Red Short Guide

Red by W. Somerset Maugham

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Characters

There are four main characters in Somerset Maugham's short story "Red": Neilson, the narrator, also called "The Swede;" Red, a dashing young man who came to this island in the South Pacific twenty-five years ago; Sally, a native woman who loved and was abandoned by Red, and whom Neilson wanted to love after Red's departure; and "the skipper," whose identity is revealed at the end of the story as Red twenty-five years later. Neither Neilson nor Sally recognizes that the older skipper is Red, which sets up many opportunities for ironic twists.

As Neilson tells "the skipper" the story of the romance between Red and Sally, the profound irony of the situation becomes clear. Although Maugham gives several clues to the identity of "the skipper" who docks near Neilson's house and listens to the story, some readers are quite surprised at the end when they learn of the man's identity. The description of the skipper is both realistic and suggestive.

He is middle-aged and of unprepossessing appearance: "He was a tall man, more than six feet high, and very stout. His face was red and blotchy, with a network of little purple veins on the cheeks, and his features were sunk into its fatness."

Other details include a look of "peculiar imbecility" and a chest covered with "a mat of reddish hair." He seems the opposite of the young man of Neilson's tale: "It appears that Red was the most comely thing you ever saw." Neilson knows of his look only by report of those who knew him when he stopped for a while in this very spot, but all these opinions are in agreement that Red was of such "beauty" that the sight of him "just took your breath away."

Another clue as to his identity besides the skipper's red-haired chest is his remark, ignored or overlooked by Neilson, that when he "was a kiddie," he "had kind of a white skin myself!" This is said right after Neilson has described the "dazzling, white, milky" skin of the young Red; and the skipper says it "with a twinkle in his bloodshot eyes." Thus, the essence of this story is irony. Beyond the irony of the narrator telling the events of the early life of the very person who is listening to him is the pathetic irony that Neilson fell in love with the lovely native girl whom Red abandoned—a girl who can never love him in return because of her persistent infatuation for Red. As Neilson continues with a review of the love that developed between Red and the beautiful girl (he was twenty and she sixteen), he makes a reference that has a deeply thematic note. He remarks that a "wise, cynical French duke" (he must refer to La Rochefoucauld) once said that "with two lovers there is always one who loves and one who lets himself be loved."

(This statement is often attributed to Maugham himself.) While the elevated love that he sees as having prevailed between Red and the native girl is of quite another kind, yet, when Neilson finally persuades Sally (the name Red had given the girl) to "marry" him, she does so perfunctorily. She never loves him but permits him to love her; however, as Neilson states, his love, after a time, wanes: "His love became bitter. He tried to melt

her heart with kindness, but it remained as hard as before." Eventually, his love "became a prison from which he longed to escape, but he had not the strength merely to open the door . . . ."

This nearly tragic contrast between the love that Red enjoyed with Sally and the mockery of love that Neilson suffers with her finally leads the Swede to end his narration with the troubling thematic conclusion: "Oh, it is dreadfully bitter to look at a woman you have loved with all your heart and soul, . . . and realize that you would not mind if you never saw her again. The tragedy of love is indifference." Early in the story, Neilson remarks that he seems to have met the skipper somewhere before (another clue to the fat sailor's identity); now, suddenly he begins to wonder what brought the captain of a run-down ship to his door.

Upon his asking the man's name, "The skipper's face puckered and he gave a cunning chuckle . . . 'for thirty years now in the islands they've always called me Red!'" Whether the reader is surprised or not to learn of the listener's identify, the effect is strong. Red is unmoved by the story of his early romance, one that the romantic Swede has presented in lofty terms. To heighten and sum up the ironic effect, Sally comes into the room, looks at Red and experiences no bit of recognition: "She gave the man who was sitting in the chair by the window an indifferent glance, and went out of the room. The moment had come and gone." The sadness and sense of waste that the "moment" inflict on Neilson is nearly unbearable: "Was that the man who had prevented him from being happy? Was that the man whom Sally had loved and for whom she had waited so desperately? It was grotesque." This reflection leads Neilson into a state of fury, and he resolves to return home to Sweden: "The Gods had played him a cruel trick."

This compact story has a nearly tragic effect. The setting is important (Maugham always paints his pictures of the islands with clarity and effect), but the heart-rending irony overarches all other features. Whether the grim sentiments about love that appear in text are indeed Maugham's opinions or not, the impression is that he had deeply felt reasons for preferring this story over all others.

Social Concerns

In the modern age of interracial marriages and liaisons between those of disparate races, the attitude, the typical one, of white men toward "native" women, as seen in "Red," may appear outdated. It may be instructive to readers today to note that, while such relationships were not uncommon, especially in the Pacific Islands, the view of most white men was that any such association was "occasional" and any "marriage" less than binding. That Neilson and Red take opposite sides in their feelings about relations with natives only underlines the social significance of interracial connections, from love affairs to marriages.

The European colonialism that had prevailed in the Islands for many years, in which natives, especially women, were treated as second-class persons, tended to create attitudes like Red's. When Neilson asks him if he thinks that the "lover" will ever return, Red says that he will never come back; that by the time the ship is paid off in a couple of years he will have forgotten all about her. That is exactly what has happened, and the more modern-minded Neilson, who appreciates Sally's qualities, is desolate. The cynicism of Westerners about natives, especially women, is again revealed by Red's comments. When he is told that Sally has taken up with "another white man," Red says, "That's generally what happens to them." At this observation, Neilson becomes furious. Clearly, Red and Neilson, the foreign settler, represent opposing views of both the people on the Islands and the nature of human love.

Neilson stands for the more liberal, modern, sensitive view, while Red displays the traditional unfeeling attitude of most of the white people living in the Tropics during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Techniques

Of his more than 100 hundred short stories, this is Maugham's favorite. He once wrote that the reason was that in it he had created a sentence that pleased him enormously: "Here love had tarried for a moment like a migrant bird that happens on a ship in midocean and for a little while folds its tired wings." While this is an impressive passage and illustrates the fact that Maugham was a better stylist than he is often considered—being lyrical when appropriate and down-toearth when needful—there are more substantial reasons for admiring this tale.

Since Maugham was bilingual, speaking French before he learned English, his early reading was French authors, and Maupassant especially was influential, particularly as to the importance of economy and plot. According to his own definition of a short story, the work must focus on "a single situation." "Red" does this in a remarkable fashion. No detail is extraneous. This effect is achieved largely by the device that Maugham favored: the retrospective narration of events and conditions of the past. The Swede Neilson makes an ideal narrator: He is educated, sensitive, a bit poetic, and lives in the Islands because of his health.

Themes

Apart from the disparate attitudes represented by Neilson and Red, the story underlines the prominent place that irony plays in human life—a theme that Maugham emphasizes in many of his works. The crowning irony is that the sensitive European, who loved in vain, is telling the story of a beautiful love affair to the very man who cast the love aside.

Further, Sally and Red do not even really notice each other after the lapse of years, even though they once were intensely in love, which compounds the sadness and the sense of fruitlessness and despair that assails Neilson. This profoundly romantic man had been overpowered by his notion of idyllic love, personified in the romance between Sally and Red. But, his attempt to live in such a delightful atmosphere fails; and his sense of loss only suffers the more from his discovery that the man he has envied so many years is now fat, repellent, and coarse—so far away from the beautiful, graceful young man whom Sally had adored.

Perhaps Maugham's own experiences in the tropics caused him to develop an unsentimental attitude about romantic love, at least as it was found during his generation. Maugham seems to suggest that, while Red's callous disregard for the girl who loved him so deeply is reprehensible, Neilson's frustrated attempt to achieve a reciprocal love with her is inevitably bound to fail and cause him grief.

Neilson may, in a way, have been trying to re-create the sort of romantic liaison that Sally had with Red. Though he persuades Sally to marry him, his proposal does nothing to bring her closer to him.

When his love for her turns sour, Maugham may be saying that idealized emotion is doomed. So, Neilson's only recourse is to go home. When Sally asks him if he will be gone very long and "He shrugged his shoulders," the reader knows that he will never return and perhaps believes that he should never have come to the tropics at all. Idealism seems to fall before crude realism in this sad story.

Key Questions

Perhaps the central question that readers may want to examine is whether Maugham gives enough early clues to Red's identity or not enough. Then the topic of whether it matters if one guesses the name of the listener to Neilson's sad story could be discussed. Certainly, Maugham did not insert these details into the story for no reason. Does an early recognition of Red enhance the effect of the tale or not?

1. One critic says that there is no crueler love story than this. Is "cruel" a strong enough term for "Red"? Would you call it "tragic"?

2. How important is the setting? Could the plot have been as effectively developed in another place? Is the idyllic setting appropriate for the themes?

3. Is Neilson's decision to return home at the end truly credible? Is the "objective correlative" adequate to provide the motivation for this extreme action?

4. Can any short story by Maupassant (say "The Piece of String" or "Ball of Fat") be shown to have parallels in technique to "Red"? Does the retrospective device work well in this story?

5. Is the passage of time clear? Could the story have been as well developed without the presence of the unsuspecting narrator?

6. Is Neilson's comment "The tragedy of love is indifference" adequately supported by the story? Does the remark apply to Red as well as to Sally.

7. Is the introductory section of the story, on the ship while the captain (Red) is trying to find a way through the reef, helpful in establishing this character's rough personality and the story's setting?

Should the story have opened with a scene including Neilson, who is, after all, the central personage?

8. Is the literary style of this tale appropriate to the characters and themes? Is Neilson's speech too literary, elegant, and lyrical to be realistic? Should it have been more down-to-earth?

Literary Precedents

The phenomenon of mistaken or unknown identity, often employed to establish a clever plot turn or a striking irony, can be found in many variations in the earliest recorded literature: the stable boy turns out to be the king's son; the farm girl is really the princess; and in a more modern example, Tom is really of genteel birth in Henry Fielding's novel, Tom Jones (1749). Red's cynicism, however, probably stems from both Maugham's personal vision of life and from his intense readings of Guy de Maupassant (especially "The Piece of String" and "The Necklace"), whom Maugham recognized as a powerful influence—both as to technique (particularly stylistic economy) and attitudes.

The device of the semi-narrator (Neilson shifts into third person in telling Red's story) is also time-honored. Numerous writers have utilized this device of having one character relate important events to one or several other characters.

It appears often in the eighteenth-century novels of Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Laurence Sterne. In the nineteenth century, the most important practitioner is Joseph Conrad, whose charac ter Marlowe narrates Heart of Darkness (1902; see separate entry), "Youth" (1902; see separate entry), Victory (1915), and Lord Jim (1900; see separate entry).

Related Titles

Almost any of Maugham's works set in the islands can be seen as related. The corrupting influence of the Tropics and the Orient that Maugham apparently believed affected Westerners (as with Red) may be found in "The Letter" (1925), "Rain (1921), and "P&O." Of course, The Moon and Sixpence (1919; see separate entry) is often viewed as the story of a dedicated artist who finds both artistic fulfillment and corrupting death in the islands.

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