

Cole Gannon

Professor Cudahy

EWRT 1A

15 February 2021

Essay #2 Very Rough Draft

The Gangster We Are All Looking For by **lê thi diem thúy** was a frustrating read. The writing rests on an uncomfortable ledge between memoir and poem. **Throughout most of the book, we follow the nameless narrator on her blurry escape from Vietnam by boat.** Each chapter feels distinct and separate from other chapters, with different focuses on dreams, or choppy/smooth writing. The story primarily focuses on the narrator, Ba, and Ma. We learn of other characters, but they are rarely brought up. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* falls short of what could've been a stronger story due to its overuse of imagery and detail, complex metaphors and storytelling, and underdeveloped characters.

I like th

One of the first scenes in the book describes the narrator's encounter with Mel, a minor character only present in the first chapter of the book:

When Mel approached us at the airport, we heard a faint rattling: a ring full of gold and silver keys hanging from his belt. With each step Mel took, the ring swung and rattled by his side. The keys were new to him. Mel was tall and thin, but the ring looked fat, important. Mel caught the ring and pushed it into his pocket. This silenced the keys for a moment. He shook everyone's hand... (Le 5)

As mentioned previously, this would be good poetry, but Mel's keys are never brought up again. Without any pause for explanation or even a hint of what this is supposed to mean, we continue. Small things are described in impeccable detail which can leave readers confused about its

importance. Sometimes the imagery is so complex, it's difficult to tell if there's deeper meaning or an underlying narrative that the author is trying to convey.

Along with the too in-depth descriptions of people, places, and things, complex metaphors and symbolism are interwoven into the story, seemingly without purpose.

One night, Mr. Russel fell asleep and dreamed that the boards were seabirds sitting on the waves. He saw a hand scoop the birds up from the water. It was not his hand and it was not the hand of God. The birds went flying in all direction across the blinding blue sky of Mr. Russell's dream, but finally he saw them fly in only one direction and that was toward the point where in the dream he understood himself to be waiting, somewhere beyond the frame. (Le 5)

This stuff is making the reader guess for no apparent reason. We also never come back to this.

This seems like a common theme during the entire book. It's never explained. Then there's that butterfly symbolism where the narrator feels like she's the one trapped in the glass and seems to empathize with it and breaks the butterfly because she was trying to free it. Too much symbolism for only one chapter. The butterfly symbolism is never used again. Oftentimes, the symbolism feels like a substitute for what should have been dialog or exactly what the character was thinking. With imagery, it takes so long to say that Mr. Russel wanted to help the Vietnamese refugees. During the final sequence of events near the end of the book, there's a sudden time shift.

One night, during our first spring together in California, my father woke my mother and me and told us to grab our coats and put on our shoes... As my

parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights. (Le 157-158)

The abrupt ending to the book without any real explanation is quite representative of the entire book as a whole. The reader is just left wondering what the meaning of the entire book was. Does that ending have a deeper meaning? Perhaps it conveys an alternative hidden narrative? In any case, the author makes no effort to answer any lingering questions.

The wildly unorthodox writing and unnecessary imagery and symbolism both take away from what should have been the focus of the entire book: the character development. Unfortunately, there is not much character development to be seen throughout much of the story. Ba doesn't really develop over the entire course of the story. He gets more and more violent, perhaps, but that doesn't count as character development. He appears to suffer from the same trauma from the war and re-education camp. While Ma would seem to be an important character to the narrator, the book never explains Ma's journey to California or if she had to suffer through the same experiences as the narrator and Ba. The most disengaged character is strangely the narrator, choosing to focus on objects and dreams more than people. Perhaps it could be the writing style but the narrator always seems fairly removed from the situation that she is part of. While Ma and Ba fought, the narrator "[ran] out front and dance[d] like a crazy lady" in front of all of the nosey neighbors. The narrator also seemed to find solace in water during periods of conflict at home.

I'd lock myself in the bathroom and ... pretend. I could listen to them and not listen to them. And when the awful quiet came, I'd break it by filling the tub with more water. (Le 67)

While this is a more typical reaction than dancing, the curt, blocky comment about the arguments seemed to convey a lack of interest or overall affect. Like many of the narrator's actions, it feels cold and emotionless, completely detached from the events at play. Frustratingly, the narrator acts as more of a clinical record rather than a stained-glass window into her experiences. Why can't we hear what she's thinking or feel what she is feeling? Put simply, the author does not like to spell these things out and would like the reader to place their own feelings where the narrator's should be.

The emphasis on imagery and resulting deemphasis on plot and character development may simply be a writing style but at what point does it take away from the meaning of an already interesting story? The show-not-tell attitude of the writing and ambiguously symbolic descriptions of people are a poor replacement for more cut-and-dry description of an emotion playing across a character. Time skips and perspective changes leave readers confused and derailed from the current events. All the more frustrating that the end of the book feels like the author expected readers to fill it in themselves. In many ways, this book is much more like poetry than a memoir, what with its complexities and onion-like subtexts leading to suspiciously similar issues of over-analysis and conclusions of meaning where no meaning existed.

2/5 -Cole Gannon

If you've made it this far, I am aware that this writing is far from ideal. It's very disorganized and repeats points over and over. It's too informal at many parts but I was struggling with getting anything written. I just had to write garbage or risk an empty word document. I will be needing a lot of feedback to whip this into shape. - Cole