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STUDY GUIDE

Out of the Dust Writing Style

By *KAREN HESSE*

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Writing Style



Shakespeare's Top Insults



Free-Verse Poetry

One question that's probably been boggling your mind is, "What's up with the poetry? I thought I was reading a novel." Don't worry, we promise you are.

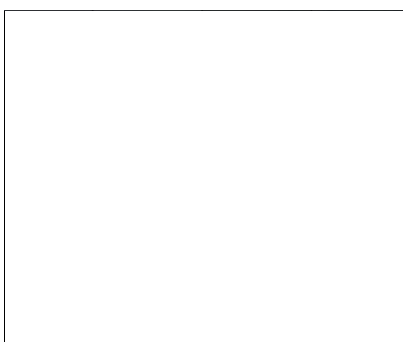
What's up, is that Hesse uses individual **free-verse** poems to move the plot forward, introduce characters, and do all the same stuff book chapters do. In her acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal for *Out of the Dust*, Hesse states that poetry was the only acceptable form for telling the story, as its sparse style illustrates the hardships of the time period through its economy of words. We're inclined to take her word for it.

The awesome thing about writing a novel in free-verse is that you get to do all kinds of sweet stuff with language to develop the story and characters. Hesse takes advantage of the countless possibilities this form opens up: Some of the chapters are only a few lines long, while others span several pages, and sometimes the traditional method of stanzas flush left on the page goes out the window to create a visual structure that uses all the page's white space. Check out Chapter 6, "On Stage," where Billie Jo plays at the Palace—if you turn your book sideways, the lines actually look like a piano keyboard. Pretty clever, huh?

Line breaks are also an important part of Hesse's poetic style. In particular, she makes great use of **enjambment**, a technique where a line's grammatical sentence carries over into the next line rather than ending. Rather than giving you a pause, it instead urges you to continue reading on to the next line. For example, in the chapter "Outlined by Dust," Billie Jo writes:

I can't help thinking / how it is for him, / without Ma. / Waking up alone, only / his shape / left in the bed, / outlined by dust.

The use of short lines here emphasizes the loneliness Daddy must feel as he adjusts to life without Ma, while forcing us to feel it a bit for ourselves by sort of careening us into it through the enjambment.



Poetry is really cool, you guys.

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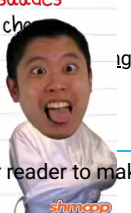
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