Sample Rhetorical Analysis of “Diary of an Interesting Year”

Helen Simpson’s “Diary of an Interesting Year” is a short story written in the form of the diary entries of an unnamed 30-year-old woman who chronicles the year 2040, noting that her significant other “G. gave me this little spiral-backed notebook and Biro” (101). The story is set in England, and the diary entries convey life in an overpopulated, environmentally devastated, and filthy world as the narrator struggles to survive.

The entries convey an increasingly difficult and violent set of circumstances and the sense of doom and hopelessness that has taken place after the “Collapse” (105); the matter-of-fact tone of the entries indicates the horrors they depict have become commonplace. When the narrator says in her second entry, “G. is really getting me down. He’s in his element. They should carve on his tombstone—‘I was right’” (101), the implication is that G.’s warnings of disastrous climate change have come true; this entry conveys to the audience that not only have things gotten very bad for the narrator but that there were warning signs that went unheeded, despite G.’s insistence that they be addressed. In addition, this entry functions as a call for us—the audience—to pay attention to contemporary warnings about the consequences of human engineered environmental destruction before we find ourselves (like the narrator) in a moment when salvation is no longer possible.

The narrator notes in her third entry that she is “glad we don’t live in London” (101), as the sewage system no longer works, the hospitals are closed, and overcrowded conditions are the norm. The rivers and streams are all toxic, and the rain is incessant—the result of “cloud-seeding” (110). The social order with which contemporary readers are familiar has broken down, and those who relied on it are forced to seek other nonexistent alternatives. In 2040, the air is humid “like filthy soup” (102), and the narrator is emaciated, her ribs “like a fence” (102). These similes convey the polluted atmosphere and privation that has resulted from “the Big Melt” (102). Figurative descriptions occur rarely in the narrative, and when they do appear, they are to convey sensory horrors. A bit later, for example, the narrator’s captor “smells like an abandoned fridge” (111).

Several entries focus on the dangers of female reproduction. The narrator discusses rinsing out her menstrual rags and her relief at not having children in conditions where she gives “a new baby three months max in these conditions” (104); furthermore, she lives in constant fear of becoming pregnant, first by G. and later by her abductor M. After a friend dies in childbirth and a group of Spanish speakers move into the narrator’s house, G. becomes depressed and the two head north in the hope of finding a more sustainable existence. But such an existence is no longer a possibility.

As their conditions worsen, the diary entries nonetheless maintain their same matter-of-fact tone, as is apparent when the narrator notes in the same entry that the man who murders G. is uninterested in her notebook and Biro. The murder itself is seemingly a foregone conclusion and a circumstance of little consequence; the narrator says, “G. didn’t have a gun. This one has a gun” (111). The murderer, M, takes the narrator into captivity and even though “what he does to [her] is horrible” (111), it remains unstated, even in the context of a form of writing as intimate and personal as a diary. When she realizes that she is pregnant, she tricks M. into beating her until she miscarries, and then the pushes him out of a tree and kills him.

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By their nature, diary entries convey the most personal and intimate aspects of their authors’ experiences, as the assumption is that that diary is to be read only by its author. For the audience, reading diary entries feels in some ways like a violation of the writer’s privacy, but the final entry is filled with pathos and written to someone else: the narrator’s lost baby. We learn, in this final moment, that the narrator wants and needs an external audience for her story. The narrator tells the dead child—who has been wrapped in her “good blue shirt” (114)—“this is the last page of my thirtieth birthday present. When I’ve finished it I’ll wrap the notebook up in six plastic bags, sealing each one with duct tape against the rain, then I’ll bury it in a hole on top of the blue shirt” (115).

This act of perseveration is done even as the narrator says, “I don’t know why as I’m not mad enough to think that anybody will ever read it” (115). The diary of an interesting year (which does not cover a full year) becomes a document that is, at least by its final entry, meant for others, even as such a possibility seems unlikely to the narrator. The fact that we are able to read it—that we can function as the external audience the narrator desires—provides an odd kind of hope for the reader; the diary acts as a warning, a message sent back to us from the future, an entreaty to change the trajectory of climate change and environmental destruction.

The narrator implores her dead child to “wish [her] luck,” and she writes: “last line: good luck, good luck, good luck, good luck, good luck” (115). The good luck she wishes is as much for us—her audience in 2015—as for herself, perhaps one of the last remaining humans in the year 2040. The narrator has appealed to us to pay attention to what is happening and being done to the world around us, and she lets us know that if we don’t change our trajectory, the outlook is dire. “Diary of an Interesting Year” is at once a work of fiction, but it is also a plea for readers to recognize our contemporary reality and to alter it. Good luck to all of us; we certainly need it.