Here We Are Short Guide

Here We Are by Dorothy Parker

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Characters

The newlyweds are a nameless couple.

We know them initially by their clothes: "the young man in the blue suit" and "the girl in beige" who "looked as new as a peeled egg. Her hat, her fur, her frock, her gloves were glossy and stiff with novelty." These descriptions confirm their innocence and naivete. Their nervousness about their honeymoon leads them to petty jealousies and arguments. One of the arguments concerns the wife's new hat which the husband fails to appreciate.

The hat cost twenty-two dollars; its expensive price tag (in 1931 dollars) suggests taste and class to the wife. Later, named characters appear in the story as the topic of discussion. The young wife accuses her husband first, of disliking her sister, Ellie, and then of finding one her bridesmaids, Louise, too attractive. The husband, in turn, is jealous of Joe Brooks, an old flame of his wife's.

The most interesting background character is Louise, who becomes the wife's foil. Louise, as the wife points out to her husband, buys cheap hats. On this issue, the wife is not unbiased, and hence not totally reliable. Also, the wife at one time owned a less expensive hat that her husband preferred. But since clothing can play such an important role in defining characters, the hats are significant. The wife's new, expensive hat is in keeping with her virginity; Louise's cheap hat then suggests sexual promiscuity. Louise is the loose woman who stands outside of, and threatens, the stability of marriage.

The real threat to this marriage, however, is the constant bickering between the couple. The wife knows this to be true: "We used to squabble a lot when we were going together and then engaged and everything, but I thought everything would be so different as soon as you were married." The story de-romanticizes marriage, suggesting that it consists of little more than a series of spats. These petty arguments may not be enough to dissolve a marriage, but they're certainly enough to make it miserable. And as the namelessness of the characters suggests, all couples are prone to this kind of marriage.

Social Concerns

Toward the end of the 1920s, women not only enjoyed the gains made possible by previous decades of feminist activism; they also witnessed a feminist backlash. This meant that women were encouraged to marry early and remain in the home. Coincidentally, American ingenuity coupled with mass marketing resulted in a blitzkrieg of products for the home and the lady of the house. Since women did most of the spending, especially on the domestic front, these items were targeted specifically for them. The notion of "privilege" replaced the concept of women's "rights." Later, the instability and insecurity generated by the 1929 stock market crash furthered the idea of home as a safe haven. Women again preferred marriage to independence.

"Here We Are" seems to rise in part out of these conservation trends. The young couple of their honeymoon journey appear innocent, naive, insecure, and prone to petty jealousies. Though they have seen the battle scars of other couples, they refuse to consider that their own marriage might be ill-timed. The setting, a train, is indeed a modern one, suggesting rapid movement forward that the couple cannot control. The fact that the story places us in the immediate aftermath of the marriage, rather than in the wedding ceremony itself or in the marriage sometime in the future when its outcome might be known, increases the level of anxiety. There is nothing to celebrate, and the future remains questionable.

The young wife is neither a feminist nor a flapper. She is far too concerned with the trappings of feminine behavior, and the idea that sex is more problematic than promising. Try as he might, the young husband is clearly inept in handling his wife's moods and needs. This couple's marriage might be in vogue, but their happiness remains in doubt.

The rise and decline of feminism illustrated by this story had its parallels when the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s was countered by a conservative backlash in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although it is socially acceptable to be a single career woman or a working mother, youthful marriages continue and the divorce rate, for a variety of reasons, still soars. "Here We Are" reminds us that the social pressure and youthful desire that can spawn a marriage may not be enough to sustain it in any time period.

Techniques

While this story contains some third-person narration, most of the story is told through dialogue. Parker's combination of minimalist narration and dialogue creates for the reader an eavesdropping effect; we feel like we are overhearing a private conversation. This technique downplays the importance of the narrator, suggesting that our best path to fiction's "truths" is through a narrative resembling direct observation. The storyteller, in effect, drops out of the story, or is used sparingly.

Setting is again significant. As in "The Waltz," these two people are in motion—in a train going to New York—but they remain confined in the restricted space of a train compartment. Furthermore, the train itself is on a repetitive and limited route; it reaches its destination and then returns to its place of origin, suggesting a back-and-forth motion that gets somewhere but never breaks out of its pattern. This mirrors the couple's repeated arguments and conversation concerning their honeymoon.

Finally, like the train route, the story's closing statement—"Yes, here we are . . .

aren't we?"—returns us to the story's place of origin, specifically to the title itself. Just as the narrator in "The Waltz" will go on dancing, the couple in "Here We Are" will continue their petty bickering throughout their marriage. They will step off the literal train that has provided them transportation, but their problematic journey through life together will continue.

Themes

In "Here We Are," a pair of young newlyweds are on a train to New York, their honeymoon destination. Whereas other Parker stories assume a certain sexual sophistication among the characters, this man and woman are apparently virgins. They have done the socially appropriate thing by "saving themselves" for marriage, but there is little indication that it will make much difference. Their marriage, like other marriages and relationships in stories by Parker, seems doomed.

Evidence for the couple's virginity can be found in their conversation and behavior. The subject of their honeymoon lovemaking appears fifteen times in the story, only to be met with embarrassment and a failure of language. "Well. How does it feel to be an old married lady?"

the young man asks his wife early in the story. Her answer sets the verbal stage for their future conversations on the topic: "'Oh, it's too soon to ask me that,' she said. 'At least—I mean. Well, I mean, goodness, we've only been married about three hours, haven't we?'" The phrase "I mean" becomes their repeated signature phrase for the topic of sex. Given the number of times the subject appears, the sexual act dominates their thoughts, yet they are unable or unwilling to say it. As in "The Waltz" (see separate entry), inner thoughts and outer words diverge.

The phrase "I mean" points to other issues as well. What is the meaning behind marriage? One, and perhaps the most important, traditional answer is procreation, necessitating the sexual act.

In a conversation where the speakers are too embarrassed, too polite, or too stifled to name the sex act, "I mean" becomes the equivalent for "sex." Thus, the characters' sense of self-identity or self-meaning is linked strongly to sex, to the act they cannot name directly. To base one's self-meaning on the unspeakable raises questions about the stability of that meaning, as well as of that self. The story also raises but does not answer the question, What is the meaning of "self," of the individual, in marriage?

It is of course ironic that a story concerning sex never offers the word or the act directly, yet there is a symbolic sexual act embedded in the story. The young wife, at the suggestion of her husband, removes her hat, and she later puts it back on as the train approaches their destination. If the hat removal is read as a symbolic disrobing, the period during which the hat is off could constitute a symbolic sexual act. If so, it is a problematic one because it is characterized by petty fights and jealousy. "We won't fight or be nasty or anything. Will we?" she asks her husband before she removes the hat. "You bet your life we won't," he tells her, shortly before another fight begins.

As in "The Waltz," the symbols in this story encourage us to read it beyond its level of realism.

Key Questions

"Here We Are" is deceptively accessible. Many readers think they grasp its significance the first time through, and dismiss it merely as humorous. By examining the characters, symbols, and setting carefully, readers can discover several layers of narrative.

1. How would the story be different if it took place in a larger room where other people might overhear the couple's conversation?

2. What is the significance of the title? 3. How would a larger presence by the narrator change this story?

4. What elements in the story reveal Parker's grim view about marriage?

5. How does clothing function as a symbol? What other symbols are present?

Literary Precedents

Literature is filled with bickering couples, but it is difficult to point to any one precedent for the characters in this story.

To the extent that this dialogue is considered a sketch, a tradition can be traced back through the psychological sketch by fin de siecle women writers such as Ada Leverson, Evelyn Sharp, and Charlotte Mew, and on to regional sketches by nineteenth-century American women.

More relevant are Parker's contemporaries—Ernest Hemingway in his cycle of "marriage stories," Edna St. Vincent Milky in her Distressing Dialogues, Katherine Mansfield in "Bliss" (1920) and Djuna Barnes in her short stories, among others—who offer a more pared down narrative. These writers also examined romantic love in the early twentieth century with a jaundiced eye. All of them portray the difficulties, ironies, and failures of so-called modern love with its attendant freedoms and complications.

Related Titles

Parker wrote a number of dialogues.

Many of them—"The Last Tea," "The Mantle of Whistler," "The Sexes," "The Road Home," and "A Young Woman in Green Lace"—examine aspects of romantic love. Others take on different topics. "Arrangement in Black and White" concerns racism; "Travelogue," "The Cradle of Civilization," and "Oh, He's Charming!" focus on characters flawed by self-absorption. Alcohol abuse is a major issue in "A Terrible Day Tomorrow."

Copyright Information

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