

Grace Knudsen
Dr. Lewis
ENG 150- WWBU Literary Analysis
11-19-18

Shifting Sympathy in *Why We Broke Up*

In the 2011 novel *Why We Broke Up* by Daniel Handler, Min Green details the events of her short-term relationship with Ed Slaterton, providing thoughtful insights about why their eventual breakup came to be. Written entirely from the point of view of Min, the story allows the reader to hear the progress of the relationship, without knowing the actual reason behind the breakup until it happens at the end of the novel. Instead, Handler describes the relationship through the manner of highlighting both of Ed and Min's positive traits, only to surprise the reader by revealing Ed's faults at the end. By delaying the true reason behind the breakup until the end of the novel, Handler creates sympathy for both Ed and Min throughout the story, thus allowing the reader to decide their own feelings about Ed at the end of the novel.

Min is the first character in the novel that appears to be truly sympathetic. After Min is with Ed at the park, she finds a small plant stuck to her jacket. She keeps it with her, saying that she could have "taken care of it and who knows what might have grown, what might have happened with this thing from the park where I loved you, Ed, so much" (155). Min wanted to fight for the relationship, and she treats the plant as a metaphor for her love of Ed. It was small at the beginning, and if Min had cared for it she could have protected it from dying. Min and Ed could have had a happy ending if they both worked together for it. This quote creates sympathy for Min because it shows how desperately she wanted her relationship with Ed to function and to survive. Min's motivation to keep her love alive is what makes her such a relatable and sympathetic character in the novel.

By the middle of the novel, Handler includes facts about Ed's life that allow sympathy for his character as well. Min learns about Ed's mother who is sick, and meets Ed's sister who seems to care for him greatly. Ed is given a supportive family background, implying that he must be a kindhearted person. Ed's family dynamic is a stark contrast to the friend group that he is involved with, which shows that Ed has a more wholesome aspect of himself that he does not let on much. If Ed's friends do not encourage him to be sentimental, then Ed will refuse to show that part of himself. Ed does show this side to Min, however. When Min meets Ed's friends for the first time at a party, Ed shows her a toy truck that he found on the ground, and tells her about how he collects them because he believes that they have been taken from bullied kids. He explains that he has kept them despite nobody understanding his reason, that "Nobody got it... I [Ed] find them [toy trucks] and I look, I've always looked, for someone to give them to, to someone who didn't think Slaterton was crazy" (128). This is an important moment in Min and Ed's relationship, because Min sees Ed's true self for the first time. Ed begins to develop trust in Min, and confides a secret in her for the first time. His speech is cluttered and he can't seem to get the proper words out because he is uncomfortable with sharing his feelings, but he shows his vulnerability to Min. Ed feels safe telling her the truth because he knows how well she understands him, despite the other people in his life not showing much interest. This trust he has in Min shows that he is truly in love with her. We see Ed's inner conflicts and the risks he is willing to take to be with Min. This makes him a more sympathetic character, instead of being written off as a jock or a player by the reader.

Sympathy is finally given to both of the characters in the novel at the same time when Ed tells Min that he loves her. Min returns to Ed's house after he and his sister have had a fight, and

Ed tells Min that his sister told him to slow down and contemplate whether or not he should be in a relationship with her. Despite his sister's reluctance, Ed tells Min that he doesn't care about the differences between them. He says that he is okay with all of the strange aspects of Min's character, "because I [Ed] don't care, virginity, different, arty, weird parties with bad cake, that igloo. Just *together*, Min... Because, Min, listen. I love you" (199). This point in the novel encourages the reader to begin to root for Ed and Min's relationship to survive, as Ed is shown to truly love Min despite all of the people around him that are telling him not to. Handler leaves out the fact that Ed's sister was telling him not to cheat on Min for a specific purpose: for the reader to believe Ed's intentions the same way as Min did, which was to believe that their relationship was pure and was going to survive.

The end of the novel is what creates a split in Handler's attitude towards Min and Ed's characters. Min and Ed's breaking point is finally revealed, as Min discovers Ed had been cheating on her. Min follows Ed into a flower shop and is greeted by the florist, who knows Ed as a frequent customer, with the words "You must be Annette" (329). Ed had been built up to be a great boyfriend and a kindhearted character throughout the novel, but this ending quote reveals his secret that he had been cheating on Min with Annette. Handler leaves this quote at the very end of the novel so that the reader can be just as surprised as Min is when she learns about Ed's actions. The heartbreak that Min feels, after having such a pure love for Ed in the past of their relationship, is magnified by this shocking revelation at the end of the novel. Min's trust is compromised, and the sympathy that had been built up for Ed throughout the novel is shattered.

However, because of the previous exposition of Ed's life and his intentions, the reader can be left with two options: Ed can either be hated for his choice to cheat on Min, or Ed can be pitied for failing to change from his past of dating a lot of girls.

To be sure, Ed's actions of cheating on Min are inexcusable. Betraying a significant other's trust is a terrible deed, and is not always worthy of forgiveness. In Ed's case, Min is right to break up with him for cheating on her. This does not mean that Ed is an overall bad person, though. Ed is not described as a goodhearted character throughout the novel just for the sole purpose of shocking the audience at the end when his cheating is revealed. Instead, Ed is made to be extremely influenced by his peers, who he has said to have not understood him very much as shown by the toy truck scene in the novel. Ed's past may have a large impact on his actions now, and while Ed should not have cheated on Min, his actions have the potential to be understood. Perhaps Ed did not know any better, because he has a past of dating a lot of girls, and he did not pause to consider the differences between the past girls and between Min. Min's character is generally met with sadness and pity by most audiences, but Ed is allowed more specific interpretation, and Handler does this on purpose. There are always two sides to a story, especially for a breakup, and Handler wants to allow as much context for the two characters as possible so that they are equally understood by the reader.

Handler allows the shocking truth of Ed's nature to be revealed only at the end of the story so that the reader can understand the tragedy of the characters' relationship in a way that avoids bias. If the reader had known that Ed would end up cheating on Min, it would be more difficult for them to understand why Min seemed to love Ed so much, or to feel upset for Ed in making the mistake of ruining his relationship. Handler wants his audience to make the choice

for themselves about the future of Ed and Min, and he intentionally allows each character to be analyzed in terms of each individual reader. By leaving the shock until the end, there is a better understanding of the heartbreak, and both of the characters can be deemed worthy of sympathy, depending on the reader.

Works Cited

Handler, Daniel. *Why We Broke Up*. Little, Brown and Company, 2011.

Writing Center Appointment: I met with Virginia to make sure I was keeping all of my quote analyses relevant to my thesis statement, because I wanted to make sure I was keeping the idea of “sympathetic readers’ in my body paragraphs. After my appointment, I revised my paragraph about Ed’s toy truck scene so that it is analyzed more as if it were from Min’s point of view. To have sympathy for Ed’s character, I had to make sure that I wrote about viewing Ed as if the reader were experiencing his character like Min was. That way, my argument about Ed being a sympathetic character was stronger and more backed-up.