Under the Suite of the Middle Class

Viramontes’ bildungsroman *Under the Feet of Jesus,* written in 1995, paints the picture of environmental burden and economic struggle faced by immigrant farm workers against the setting of a Californian grape field. The novel focuses on a young girl named Estrella, which translates to “Star” from Spanish. She takes on the role of a mother: at only thirteen and the oldest of her four siblings, Estrella looks after her family when her dad leaves. Her mother, Petra, and her step-father, Perfecto, take the family across Central Valley to find jobs harvesting crops. When Alejo, Estrella’s best friend and potential love interest, falls severely ill from being doused by pesticides, Estrella, Perfecto, and Petra strive to use their limited resources to keep him alive. When they run out of money, Estrella firmly takes control by threatening a woman with a crowbar in order to transport Alejo to a hospital.

Estrella’s choice of using the crowbar as a weapon to wreck the nurse’s belongings and frighten the nurse may be perceived as an act of gross indecency. The nurse appropriately followed the rules of her job by requiring payment for her medical services. From the lens of morality, Estrella’s actions seem like an unwarranted and amoral exploitation of the nurse’s weakness. Yet on the other hand, Estrella’s actions may be framed as brave and heroic when the family’s dire circumstances are put into context. As someone without the financial means to get proper treatment for Alejo, Estrella faced a difficult choice between saving her best friend by doing something corrupt or saving her own integrity while losing a loved one. Yet with both the choices, Estrella would be confronting the stark reality of life as a child and losing her innocence. Like many children from the lower class, Estrella deals with the ugliest parts of the world early on in life and does not get to live a conventional, carefree childhood. Viramontes illustrates Estrella’s premature loss of innocence throughout the novel as inescapable—because of the circumstances and socioeconomic class she was born into, Estrella often holds little to no alternative in moral dilemmas, which leads her to lie, cheat, and steal. She was robbed of the privilege of freedom of choice. Petra, Estrella, and their future children will inevitably join this cycle of systematic oppression. Through the stylistic choice to juxtapose the losing of innocence with allegorical anecdotes revoking imagery of immobility, Viramontes alludes to the inescapable generational oppression of immigrants and migrant farm workers, members of the lower class. Ultimately, *Under the Feet of Jesus* stands as a social critique of the indifference from the middle class in the United States*.*

Many would argue that every child should have the right to a childhood. For most people, innocence is a key part of childhood: children need the time and space to grow naturally, and, generally, children should enjoy a precious couple of years of simplicity at the beginning stage of life before they have to confront the complex “real” world. During childhood, people typically learn and gather the memories that they hold dear for the rest of their lives, making childhood an important and sacred stage in a person’s life. Not every child’s family can afford a safe and loving environment for their children. Petra could not afford this for her children-- Estrella is deprived of such a childhood, since she is pressured with the burden of taking care of herself and her family early on. In dealing with the economic struggle, Estrella is often left with no choice but to take immoral actions, such as lie, cheat, and steal. When Estrella sees a scale on the nurse’s desk, she describes flashbacks to when she picked cotton for a living, remembering “how she wet the cotton or hid hand sized rocks in the middle of her sack so that the scale tipped in her favor when the cotton was weighed. The scale predicted what she would be able to eat...the thought that she had to cheat for food made her resentful of any scale” (137). As a pre-teen, Estrella needed to confront the unfairness and ugliness of the world. If she did not pick enough cotton, she and her siblings would starve. Putting rocks on the scale can be considered both lying and cheating; therefore, Estrella’s actions can be considered sins. Yet, these sins are not her fault, so she is not an immoral person--she leads an ethically questionable life and stands in this position because of her social class. As a result of needing to lie, cheat, and steal, Estrella lost her innocence early on in her life.

Viramontes uses stylistic choices and parallels to illustrate Estrella’s early loss of innocence. Throughout the novel, Viramontes demonstrates a heightened awareness of the passage of time, which she uses as a device to emphasize the losing of innocence. Viramontes uses motifs to demonstrate the undeniable aging of the main characters. Aging manifests in multiple dimensions throughout the novel, both in the physical and emotional sense. Perfecto senses his physical aging when he catches a glimpse of his reflection in a silver towel dispenser. Viramontes notes Perfecto’s reaction to realizing what he looks like, describing how “he rubbed his eyes and his eyes watered and [he] put his glasses back on to see himself. Old, so old” (137). The imagery of Perfecto’s eyes watering connotes tears and sadness, while the rubbing of eyes demonstrates exhaustion-- he may feel weary at the parts of life that used to excite him, which is a psychological sign of aging. Moreover, Perfecto’s need for glasses illustrates further physical decline with his loss of vision. Through using a dreary tone, Viramontes correlates physical aging with sadness, weariness, and weakness. This dreary tone continues through Viramontes’ descriptions of emotional aging. Part of emotional aging comes with adapting to strenuous circumstances by adopting a higher emotional maturity, which happens to Estrella. As a thirteen-year-old, Estrella takes on the role of caretaker for her younger siblings. Thus, she needs to make difficult moral decisions on their behalves and sacrifice her own comfort for the safety of her family. The dreary tone used to convey the passing of time and this parallelism between emotional and physical aging shines a negative light on the forced maturity of children.

This negativity is reinforced throughout the novel: Viramontes creates an ambience of stress and panic through underlining a sense of rushing against time. When the nurse meets Alejo and attempts to diagnose his illness, she keeps checking her Timex wristwatch (137). The nurse’s habit suggests that she feels pressed for time. Following the visit with the nurse, Perfecto drives Alejo to the hospital as the orange Union ball shrinks with the sun” (151). The idea of the sun shrinking alludes to the closing of the day and the eventual closing of the hospital. Thus, Perfecto races against time to save Alejo. Similar to how the nurse and Perfecto feel as if they are do not have enough time, Viramontes implies that children like Estrella do not have enough time to be a child. Instead, their pressing circumstances leave them rushing into responsibility, and they are forced into maturing before they are fully ready. Through stressing the passage of time and what that means for Perfecto, Alejo, and Estrella, Viramontes sinks the plot into a cloud of sorrow associated with a loss of innocence.

Viramontes further highlights the sorrow and hardships of Estrella’s loss of innocence by juxtaposing Estrella’s maturity against the blithe play of the twins. As Estrella deals with the weighty matters, her siblings, who are only a few years younger than she is, are oblivious to their surroundings. When Perfecto finally arrives to the Corazon Community Hospital, the twins “fogged their breath on the windows and made finger faces (155)” while Estrella, a child herself, holds “Alejo’s arm around her shoulder (155)” and carries him into the hospital to get treatment for his illness. In this scene, Estrella faces a physical burden in carrying the weight of Alejo, who is older and heavier than she is. Estrella manages a challenging mental burden by attempting to figure out the best line of action to maximize Alejo’s chances at staying alive despite having the financial means to do so. Estrella navigates a hefty emotional burden throughout the hospital scene as she gives it her all and still may end up losing a loved one forever. Contrastingly, the twins use their fingers to draw happy faces on a car window. While Estrella walks outside of the car, the twins remain inside-- physically shielded from the outside world, emotionally shielded from the burdens that come with the loss of innocence. Drawing sloppily with their fingertips, the twins epitomize the impulsiveness and blitheness of innocence. Their carefree drawings of faces convey that the twins do not understand the magnitude of the situation their family is going through. Yet, Viramontes hints at the transience of their innocence: the drawings are made against the canvas of fogged breath, which eventually evaporates and fades quickly off the windows. The twins’ happiness in their oblivion-- and their lack of responsibility-- will disappear in time, just as the faces they drew in the fog will. The stark contrast drawn between the weight of Estrella’s burdens and the carefree, lighthearted activities of the twins underscores the differences between the siblings. The twins have the privilege of not needing to care or act in Alejo’s dire situation. Contrarily, Estrella faces the immense responsibility of the role she was pushed into in this moment. Viramontes puts Estrella’s mental struggle in the foreground during this scene, emphasizing Estrella’s premature loss of innocence.

Estrella’s premature loss of innocence lies out of her control: it is a result of intergenerational systematic oppression. Viramontes expresses this cycle of oppression through a her symbolic imagery depicting sinking and immobility. When a biplane douses Alejo in pesticides, he feels as if he is sinking into the Earth and unable to escape. He describes “his feet sinking, sinking to his knee joints, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs” (78). Just as Alejo feels powerless in his physical struggle against the tar, these immigrants and migrant farmers feel powerless against the cycle of oppression. As hard as people try to escape, the lack of social mobility is ingrained in society through personal, institutional, and cultural prejudices. In Alejo’s case, he does not have control over his body while he’s sinking, and, simultaneously, without an education, he does not have control over his future in the United States.

Viramontes demonstrates this lack of control with other motifs, such as vehicles that cannot move. When Perfecto arrives to the nurse’s office, he parks next to a white ambulance. Viramontes describes the ambulance, noting “the tires of the ambulance were missing, and Estrella sat back to think” (134). A similar problem occurs with Petra’s wagon: “the tire was buried up to the axle in mud and it spun like a treadmill...The tire getting stuck in mud or sand was not new” (128). Since a vehicle’s main function is to transport items or people, a missing tire or a tire getting stuck renders a vehicle essentially useless. Viramontes draws attention to the immobility of objects that are built specifically to be mobile. These faulty vehicles are literary representations of the deep-rooted faults in the social system. Similar to how the vehicles are unable to move to a different position, people in lower socioeconomic levels in the United States are constantly unable to move and better their positions in society. Like many other migrant farmers, Estrella and Alejo remain stuck in a seemingly endless, cross-generational cycle, in which the American dream is unattainable.

This cross-generational cycle of oppression faced by the lower class in the United States is perpetuated by the middle class and the social structure they enforce. In Estrella’s case, the nurse symbolizes the middle class with her Timex wristwatch, perfume, and perfect red lipstick: the nurse has much more financial power than Estrella’s family. Although Estrella makes several attempts to barter her babysitting services and Perfecto’s fixing services, the nurse waves her off each time, refusing to help Estrella in her desperation (147). She unapologetically takes the family’s last dollars as payment. The nurse closed herself off from the struggle of Perfecto and Estrella, allowing herself to be ignorant or dismissive towards their situation. Because of her blatant indifference, Estrella uses physical force to get what her family needs, in turn losing more of her innocence. This situation is a microcosm of what happens throughout society: because of the blatant indifference of the middle class, children in the lower class are forced into situations where they need to lie, cheat, and steal to survive, which leads to a premature loss of innocence. Viramontes implies that, like the nurse, the middle class does not actively harm the lower class; rather, it is their lack of action and compassion that contributes to the suffering of the lower class. Through this claim, the middle class robs children in the lower class of their childhoods and renders the lower class stuck in a cycle of oppression. As such, immigrants in the lower class like Estrella and Alejo live in a free country, but they will never attain enough power to have social mobility and be truly free.

Viramontes’ main purpose in combining these stylistic elements and symbolic imagery is to bring this lack of social mobility and freedom to light. She frequently illustrates the effects of unequal environmental burdens faced by people in poverty, such as Alejo’s illness from heavy pesticide exposure. Through her lyrical and vivid descriptions of the life of migrant farmworkers, she advocates for the lower class by appealing to the sensitivity of the middle and upper classes. In emphasizing the tragedy Estrella’s family faces, Viramonte compels readers to be aware of the ways in which they indirectly are affecting another social class. *Under the Feet of Jesus* stands as a book for the environmental justice movement. Through her storytelling, Viramontes calls her readers to action.