

For a short story to be effective, it must be able to produce high levels of intensity, emotion and drama. To do this, it must convey a great deal of information in a short space of time. As a result, the short story usually leaves a great deal of its content open to interpretation and examination by the reader. Also, the denouements of short stories frequently remain inconclusive and unfulfilled. Together, these attributes add to the action and intriguing character of this genre of literature.

An essential element of the short story is to make the personal events experienced by the characters universally understood by the reader. The story must present themes which are relevant to the reader, in order for it to make an impression. For this reason, short stories tend to be based on some type of controversy or debatable issue. In Sinclair Ross' highly metaphorical short story "The Painted Door", the explicit theme is centered on adultery. However, there are other, more subtle, motifs in the story that play a very significant a role in its success. The themes essential in making the protagonist's adultery understandable are the landscape, her isolation, and the feelings of betrayal and guilt that she experiences following the central act of the story.

A great deal of this story is spent describing Ann's environment, both inside and outside her house. The story takes place in the past, before automobiles or telephones. Ann and her husband are settlers in a largely uninhabited and desolate area of North America (perhaps Saskatchewan). The starkness of the land is described early in the story: "Scattered across the face of so vast and bleak a wilderness it was difficult to conceive [the distant farmsteads] as a testimony of human hardihood and endurance." (246).

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The barrenness of the surroundings in which the characters live produces an impression of extreme, almost unbearable, isolation and loneliness. This theme, perhaps the most vividly expressed theme of the story, pervades throughout the entire duration of the narrative. At one level, it serves to explain how the circumstances of Ann's adultery arise, but, on another level, the description of the terrain serves a metaphor for the spirit itself. In other words, the emptiness of her surroundings point to the feelings of emptiness and loneliness she experiences. In this way, we can empathise with Ann through the descriptive passages of her bleak surroundings. Her attempts to keep herself occupied during the absence of her husband by carrying on with the household chores further emphasises the sense of tedium in her life. The almost exaggerated meticulousness in the way she proceeds with her chores illustrates her attempts at detaching herself from the reality of her isolation (does the house really need to be painted in the middle of winter?).

The weather outside deteriorates as her concern for her husband increases. She ventures outside the safety and warmth of the house to feed the horses in the stables. The blizzard is so ferocious that by the time she returns to the house, she realises that if her husband had ventured home in the storm, he has little chance of surviving the journey. The storm thus serves as a metaphor both for Ann's anxiety about her present life, and also for regrets about past decisions. The physical separation from her husband signifies the isolation Ann is experiencing in her marital relationship. Together, these emotions make it possible for Ann to engage in an act that under normal conditions, would be out of character for her.

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At this point, Steven, their neighbour, arrives. We learn that Ann considers

Steven attractive, perhaps even more attractive than her husband. The sexual tension between them soon becomes apparent: "Something was at hand that hitherto had always eluded her, even in the early days with John, something vital, beckoning, meaningful. She didn't understand, but she knew. The texture of the moment was satisfyingly dreamlike. . ." (254).

Eventually, she accedes to Steven's persuasions that John, her husband, will not be returning home, either because he is stranded at his father's house (where he had gone that morning, before the blizzard), or he has lost his way and perished in the cold. She surrenders herself to her loneliness and temptation, and her relationship with Steven is consummated. The storm is thus a metaphor for passion, emotion, and crisis.

After having sex, she visualises moving shadows and flickering light from the bed she is sharing with Steven. It is unclear whether she is awake or dreaming. The spectre of John then appears. At first, Ann attributes this to a dream, because she knows that the house is completely isolated. Then, she is profoundly struck by the act of betrayal she has just committed: "She knew now. She had not let herself understand or acknowledge it as guilt before, but gradually through the wind-torn silence of the night his face compelled her." (259). The abatement of the storm signifies Ann's return to rationality and moral conscience. This reality is reflected in Steven, whom Ann sees from a different perspective at this point.

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Instead of sharing her emotions of angst and shame, he remains calm and displays no feelings of guilt. As a result, he is now substantially less attractive to Ann than he had been the previous night. This adds to her sense of betrayal as she recalls the admirable qualities of her husband: "she understood that thus he was revealed in his entirety - all there ever was or ever could be. John was the man. He was the future." (261).

The conclusion of "The Painted Door" is shocking and ironic, which is what makes the story so effective. The reader is left with a definite, yet somewhat inconclusive ending. It is the only instance in the story in which we are not a party to the protagonist's emotions. The conclusion serves to produce almost as many questions as it answers, because we are not completely certain what the implications are for Ann. The sudden termination of the story fails to reveal both what John's motivations were, and what Ann's future holds.

This "Twilight-Zone-esque" formula is what makes a short story like "The Painted Door" so effective. The open-ended and disturbing culmination, coupled with the abundant use of symbolism and metaphor, compel the reader to ruminate on the implications long after the reader has finished reading the story.

Works Cited

Ross, Sinclair. "The Painted Door". Elements of Literature, Second Canadian Edition. Ed. Robert Scholes, et al. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990. 245-261

Essay #2 (Revised)
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