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An Analysis of the Adults in *Hello Universe*

The novel *Hello Universe* by Erin Entrada Kelly expresses many messages through the perspective of young children. These perspectives help the reader understand the character's life and their surrounding environment. The main perspective that the story focuses on is Virgil's, an eleven year-old Filipino boy whose life is determined heavily on predetermined factors. Some of these factors are the connections that he has with the adults of the story. Each adult's connection is either positive or negative to Virgil and is uniquely important to Virgil's development. That being said, three groups of adults that significantly impact Virgil's life are Lola, Mr. Bullens, and Virgil's parents.

To start, I believe that Lola, Virgil's grandma, has the most positive influence on Virgil due to her story-telling. She teaches Virgil life lessons through her stories, which aid him in stressful times. We know she has this intention because after she tells Virgil her story of Ruby San Salvador, she says, "Of all the questions in the world you could ask, why are you asking about hands?" (Kelly 23). Lola compares the importance of Virgil's question and her story to imply that his question is out of the ordinary compared to Ruby's questions in her story. This elevates the importance of the story in Lola's perspective, which means her story-telling is a way to convey important messages to Virgil for his own well-being. Virgil has caught on to that

because we see him utilize these lessons in the most stressful times such as the time when he was stuck in the well and “talked” to Ruby San Salvador. Before continuing, for all the following to be comprehensible, one must assume that Ruby is a manifestation in Virgil’s mind. According to Peter Mertin in his article, “What Do We Know about the Correlates and Underlying Causes of Auditory Hallucinations in Nonpsychotic Children and Adolescents, and What Are the Implications for Diagnosis and Treatment?”, “...it was the influence of high levels of emotion, particularly anxiety, on cognitive functioning that was implicated in triggering hallucinations” (288). Taking this into account, one can infer that Ruby “appeared” because Virgil was under high levels of stress. So when he is talking to Ruby, in reality, he is trying to comfort himself using the lessons that he picked up from Lola. For example, when he explained the story of Paulito and the Jungle Dragon, a story told by Lola when he was small, at the end, when he kept denying that he is a hero, “Ruby” ends the conversation with “My dear Bayani... There is always a next time [to fight]”(Kelly 202). This conversation ended on a positive note, which can be interpreted as Virgil making an effort to feel better. In addition, the morals of Lola’s stories reinforce his ideas, such as “a hero doesn’t need to be physically big”. Putting both factors in combination, Virgil’s inner monologue’s tone and Lola’s life lessons put a wall up against negative thinking, which relieves stress. So as we can see here, Lola’s tendency to tell stories indirectly helps Virgil get through stress.

Unlike Lola, Mr. Bullens, Chet’s father, doesn’t have positive influence on Virgil. In the story, Mr. Bullens is most responsible for Chet’s bullying behavior because of his insensitivity to others. He makes many insensitive comments such as “Some people are just born defective”(Kelly 74) and “Disabled people don’t have it all going on upstairs..., but they can figure out how to bag groceries” (Kelly 75). The use of the word “defective” in his first

statement and the contrast of the second statement make both statements sound intentionally offensive to disabled people, indicating that Mr. Bullens is insensitive to people who are in need for help. His insensitivity was projected onto Chet, who practices this on other children such as Virgil. But he particularly chooses Virgil because of how different and vulnerable Virgil is. Virgil's differences are important because according to an article, "Preventing Bullying" by Thomas Billitteri, "Often youths are bullied simply because they display some physical characteristic that draws attention". Chet describes Virgil with "The Chinese or whatever-he-was kid"(131) or a "skinny kid who never talked"(Kelly 131). Virgil says that Chet bullies him because he is "eleven years old and didn't know his multiplication tables"(Kelly 33). Because all the above is something that stands out to Chet and Chet is insensitive to differences, Virgil becomes a vulnerable target for Chet to abuse. Even though Virgil is on the receiving side of the abuse, he doesn't do anything(until the end). One may interpret that he develops a passive behavior towards abuse, which shaped many aspects of his life such as his inability to speak up against his parents and his cowardice when trying to talk to Valencia. Virgil was willing to accept life even when he doesn't feel comfortable about it. Taking a step back, the main root of why Virgil is so passive can be traced back to Mr. Bullens's insensitivity, which is learned by Chet and practiced on Virgil. So it can be concluded that Mr. Bullens negatively impacts Virgil by indirectly and unintentionally forcing Virgil into submission via Chet's bullying.

Finally, like Mr. Bullens, Virgil's parents are insensitive, but their most unforgivable abuse is their ignorance towards Virgil. One instance where we see this is in a flashback, when the Salinas introduce Virgil to Lola. In the text, it says "After Joselito and Julius scurried off...Virgil's parents presented him like a rare exhibit they didn't quite understand" (Kelly 4). This event is tragic towards Virgil because it makes Virgil believe that his parents don't even

acknowledge his efforts to satisfy their expectations. He also realizes that his parents “didn’t quite understand him”, implying that his parents spend less time with Virgil and bonding with him. This is more apparent when incorporating their favoritism towards his brothers. Virgil’s feelings are even more hurt when his parents do acknowledge his behavior, but defames him with names. Virgil testifies, “That was their name for him: Turtle. ...Every time they said it, a piece of him broke.”(Kelly 4). The key phrase “A piece of him broke” can be interpreted as his loss of confidence and pride. In other words, Virgil has low self-esteem, which makes it harder for him to talk to other people. And even this doesn’t wake Virgil’s parents up. Yet another form of ignorance Virgil had to face was his parent’s lack of concern when Virgil was lost. When Virgil arrived home, he saw, “His parents...were in the living room, but they didn’t seem overly concerned with Virgil. They were watching television... filling the room with their laughter”(Kelly 303). From this scene, the reader learns that their ignorance extends Virgil’s safety. This is an extreme form of favoritism towards Virgil’s brothers because all attention is on them, while no attention was on Virgil in that span of time. Had something had happened to Virgil, they wouldn’t have known until it is too late. So looking all the effects their behavior has on Virgil, one can judge the Salinas as ignorant to his son in ways that one may find absurd.

Though most of the effects of the Salinas’ ignorance are negative to Virgil, the only notable positive effect from this ignorance is that it becomes an obstacle that Virgil overcomes. In the beginning of the story, Virgil develops hatred towards his parent’s behavior. He thinks, “Don’t call me that[Turtle]... It makes me feel like a loser”(Kelly 34). This provides a means for him to change because many children don’t want to feel like a loser. His next step to overcoming this obstacle is to gather his resources, namely the mentality and courage to face his issues. Right before he was found, Ruby, who is assumed to be a manifestation in his mind, says “The world

looks different through newly opened eyes, Virgilio. It's the trick of time. What you believe today, you may not believe tomorrow"(Kelly 283). One interpretation of this is that this is Virgil's invitation to reformation into a new individual with a different personality. We see this in action when he stands up to Chet and firmly tells him "Call me that again , and you'll regret it,"(Kelly 301). Virgil displays bravery and confidence in this scene, two qualities that he lacked before. This transition helped him overcome his mother's teasing. When offended by his nickname, he tells his mother, "I wish you wouldn't call me Turtle... You can call me Virgil. Or Virgilio. Or Bayani. But don't call me Turtle"(305). This scene, along with the other events, proves Virgil's improvement. In the beginning of the story, Virgil is timid and shy, but by the end, he has confidence and courage. This cannot be done if Virgil had not had a problem, like his parent's nickname, to resolve in the beginning. So to end, Virgil's parent's behavior, though they don't have ill intentions, becomes an obstacle that Virgil needs to cross over, which helped him improve as a whole.

In conclusion, three groups of adults that have the most influence on Virgil are Lola, Mr. Bullens, and the Salinas. They all impact Virgil, directly or indirectly, negatively or positively, and have behaviors that contribute events that impact Virgil's development. These attributes are seen through eyes of children, such as Virgil, who are unbiased and provide accurate testimony. With this, readers can all learn about how children perceive their own actions and make amendments accordingly.

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