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In-Class Essay - Discuss the use of 'the villain' in the novel.

In the real world, is there even such a thing as a villain? Katherine Vermette's 2016 novel *The Break* may be a work of fiction, but in creating a realistic snapshot of the intersection between different communities and generations in the very real setting of Winnipeg's North End, it proves how impossible it is to label real people as 'heroes' and 'villains,' 'good people' and 'bad people,' shows the value in dispelling the stereotypes about marginalized and impoverished communities, and fights to show their hope.

Vermette grew up in the North End and returned to raise her children there (see [radio interview](#)). She knows just how difficult and dangerous it can be to live there, and she doesn't shy away from portraying it. The cold of Winnipeg's winters, something experienced in one way or another by almost every character in the novel, is used to parallel the effects of poverty as a result of systemic oppression that the community faces. Characters more affected by poverty, like Phoenix, also experience more of the dangerous cold: she "stumbles into the warmth" of her uncle's house after having "been out there, walking in the cold, all day," her feet having "lost feeling hours ago," becoming "clubs on the end of her legs" (24, 27). Characters less affected, like Rita, find themselves experiencing the cold in shorter bursts: "Rita comes back in with her hood up," saying "'it's getting fricking cold out there'" (215). Vermette discusses what the cold means to people in the North End, saying that "if you don't have a place to go the cold is incredibly dangerous," adding that "someone who's homeless has to constantly be looking for a place to find warmth and it becomes a very, very dangerous place" (radio interview at 17:30). Her experiences with living in this cold inform *The Break's* passages

about it, helping the reader empathize with what Phoenix has to go through and understand the role of the cold in the experiences of this community; this is one of the many aspects of life in the North End that are used to bring the reader away from the stereotyped, fictitious setting of a lot of interpretations of impoverished communities and closer to the real place.

For *The Break*, Vermette drew on a variety of human experiences, from her own stories and, as her character Stella puts it, “stories that really belong to other people but were somehow passed to her for safekeeping,” in order to form a “pattern” of “all those big and small half-stories that make up a life” (84). This complex and interconnected pattern of perspectives serves to show what the North End is actually like and what the people and communities there go through. Vermette expresses her desire to show this, saying that the North End is “a rich, full place, and [it’s] full of all sorts of people, and all sorts of strength[s] and virtues,” and she “wanted to really fill up that picture and not just leave it as the stereotype” (radio interview at 3:56). In doing so, she creates doubt in the reader’s mind as to what character is really ‘the villain’ in this story. Despite Phoenix’s violence, Vermette makes the reader empathize with her, showing that “she comes from violence,” that “she’s in a violent world,” that she “reacts to that abuse by abusing others,” and that, despite it being “hard to be empathetic to someone like that,” Phoenix “has no one she can rely on,” being “completely abandoned” (radio interview at 16:34). If Phoenix is not really ‘the villain’ in this story, despite being the obvious choice, then who, or what, is?

To Vermette, ‘the villain’ is not any of the characters, but rather the situation that they’re in as a result of centuries of oppression. This is what makes the usage of a myriad of different perspectives so effective: by building up this all-too-real portrayal of the

North End from all of these points of view, Vermette helps the reader to look past the actions of the characters and instead enables them to see the societal issues that have affected all of them and thrown them all into a situation where something this awful could happen. This ‘villain’ is aided and abetted by the stereotypes that form around communities like the North End, as these stereotypes serve to further marginalize the people living there. For instance, the stereotype that Indigenous people are lazy, expressed by two of rookie cop Tommy’s colleagues:

[About Tommy:] “He’s a good little worker, this one.” He can hear Christie tell Evans. “Didn’t think he would be, being a May-tee [Métis] and all.”

“Oh they will surprise you, they will surprise you,” Evans starts playing along. “Not full-blooded Indians [Indigenous people] or anything. Good little horses them May-tee.”

This stereotype serves to further marginalize Indigenous communities, creating a stigma that reduces their employability and dismisses anything they might have to say about their situation; this is just one among many expressed by privileged characters in the novel, and one of the least subtle expressions at that. In expressing these stereotypes and then juxtaposing them with the reality of her North End, Vermette hopes to dispel them, to show how useless and damaging they can be, and give communities like this hope.

*The Break* is a complex story. It presents a multitude of perspectives, always interconnected, often contrasting, and asks the reader to find meaning not just through those connections but between them. The denizens of Winnipeg’s North End aren’t ‘heroes,’ and they aren’t ‘villains’ either, despite often being stereotyped as such: they are people, strong people, “struggling and fighting and succeeding everyday,” and that is

where Vermette finds that “a lot of the beauty lies in the place” (radio interview at 4:34). There is a ‘villain’ to this story, the cultural and societal oppression that the people of the North End face, and it is fought against not only by the characters but also by the novel itself, as it works to dispel the stereotypes that enable ‘the villain.’ In this way, everyone in the story is fighting against this ‘villain’ just by finding happiness and hope against all odds, and so they are ‘the hero.’ The novel, too, is ‘the hero.’ Vermette’s final message of hope, coming after everything, the portrayal of the harsh and unforgiving environment, the variety of human experiences, the revealing and dispelling of stereotypes, feels earned because that hope really does exist, and knowing this, having seen it firsthand alongside everything else, Vermette wanted to express it most of all.