

My Theme: Human's Potential for Cruelty

Text: "The Darkness Out There" by Penelope Lively

Text Type: Short story

When I first began to read 'The Darkness Out There', I liked Mrs Rutter. She is presented as a sweet old lady who tragically lost her husband to the war when she is still young. I felt sorry for her as she seems so lonely living in a small cottage with a bad back and wonky leg and is genuinely fond of the children's companion. The descriptions that the author used: "composed of circles" and "a cottage loaf of a woman" lead me to like her as a homely and pleasant old grandmother. However, my sympathy and liking for her stop abruptly when she starts to recount the story of the German war plane to the children that volunteer at her house, Sandra and Kerry. During the Second World War, a German plane crashed in the woods. Mrs. Rutter and her sister went out to investigate and were overjoyed to learn that it was one of the enemy's. They saw that one of the crew was still alive but trapped in the aircraft, clearly in pain. Much to my shock, they just left him to fend for his own life. I am so surprised to find how cool and composed she is when she tells this story to the children. Her cold and callous nature shocked me when she thinks more about the inconvenience of the rain than the suffering and agony of the poor soldier: "He's not going to last long... Then we went back to the cottage. It was bucketing down, cats and dogs." Her cruelty and cold-bloodedness are in such a huge contrast with the old lady who is as harmless as a dove in the beginning of the story the readers are led to like and pity. She returned to the site the next day, and she had 'never imagined that the soldier would last the night'. As she recalls the death of the soldier she says, "He must have been a tough bastard. He was still there that evening, but in the morning he was dead". Her nonchalant and unrepentant attitude towards the death of the soldier as if he deserves it gives me a shock as I thought that with the advancement of age, she would have come to regret her past actions but she doesn't even seem to be apologetic in any way. Instead she explains it in terms of revenge for the death of her husband, who was killed in Belgium at the start of the war. I was stunned by the hatred and vengefulness bottled up in Mrs Rutter, when she says: "That was eighteen months or so after my hubby didn't come back from Belgium. Tit for tat." It baffles me how she tells the children that she is fond of youths: 'I like young people... I've got a sympathy with young people' and yet she has no sympathy for the injured soldier who was in his early twenties and refused to save him even though she has the ability to do so. I don't think Mrs Rutter should have let her hatred for his country blind her and lead her to perform such a cruel act on the poor young man. Her grief and pain in losing her husband should not be a reason to seek revenge and inflict pain on the innocent young soldier who is only defending his own country. Had Mrs Rutter been more understanding and compassionate, she could have saved the soldier and made a difference to his life.

I initially believed that all of us have the inherent kindness and humanity in us that compels us to help those who are suffering, even if the person's injuries are too critical, our first instinct is still to try our best and alleviate their pain. Mrs Rutter taught me that not all people are kind, some are cruel and vengeful under the façade of a harmless, innocent old lady. The realization that Mrs Rutter is such a cold-blooded and selfish woman had a lasting effect on me. I learnt that we couldn't take a person at face value and that first impressions are often deceiving as we never know how much cruelty a person is capable of under their veil. Like Mrs Rutter, she is seemingly a vulnerable old lady, but we come to realize that she is not as innocent as she seems. She had done something terrible in her old days but is still not contrite about it. This made me realize that morality does not come with old age but depends on our character, a misconception I had when I thought that a stereotypical old lady like Mrs Rutter would not be capable of great cruelty towards others but I was shocked at

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Margaret Mallett



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Reviewing **Darkness Out There Penelope Lively Text**: Unlocking the Spellbinding Force of Linguistics

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