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English 269

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Captivating Chokecherries

Chokecherry trees are often small in stature and vary in coloring. The trees contain hanging clumps of white flowers, and the small circular berries—referred to as drupes—range between red, crimson and black. The trees' flowers, berries and bark are all referred to as possessing a bitter taste and unfavorable scent. Chokecherries are native to North America, specifically Idaho, Nevada and Utah. However, the trees can adapt to many extreme environments and can grow across most North American ecosystems. The chokecherry berries have a history of being used by indigenous peoples for food and medicine. More specifically, it was used for external wounds and calming of respiratory illnesses. The chokecherry tree transforms Sethe's permanent site of trauma into a symbol of beauty. The horror in which Sethe experiences through slavery juxtaposes the admiration and beauty she finds within nature. She utilizes the life she finds in nature to cope, heal and divert herself from the past.

Trees are a consistent source of escape for Sethe. The rustling of the trees overshadowed her own dark experiences: "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful souging trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that" (Morrison 7). The whistling of the wind and "souging" of the "most beautiful

sycamores” allowed Sethe to overlook the horror of the “boys hanging” from it. While she might be ashamed of her subconscious repression, it is a method of protecting oneself. Sethe hyperfocuses on nature to cope with her scars as well: “A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know” (Morrison 18). The tree alludes to a larger concept of healing and solace. Time may not heal the reminiscence of Sethe's scars, but it may aid how she copes with their presence. Instead of viewing them as living reminders of her trauma, she transforms them into a symbol of strength and life. Paul D refers to Sethe's scars as “a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree...nothing like any tree” (Morrison 25); he pessimistically describes her scar as the antithesis of nature's beauty. Whereas Sethe's sanguine outlook supports her determination to simply *survive*. Nature serves as her backbone, a crutch to look towards during arduous times.

Sethe looks towards rolling hills, trees swaying in a soft wind and leaves floating across the bright blue sky. Whether Sweet Home is truly beautiful or merely a figment of imagination, it served as a very real escape: “Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm--every tree and grass blade of it dies” (Morrison 43). Sethe asserts the permanence of her experiences by detailing Sweet Home is “never going away,” even if “every tree and grass blade of it dies”; in spite of looking towards nature as a calming force in her life, the memories and physical marks are forever ingrained into her person: “When her dreams roamed outside 124, anywhere they wished, she saw them sometimes in beautiful trees, their little legs barely visible in the leaves” (Morrison 47). The chokecherry trees captivate Sethe, almost enough to camouflage the “little legs” in the trees alongside the cumulative atrocities of slavery. The trees, while a reminder of loss and trauma, simultaneously embody *life*.

References

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