The Other Woman Short Guide

The Other Woman by Sherwood Anderson

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Characters

The story, though deceptively simple on the surface as indicated above, is fascinating and complex enough to raise a number of interesting issues that seem to call for clarification in the course of one's reading of the text: (1) Why was the bridegroom attracted so intensely to the tobacconist's wife? (2) Why was she so willing to come to a stranger's lodging on such short notice for a sexual rendezvous? (3) Given the social and domestic constraints of that period, why did her husband apparently not object to, and prevent, her going out alone at night for an unexplained reason to a stranger's lodging? (4) Is Anderson's story of "The Other Woman" merely a literary stunt that he whimsically thought up to show off his creative writing skill? (If that were the case, the provisional response might be that it would be difficult if not actually pointless to take the story seriously enough to analyze it, because a frivolous piece of writing is far more likely to evoke frivolous commentary and interpretation than is a serious literary text.)

The matter of sexual attraction, on which "The Other Woman" is predicated, deserves more than a simple-answer dismissal such as "There's no accounting for taste." Anderson had already been married and divorced and married for the second time when he wrote that piece of short fiction; he would go on to divorce his second wife, marry and divorce his third, and take a fourth wife.

Anderson was clearly susceptible to a range of feminine charms and enticements. However, something more than "love of women" and inconstancy of affection on the part of the author seems to have been at play in the shaping of Anderson's story. Perhaps it was some peculiar masculine susceptibility, possibly another example of the "one touch of nature [that] makes the whole world kin" (to adapt Shakespeare's line from Troilus and Cressida [III, iii, line 175]), a suggestive expression that O. Henry made use of in at least two of his short stories.

Anderson has an interesting way of making his point about a feminine feature that men may find beguiling.

As the bridegroom (new husband, rather) tells his story of pre-marital infatuation and sex on the sly to the narrator, he recalls what it was like to see "the other woman" and feel an intense emotional charge before he propositioned her. As indicated earlier, he regarded her appearance as ordinary, and she seemed to be some years older than he, but she had become something of an obsession with him. So affected did he become, that "his hand began trembling, his voice was reduced almost to a thick whisper," and he urged her to come to his apartment that night. A note on what Anderson himself might have been responding to imaginatively, as he was writing that line, is provided by Marchette Chute in her biographical study, Two Gentle Men: The Lives of George Herbert and Robert Herrick (1959).

Ben Jonson (the famous actor-dramatistpoet), she points out, "had once written a song for one of his plays in which he praised the art of 'sweet neglect' in a woman's attire.

Herrick borrowed both the idea and the metre, and the result is his own brilliantly original lyric, 'Delight in Disorder.'"

It is important to recognize that this particular matter of "delight in disorder" represents only a part of a larger set of factors involving the impromptu bonding of two strangers whose mutual readiness calls for a broader and more cogent explanation than the story itself provides. That explanation should attempt to throw light on a wide range of other heterosexual bonds, including those in which the woman's clothes are not in disarray and the man is "turned on" by different stimuli that might be ignored by otherwise responsive males.

The "bottom line" here, the common denominator, is (in our popular idiom) "good chemistry" between the man and the woman, however ill-suited to each other they might appear to an outsider. Lest the reader consider the term too glib for a description and therefore meaningless, perhaps like the alternative term "good vibes" [vibrations], there is something to be said on that point.

It would seem difficult to make the case that waves or wave-like rhythms from one human body (i.e., brain waves, pulse beat, circadian rhythm, etc.) might harmonize so closely with those from another body in close proximity as to cause an actual physical attraction (circadian rhythm a possible exception). Using vibrations as a metaphor for human attraction evokes the great unifying orderly pattern, in physics, of the electromagnetic spectrum, with its enormous range of periodicity. "All electromagnetic waves," the science writer and editor John L. Chapman wrote (in his July 1964 Harper's Magazine article, "The Expanding Spectrum"), derive from "the oscillations or vibrations of atomic particles. The wavelengths of radiations range from hundreds of miles for the longest to about one ten-billionth of a centimeter for the shortest."

But there is some basis for applying the notion of "good chemistry" between, let us say, a fairly close heterosexual couple to a story such as Anderson's "The Other Woman," where so much depends on an unlikely mutual attraction. For the sake of clarity, when we consider the analogy with chemistry, instead of with waves on the electromagnetic spectrum, or body rhythms, there is a ready-made frame of reference, and it goes back to the first decade of the nineteenth century. In 1809 the pre-eminent German dramatist and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published a remarkable philosophical-romantic novel, Elective Affinities (Die Wahlverwandtschaften). In its exploration of relationships—to be more exact, attractions and repulsions—the book brought together the physical and chemical worlds, the social world, and the world of the individual seeking (through some compelling inner force) particular attachments.

For this reason Goethe's novel is particularly relevant to this examination of Anderson's story. It enables the reader to consider the tendency of objects, including humans, to be drawn toward other particular objects— similar or dissimilar—sometimes in defiance of reason or logical expectation.

David Constantine, in his Explanatory Notes to the Oxford University Press World's Classics paperback edition of Elective Affinities (1994), which he also translated and

edited, states that that expression "was current in science from the late eighteenth century onwards, [and] was given wider currency in its human and emotional sense by Goethe's novel, by the title alone perhaps." Anderson may never have encountered the term, though that does not affect the present discussion. The specific application of "elective affinities" to human relationships, i.e., considering them in terms of chemical bonding, grows out of a discussion involving four characters: Charlotte, Eduard, the Captain, and Ottilie. Goethe's quartet and the recombination potential those characters have (the two couples could change partners) are of course not replicated in Anderson's story. There, the bridegroom first has a sexual bonding with "the other woman" (whose husband remains dormant), then marries his intended, and afterward retains a weak physical bond with his wife as well as a strong psychological bond with his one-night-stand partner. Nevertheless, in Anderson's story, even with a trio instead of a quartet, the particular sexual choices this man and his two women make are sufficiently evocative of the deep forces suggested in Goethe's novel so that they may serve as a basis for our gaining a better understanding of Anderson's deceptively simple anecdotal tale.

Goethe lays out his rationale of elective affinities through the conversation of his principal characters, in Chapter Four of Part One. Following are brief relevant passages from Goethe's novel that seem to have a bearing on "The Other Woman."

The Captain answers Charlotte's question about whether their discussion has already gotten to "'relationships and affinities.'"

"'We say of those natures which on meeting speedily connect and inter-react that they have an affinity for one another.'" The Captain adds that it may be an extremely remarkable affinity. He gives the example of acids and alkalis, which, though opposed to each other, "'will most decisively'" seek out, take hold of, and modify one another and form, in so doing, "'a new substance together.'" Charlotte remarks that when he speaks "'of these wondrous entities as related they seem to [her] not so much blood relations as related in spirit and in the soul.'" In exactly this manner "'true and important friendships may come about between people: opposing qualities make an intenser union possible.'"

Eduard, asked for his view, says that only through the complicated cases—which he considers more interesting than any others—"'do we realize the degree of affinity and how near, strong, remote, or slight the relations are. Affinities are only really interesting when they bring about separations.'" The Captain offers an example: a piece of limestone put in dilute sulphuric acid will combine with the limestone's calcium to make gypsum. "'A separation and a new combination'" took place, apparently a matter of "elective affinity." Thus, "'one relationship [seems to have been] preferred to another and a choice made for one over the other.'" Charlotte, bothered by their "'playing with analogies,'" asks about the validity of expressions such as "choice" and "elective affinity" in the human context they are considering.

She tells them she knows about enough cases wherein "'a close and [seemingly] indissoluble relationship was annulled by the casual arrival of a third party, and one of the pair, previously joined so beautifully, driven out into empty space.'" Eduard replies

that as to this matter, "'chemists are much more gallant. They add a fourth party, so that nobody goes without.'" Such cases, the Captain tells them, are the most important and amazing of all, the two pairs of substances being brought together, each substance then leaving its former connection and recombining elsewhere. In that flight from one connection and search for a new one, a person truly tends to detect "'some higher prescription,'" attributing "'to such substances a sort of volition and power to choose and . . . "elective affinities" seems perfectly justified.'"

Once again, it must be pointed out that there is good reason to emphasize these social and chemical processes in Goethe's novel in relation to "The Other Woman," though there are many differences in the two fictions. First, there is a basic connection between the two, what Allan Bloom refers to as the primacy of "the law of love."

In his extensive literary examination of that particular ruling passion, Love & Friendship (1993), he writes, "Goethe plays on this theme with great delicacy in Elective Affinities when husband and wife, who are each in love with someone else, make love, or make-believe-love, with their true loves in mind. The child who results from the act resembles the true loves who were imagined during it." Second, the particular nature of the bond, so to speak, between the bridegroom-turned-husband and the other woman has generally been ignored in the critical commentary on the story.

Judy Jo Small, in A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson (1994), states that there has been minimal discussion of the story. The sources she cites and her own commentary deal with matters such as the following: Has the man found happiness through his one-night stand and "a way to endure a celibate marriage" by "repeated fantasizing about" it? Has his inhibited "inner, instinctive life" been released by that one-night stand? Is the story another ironic parable, by Anderson, of human shortcomings? Is the man's wife noble, replete with sentiment? Does the man protest too much that he loves his wife? Does the man in revealing so much about his personal life obtain relief through catharsis? What can be said about the two different narrators in the story? What can be said about the Freudian elements and the ironies in the story? The present essay, instead of taking up any of these abovementioned aspects of the story, is more concerned with the nature of the bonding process affecting the characters and their mysterious inner promptings that cause the unexpected behavior in this deceptively simple tale.

Social Concerns

Sherwood Anderson's "The Other Woman," like certain other short fictions of the early twentieth century, may appear quite simple, even superficial, to twentyfirst century readers. But the complexity and resonant quality of this anecdotal confession resulting from an adulterous affair may become more manifest when it is considered within its cultural and temporal context. Given this wider perspective, the story's fidelity to the vagaries of human nature, when the central figure is held back by an internal force (inhibition) as well as by an external force (editorial censorship or, at the least, prudery), makes it all the more appealing and meaningful to the thoughtful reader of this later time. In typical Anderson fashion, the soliloquizing central figure is inquiring into the nature of his own mental world as well as the greater world of humankind: what is going on here, and how can such things happen?

Before considering the social issues involved in the unnamed central figure's experiences as given, there is a special feature of the story that makes it more intriguing and problematic than it would be otherwise. Anderson, in explaining how the original storyline came about, seems to have indulged in writerly gimmickry; that is, concocting his tale of a man emotionally torn between two women in a way that would demonstrate his literary agility, i.e., as a stunt. Judy Jo Small, in A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson (1994), discusses the composition of the story by Anderson as he commented on it in a letter to Ben Huebsch, his publisher.

(The letter is included in Charles E. Modlin's 1984 edition, Sherwood Anderson: Selected Letters.) Anderson considered it "decidedly French" as far as its intrigue and its spirit, written somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "bad little boy stuff," its aim (in a way) having been "to show the mutts" he knew "their damn technique." This special feature, the author's deliberate creation of a story situation and a narrative manner or style to go with it—almost as though this were a creative writing exercise—might seem to lessen the story's value by shattering its self-contained world with the implication of "What if we had this situation and those characters in it?" Anderson makes it difficult for the reader to suspend disbelief. But how else can the reader benefit from the story if not by being induced to believe in the elements of the story and not simply in hypotheticals?

One way was suggested above. The story seems faithful to the vagaries of human nature when the central figure or protagonist is inhibited and also constrained by an enforced code of etiquette and decorum.

Anderson offers us a fairly familiar scene.

The leading figure in this little social entanglement is a man who has allowed himself to become involved amorously with two women, at least one of whom—his wife, in this case—must never be allowed to discover his inconstancy. Unlike many men in such an awkward and risky situation, however, this individual does not really know his own mind and is gripped by emotional forces he cannot control. He would like to keep both

women, but he is so confused about how to do this and about which woman is more important to him that in the end he simply appears feckless and foolish.

But Anderson's bridegroom character is a more complicated figure than his one-night stand, the act of premarital infidelity that is so crucial to the story, might lead a reader to think. There is real psychological, as well as social, significance in his telling a confidant, the narrator of this story, that his one and only sexual experience with someone else's wife was "the most notable experience of [his] life."

The first social concern of importance here has to do with the position of either of the two women in the story and ironically unites them in a way that has been preserved in folklore but in these more enlightened times seems crudely insensitive. According to the archaic view of women that is reflected in "The Other Woman," they may be reduced in one way or another to objects of convenience for men or objects for inspection and evaluation by men. Thus they often become trivialized under male scrutiny, however friendly it may appear. The two women referred to above are the socially prominent young bride-to-be in this mini-drama and the very ordinary "other woman"—the wife of a tobacconist who runs a small cigar store and newsstand and whom the prospective bridegroom summons to his house for sex on the very eve of his wedding. The women both have the same purpose in the story: to serve the same man unquestioningly; to just give him what he wants. To mark a difference, however, his "intended" is lovingly, passionately expressive on paper, as a token of what she will give later, while the "other" is merely a silent service provider for less than two hours before he goes to call on his fiancee during the crucial night before his wedding. Ironically, it is the physicality of this "other," who is so common in appearance and possibly ten years his senior, that has so actively engaged the man's imagination and his passion.

The other social concern in Anderson's story has to do with the fragility and vulnerability of the marriage tie. Although this is a very special case—the "infidelity" or faithless act having taken place shortly before the marriage ceremony—apparently the husband-to-be, so caught up in his exciting marriage plans and expectations, was already taking his forthcoming change of status lightly and might well have been considered a bad marriage risk. Yet on the surface of things, it might seem that no (social) harm was done because of his onenight-stand, which not only did not prevent his marriage from taking place but (to hear him comment on the subject) seems to have had a beneficial effect on it. A more considered view of the matter reveals two important points. First, his having entered into marriage with dirty hands, metaphorically speaking, calls in question his seriousness and dependability in general. Second, at a very important point in his life (gaining honors and recognition for his government appointment and his poetry), he did more than "stepping out" on his "intended." He induced a middle-aged woman to forsake her husband and come to his apartment to have sex with him as if the husband was of no importance and had no prior marital rights vis-a-vis his own wife.

Techniques

"The Other Woman" may resonate markedly in the minds of some sensitive readers because it represents many different forms of expression in conveying the physical and mental experiences of the bridegroomturned-husband. To begin, it is an interesting and curious example of the reverse tall tale. In the conventional tall tale pattern, the native speaker or narrator, an insider, offers a curious, far-fetched account of a very unusual creature, situation, or condition, to a credulous stranger, an outsider. In Anderson's story the insider seems to be the naif who cannot understand what he himself is talking about. He seems quite confused as we get his account, he contradicts himself, and at one point he is quoted as saying, "I am afraid I muddle this matter in trying to tell it." His audience (the outsider to whom he told his story, and who records his story) seems shrewd enough to appreciate the man's confusion about which woman he really loves and craves. He claims to love his wife but does not sleep with her, and instead thinks of the other woman as a vicarious sex-and-love object. Thus the tall tale, which usually requires a fool or an unwise, unknowing person to serve as a foil for the speaker, is given a special meaning in this story. Anderson's speaker clearly does not know what to make of his own account of an incompatible, perhaps unbelievable, pair of deep emotional attachments to two different women. As indicated above, Anderson had written his publisher that in "The Other Woman" he tried to show the French writers he knew their damn technique [sic] because he put in this story their intrigue, spirit, and bad little boy stuff.

Possibly he did not know what other stuff was also getting into the story through his own secret life (i.e., his subconscious) when he projected himself into the character of a man emotionally tied to two women, neither of whom he slept with any longer.

Another important aspect of "The Other Woman" that Anderson, knowingly or unknowingly, reveals has to do with socioeconomic class distinctions and divisions.

A number of possible bases for the man's being drawn to the woman have been given above, but there are other bases that may justifiably be suggested. One of them is the fact of her being relatively poor compared with the bachelor who keeps a personal servant on the premises, wins the hand of a young woman from a wealthy, socially prominent family, and is himself moving upward into the ranks of government service. Though Anderson does not describe actual poverty in relation to the other woman, the reader can gather, from the fact that she lived with her husband above the tobacco shop that her socio-economic status is far below that of her one-night lover.

One is tempted to provide a sub-title for the story: "The Gentleman and the Lower-Class Woman." If the lower-class designation seems a bit peremptory in her case, lowermiddle class might be substituted, but the gap between these two one-nighters would still be huge.

If any further evidence is needed of the essential difference in their worlds, besides the facts of her husband's operating a little tobacco shop and newsstand and their living

above that shop, this additional piece of evidence can be presented: The man's being able to seek her out in the shop when the husband apparently was not present and to directly proposition her with immediate success suggests something that is of great importance. As a mere regular customer for the morning paper he could take gross liberties with her that an upper-class woman would be unlikely to allow in a man known only by facial recognition. The woman might have been flattered by his notice of her and his upfront sexual advances, crude as they appear in the text. In any event, his loving her and leaving her and his not having to face any recriminations or threats on that account might well be interpreted as signs of her tacit recognition of inferior status. She is clearly shown to be beneath the man, and in effect to be a kind of victim of social discrimination. That fine figure and social climber, whatever his protestations to his confidant about such matters as "'having had the most notable experience of [his] life,'" with her, took advantage of the married woman and used her. He loved her and left her, in Anderson's little social drama with economic overtones and wound up at the end having it all, except what he really wanted. However, she seems to have been the one who paid the price.

Among the other forms that may be used to describe Anderson's story with its indeterminate ending are the following: confessional, anecdotal tale, exercise in self-deception, and narrative within a narrative.

As the text makes clear, the man's tale was told to the person who ostensibly wrote down the highly personal account. Most of the story consists of direct quotation from the subject himself, but this nearly dominant first-person point of view is set off by the secondary narrator's two-and-a-halfpage introduction of the subject, beginning with the subject's keynote statement and the secondary narrator's response. "I am in love with my wife, he said—a superfluous remark, as I had not questioned his attachment to the woman he had married. We walked for ten minutes and then he said it again. I turned to look at him. He began to talk . . ."

There is something significant about Anderson's enclosed-narrative technique that may escape the notice of a casual reader.

If this literary form is to have any deeper significance than what is provided by the mere storyline and its packaging (i.e., the way it is written and presented), a purpose, or at least some advantage, must be sought for its use. In the present case the following explanation is offered. While the reader has only the given text to deal with, it would not be amiss to speculate on what is left out, what is being concealed for whatever reason, by the man who is at the center of the action. It is all too evident that when he protests too much about how he loves his wife, the reader has to consider everything else he says, too. But there are many other matters that are conveniently omitted, such as his domestic relations after marriage and why he sleeps apart from his wife (though she keeps her bedroom door open). Then there is the matter of the outside narrator, who refers to the man in question as "my friend." What else does the former know about his friend that would throw light on this pre-marital adulterer's behavior as it is displayed in the story?

All of which is to say that on the basis of at least one criterion, "The Other Woman" is a very successful short story. Indeterminate ending or no, the storyline may well take on a life of its own in the mind of a sensitive reader considering the implications of the startling last two paragraphs. In that passage the man lets on that speaking of all these intimate matters has sexed him up so that he will in effect bring the other woman back up in the forefront of his consciousness, enjoy a virtual sexual union with her, while apparently having sex with his wife. After the head-swimming experience, he will open his eyes and see his dear wife, then he will sleep, and awaken feeling once again that he has undergone a most notable life experience. But that other woman, the only one who ever made possible for him a most notable life experience, will be completely gone.

Themes

There is a cluster of interrelated themes in this deceptively simple story, all of which may be more effectively considered as aspects of a general psychological state, by no means abnormal, than as distinct topics, each sufficient unto itself. Since they permeate the story and must permeate any serious discussion of it, some of their substantive material has already been touched on above. These themes, as applied to the central figure (protagonist is too heavy a designation for him here), are as follows: (1) living a "secret life," and what it is like to live a "secret life," i.e., opting to dwell temporarily (as conditions permit) outside present reality, and within an alternate and much more desirable world of the mind; (2) beginning a "new life," whereby the "secret life" or "dream life" may somehow become a reality on however limited a basis; (3) wanting to have the best of both worlds: the world of present reality and the considerably more desirable world of the "secret life" of the mind; (4) becoming dissatisfied with what was once so strongly desired; (5) finding the course of one's life shifting from a pattern of order to a pattern of disorder.

In what the central figure considers his life's "most eventful week," a number of unusual things happened to him. Seven days before he was to be married, he received a telegram informing him that he had been appointed to a position in the government. His poems won a prize from a poetry society. As a result, his home city's newspapers played up the story of his successes, one paper even including his picture in the news item. His very evident celebrity status was brought home to him when he called on his fiancee (whose father was a judge) and found a houseful of people there, all of whom later that evening "seemed to be praising him." One night later in the week, he went alone to the theater and again found himself the center of attention because of all the publicity. This "altogether abnormal time" for him turned his head, and he became possessed by "[the] most absurd fancies" in which, for example, he was the focus of much more adulatory attention than ever before. Riding in his carriage through the city, he found the eyes of a hundred thousand people looking up at him, praising him. In this state of excitement and heightened awareness he wanted to dream about his fiancee, sketch out "noble poems," or formulate plans for advancing his career. None of these desirable courses of action could be followed, however. His mind, which had already been pre-empted by visions and thoughts of the tobacconist's wife, had no room for much of anything else. And so began his alternate existence.

The basis for his actually favoring the unprepossessing "other" over his seemingly far more attractive fiancee may not be clear to many readers, unless the principle "there's no accounting for taste" is applied, and even then the issue will have been bypassed. The matter is worth going into, however, and will be treated below, in the section on Characters. But the notion of the hidden or suppressed life, unobtainable in the present reality, is hardly unfamiliar, in Western society at least. Needless to say, it occurs widely in low-grade form and is by no means limited to a fantasy concerning a secret but unobtainable love.

As to the man's becoming dissatisfied with what was once so strongly desired, a situation so well expressed in the eighth line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 29—"With what I most enjoy contented least"— Anderson makes his character's position abundantly clear. Some time before his wedding, he had become affected by the sight of the wife of the man who ran the newspaper stand and cigar store. During the week prior to the wedding, "in the midst of his distraction she was the only person he knew who stood out clear and distinct in his mind." Wanting "so much to think noble thoughts, he could think only of her." As he expressed it to the narrator of the story, though his fiancee was the only woman he wanted to live with and to have as his "comrade in undertaking to improve [his] own character and [his] position in the world," just then he wanted in his arms only that other woman. Stalking her at her lodging, thinking of her, surely in bed with her husband, made him furious. Then he went home and took to his bed, "shaken with anger." Trying to read his inspirational bedside material—books of prose and verse—he was not able to hear the voices of the dead writers, and even when he tried to think of the woman he was in love with, "her figure had also become something far away, . . . with which [he] for the moment seemed to have nothing to do."

Finally, the theme of finding the course of one's life shifting from a pattern of order to a pattern of disorder pervades the entire confession of the unfaithful but self-justifying bridegroom to the narrator of the story.

The very first words of the story and of his confession state that he is in love with his wife, a remark that the narrator considers superfluous because he has not raised the question in the first place. The bridegroom's reiterations of this husbandly sentiment appear quite unconvincing, not only because he doth protest too much, but also because he states clearly a number of times that the spirit or thought of that other woman is still very much with him: it goes with him, it gets inside his mind and gives him there a dramatic equivalent of genuine sexual experience. And it deludes him. For example, at the end of the story, the former bridegroom, whose wife sleeps in a separate room next to his (though her door remains open), reveals once more his confusion over which woman he really desires. He wonders why he was so silly about fearing he would give the narrator the idea he was not in love with his wife. Then he adds, revealingly, "As the matter stands I have a little stirred myself up. To-night I shall think of the other woman." A clear measure of his discomfort in disorder is shown earlier in the story, before his invitation to the tobacconist's wife, who so occupied his thoughts as he lay abed that he could neither think of the woman he claimed to love nor sleep: "I rolled and tumbled about in the bed. It was a miserable experience."

Key Questions

1. Given the husband's insecurity, hesitancy, tentativeness, etc., why do you think he made such a strong point of his love for his wife? (Reread the opening of the story.)

2. Why does the main character make so much of the contrast between light and dark, the mind when asleep and the mind in the waking state?

3. Do you find something childish or just plain naive in the husband's whole attitude toward his own feelings about "his" two women?

4. In what ways might this 1920 story be considered expressive of life and domestic relations today?

5. Why do you think Anderson failed to give his characters names? Do you think they are supposed to represent allegorical figures, simple stereotypes, or something else? What does this namelessness tell you about the storyline and the author's attitude toward his characters?

6. As you consider "The Other Woman" and its implications, what, if anything, in your view is really lacking in Anderson's presentation, other than names of the characters?

7. In your opinion, should the story, in order to be more effective, have been made longer, with an expanded cast of characters, a detailed setting (time and place), dialogue, plot twists, and other desirable elements?

8. Can you justify or defend the bridegroom's behavior just before the wedding, i.e., his having sex with another woman because he just felt like it?

Assume either a plaintiff's or a defender's position, and present your case.

Literary Precedents

The most relevant feature of "The Other Woman" having to do with literary precedents is the technique referred to earlier, the enclosed narrative. That is, a story with a loose outer frame which has the potential for a story or which constitutes an actual story. Broadly, the term includes one or more of the following features of a loose outer frame of reference: the recorder of the events, the commentator on the events, or the compiler of the data on the events. A somewhat different definition of the framing or enclosure technique, applied to the short story, is given in The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, 4th ed., by J. A. Cuddon and rev. by C. E. Preston (1999): "A frame story is one which contains either another tale, a story within a story, or a series of stories."

The nineteenth-century writers produced a number of short fictions that illustrate what has been said here about the enclosed narrative as a literary form. Four examples may be mentioned, drawn from the sizable pool of stories. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (1835) is a sketch suggested to the imaginative narrator by "a story, told as truth," in an old newspaper or magazine about a man in London who walked out on his wife. He moved to a nearby lodging but managed to keep an eye on her during an absence of almost twenty years, then returned to their original dwelling and resumed married life with her. There are actually three story or quasi-story patterns in "Wakefield." One consists of comments on what happened to the wife during this interval, another consists of comments on what happened to the husband, and the third gives the reader what Hawthorne the narrator makes of this journalistic account.

Edward Everett Hale's patriotic classic "The Man Without a Country " (1863) concerns the circumstances surrounding the treason trial in 1807 of an army lieutenant, Philip Nolan, who had been involved in the Aaron Burr conspiracy to promote a secessionist movement in the newly formed republic. A cogent summary of this artfully constructed fiction with the ring of truth is given in John R. Adams's Edward Everett Hale (1977). This "officer convicted of treason angrily expresses the hope that he may never again hear the name of his native country . . . . As his penalty, his wish is granted by the court; he spends the remainder of his life at sea, is transferred from one government ship to another, and is tortured by incessantly intensifying remorse."

Frederic Ingham, a shipboard officer who knew Nolan (Ingham is a fictional alter ego for Hale) makes himself the reader's tour guide to the life and hard times of the unhappy outcast. Ingham explains how he became involved in the Nolan story in the first place, provides historical commentary on Nolan's part in the Burr affair, and includes relevant correspondence from ships' officers on Nolan, one of which letters fittingly covers Nolan's last hours and words.

Mark Twain's melancholy account of the buckshot-laden amphibian, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865), is nestled within a droll outer narrative.

That covering involves the narrator, who goes in search of information about a friend of his friend—Leonidas W. Smiley— supposedly to be found in a rundown mining camp. Winding up in Angel's Camp, California (even today the sidewalks have commemorative frog inlays, and a local building has a plaque marking where Twain heard the original account and made it his own), he there encounters an old codger named Simon Wheeler. Answering the narrator's inquiry about the Smiley character, Wheeler spins a long, rambling yarn about a gambler he knew named Jim Smiley and his odd assortment of animals that he trained for betting purposes. Eventually Wheeler relates the memorable tale of the nasty trick played on Jim Smiley's jumping frog by the unscrupulous stranger who filled it with buckshot while Smiley was away getting the stranger a frog to bet on. After that small gem of a tale, Twain concludes his outer narrative as follows: When Wheeler is called away briefly but tells the narrator to wait for his immediate return, the narrator begins to take off. Then Wheeler gets back quickly and tries to restrain him, physically and with a new yarn (about a one-eyed cow), but nothing avails, and he makes his escape.

H. C. Bunner's "A Letter and a Paragraph" (1884) contains, in epistolary form, a journalist's account, to his friend, fellow reporter, and former roommate, of the purported last twenty-two years of his life, up to his fortieth birthday. The account traces the career of the letter writer from the drab poverty and hardship of his cub reporter days (which began when he was eighteen), through his presumed success and inexpressibly happy marriage and fatherhood, down to the wonderful present.

This is the main story, but not the end of the letter. The secondary story enclosing the main one is given in the rest of the letter and in the paragraph following—a news item from the New York Herald, November 18, 1883. The secondary story in fact involves the switch ending, the reversal of intention.

As he confesses near the end of the letter, he has heart disease and, the doctor has told him, he may die at any time. More, he is still in the old shabby room he once shared with his journalist friend, and ten years have not elapsed since the latter left their lodging but rather a mere two days. He has burnt his writings and, as the letter makes clear, is filled with thoughts of death and of what kind of memory of himself he is leaving his old friend. "What a wild dream have I dreamt in all this emptiness! . . . I have tried to show you that I have led by your side a happier and dearer life of hope and aspiration than the one you saw." But the paragraph, with his obituary, is a switch from the prior switch. It reveals that the dead man had actually attained some success as a journalist (for some years he had been on the staff of his original paper, the Record) and as a creative writer. As to certain other details, he "was about thirty years of age, and unmarried."

Related Titles

A helpful general statement about Anderson's puzzled, confused, answer-seeking characters (generally male), of whom the central figure in "The Other Woman" is an example, may be found in Sherwood Anderson: Short Stories, edited and with an introduction by Maxwell Geismar (1962). Anderson, in writing "The Dumb Man" (a poem in prose, a la Walt Whitman's prose poetry), included in the 1923 collection The Triumph of the Egg, was—according to Geismar—like Theodore Dreiser in this particular regard. He "had deliberately chosen the role of the puzzled and baffled spectator standing in awe before all the mysteries of life. That was the typical role of the whole new generation of native realists who had come of age in the 1900s and the 'teens and who opened up the road for that 'sophistication' which marked the literature of the twenties."

As to "The Other Woman" and its literary connections with other stories by Anderson, there are so many of his short fictions it is possible to link up in one way or another that extensive tracing would have relatively low utility value. Judy Jo Small in A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Sherwood Anderson, cited earlier, comments that "Sexual inhibitions between married couples appear frequently in Anderson's works." She cites N. Bryllion Fagin's 1927 book (reprinted in 1973), The Phenomenon of Sherwood Anderson: A Study in American Life and Letters, which "mentions the obvious influence of Freud on" the present story and its revelation that while the man consciously loved the proper woman, so to speak, on an unconscious level he desired the opposite kind.

But Small's most important contribution to literary linkage as it is discussed here is her pointing out the general similarity between "The Other Woman" and Anderson's beautiful and more sensitively written story "A Walk in the Moonlight" (1937).

The extramarital situation is somewhat different from that in "The Other Woman," but no matter. There are close parallels between certain features of the two stories' plots, particularly in regard to what was referred to above as elective affinities. For example, in "A Walk in the Moonlight," a country doctor, secure in a very successful marriage which has survived a number of family tragedies, suddenly becomes lovesmitten (an outsider might say "infatuated") with a Polish servant he encounters in the house of a patient. Realizing the situation might culminate in a scandal, he still cannot restrain himself, since he feels gripped by forces beyond his control. He asks, "'What is this thing about women, about men?

Why does all of this thing, this force, so powerful, so little understood, why with the male does it all become suddenly directed upon one woman and not upon another?'"

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