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IB English Literature SL

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April 4th, 2019

### Literary Commentary on Jan Kemp, *Elephant Riding*

The rare intimacy we experience with animals can reveal the innate beauty of life and connection, though often, in modern times, this feeling is exploited for financial gain as the animal is used for tourism or entertainment. The persona in Jan Kemp's poem, *Elephant riding*, describes their experience of roaming the streets of New Delhi on the back of an elephant, revealing the closeness they feel with the creature, but also the disappointment towards the exploitation of the animal, presumably as a tourist attraction.

The intimacy between the persona and the elephant is expressed throughout the poem through short, descriptive expressions. As the poem begins, the persona directly describes the action of climbing up the animal in straightforward terms: "Climbing up / the back of an elephant / you spring into / the toehold of its tail," (1-4) with a liberal use of enjambment that simultaneously slows the pace, allowing the reader to take in the minute details in her approaching the elephant, and establishes an endearing tone regarding the animal. The alliteration of the "t" and "r" sounds: "you spring into / the toehold of its tail," "grab the ropes / strapped round its belly" (3-4, 6-7) expresses the strong and firm, yet round and gentle body of the elephant. However, the reference of the "mahout" (5) who leads and controls the animal, and the "ropes / strapped round its belly" (6-7) hints at a later theme of exploitation.

After the persona "hauls [themselves] up" and the elephant, personified and referred to as a female, stands up: "she rises," the persona shifts their attention to the experience of riding the elephant through the "New Delhi streets" that are decorated by the "Ashoka leaves," establishing the environment as foreign and rare, evoking an adventurous and alluring tone. (8, 9, 33, 13) The suggestion that "[she is] high / under the hanging Ashoka leaves" (12-13) references both the physical height and grandioseness of the elephant, as well as the mental excitement felt during the ride, further enhanced by the alliteration which draws focus to the

tallness—“high” as much as to notice the “hanging” tree leaves. The elephant is described to “move like a ship,” describing its smooth and slow walking pace, as they “flow forward,” like a sailing ship. (11, 14) This metaphor is extended in describing the elephant’s ears, likened to “grey sails,” with an additional image of sailing at sea, as they later suggest that the experience is “like riding a whale.” (15, 21)

The level of respect and closeness the persona feels towards the elephant is reinforced as the animal is again referenced as “She,” (16) endearing her not only to the persona but also to the reader. This intimacy is also present in the description of her “[flinging] the odd young-leaved branch / into her mouth,” while admiration is expressed in the words: “triumphant trunk.” The persona wants to express this intimacy, “to scratch / the top of her stubbled head” like one would do to a close pet, and “tell her it’s like riding a whale / they’re both your favorite creates.” (16-17, 18, 19-20, 21-22) However, a hint of sadness is shown as the persona “[would] like to know their languages / couldn’t she speak / just a little of hers?” (23-25) suggesting the eagerness to express their feeling of admiration and connection towards the elephant, adequately concluding the persona’s interest and closeness that they feel during the ride.

Such expression of closeness and intimacy, however, is directly contrasted as the speaker shifts their tone and draws attention back to reality, where the animal is being used merely as a tool for monetary gain. This change is indicated as the description of the elephant is abruptly ended and the focus is altered to the mahout who “rubs thumb & fingers together,” (27) requesting payment for the ride—the lowly action emphasizing how the persona feels disgusted by this avaricious behavior. The persona “furiously nodding” is an expression of frustration and anger towards such behavior, especially right after the enjoyable ride and the connection she felt with the elephant; and the italicized speech: “yes pay, of course we’ll pay,” shows that this frustration is towards the materialistic intentions of the mahout who uses the elephant merely as a means to make money. (28, 29)

The persona, despite this anger, hints still at the fantasy of riding the elephant “forever / riding New Delhi streets,” but is then reminded again of the mahout as the “mahout’s boy” is accompanying the ride, and switches back to a negative tone: “or it’ll suddenly have had enough / trumpet & fling me off or bolt.” (32-33, 34, 35-36) This imagination of the elephant

refusing and rejecting her—“fling me off or bolt”—indicates the distance they developed due to the greedy desires of the mahout, which is further shown in the shift from referring the elephant as a “she,” to an “it,”: “it’ll suddenly have had enough.” (35) The suggestion that the persona would “never have paid / till he let [them] down,” (37-38) indicates that the disconnect is enhanced as the persona is physically distant from the elephant; they would have never thought to treat the animal as the mahout did—a service to be payed for—until they were physically distanced.

The persona does, in the end, let go of the animal, though the mixed feelings of the connection she felt riding the elephant, and the pity towards the animal, is juxtaposed and alternatingly expressed in the following lines: “[the persona] watched her / join the diesel-belching traffic circle / my ship of the jungle.” (39-41) The contrast between the wondrous image as the “ship of the jungle” and another merely as a form of transportation amongst the “diesel-belching traffic” is enriched though the diction describing both perspectives—one wonderful, and the other revolting. (41, 40) The following expression of it being “dirty & grey / non-comparised, gentle, knowing female,” (42-43) shows the humility and gentleness of the creature, yet is immediately contrasted with the reminder that it is still, only a “working animal” (44) for the mahout.

Through the vivid descriptions of the experience of riding an elephant, personifying and endearing it to the audience, yet starkly shifting tone to a narrative regarding the exploitation of such a gentle creature by the mahout, communicates the pity the persona feels towards their fantastic experience followed by the reminder of material matters. The poem concludes with a clear remark regarding this pitiful emotion, referencing the elephant again personified as a female: “they say / a woman is beautiful / when she walks / like an elephant,” (45-49) appreciating the beauty of the animal, and showing compassion at its exploitation.

*Word Count: 1,115 words*