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A Mother’s Unwavering Strength

Strength is a human quality that comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it comes packaged as an Olympic weight lifter; other times it takes the form of a political leader. It may even take the form of a mother’s supportive arms. Ruta Sepetys explores this idea in her debut novel *Between Shades of Gray*. This book of historical fiction chronicles the lives of a Lithuanian family torn apart by Stalin’s purges and demonstrates the variability of human strength through many characters. Of particular note is the mother in this story. Despite the physical weakness that eventually destroys her, Elena Vilkas must be considered the strongest character in the novel due to her mental stamina, her emotional devotion, and her moral resolve. She proves that strength comes from an unwavering sense of determination which makes her the strongest character in the novel.

When friends fail, governments crumble, and environments revolt, a person’s mental strength becomes the critical factor for survival. Elena Vilkas is a mentally strong character. Even before her arrest, she has the mental stamina to prepare for the worst by gathering and hiding precious items. “She [is] playing the Soviet officers like a careful hand of cards…sewing jewelry, papers, silver, and other valuables into the lining of her coat” (Sepetys 11). She keeps her emotions in check in order to take the necessary steps to protect her family. After her family’s arrest, she becomes the source of reason and logic for those around her. When others give in to their emotional distress, Elena Vilkas remains strong and grounded in her role as protector. She is able to think through each situation and make decisions based on fact. Elena is determined to survive and she knows that she must summon a deep mental strength in order to do so.

In addition to her mental strength, Elena Vilkas also possesses an emotional strength which is displayed by her ability to keep her emotions under control. It would be easy to let her emotions run wild and take control, but she summons the strength necessary to keep her emotions in check. This is readily obvious when she and her children are introduced to their housemate, Ulyushka. She is a particularly loathsome and selfish woman who makes life difficult for the Vilkas family. “A squat Altaian woman wrapped in layers ran to the door and began screaming after the guard. Mother shoved us in the corner. The woman turned and began yelling at us” (Sepetys 105). Under normal circumstances, Elena might lash out and allow her anger to take over. In this situation, however, she knows the value of control and she knows that they need the support of Ulyushka, so she controls her emotions in order to provide security for her family.

While Elena possesses both mental and emotional strength, her greatest asset may be her moral resolve. She is unflinching in her moral stand. She has a clearly defined sense of what is right and what is wrong, and she is willing to stand by her beliefs, even when it is more difficult to do so. She refuses to act as a translator for the NKVD even though she can receive special privileges for doing so, because “a guilty conscience is not worth extra food” (Sepetys 122). She refuses to sign the papers declaring herself a criminal because she knows it is the wrong thing to do. “Komorov marched over to mother. He grabbed her by the arm and spit something that resembled an oyster onto her face…Mother quickly wiped off the slime as if it didn’t bother her at all” (Sepetys 146). Elena’s conscience will not allow her to sign the papers, so she must face the consequences of her moral resolve. She stands strong in her determination.

In the face of unbearable oppression and violence, many characters in *Between Shades of Gray* display an inner strength, but none more so than Elena Vilkas. She possesses a mental strength that allows her to protect her family and care for those around her. Her emotions are kept under control when most other characters are crumbling around her. She is firmly grounded in her sense of right and wrong and summons the strength to stand by her beliefs. This combination of characteristics is what sets Elena Vilkas apart from the other characters. When her children or fellow prisoners are weak, she is strong for all of them. Unfortunately, her physical body is not as strong as her mind and her soul, and she succumbs to disease after a long battle for survival. Her strength will live on in the person of her daughter who learned of true strength from the woman who gave her all.

Bibliography

Sepetys, Ruta. *Between Shades of Gray.* Penguin Young Readers Group, 2011.