Contrasting Miss Hancock and Charlotte’s Mother

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Charlotte’s mother is “a flawless, modern building, created of glass and the smoothest of pale concrete,” and Miss Hancock is a birthday cake, “frosted by someone unschooled in the art of cake decoration.” A young girl named Charlotte writes these metaphors taught by her wonderful, enthusiastic English teacher in middle school. This creative class is an escape from her life with her mother who is always cool, calm and controlled. As Charlotte enters high school, her attitude changes and she soon forgets who she is and what is important. Through the use of carefully crafted extended metaphors, Budge Wilson contrasts the characters of Ms. Hancock and Charlotte’s mother in key ways in this short story.

Ms. Hancock and Charlotte’s mother interact with Charlotte very differently. Ms. Hancock is a very laid back, fun and enthusiastic teacher and she encourages all her students to express themselves and to be who they are “…without fear of mockery of [their] peers…” When asking her students to write metaphors, she exclaims, “Let it all out…without restraint, without inhibition, with verve” so students can allow their minds to run free when composing metaphors or writing. Miss Hancock always encourages her students to be outgoing and to speak their minds especially with Charlotte as she says, “Oh heavens. Charlotte, breathed Miss Hancock, of course I want it! Read it all to us. Do Charlotte. Oh do!” Miss Hancock urges Charlotte to share her extended metaphor about her mother even when Charlotte feels unsure and nervous. From the metaphor and through Charlotte’s eyes, we learn that Charlotte’s mom is stern, judgmental and serious. She has strict rules about hanging out with friends as, “weekends did not include parties or boys.” Charlotte would often hang out with her friend Julia and talk about boys instead of actually experiencing parties and hanging out with boys. Charlotte also feels intimidated by her mother, her efficiency and work ethic, “When I returned at 6 o’clock, my mother, who had been home only one hour, has prepared a complicated three-course meal-expert, delicious, nutritious.” She feels anxious thinking about her inability to live up to her mom’s expectations. At home, Charlotte “spoke quietly, never complained, ate what was put in front of [her], and obeyed all rules without questions or argument.” Her mother was very judgmental to Miss Hancock calling her “brassy” when she has only met her once at the Home and School meeting. Charlotte’s mother and Miss Hancock both have different ways of interacting with people, but when it comes to Charlotte they have very different methods of relating to her.

Both adults have their own ways of teaching Charlotte at school and at home. Ms. Hancock embraces creativity and allows Charlotte to be herself and express her feelings through writing. She makes learning fun to enhance interests and makes students want to learn despite their attitude or intelligence, “she could analyse without destroying a piece of literature.” Miss Hancock also has her own way of approaching Charlotte about her feelings for her mother when she says, “I don’t want to push you even a little bit, but are you sure you don’t want to discuss it?” This is very different from the way Charlotte’s mother always tells Charlotte what to do and when to do it without question. Miss Hancock allows her to make her own decisions and encourages independent thinking. She also reminds Charlotte how talented she is as she says, “…. your writing was very intriguing today, and that it showed a certain maturity that surprised and delighted me.” This was something that Charlotte was never told from her mother so it was meaningful. Miss Hancock’s small gestures like “waving her hand in a fluttery farewell” show that she’s passionate about teaching and that she cares about her students and appreciates them. Charlotte’s mother has a very straight forward way of teaching Charlotte, she would tell her do to something immediately without question and Charlotte would obey. As a child, she was told by her mother to “keep [the toys] all in one spot, over there behind daddy’s chair” to manage her toy “garden” neatly so that it wouldn’t make a mess everywhere. This left Charlotte feeling sad and empty as she says, “but what was it about my mother’s methods that left me feeling so depraved, so unsalvageable?” Charlotte’s mother’s demands make Charlotte feel devalued and unwanted at times, “I was 13 by now, and knew all about cleaning tubs and wiping of countertops and sweeping up crumbs.” She felt like a cleaning lady rather than a teenager. Charlotte gives clear evidence of her feelings in her interactions with her mother and Ms, Hancock but her descriptions of their contrasting physical appearance speak louder than words.

Ms. Hancock and Charlotte’s mother are opposites in physical appearance. Miss Hancock is flamboyant in her style of hair, makeup and clothing. In the beginning of the story, Charlotte briefly describes Miss Hancock’s makeup application showed “an excess of zeal and a minimum of control.” Her “luminous frosted lipstick” and “her eyelashes curled up and out singly, like a row of tiny bent sticks” are more examples of her excessively, colorful and bright appearance. By contrast, Charlotte’s mother is cool and reserved in her style. She is stern and intimidating in the way she carries herself. She embodies Charlotte’s description of her in the office building metaphor. She is a hard woman made of stone. Charlotte’s mother looks rock hard like a statue and almost inhuman in appearance, “…with her dark hair, her flawless figure, her smooth hands. She never acted frazzled or rushed or angry.” Even her facial appearance was pristine, “her forehead was unmarked by age lines or worry marks.” These physical contrasts also mirror the differences in their personalities and relationships with Charlotte.

In conclusion, through use of carefully crafted extended metaphors, Budge Wilson contrasts the characters of Ms. Hancock and Charlotte’s mother in important ways. By the way they interact with Charlotte, Miss Hancock is very relaxed and calm while her mother is very intimidating and demanding. They both have their own way of teaching Charlotte: Miss Hancock embraces creativity and encourages her to be more outgoing while her mother is very straight forward. And finally, they both have different physical appearances from a carefree and flamboyant school teacher to a hard and controlling mother.