

Culminating Writing Task Exemplar Student Response

In *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse, the phrase “out of the dust” relates to the theme of home and family being important. Billie Jo overcomes many challenges, and one of those challenges is the constant dust storms. In addition to the dust storms, she suffers the death of her mother, and burned hands. She also nearly loses her relationship with her father. Throughout the novel, she talks about wanting to leave the dust behind, but in the end she learns that she can’t do that because the dust is part of who she is, and where her family lives. One of the important themes of the novel is how important home and family is. By the end of the novel, Billie Jo grows up and realizes that home and family are important to her, more important than her desire to get “out of the dust.”

Billie Jo and the rest of her community suffer through many dust storms. Dust is in their houses and in their food. It ruins their crops. Billie Jo’s father is a farmer, so the dust is a real problem. Her mother spends a lot of time cleaning the house, but also tries to make their home better by planting some apple trees. As Billie Jo says, “In spite of the dust,/in spite of the drought,/because of Ma’s stubborn care,/these trees are/thick with blossoms” (43). Billie Jo appreciates how her mother has hope that the trees will give them apples. When she talks about the dust, Billie Jo isn’t always hopeful, though. She is upset when she sees Jo De La Flor’s skinny cattle and says, “I look at Jo and know our future is drying up and blowing away with the dust” (39). Because of the dust, there is no future.

After her mother dies, Billie Jo finds her life even more unbearable, and she thinks even more often about leaving the dust behind. She is suffering from burns to her hands, which makes it hard to play piano. She and her father aren’t talking to each other. “Restless,/I tangle in the dusty sheets,/sending the sand flying,/cursing the grit against my skin,/between my teeth,/under my lids,/swearing I’ll leave this forsaken place” (104). Now that Ma is gone, Billie Jo has to do the cleaning, which is hard because of her hands. She says, “It isn’t the work I hate,/the knuckle-breaking work of beating mud out of/every blessed thing,/but every day/my fingers and hands/ache so bad. I think/I should just let them rest,/let the dust rest,/let the world rest./But I can’t leave it rest,/on account of Ma,/haunting” (110). Billie Jo feels guilty because she partly caused Ma’s death. She is reminded of her mother when she sees the dirty house because she knows her Ma would be cleaning it.

Toward the end of the novel, Billie Jo becomes so miserable that she decides to leave home, to leave the dust behind her. She and her father are still not talking to one another, and she is worried about the spots on his skin. She says “My father’s digging his own grave,/he calls it a pond,/but I know what he’s up to./He is rotting away,/like his father,/ready to leave me behind in the dust./Well, I’m leaving first” (196). She is afraid her father will die, too, and leave her behind “in the dust.” She sneaks out of the house in the middle of the night. She gets on a train heading west, and meets a man who has left his family behind and has nothing but a photograph of them, which he gives to her. She suddenly misses her father, and realizes that the best place for her to be is at home with him. She says, “Getting away,/it wasn’t any better./Just different,/And lonely./Lonelier than the wind./Emptier than the sky./More silent than the dust,/piled in drifts between me/and my/father” (204). Billie Jo knows that she can’t run away from her problems.

Billie Jo never manages to get “out of the dust.” At the end of the story, she has grown up enough to know that she needs her family and her community around her, and that she will just have to put up with the dust like they do. She calls her father “Daddy” and says, “I tell him about getting out of the dust/and how I can’t get out of

something/that's inside me" (205). She recognizes that the dust is as much a part of her as her family and friends are, and that her place is with them. She begins to forgive herself and her father for her mother's death, and begins to live her life again.