

In the novel *The Beet Queen*, Louise Edrich presents two siblings with opposite personalities in order to show how different people respond to and interact with the environment in unique ways, ultimately illustrating that every person's interactions within nature impact his/her surroundings.

Karl, the older brother, has a negative impact on the environment while the environment has a mesmerizing impact on him. Just as the dichotomy of the first paragraph alludes, Karl becomes both an addition and a subtraction. Beginning with the characterization of Karl, we see a character who is "hunched with his sudden growth and very pale." This description mirrors the way Karl will later interact with the world around him. He is at once part of the growth of nature, but is weak in that growth. The author references the Dust Bowl-esque time period in American history and states that the children have come from Kansas because North Dakota had a better climate and environmental situation. There can be no doubt that the children have been impacted by both their old and new environments. Through that reference the reader sees that the children have come from a desolate area into this more fertile area. We must wonder if they are bringing that desolation with them to an area on the brink of collapse. On the way from the train to their aunt's house, the siblings encounter a setting of "weathered grey or peeling gray paint with dogs tied to their porch railings." This image conjurs the idea of a once thriving environment, now neglected or in trouble. Karl encounters a single tree with blooms on the path. He becomes transfixed by those blooms. In stopping to admire nature, Karl unwittingly becomes an instrument of its demise. He stands and stares at the tree despite the cautions of the woman from the porch. His intense obsession with the blooms and the tree result in the woman unleashing her dog, causing Karl to rip a branch from the tree to defend himself. This act ultimately brings about the death of the tree. Karl's admiration of his environment while suggesting appreciation, actually allows for interference with nature. Finally, when broken from his trance and urged to run, Karl does not go further into nature, rather he returns to the safety of the train/boxcar. This shows how his desire to admire nature and the environment around him ultimately makes him an interloper and has a negative impact on that environment. He is awed and frightened by the ways in which the environment has become frail (just like he is when he arrives on the train.)

Mary, the younger sister, is not as poignantly impacted by the environment and she has little impact on the environment. Beginning with Mary's physical description, the reader sees a small, square girl who takes up little space in her world. Mary leads the way when the siblings depart from the train. She is the at the forefront as they move through the industrial/commercial part of town and into the residential area. She passes the same houses, yards, bushes, and trees that Karl sees. We can assume she has walked right by the blooming tree which later transfixes Karl so significantly. "Mary trudged solidly forward, hardly glancing at it (the tree)." Upon discovering Karl's lagging behind, Mary is frightened by his lack of progress. She watches the scene with the dog unfold and does nothing to interfere on behalf of her brother or the tree. She simply acknowledges to the reader that the place where the branch has been torn will eventually lead to the trees downfall. The most telling event in the passage concerning the interplay of Mary with her environment comes when Karl yells "Run!" She runs toward Aunt Fritzie's house and thus farther into her new environment, refusing to return to where she once was. When the reader is brought to the present-day, it is with the remembrance of Mary passing the tree a year later and seeing it's death. By refusing to be mesmerized by or interfere with the environment around her, Mary actually negates her negative impact on that environment.