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ENG –

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Finding One's Ethical Voice: An Examination of Pam Muñoz Ryan's *The Dreamer*

In Pam Muñoz Ryan's *The Dreamer*, we follow the fictionalized biography of a timid, budding young poet Neftali Reyes, who is spellbound by the wonders of the natural world: where birds become words and words become flowers. From the lost, lonely boot outside his bedroom window, to the new words he keeps tucked away safely in a dresser drawer near his bed, Neftali discovers stories hidden in the treasures he finds: a stark contrast to the vast injustices he witnesses in the world around him. Despite growing up with a formidable father, the young Reyes finds the moral courage to make his voice heard and later creates a new identity and adopts a pseudonym to become known as the Nobel Prize–winning poet Pablo Neruda, whose voice stands as a crusader for the mistreatment of the indigenous people of Chile. Ryan's compelling prose are the perfect accompaniment to illustrator Peter Sis' warm, whimsical pen-and-ink pointillist art and together poignantly show, the beautiful transformation of Neftali's unbounded imagination and journey of self-discovery. In this paper, I explore Ryan's evocative text *The Dreamer* in which Fear, Silence and Injustice transform into Strength and Moral Agency, and make the claim that poetry and activism, and triumph through adversity serve as vital foundations for finding one's ethical voice.

In this early excerpt, Ryan introduces the reader to the authoritative power of Neftali's disapproving father, who lacks the patience for Neftali and barks at what he calls his love of reading and writing, "incessant daydreaming" (Ryan 10) while Sis' tiny dots of ink conspire to illustrate: A large and looming outline of a man that fills an entire doorway:

“Do you want to be a skinny weakling and amount to nothing?...Your mother was the same scribbling on bits of paper, her mind always in another world” (Ryan 10–11).

We learn that Neftali never had the fortune of knowing his birth mother as she had died two weeks after he was born and therefore, is left to ponder his father’s belittling words:

Was Father right? Could daydreaming make you weak? Had it made his mother so weak that she had died? (Ryan 12).

Neftali’s father’s overpowering presence throughout the text exemplifies his myriad attempts to silence Neftali and yet, even when the young boy is filled with self-doubt, he knows he cannot ignore his calling. He listens through turbulent seas of adversity and follows an insatiable curiosity for life that beckons him: to share his voice with others and be a voice of change in the world.

As Ryan’s *The Dreamer* progresses, the shy, young Neftali finds the courage to exchange small gifts with another young child unknown to him, through a small hole in their shared fence that separates their properties. Neftali receives a beloved sheep and in return, offers a remarkable pinecone that has activated his own imagination. The encounter is representative of Neftali’s yearning for human connection and imaginative power. Two themes that are prevalent in Neftali’s young life and throughout adulthood and can be seen in Ryan and Sis’ work that seamlessly interweave this common thread. A small young boy is seen riding on the neck of a giant eagle and wonders:

*What wisdom does the eagle whisper  
to those who are learning to fly?* (Ryan 119).

Being a shy, lonely boy, Neftali longs for the companionship of others but finds a special kind of kinship in all of the things that he befriends: from the missing boot to the magic pinecone and pet sheep passed through the fence. When a sympathetic librarian offers

Neftali a hideaway near a lagoon where he can read uninterrupted, he soon communes with a pair of resident swans to whom he feeds his daily breakfast scraps. Neftali issues a warning to the swans: to stay in the shadows of the bank so that hunters may not see and kill them and for what purpose he asks, “to make powder puff from your down or decorate a silly hat with your beautiful long feathers?” (Ryan 202).

When Neftali discovers one of the mated pair has been killed by hunters and the other fatally wounded, he becomes its loyal caretaker, attempting to nurse it back to health though it later dies in his tender arms. An image of a boy gingerly carrying a swan is balanced on the page:

Yes, rest your head my friend. Rest your head...  
The swan’s silky neck unfurled. And the life  
disappeared from its body (Ryan 223).

In the mournful tragedy and relationship Neftali experiences with the swans, we see an inner fortitude and compassion begin to emerge for those who are unable to speak for themselves and from it, his ethical voice begins to take root.

Neftali’s musings and curiosity of the natural world found in the treasures he collects and the swans he befriends become transposed into a larger empathic morality and growing concern for others as he too grows and witnesses the injustices placed on the world around him. These experiences and hardships lay a vital foundation for finding his ethical voice.

Neftali at the age of eight, had never seen the ocean before and is moved by its majesty. Ryan writes, “He stood, captivated, feeling small and insignificant, and at the same time as if he belonged to something much greater” (Ryan 159). The sentiment here foreshadows Neftali’s search for self. The ocean in its vastness is a symbol of great power both in terms of its raw danger but also in the danger Neftali must face, to find the courage and his voice to stand up to his father and later, to stand as a powerful voice for the indigenous people of his homeland Temuco, Chile.

In *The Dreamer*, we see Neftali's strength as cumulative, and it is put to the ultimate test during ocean swimming lessons his father forces upon him and his little sister Laurita. As Neftali continues to experience the harsh brutalities placed upon him and those more vulnerable than he, a power churns beneath the sea and within Neftali:

The next wave pushed him down...Frantically, he lunged for Laurita and scooped her into his arms. Neftali shook, but not from fear. This time, he trembled from teeth grinding anger. Father *was* wrong. He *had* changed (Ryan 232–3).

Sis' surreal imagery of tiny, frightened children peering up from a sea enveloped in the form of their father, serves as momentum for Ryan's text where we see Neftali's resolve as the compassionate older brother who makes a personal pact to protect and be a voice for his younger sister:

Neftali made up his mind. He would come back to Puerto Saavedra. But after today, he would never go into the ocean again, no matter what Father said or did (Ryan 233).

Neftali finds the courage to use the voice he is discovering to defy his father about swimming and from this moment forward, vows he will no longer tolerate the intimidation from his imposing father and be forced to swim in dangerous waters. We see a young man imbued with courage and determination, not the "amount-to-nothing weakling," his father claims him to be. Neftali will no longer stand idly by and do nothing. He will take a stand against his father, for himself and for his sister Laurita.

When he is left to linger on the beach, Neftali finds a stick and "defiantly writes giant words in the damp sand: IDIOT, DAYDREAMER, ABSENTMINDED, AMOUNT-TO-NOTHING...feeling a peculiar sense of ownership" (Ryan, 234). Giant words are marked by tiny speckles in the sand in Sis' powerful imagery here as Neftali sees, feels, and hears poetry all around him and wonders:

*Where will the waves take the debris  
abandoned in the freckled sand? (Ryan 236–7).*

As Neftali continues to witness the vast injustices of those who are more helpless, he is propelled into action and finds a mounting courage to speak up for himself and to be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. Ryan’s wandringly imaginative prose merge elegantly on the page where we see a vulnerable child meandering down a lonely road inside a winged pen that resembles a swan in flight:

*I am poetry,  
surrounding the dreamer.  
Ever present,  
I capture the spirit,  
enslave  
the reluctant pen,  
and become  
the breath  
on the writer’s only road.*

Through adversity and uncertainty, Neftali is unwavering in his perseverance to stand up to his oppressive father and be a voice for others.

A prominent figurehead at the railroad, Neftali’s father often hosts dinners at his house for the workers yet is shamed when he learns the name of the poet whose verse was read aloud at his table was none other than his own son. “How could [Neftali] feel so proud yet so full of fear at the same time? He glanced up and caught Father looking at him...Father did not look happy” (Ryan 284–7).

When one of the dinner guests compliments Neftali’s writing, his father dismisses it a “frivolity” and “a mere hobby and nothing more” (Ryan 286), but Neftali’s Uncle Orlando

proposes that Neftali come work for him at his printing press and pitches the idea as an opportunity for Neftali to learn the ins and outs of business:

“He would make a good assistant for me,” said Uncle Orlando...  
To help save money for the university.” Father’s face reddened  
with anger. “I p–p–promise to bring up my score. I would not l–let  
my marks in school suffer.” [Neftali] could not believe he’d spoken  
out to Father. Where had the words come from? (Ryan 287–8).

The summation of courage that has been building in Neftali becomes realized here when we witness for the first time, Neftali finding his voice as a poet and beginning to make his voice heard in front of his father.

Neftali’s father’s attempts to suppress his son’s self-expression is relentless. He is irate when he discovers a political article written by Neftali has been printed in the Santiago newspaper for all the world to see. He throws Neftali’s notebooks out the window and storms outside. Feverishly blowing his conductor’s whistle, he sets fire to it all.

A plume of smoke filled the air...”No!” [yelled Neftali]...  
...In several giant bounds, he stood on the edge of the  
street, hoping to salvage something, anything” (Ryan 326).

Neftali’s father’s resolute attempts to silence Neftali falter in the face of his son’s growing, courageous resolve to have his truth known, no matter what the cost.

...“Now we will see what you become!”... Not saying a  
word, Neftali nudged the [ashes] aside with his boot,  
Underneath, a tiny ember blinked (Ryan 329).

Here we witness the transformative power of fire and loss and also see them to be symbols of death and rebirth and yet, even when met with such adversity, Neftali’s undying internal flame is only further fueled to follow what he feels compelled to do: to be a voice of and for the voiceless. Neftali’s resilience on his path of self-discovery is humbling in this heart-wrenching scene. A poignant compliment to verse is paired with an image of notebooks resting on a cloud that ascends toward the heavens while we read:

*Where is the heaven of lost stories?* (Ryan 230–1).

Sís' emotion–infused illustrations continue to spring forth naturally as quiet compositions on the page and lend a rich dimension to Ryan's compelling prose as witnessed in this powerful scene and throughout the text. Together, they mirror effortlessly what the reader sees as Neftali's inner imaginative world: a world of escape from the harsh external realities of life; a haven where *the dreamer* is safe to dream and to create.

As Neftali begins work at his uncle's printing press, he soon becomes privy to secret meetings held behind closed doors that organize protests against developers attempting to take away the land and rights of the indigenous Mapuche people. Neftali becomes increasingly aware of the high stakes involved in voicing one's truth.

Just as Neftali's father has attempted to silence him by burning his notebooks, a violent mob has attempted to do the same and set fire to his uncle's printing press. Neftali hears the news and quickly flees to the scene:

“Nephew, they may have silenced *La Mañana*, but they will never silence my pen.” He extended his outstretched hand. Neftali looked into his uncle's determined face. He did not see a man defeated by exhaustion... He saw an intense resolve to speak for those who could not speak for themselves. Neftali reached out and grasped his uncle's palm and held it tight. ‘Nor will they silence mine’ (Ryan 308–9).

A swarm of dots migrate on the page in the image of a giant swan. Amidst the ash and soot, Neftali wonders:

*Is fire born of words?  
Or are words born of fire?* (Ryan 310–11).

Here Neftali experiences firsthand, the unyielding attempts to silence the press and where we see a foundation being laid for a young poet activist. In *The Dreamer*, the young Reyes, who will later be known as Pablo Neruda and throughout his life will blend poetry and politics and align himself with the mass sufferings of people to be a powerful voice for them.

Neftali begins writing for the University of Santiago's student paper and receives news that a student poet whom he admired was imprisoned during a student protest and died in jail. This is a sobering reminder of the high stakes involved when voicing one's truth and speaking with moral authority. He also realizes that disobeying his wrathful father, who forbids Neftali from wasting time on what he deems writing: "a useless hobby," could cost him an opportunity at a college education. That is a risk he is not willing to take.

*The Dreamer* artfully portrays a silenced young man whose verse blossoms from his fascination with the natural world and the hardships he witnesses both in nature as well as with his fellow man. In a noble effort to avoid laying shame to his father's name for speaking out against important issues, Neftali thumbs through a book of Italian poetry and lands on the name Paolo and converts it to Spanish:

The name was not only a perfect solution, it was a perfect fit. He picked up his pen again. At the end of the poem, instead of signing Neftali Reyes, he wrote Pablo Neruda. He would use this name to save Father the humiliation of having a son who was a poet (Ryan 334–5).

The reader stands with Neftali as he stands up for himself. It is with great integrity that he adopts a pseudonym, not out of cowardness but out of a kindness and respect for his father. In honoring his family's name, Neftali honors his own moral conscience with the voice he is compelled to give to those who do not have one.

Neftali Reyes, now known by the penname Pablo Neruda, sees the world in its smallest measures, pinecone by pinecone, and as Temple Bowers writes in, "Thematic and Craft Considerations of *The Dreamer*, "[Neftali] has seen the best there is to see...[having] undergone a metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood" (38). A young Neruda now decides to speak not only for himself but to also be a voice for others.

In an interview with *The Paris Review* entitled, "The Art of Poetry," Neruda himself said, "I have never been in with those in power and have always felt that my vocation and my

duty was to serve the Chilean people. In my actions and with my poetry.” At the end of *The Dreamer*, Ryan encapsulates this sentiment eloquently in which she writes:

*Poetry had laid down its path, and Neftali had no choice but to follow...when he did not agree with the politics at the university or the politics of country. He wrote. His convictions played out with monotonous determination of a printing press...*

Like the Stork commonly seen in folklore delivering babies in clothed bundles to doorsteps, in *The Dreamer*, Sís’ gliding imagery of a swan is seen over several pages carrying Neruda’s poem[s] and Ryan’s words which:

*...traveled over fences, bridges and, across borders, their wings beating with the same pulse, their hearts eager to feel all that he could dream (Ryan 343–52).*

As Neftali sets out on an inspiring journey of perseverance and self–discovery, he not only transforms his life but the world around him. In this paper, I have illustrated how Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *The Dreamer* portrays the transformative power of triumph through adversity and how artistic imagination by way of poetry lays the foundation for Neftali’s moral courage. For it is in the face of his own hardship, through courage, beauty, and righteousness, that Neftali Reyes finds his beautiful ethical voice. As Pam Muñoz Ryan and Peter Sís masterfully convey in the biographical fiction *The Dreamer*, Neftali Reyes, also known as Pablo Neruda, becomes not only an important figurehead for political activism in Chile and a prominent crusader for the rights of the voiceless, indigenous people, he finds the courage to follow his own true path to become one of the most beloved poets the world has even known.

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