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“Cold Hands, Warm Heart”

Sydney Lewis

Amos Oz was born in Jerusalem in 1939, giving him a unique outlook on the State of Israel. He was a student at the Hebrew University, where, like one of his characters in *My Michael*, Hannah Greenbaum, he studied Hebrew literature. Oz wrote *My Michael* in 1968 and sold more than 50,000 copies. It was his first work to be translated from Hebrew to English, so this particular book drew in a large audience. In *My Michael*, Oz touches on many relevant themes, such as the conflict over the state of Israel, madness, love, war, and dreams, by surveying them through opposing pairs. Throughout *My Michael*, Oz uses terms of “hot” and “cold” to symbolize division and detachment, a central theme in the novel. These concepts are relatable ones that all of Oz’s readers, regardless of ethnicity and upbringing, would not only be able to understand but be able to feel for themselves. This universality makes “hot” and “cold” the perfect dichotomy to describe relationships and characters.

The first instance of “Cold hands, warm heart” in the novel occurs when Hannah has her arm around Michael. He jokes that since her hand is frozen, she must have cold hands and a warm heart. She responds, “My father had warm hands and a warm heart.”¹ Here, Hannah introduces a recurring comparison between Michael and her late father. Throughout the novel, Hannah describes her father as strong and smart. She consistently recalls specific phrases and stories he would tell her. The first time Hannah meets Michael she says, “I loved my late father more than any other man in the world.”² The reader immediately feels the tension between contemporary

memories of Michael and memories of Hannah's father from the more distant past. The hot-cold dichotomy already correlates to relationships and deep personal feelings.

Amos Oz's short story "Where the Jackals Howl" also explores a father-daughter relationship with the same dichotomy. In this story, Matityahu Damkov uses excessive force to grab his daughter Galila and shake her: "Blood filled his eyes. He swooped upon her, clapped his hand over her mouth, dragged her back inside the room, buried his lips in her hair, probed with his lips for her ear, found it, and told her."³ Here, the blood in the father's eyes demonstrates his anger, a feeling generally associated with heat. Galila's passivity is cold, as she is not moving or taking action on her own. This descriptive language helps the reader feel, not only understand, the tension in the relationship between Galila and her father.

The hot versus cold motif in *My Michael* also represents the differences between Michael and Hannah. Since the reader views the world through Hannah's eyes, her husband's detachment becomes more and more apparent as she retells more memories. She feels looked down upon and pitied when she says: "Michael, who sometimes speaks to me as if I were an unruly little girl, converses with his son as man to man."⁴ This type of observation, which makes up most of the novel, provides a lens into Hannah's life. She is very descriptive and detail-oriented when describing her husband. She characterizes Michael's actions and qualities in terms of temperature: "he agreed coldly," "warm lips," "warm belly," "warm, firm hand," and "cold pleasure" are a few examples of this. These descriptions bring the hot-cold dichotomy into concert with the male-female dichotomy upon which many of Hannah's observations are based. This connection allows the male-female dichotomy to be more than a concept. It is now a feeling that every human can share.

Oz uses dichotomies like night-day and winter-summer the same way he uses cold and warmth: to symbolize characteristics of relationships,

often detachment. Hannah feels a “sense of disappointment on waking. I mock at my vague longing to fall seriously ill.”⁵ Hannah’s tenuous health is a recurring theme throughout the novel. During the winter nights she has fits of diphtheria, but by the end of the winter when she has recovered she is lonelier and more upset. The heat, which can be a respite from the cold winter months and led to Hannah’s physical recovery, serves the opposite role for Hannah. It demonstrates that even when most people feel comforted in the heat, Hannah still feels off. Because of the universality and simplicity of the hot-cold dichotomy, it is clear to every reader that something is wrong with Hannah.

Hannah, like seasonal shifts between cold and warmth, alternates between living in the past and the present time. She is mostly trapped in the past but sporadically exists in the present relative to the events of the chapter. While the whole book is written in the past tense, Oz clearly indicates which memories are from a more distant past and which are the actual stories she is trying to recount. Hannah’s past with the twins, Halil and Aziz, haunts her and returns to her through vicious nightmares of assault. Hannah uses the past in order to get through her present-day life. The tone of the novel when she is in present-day seems dull and uninterested, but when she returns to her past, the details become more vivid and intense. Again, we can look at the hot-cold dichotomy. The dull present is cold, while the vivid past is hot. Not only have the ideas of hot and cold described interpersonal relationships, but Oz has now used this dichotomy to describe one person’s relationship with herself and her surroundings.

Amos Oz’s use of the dichotomy between hot and cold is crucial in understanding how Oz wants us to read his work. *My Michael* was not only translated into English to allow non-Israelis to read it, but it, along with other works by Oz, was written with universal understanding in mind. The most important facets of these stories – relationships like Michael and Hannah, night and day, and Matityahu and Galila – are written to go along with

concepts that everyone can understand. No matter the reader's background, relationships, and beliefs, that reader can relate to Oz's stories.

Sydney Lewis is a sophomore from Nashville, Tennessee majoring in Health and Societies. She may accidentally get a minor in Jewish Studies. She can always be found at Hillel pretending to study, but actually talking to her friends.

Endnotes

1. Amos Oz, *My Michael*, trans. Nicholas De Lange (Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 29.
2. Oz, page 4.
3. Amos Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl: and Other Stories*, trans. Nicholas De Lange and Philip Simpson (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) 19.
4. Oz, 116.
5. Oz, 21.