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The role of convention in “Touching Bottom”

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What is convention? In other words – what is normal to others that we choose to apply to ourselves?

There is an idea engrained into society that individuals must follow a certain base of principles and customs. However, these ideas, more often than not, steer individuals away from breakthrough and prison diversity in boxes. The customs of society serves only to hurt true individuality, and cage personal growth. In Kari Strutt’s “Touching Bottom”, the nameless protagonist is strapped in a wave of convention and struggles to find the root of her discontentment in life. Through her toxic marriage, routines of the pool, and the unfamiliar ocean, the narrator of “Touching Bottom” demonstrates how convention prevents satisfaction in personal life by allowing individuals to overly rely on the normalized sources outside of themselves.

In “Touching Bottom”, the relationships between the narrator and specific characters highlight and start to illustrate how deep the protagonist has been caught in the current of normality and regularity. Her ideas of what a ‘normal’ life would look like contains the convention of getting married and having the ordinary relationship with a spouse. This relationship is perhaps one of the most important ones in the protagonist’s journey of character growth. She relies on her marriage, and feels the need to simply obtain this relationship in her life – any relationship to fulfill the many common societal expectations, including marriage. The hints of her marriage failing appear before her marriage even begins, and “the day [she] got married [she] felt lonely and afraid (pg. 2).” The narrator knows that this marriage does not lead well, and will not end well. The entirety of this relationship sits on an incredibly small platform of attraction that serves only to crumble over time. In fact, the very little dialogue and interaction between these two characters allows readers to wonder if there really was any love between them at

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all. Yet, when the time comes, she follows her husband to California and leads a life with him for a substantial period of time. The story is worded in such a manner that makes it seem like the husband is the only support system of the protagonist. However, if she chose to steer away from marriage, she would find herself with a bundle of other individuals, like her father, that would have supported her. She does not; and the eagerness of the protagonist to dive so quickly into this marriage demonstrates her how ready she is to succumb to the customs and norms of society. In the end, the protagonist is no longer dependent on one of the conventions (marriage) to achieve satisfaction in her life. The protagonist no longer relies on her marriage for fulfillment of convention. She divorces him, and finds herself happier in herself, freed from an unhealthy marriage and unfamiliar places.

The protagonist's relationships with specific bodies of water are also important points of interests when dissecting her journey with self-satisfaction. Starting from early childhood, she is almost always only exposed to the walls and lines of indoor pools. Whether it be in the bathtub, or the pool, there would always be a security net to hold the protagonist inside a shelter of customs and rule. In the pool, specifically, she learns to stay inside the lines and work within the timer because in competition, rule breaking will get her disqualified. She tries to follow these regulations while struggling in the current -- in her time of crisis. She remembers her coach's advice and "[pulls] hard, body rigid, head down... (pg. 4)". However, she finds that ridiculously, it does not work. The rules of the pool do not apply the same in the ocean. The narrator is so sucked in to the idea of convention that she finds it hard to break the rules of the water that she is so trained and used to. But disqualification is nothing compared to the possibility of death. So she breaks the familiar customs of swimming, and is freed from the current. Her routine is finally broken. She finds that, quite instantly, her troubles are resolved as she swims out of the current: out of the rules. While convention may have served the protagonist well in the pool, the narrator discovers how these rules only cage her in a fixed routine. When she escapes this mindset, she

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also escapes her reliance on pool rules in the water, and is finally able to swim out of her current – representing her dissatisfaction in life.

In the ocean, the protagonist finds herself at the bottom, touching the sand. She realizes that there, in the ocean, the bottom is not the same as in the pool. The ocean symbolizes the real world, whereas the pool represents the small, safe world of youth, protected by water chemicals and lifeguards. When she reaches the bottom of the ocean, she discovers that “it [is] so soft and warm under that deep blanket of water (pg. 4)” and that the bottom, in fact, is not as deep as she originally imagined. The narrator had never touched the bottom before. Not in the ocean. The bottom is warm, and soft, and she gains comfort from – incredulously, the very thing she was never allowed to reach in her lessons in the pool. This illustrates how the rules she is so familiar to has boxed her inside a shelter of dependability. When she finally breaks out of these customs, she reaches the bottom of not only the ocean, but of her discontentment in her life. The narrator, no longer relying on the customs and regulations of the pool, finds that the bottom is, in fact, the push that she needs.

The protagonist in “Touching Bottom” lives through a series of events that handicap her personal growth. From all of them, she learns to break through convention and learn to follow herself, not her husband and not the familiar rules of the pool. Convention must be broken for satisfaction in an individual’s life. This is because individuals will overly rely on these common societal norms and lose their choice of path, only following the conventional route. With all that being said, maybe rule breaking is not so bad, after all.