

Entry #5 The Valley of Childish Things by Edith Wharton

I think that Edith Wharton is one of the most careful and thoughtful writers that we've read so far in class. I found myself particularly intrigued by her short story, *The Valley of Childish Things*. Despite its short length, the story contained a lot of symbolic and metaphoric language that afforded the story a deeper meaning. I think that one of the strongest arguments in the piece is the argument against the infantilization of women. The piece was originally published in 1896. That is important to note because women's rights and women's suffrage was just a whisper on the breath. While some strides had been made, it was just the beginning of a long battle for equal rights for women. The infantilization of women was common: as wives they were subservient to their husbands and as mothers they were subservient to their children. Women were expected to be coy, simple and innocent creatures. I think that these are the expectations that Edith Wharton is addressing in *The Valley of Childish Things*.

First of all, Wharton utilizes literary tropes that evoke thoughts of childhood. By starting the story with "once upon a time," Wharton immediately creates a nostalgic mood for the reader. The protagonist is a little girl that eventually decides "that it was time to see something of the world about which the lesson books had taught her" (1456). She leaves the Valley of Childish Things, returns, and is ultimately rejected by her companion in favor of a younger, more playful little girl. The protagonist quickly realizes that when you leave child you, it is not so simple to return back to that place. When she is rejected by her companion, he offers her some sort of strange comfort by telling her that she should have taken better care of her complexion (1457).

I think it is important to note the short length of this story. To me, the short length is symbolic of childhood. Childhood seems endless as we live through it, but upon growth and reflection, we realize that that part of our development is so small. Once again, that's why I think that Wharton is making a commentary on treating women like children. It is like asking a person to spend the rest of their life in one of the smallest parts of their lives. The protagonist is able to experience so many things, but because that knowledge does not align with what is expected from her socially, she is rejected for growing up.

If I were to extrapolate another metaphor from this piece, I would also consider the Valley of Childish things as a metaphor for the leisure class of Wharton's time. I know from Wharton's brief biography that she was a socialite and that she came from money. Perhaps this story was a reaction to grandiose smallness of Wharton's social class. While these people were free to indulge and party and enjoy life, they were not pushing themselves to grow and learn more about the world. And, when educated people like Wharton tried to combat that lifestyle, they were rejected for being too smart.

Overall, I think that this piece is ripe with literary meaning. Despite its short length, it is boisterous in meaning and rich with strong language and metaphor. I think that Wharton's writing easily lends itself to academic study because of her carefulness, craft and social commentary.

October 6, 2015

Entry #6 **An Old Man's Winter Night by Robert Frost**

The first thing that struck me about this poem was the use of alliteration, consonance and assonance. I think that these three literary devices created a cohesive voice and tone for this piece. The first two lines of the poem set the scene: "All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him/Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars" (1630). The assonance in the first line features a strong "o" sound (out, of, doors, looked) and the second line showcases the consonance of "t" and "th" sounds (through, the, thin, frost, almost, separate, stars). The use of these poetic devices creates a poem that sounds nice. It is important to look carefully at these first lines because they are the reader's introduction to the poem. In those lines, Frost is teaching the reader what their expectations of the poem should be. It also denotes his carefulness and thoughtful attention to detail.

An Old Man's Winter Night features an old man that is getting ready to go to bed. This simple routine, however, becomes a time of reflection and fear for the old man. Like the alliteration and the consonance in the first two lines, Frost also utilizes other literary techniques to make this simple subject both contemplative and poignant. For example, I noticed the use of opposites and contrast in the poem. The poem is set in nighttime, but the old man is often referred to as a light: "A light he was to no one but himself/Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what/A quiet light, and then not even that" (1631). The poem continues on and describes the contrasting relationship between the sun and moon: "He consigned to the moon, such as she was/So late-arising, to the broken moon/As better than the sun in any case" (1631).

I think that these contrasts between light, dark, day and night are significant because of the poem's subject matter: the old man. What does the reader know about the old man? He is

alone, for one thing. And another: he is old. He is the old man that the title describes. It's obvious, right? That's why I think that the nighttime is a metaphor for the old man's life. If the old man's life is a day, then it is coming to a close, and he is hesitant to let the light go out. It is important to also consider the fact that it is a winter's night: it's cold and the roof is heavy with snow. I think that this detail is meant to frame the old man's isolation and loneliness. The image of a summer's evening is much different in tone than a winter's night. The reason that I think that the temperature illustrates his loneliness is because of the type of language that is associated with cold and hot in terms of emotion. If someone has a cold heart, or if they are described as frigid, they are the type of person that doesn't keep company well. In contrast, if someone is described as warm or bright or sunny in their disposition, they are typically attributed with positive qualities and attitudes.

Between Frost's careful literary craft and rich symbolism, *An Old Man's Winter Night* is a rich landscape for literary analysis and interpretation. I think that that's why Frost stands up as one of the great poets because of his attention to detail and exemplary use of language. By the end of the poem, the old man rotates through a restless sleep and Frost explains that "one aged man—one man—can't keep a house/A farm, a countryside, or if he can/It's thus he does it of a winter night" (1631). I think the ending is supposed to make a larger illustration about human life. As I mentioned before, the poem is salted with metaphors that pertain to life and death. I think that Frost's ultimate point is that no one man can carry on throughout this life alone. There are consequences to be had (loneliness, coldness, etc.) if that is the path that you choose.

October 15, 2015

Entry #7 **Snake Eyes: the Biblical Parable and *Death Comes for the Archbishop***

There are obvious allusions to religion in the bulk of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather. For one thing, it is book about Catholic priests proselyting to the rural southwestern United States. Religion and spirituality are the thematic pillars that hold the narrative upright. Despite the clear references to religion, however, Cather also crafted a narrative of nuance that is only available to the careful reader. In my opinion, the organization of the narrative is similar to the Bible. In this journal entry, I would like to discuss the function of the narrative's organization and how the content reacts to that form. To do this, I will do a careful reading of the second chapter of book two, *Missionary Journeys*. The chapter is titled *The Lonely Road to Mora*. I selected this passage because, in my opinion, I found it to be the most ripe with the qualities of a biblical parable.

Analyzing the structure of this book is paramount to a close reading of the text. To me, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* read as a collection of short stories rather than a novel. The narrative had a meandering quality to it that allowed the text to wander. I do not think that the book needs to be read from cover to cover, rather, the ordering of the text is a mere suggestion to the reader. This structural choice reminds me of the structure of the Bible. While there are narrative components to the Bible, there are separate stories (parables, etc.) that can stand alone without the context of the grander narrative of Christianity. The story of the good Samaritan and the story of the prodigal son stick out as good examples of this concept.

In Cather's narrative collection, there are similar threads of stories that utilize both Catholic symbolism and elements of the traditional parable. For example, *The Lonely Road to*

Mora details the journey of Father Latour and his Vicar. As they travel, they decide to stop at an isolated home. They are quickly and quietly warned by the woman of the house, Magdalena, that her husband is dangerous. They flee the home of Buck Scales and, ultimately, Magdalena escapes and asks for Father Latour's help. Father Latour learns that Buck Scales was a murderer and an abusive husband. Ultimately, they were able to remove themselves from a bad situation. Buck Scales is an important character in this story because he acts as foil for good intentions. In my opinion, Buck Scales is a representation of Satan.

There are several clues that Cather left in the text to lead me to this conclusion. First of all, his name. The surname of Scales evokes the image of a snake. Furthermore, the descriptions of Buck Scales' physical appearance suggest that he is not entirely human. There is a subtle mysticism about the way that he looks and acts that led me to believe that his character meant something more. For example, Buck Scales is described as having "a snake-like neck [that terminated] in a small, bony head" (66). The narrative goes on to describe that his head "showed a number of thick ridges, as if the skull joining were overgrown by superfluous bone" and that "the man seemed not more than half human" (67). The description of his forehead was important to me because I imagined a set of small horns protruding from his skull. It is clear that Buck Scales is the villain of this story.

It is important to clarify that the character of Magdalena acts as an opposite to the character of Buck Scales. She is a righteous character because of her desire to help the priests flee from danger. Furthermore, her escape and repentance at the end of the story align her with the archetype of the biblical Mary Magdalene. Despite the difficulty, she was able to flee from an evil situation to be redeemed and rescued for her efforts. Ultimately, the priests trust Kit Carson to take care of Magdalena. Kit Carson, in my opinion, is a character that represents Christ. I

think that Kit Carson is a Christ-like figure because of the way that Father Latour reacts to meeting him for the first time. Latour observes that "there was something curiously unconscious about [Kit Carson's] mouth, reflective, a little melancholy,—and something that suggested a capacity for tenderness...the Bishop felt a quick glow of pleasure looking at the man" (75). Latour's reaction is important because it cements Kit Carson's status as a benevolent character.

October 19, 2015

Entry # 8 **Trifles by Susan Glaspell**

There is a clear line between the sexes in the play *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell. I think that *Trifles* is a successful commentary on gender because of the way that the men and women are contrasted in the piece. All of the characters carry equal weight as the play progresses. It is interesting to read a drama rather than see it performed. As a reader, I felt that I had to comb through the dialogue in order to absorb the importance of the Glaspell's understated style. Be that as it may, I noticed a lot of commentary in Glaspell's work about the differences between men and women.

I think that *Trifles* is a piece of writing that focuses on the problematic nature of assumptions. There are assumptions made about Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter in many different ways. First of all, the County Attorney and the Sheriff dismiss Mrs. Wright as a suspect for the murder because she is a woman. Despite the fact that Mr. Hale reports Mrs. Wright's strange behavior when the body was discovered, neither the County Attorney nor the Sheriff think to look for evidence or motive to make Mrs. Wright a suspect. In contrast, however, both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are effective as detectives. They, in my opinion, were able to discover more about the murder of Mr. Wright because they were observing the details that were important to Mrs. Wright. From the broken fruit preserves to the canary in the sewing basket, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters were able to discover the discontent and tension that was present in the Wright's home.

Assumptions are being made about the women on both sides of the justice line. While Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are able to discover important details about the murder, Mrs. Wright,

in contrast, is saved by the assumptions made about her because of her gender. It is clear to me that Mrs. Wright murdered her husband. While that is not explicitly stated in the excerpt we read for class, I know that that's how things turn out. Mrs. Wright, however, is protected from being accused because the men in the story don't believe that she was capable of murdering her husband. This becomes clear when, towards the end of the excerpt, the County Attorney agrees to take the sewing notions to Mrs. Wright because he doesn't think that the things that Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale picked out aren't dangerous, despite the fact that that's where the women found the dead bird (1572).

I think it is important to note that the men in this story are not bumbling idiots. They are well informed professionals, but they are affected by the assumptions they make about women. Because of their assumptions, they fail to generate more insight about the crime. But I think that *Trifles* asks an interesting question about what those assumptions do to opportunity. If given the opportunity, would Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters been the better detectives? Or, conversely, if they were not familiar with the intricacies of homemaking, would they have discovered the dead canary? Therein lies *Trifles* greatest strength: it asks the questions, but it does not give you all the answers.