

In the "Astronomer's Wife" by Kay Boyle, something as simple as a conversation with a plumber about a stopped elbow is enough to trigger an awakening in Mrs. Katherine Ames. When Mrs. Ames realized that the plumber was talking about something she understood (the stopped elbow), she realized that her marital problems were not the result of a division between the sexes; instead, she realized that some men, like the plumber, are as practical as she is, and that some other men, like her husband, scorn people like her because they are intellectually inclined. Previous to this discovery, Katherine did not realize that there were different kinds of men, and therefore she did not realize that she and her husband were mismatched. Furthermore, in her awakening, Mrs. Ames also discovers that she, like the plumber, occupies as valuable a place in society as the astronomer, for she does the "dirty" work to free people like her husband to have time to think and to discover.

The scene in question takes place after Mrs. Ames has already noticed that the plumber has a few physical characteristics that match her own (such as blond hair), and she is talking to him as he descends into the earth. The scene begins immediately after the plumber says "I think something has stopped the elbow", because this phrase was one of the few things that a man has ever said that Mrs. Ames has understood. After the plumber has descended into the ground before the scene, Mrs. Ames is the only one left. She spends the entire duration of this scene sitting on the grass, silently thinking and revealing her thoughts to the audience.

During her course of thinking, Mrs. Ames makes the important discovery that there is a whole race of practical people like herself, men and women alike. She knew that "when her husband spoke of height, having no sense of it, she could not picture it nor hear", but strangely enough, when another man who happened to be a plumber spoke of his work, "madness in a daily shape, as elbow stopped, she saw clearly and well". Mrs Ames finally realized during these thoughts that these were two men with two different ways of life, and perhaps her way of life suited the plumber's more than the astronomer's, in that she too could identify only with daily concerns. The division between people in her mind was no longer just between men and women; it was now the working and the thinking, those who "had always gone up, [and] others who went down, like the corporeal being of the dead". She now recognized that there were both physical and spiritual human beings, herself and the plumber being the former, and her husband being the latter.

The theme is revealed in the way that these two classes of people, the toilers and the thinkers, react to the world. The people who work with their hands, when they see "weeds springing up, [do] not move to tear them up from life". In other words, people like Mrs. Ames, upon recognizing something that occupies the same position in society that they do, such as the often ill-regarded weed, do not feel compelled to destroy it. Weeds, like the workers, although considered ugly, are as necessary for nature to be in balance as the more beautiful flower is. However, people like the astronomer "could balance and divide, weed out, destroy". This indicates that people with lofty ambitions, like the astronomer, do not regard the common people as necessary for the world to run smoothly, and would rather obliterate them. The astronomer does not realize that by unclogging pipes and performing other such chores, those people have allowed him to be free to think about large-scale problems. Interaction between the two types of people is necessary, whether either one realizes it, for the world to function.

The "Astronomer's Wife" is an excellent short story that brings out the often forgotten point that both the practical people and the ambitious dreamers are important for each other's survival. While Mrs. Ames perhaps could never get along without her husband, it was no fault of her own that she didn't. She provided a comfortable existence for the astronomer so that he would be free to do his work, and the marriage would have been happier if Mr. Ames recognized all that she had done, and had considered her lifestyle a valid one. Of course an understanding was never reached, because otherwise the author would not have been able to illustrate the similar conflicts that exist in today's society so well.

