**Understanding Juliet Eilperin’s “Ice Accommodations” through the lens of Christopher Wren’s “Walking to Vermont”**

**Final Draft**

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Initially, Juliet Eilperin and Christopher Wren appear to have very similar experiences. They embark on similarly bold adventures to obscure locations and participate in activities. Eilperin overcomes personal trepidation and extreme cold on her quest to understand the nature of the frozen north. Wren endures insect bites, blisters, and a suspected case of Lyme disease on his trek into retirement. One would think that texts with deep structural similarities would have similar effects, but when looked at closely we see that are actually quite divergent. “Walking to Vermont” sets a thoughtful tone and slowly discloses the revelations of an introspective and deeply personal journey. The reader is left not only with Wren’s personal discoveries, but also with weighty existential and philosophical questions to ponder. In Eilperin’s case the meaning and message of the text are not immediately clear. Is it a tale of personal triumph and realization or is it a depiction of imminent danger of global warming? In both tales, the literary devices of setting and a personal struggle narrative play a direct role in molding the text’s message. Wren’s text provides a clear guide as to what a tale of personal struggle looks like, by using this clear and explicit example and comparing it to Eilperin’s text we can remove the ambiguity and get to the heart of Eilperin’s writing.

Wren’s settings are exquisite beginning with his description of a graveyard he encounters. He describes the “wrought-iron gates of an eerily abandoned graveyard, identified by a metal sign as ‘Gates of Heaven’” (116). In a story that is otherwise focused on natural unspoiled backgrounds, the inclusion of a graveyard stands out and establishes an ominous and foreboding tone. This is not simply a walk in the woods, but something darker and more profound. The graveyard “not to mention heaven itself, had vanished under a profusion of weeds” (116). This illustrates the transience of both life and memory, leaving us pondering our own mortality and priming us for further consideration of death and the passage of life.

Setting is not exclusively used to demonstrate the morbid aspect of the time passing. Wren encounters the Ten Mile Shelter that “had changed little since Abe Lincoln. Except that Abe’s lean-to did not have its wooden beams festooned with nylon cords ending in metal cans and jar tops” (117). The shelter illustrates the passage of time by juxtaposing the historical image of a wooden lean-to and the modern nylon accessories .The result of this juxtaposition is not morbid. Instead, it points out the oddities of different eras and stage in our history. Wren’s text is heavily influenced by his personal transition into the lifestyle of an older man. In the same way that history experiences oddities and changes, so to does Wren. This is the trip where he must confront his new and discomforting reality. The lean-to acts as an allegory and alerts us to his personal dialogue with his particular history.

When Wren arrives in Vermont, he reaches both the conclusion of his tale and of his personal transition. He sees the world through different eyes; at his own house he “had not appreciated until now the delicacy with which the setting sun filters through a curtain of sugar maples and firs on Bragg Hill in the twilight of a summer evening” (119). The sun setting over the hill once again evokes death and ageing. Echoing the cemetery setting, we are forced to confront the issue of our own mortality, to appreciate the subtle beautiful moments while we can. All of which is achieved simply through subtle use of setting. In all of these examples, setting is used to keep the story intimate and away from any broader themes or issues. The trip leaves both Wren and the reader lost in personal consideration and introspection.

Setting alone does not elucidate the message and lessons in a story,. In Wren’s case, the personal struggle narrative has a critical effect: to focus the reader on the tension present in his emotional and psychological development. While the setting reveals to us the base themes and questions that underlie the text, the personal narrative keeps it focused on Wren and his transition from a working life into retirement. Wren had it screamed at him that “an exit from an aircraft in flight had to be vigorous to clear the propeller blast” (115). If he wants to successfully enter retirement, the trek to Vermont must be one of dramatic energy and change. The tension draws us in. We are concerned, anxious, and nervous about his ability to “jump”. Subtly and unconsciously, we are invested in his personal story. The jump is not flawless; he has a suspected case of Lyme’s disease and perpetually suffers under the yoke of “chafing fresh hot spots on whatever skin on my heels and toes had not turned raw”(118). As we discover, these challenges are essential because in overcoming them he “stumbled upon the secret of how utterly irrelevant chronological age is” (119). We are drawn along, wincing at his pain and rejoicing in his accomplishments. The text pulls at us personally, deeply involving us in his development and progress. Wren’s effectiveness at drawing us in demonstrates why “Walking to Vermont” is a paragon of a personal narrative. In the end, we leave feeling accomplished, with some resolution to the existential considerations and challenges imposed upon us.

Through the lens of our detailed and clear understanding of Wren’s use of setting and personal narrative, we can analyze Eilperin’s use of the same tools to illuminate the meaning and message of “Ice Accommodations”. Setting in Eilperin’s work does not drive the reader into introspection as Wren’s does; rather, it evokes wonder and appreciation in the reader. The hotel does not have walls simply made of ice, the ice is “shockingly clear. While occasional cracks make patterns in the blocks, the ice itself is completely transparent—unlike ice made from ordinary tap water—which makes it look otherworldly” (107). These walls are priceless and fascinating, and the description seduces the reader into a state of wonder. We are distinctly not somber or introspective. Instead, we are transfixed. Wren’s setting prompts refection and thought, Eilperin’s creates appreciation. The relative lack of personal or existential focus indicates that this is story focused on topics with big, broad scopes and not on the personal transformation of Eilperin herself.

The hotel continues to impress. It is a place where each room is “another civilization that is at once more sophisticated than ours and more severe. Each of the two-dozen or so intricately carved suits represents a world of its own” (107). We are left further entranced by the unique artistry and depth of this hotel. The soaring and laudatory prose does something that is conspicuously absent in Wren’s writing; it focuses the reader on the setting itself. In “Walking to Vermont” we see setting used as an instrument of guidance, one that prompts the reader to speculation and conclusions. The ice hotel garners attention for its own sake and does not facilitate our understanding of Eilperin’s personal story. It is now evident that story is focused on the world of the hotel; we are being prodded to think thoroughly and examine the surrounding itself.

We are not focusing on the setting simply for its intrinsic beauty and innate value; this is not travel guide. It contains a problem, a tension that compels us to read onwards. We see a stunning locale changing because “its not getting cold as quickly as it used to in the winter” (109). This is tragic, as we have been convinced of the hotel’s uncommon beauty and irreplaceable ambiance. Subtly, we have been emotionally connected to the hotel and consequently we are have been connected to the issue of global warming.

If the setting does not sufficiently elucidate the fact that Eilperin’s text acts as a warning about the dangers of global warming, an analysis of her personal narrative makes it crystal clear. Similar to Wren, Eilperin frames her story as a personal struggle. Instead of overcoming a life transition, she is fighting a deep dislike of the cold. She is skinny and unprepared, but endures and comes “to find the extreme cold relaxing, a way to dial back the stress and hyperactivity that characterize [her] everyday existence” (108). Instead of the cathartic conclusion that Wren garners from overcoming his challenges, Eilperin makes peace with her tormenter. This difference is significant because by becoming comfortable with the cold she attunes the reader to its values and benefits. The cold is not a challenge or trail we must endure, rather it is valuable entity with benefits we can appreciate and harness. Just as we come to appreciate the cold “it becomes increasingly clear that the northernmost regions of the globe are becoming less frigid” (105). Her quest to conquer the cold does not draw the reader into an investigation of her temerity; rather it creates a relationship with the challenge itself. Our attachment is to the cold, leaving us once again fully and perhaps unintentionally invested in the issue of global warming.

Read alone, “Ice Accommodations” is ambiguous. When the story is placed within the context of a detailed examination of Wren’s similar text we are better placed to fully comprehend its subtleties and meanings. Wren’s tale is an archetypal personal story, the setting drives us into introspection and the narrative gives a stake in the result. “Ice Accommodations” appears to be similar, but in Eilperin’s text setting is not a textual tool to lead the reader to personal and introspective conclusions, it is an active subject of the story that elicits awe, concern, and anxiety from the reader. Unlike Wren’s narrative, Eilperin’s personal struggle does not reach a catharsis for the narrator or the reader. Instead it introduces and familiarizes us with the both the benefits and fragility of the cold. It is evident that “Ice Accommodations” acts not as personal story, but as a subtle and emotional method of attaching the reader to the issue of global warming.

Works Cited

Christopher S. Wren, “Walking to Vermont,” in *The Princeton Reader*, ed. John McPhee et al, Princeton UP, 2011.

Juliet Eilperin, “Ice Accommodations,” in *The Princeton Reader*, ed. John McPhee et al, Princeton UP, 2011.

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