The Waltz Short Guide

The Waltz by Dorothy Parker

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Characters

There are only two characters in "The Waltz," the female narrator and her male dancing partner. One of the first questions to ask about Parker's nameless narrator is, why doesn't she say 'no'?

Readers may be tempted to think the era in which this story was written is a factor; surely women are more willing to say 'no' or to express their feelings in the 1990s.

Yet Parker touched on a seemingly timeless quality when she created the narrator.

Women today still identify with the narrator, citing incidents in their lives when they felt obligated to accommodate their partner's wishes in a social setting when they preferred otherwise.

Another important element of the narrator is the dual nature of her personality, as revealed by the external and internal voices. The external voice is the feminine voice of compliance. It says Yes, and provides information in the form of a question so as not to appear threatening. In many respects, she represents a one-dimensional, or stereotypical, character. The internal voice, as critic Paula Treichler points out, is marked by sophistication, education, and knowledge of the male sphere. It contains allusions to literary figures, popular culture, and theater. Furthermore, the voice uses slang, curses, and knows sports metaphors—language not expected from women in the early part of this century.

The male dancing partner remains somewhat of a mystery, since he never speaks in the story, and we see him only through the eyes of the narrator. While the narrator seems believable, questions about her reliability can be raised because at the story's conclusion she is willing to dance again with the same partner. And, since the narrator's internal thoughts are grounded in exaggeration, how do we know that her dance partner is as bad as she suggests? Were his kicks as vicious as she complains internally? It is important to recall that the interior monologue form offers an avenue for psychological exploration. The allusion to Freud, as well as the fact that Parker wrote several internal monologues, suggest that Parker knew something about psychology. She applied that knowledge to the creation of her narrator, who ultimately denies the pain she suffers. The depth of the narrator's denial suggests the extent to which she feels forced to conform to conventions of feminine behavior.

Social Concerns

On the surface, "The Waltz" appears to be merely a woman's complaint against an inept dancing partner who moves too fast and kicks her shins. Read allegorically, the story offers a stinging assessment of marriage. Parker achieves this by setting an external voice that agrees to dance against an internal voice that complains about the experience.

While the external voice is one of compliance, the internal voice is characterized by exaggeration: "I guess I'm as well off here," she tells herself of her waltzing.

"As well off as if I were in a cement mixer in full action." Yet the waltz does not last for "one-hundred years" or for "one-thousand years," but for a significantly specific number: "And here I've been locked in his noxious embrace for the thirty-five years this waltz has lasted."

Parker was thirty-five years old when she divorced her first husband in 1928, but given the dance's symbolic representation of sexual encounters, the number more likely refers to the length of a marriage.

This marriage, however, is not limited to one specific couple. Parker uses nameless characters to extend her critique to marriage overall. It is an institution in trouble, characterized by miscommunication, male insensitivity, sexual dissatisfaction, and physical abuse. The female partner feels obligated to say yes to her partner's request, refusing to tell him how she really feels. She feels "trapped" by her setting and by social expectations for women to pair off. "But what could I do?

Everyone else at the table had got up to dance, except him and me." His "dance," however, is too fast; the woman can never feel comfortable or satisfied. "Why can't we stay in one place just long enough to get acclimated?"

This complaint is interrupted by repeated incidents of violence and denial.

The male partner kicks the narrator's shins; her external response is to grin and bear it. Internally, however, the assault takes on a larger meaning. "I don't want to be of the oversensitive type, but you can't tell me that kick was unpremeditated. Freud says there are no accidents.

I've led no cloistered life, I've known dancing partners who have spoiled my slippers and torn my dress; but when it comes to kicking, I am Outraged Womanhood." Severer allusions to violence appear: "plaster cast," "splintering bones," "dead," and "I'm past all feeling now." Collectively, Parker's literal exaggerations take on allegorical power.

Parker's stinging critique of marriage and of male-female relationships points to one of the paradoxes embedded in the so-called Roaring Twenties, or Jazz Age.

The social and sexual freedom women experienced often backfired due to lingering, neo-Victorian values regarding sex.

Liberated women were still expected to be "ladies" (at least in appearance) while there was little expectation that Jazz Age gents would remain gentlemen. The resulting tension contributed to rising divorce rates. The physical violence occurring between Parker's waltzing couple eerily forecasts the spouse abuse prevalent in the 1990s.

Techniques

In an interior monologue, an author must create a character through voice alone. Parker uses humor, sarcasm, and exaggeration in the internal voice of "The Waltz" to illustrate the wit, intelligence, and expectations of the narrator. The strength of this voice helps to set up the story's surprise ending—her willingness to go on dancing—which in turn recalls the old adage, "actions speak louder than words." If that were all the story had to offer, we would consider it clever, but not important. Other elements raise this story to the level of allegory.

Setting is particularly significant. The setting is much narrower than the room in which the dance takes place. The dance itself, the embrace of the two partners, is the setting. Both constraint and movement are present, for the partners are "locked" together as they dance their routine pattern. This mirrors the movement of the story as a whole. We move through the story's pattern of inner complaint and outer denial, expecting to be released in the end. Instead, the story's closing statement, "I'd simply adore to go on waltzing," returns us to the story's beginning, where the narrator agrees to dance: "Why, thank you so much. I'd adore to." The story's signature phrase, "There was I, trapped. Trapped like a trap in a trap," emphasizes not only the narrator's entrapment, but the reader's as well. This is a "dance" that will never end.

The image of an ongoing dance invites us to read the story allegorically. Parker's social occasion becomes a symbol for love, or more specifically, for a marriage.

The continual kicking by the male partner, the repeated allusions to suffering and death, and the refusal to complain or stop the dance—"Maybe it's best not to make a scene"—all take on a more problematic meaning in light of the "thirtyfive years this waltz has lasted." Parker, who knew the metaphysical poets well, was familiar with conceits, extended metaphors, and the power of symbols.

She applies these traditional techniques to modern psychological fiction to produce a timeless and troublesome tale of romantic love.

Themes

Several themes can be discerned from "The Waltz." One of these concerns conformity to societal expectations.

Conventions regarding feminine behavior dictate that a woman accommodate herself to the needs of a man. Therefore, the narrator finds it difficult to say 'no' when asked to dance, or to talk of her problems with the waltz. This leads to a second theme, one seen in many of Parker's stories: the lack of communication between the sexes. Rather than express her displeasure, the narrator endures the waltz in silent agony. To complain would risk stopping the dance, failing to be feminine, and being left alone, behaviors unbecoming to a lady in a social setting.

Closely related is the issue of women's over-dependence on men. Whether induced by societal pressure or by inherent flaw, the narrator seems to prefer the crudest of male companionship to her independence, perhaps for a reason.

Given the fact that the narrator would remain the only uncoupled female at her table if she did not dance, independence takes on the look of isolation. Through the physical suffering of the narrator, however, Parker points out that there is a price to pay for her dependence.

Finally, "The Waltz" suggests that love—or what passes for love in the form of twentieth-century relationships—is full of disappointments. Couples often locate each other in "last resort" situations. Sex is hurried and unsatisfying. Abuse occurs.

Yet the dance continues without people growing wiser. In its allegorical form, "The Waltz" offers a realistic portrayal of a couple as it de-romanticizes the conventional love story.

Key Questions

As short as it is, "The Waltz" offers much room for discussion, in part because of the strength of the narrative voice and the plot reversal.

1. Which of the two voices—external and internal—do you believe and why?

2. How would you characterize the language of the two voices?

3. How would you retell this story from the male partner's point of view?

Remember, he does not know what his female partner is thinking, only what she says and does.

4. How fair or accurate is Parker's portrayal of male-female behavior? Of social convention and rules?

5. Would this story be more or less effective if it were told from a third-person point of view?

6. At one point in the story, the narrator tells herself she loves her dance partner. Should we believe her? Why or why not?

7. Is the male partner the real "villain" in this story? Why or why not?

8. Why does the narrator agree to continue dancing with her partner?

Literary Precedents

The narrator in "The Waltz" fits the literary precedent of the witty, complaining female found in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath" (in The Canterbury Tales, c. 13871400). The use of humor to critique male-female relationships, however, has a more recent tradition among American women writers. The nineteenth century saw the rise of Fanny Fern, Francis Miriam Berry Whitcher, and Marietta Holley, writers who offered sharp commentaries on the sexes through the protective device of humor.

An interesting comparison can be made with a turn-of-the-century regional story, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun." Although set in a different time and among different circumstances, Louisa Ellis finds a way to say 'no' to a man's offering.

Related Titles

Parker recreates a similar sense of entrapment, as well as commentary on romance and social conventions, in her other stories using the internal monologue form. These include "The Garter," "But the One on the Right," "A Telephone Call," "Lady with a Lamp," "The Little Hours," and "Sentiment."

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