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The Beauty of Sorrow

In the category of figurative language, the works of Angela Carter reign as titans, ensuring that their creator's appellation will long survive the woman herself. Of these giants, one in particular endeavors to redefine the limitations of tropes, stretching them into a landscape where meanings morph with perspective, using literal imagery as a transparent mask for emotional subtleties. "The Smile of Winter" is a sunrise crowning a sea of symbolism and metaphor, transforming a simple scenic tour into an evocative apologia, which defends the narrator's self-accepted depression by portraying its beauty through the setting's allegorical lens. The narrator entices the senses with evocative language, turning them against the reader's doubts to proclaim victory in a conquest for understanding. To her, depression is nothing to be ashamed of or challenged but rather, it is an axiom of self to be embraced. Carter depicts these sentiments via the protagonist's rich descriptions of the surrounding area and its inhabitants, natural symbolism, and the attenuated irony of the narrator's commentary. As any good realtor would say, one of the key things to consider when trying to sell something is location and with that in mind, Carter's "The Smile of Winter" makes one hell of a sale's pitch.

The short story takes place in a seemingly remote fishing town, far more frigid than tropical, as bleak and unforgiving as it is mysterious and compelling. Much like the rustic locale,

the narrator of “The Smile of Winter” is nameless though neither seems less real for it; on the contrary, this lack of designation makes one synonymous with the other. Bound in ambiguity, both exist with a stoic resolution to perpetual continuance. From the trees “subtly wrapped by the weather, squat on their hunkers,” to the houses, “each one dedicated to seclusion,” (53) a paradoxical theme of determination and lethargic indifference emerges. Living for the sake of living, for even “if a tidal wave consumed the village...life would go on just as before” (57). Here the narrator hyperbolically highlights the constancy of her chosen home; it is as unlikely to succumb to the forces of change as she is. Yet this resilience does not come without a price; the shield of isolation she has erected blocks out the potential for intimate connections whilst simultaneously piquing her interest in them. The repeated references to the motorcyclists depict this as the narrator takes an almost perversely masochistic joy in their inaccessible nightly presence. They are entirely separate from her and their beauty entices as much as it sharpens the loneliness, which ironically aids her, as by her own admission: she came there to be lonely (53). This bittersweet contrast between the awe of sensory stimulation and its consequences creates an overarching pattern throughout the story, a simulacrum of the narrator’s own internal conflict. All around her, “an excess of sky bears down with an intolerable weight, pressing the essence out of everything” causing everyone in the seaside town to retreat inward, “in an introspective somberness” (52). The majesty of nature’s sovereignty forces the essence out of the landscape around them, leaving it nowhere to go but into the inhabitants and subsequently, the narrator. She shows an awareness of this, however, which again suggests that her continued residence there is an endeavor to feed a melancholy she refuses to relinquish. Though her world is not despair alone, throughout it, a muted brilliance repeatedly captures her attentions and provokes that wintery smile.

Carter, like an editor of a black and white movie selectively retouching its everyday items in Technicolor to spotlight their emotional subtext, shades in her protagonist's swaying sentiments with choice adjectives. Each time this happens little pieces of consolation and happiness emerge clothed in the vibrant colors absent throughout the rest of the earth-toned story. The red pegs that stakeout the sandy trails of her wistfully admired riders, speak of her passion for them, while rare pink shells blush with innocence and fragility in a world poised to crush them. The aural imagery of the otherwise grave village women laughing, echoes across their electrifying gold teeth and resounds against the visual backdrop of a promising dawn's violet light, which sits above the chameleon colors of the sea. Again, the ever-perceptive narrator is dutifully aware of these out-of-place concrete details; upon seeing "an orange tree hung with gold balls like a magic trick," she specifically notes that "it does nothing but stress by contrast the prevailing static sobriety of everything" (56). One of the most important pieces of color, however, sneaks by almost unnoticed, wedged in the metaphor: "Smiling my habitual winter smile, I stand at the end of my garden attended by a pack of green bears" (56). The import of the line lies with the tenor of the metaphor, those loyal pines that serve as the narrator's only comrades in her otherwise solipsized existence.

Throughout the work, the narrator personifies the stalky trees in her garden, imbuing them with many of the qualities inherent in herself. These silent, ever-present plants embody her own quiet resolve to simply remain there, undisturbed and undaunted. Even as she describes their uncompromising devotion to growing in such a brutal climate, she is doing the same, her depression thriving in that stark winter paradise where beauty and barren blend. In a way, the trees are her foil characters, reflecting back the strength she lacks, for while the narrator clearly knows what she wants, an excess of solitude leaves her searching for what she has forsaken. This

results in those restless eyes being flung against the motorcyclists and moon with an intense longing that whispers of rebellion, challenging her chosen course. Conversely, her garden remains stable and steadfast, which may be why she seeks its company with such regularity. As if trying to emulate what she finds there, she poses with live wood and dead, and together they “all strike picturesque attitudes and that is why [they] are all so beautiful” (54). This quotation brings to light the narrator’s own view of such quiescent affectation, admiring through imitation the ability to sit unabashed and tear-stained, facing the world with the salty truth of life on either cheek. Though at times she suffers for it, she will not abandon her chosen path, no matter its perils; there is a deep-seated need to persevere, which her own narration seeks to delineate.

Of all the symbols used to fill out her autobiographical character sketch, there are two with which the narrator seems particularly fixated: the moon and the smile of winter. In both cases their importance is stressed via ample repetition, though the former’s purpose is perhaps more subtle. The “winter moon [which is] bright enough to pierce the heart,” (56) unleashes tears that are far more tangible than the metaphorical wound they spring from. The source of the narrator’s celestially sent sorrow comes from the constant reminder of what exists outside herself. Much like the moon, which lacks a light of its own but reflects the sun’s, the narrator mirrors everything around her, casting its beauty back with a seasonal smile while failing to retain its essence. Seeking to recreate a visceral version of this loss, she plays the artist, resculpting the marrow of the statuesque landscape into her morose mirror image, and on its face that smile forms. It is an expression which never wavers, and so sure is she of its presence that she sees it projected onto the whole of her home until “everything has put on the desolate smile of winter” (54). Thus, the delicate curl of lips tight with turmoil successfully outlines an objective correlative that drinks in empathy as though dehydrated. Yet, the nameless guide who

wears that smile patiently waits until the journey's conclusion before draining the final feelings from her voyeuristic readers.

From the beginning, this second-person narrative surreptitiously leads the reader through the protagonist's world, overturning its rocks to expose the secrets scurrying beneath. Here little gems of insight are found and prized by readers for their presumed originality; however, the twist is that the bejeweled assumptions the narrator led her audience to were handcrafted with revelation in mind, for "in this country you do not need to think, but only to look, and soon you think you understand everything" (53). The narrator assaults the fourth wall with the profundity of her purpose during the denouement where the melancholiac allegory is definitively revealed as intentional. This in turn provides readers with the missing epiphany of intent and gratifies them with an instant reevaluation of the piece, illuminating it with the light of deliberateness. As she states in the final paragraph, "Do not think I do not realise what I am doing" (57), for she knows exactly what she is doing. In tracing the course of her surroundings' apathy to her loneliness, she subsequently spawns a dichotomy by being acutely aware "of these pieces of inimical indifference" (57). Without the light of life surrounding her, neither her beauty nor depression would exist because it is the contrast that creates them. In combination, these concepts provide a "Decembral littoral [that] suits [the] forlorn mood" (53) of the piece and narrator alike. Winter may be desolate, but it has a woeful charm elegantly personified by an aching smile, and much like the words that pass through those smiling lips, its tragedy speaks to the heart of things.

Work Cited

Carter, Angela. *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

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