Helen Maher

Mr. Lindberg

English 10

28 Sep 2023

Biting the Apple: a Look Into Figurative Language and The Dismissive Nature of Misogyny

Emotional, mad, hysterical: women have been the supposed downfall of humanity since the very beginning. Though it was only Eve who cast mankind out of Eden, every girl has been subject to shaming, harassment, and violence as if she bit the apple herself. This repeating history makes its way into every aspect of a woman's life, including her art, her job, and her writing. In Bonnie Jo Campbell's "Boar Taint," Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," the female protagonists are forced to live through the consequences of men's actions. Whether pity, kidnapping, or death by stoning, they are mercilessly thrown to the wolves by people who claim to love them. Throughout the infinite cycle of fear, danger, and blame in these three stories, the grip misogyny holds both on women and the world around them dismisses and blurs the boundaries they try to set in stone; this forces women to step into peril and discomfort to protect the haphazard tradition of men's egos.

The disquiet entrenching the lives of Oates's Connie and Campbell's Jill is often overlooked in favor of seemingly unrelated things, demonstrating how they've been taught to dismiss their uneasiness. In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," Arnold Friend, a demonic man, arrives at the protagonist, Connie's, house while her family is out, with the intent to lure her away. When she threatens to call the police, Arnold Friend interrupts her: "'Honey,' he said, talking straight through her voice, 'honey I'm not coming in there but you are coming

out here'" (Oates 672). By speaking over Connie, he tries to distract her and convince her to come outside, to put herself in danger. She quickly realizes his intentions to kidnap her and rushes to the phone to call for help. Out of nowhere, the narrator remarks, "The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before… The kitchen window never had a curtain, after three years, and there were dishes in the sink for her to do —probably— and if you ran your hand across the table you'd probably feel something sticky there" (Oates 672). Amid Arnold's attempt at seizing her, Connie stops to ponder what beautifully mundane things she will lose. This might not seem out of place to the reader at first glance, however, one can easily discern that Connie simply does not have the time to long for her kitchen; she is running for the phone, trying to save herself. This moment of pause is life or death for her, and her subconscious still diverts her attention.

Similarly, at the end of Campbell's "Boar Taint", as the story culminates in the near biblical rising seen from the hog, Jill cements her tendency of silence and fear. As she examines the animal with Ernie and two neighbors, she begins to feel unsafe. The narrator notes, "The men and the boy couldn't stop staring at the hog, and the four bodies boxed Jill in, put her in a little closer to all of them than she wanted to be. Her foot was throbbing now" (Campbell 165). In this excerpt, Jill's foot becomes a replacement for an emotional ache. Throughout the story, Jill never once voices her discomfort and instead spirals or ignores it completely. By changing the focus to a physical sensation, she dismisses her feelings as irrational and not as valuable as the rancid curiosity of the men around her; she ceases to be whatever burden she perceives herself as. When focusing on a tangible pain, she doesn't fixate on her ever-present fear of the men around her. She cannot tell them to step away from her, so she steps away from herself. These departures

from the narrative add to the horror of these two stories, reminding the reader that the only way Connie and Jill know to cope is to isolate themselves from their feelings.

As Oates's Connie and Jackson's Tessie realize the danger they're in, they work to set barriers, both physical and emotional, and are forced to watch as those lines are crossed in appalling ways. Arnold Friend threatens and patronizes Connie as she tells him to leave. She rushes to lock the door when he continues making advances. He calls her attempts futile, saying, "But why lock it… It's just a screen door. It's just nothing" (Oates 672). By locking the door, Connie not only sets a physical boundary but an emotional one. She tries to protect herself from both bodily harm and the immense trauma she would experience if abducted. She says no over and over, and tries to set a final boundary, but he bypasses the line just as quickly and as easily as she draws it. Likewise, in Jackson's "The Lottery," Tessie finds her humanity retired in the minds of the townspeople. The story follows the population of a small town throughout a superstitious annual holiday that culminates in the stoning of a randomly drawn citizen. The ancient tradition is supposed to honor the harvest, but seems to have turned into an exhibition of cruel power. When Tessie's lottery slip opens and reveals a black dot, the townspeople close in around her, rocks in hand, despite her cries for help. Tessie screams, "It isn't fair, it isn't right" (Jackson 396). In a last desperate attempt, Tessie tries to set a boundary by appealing to the morality of her loved ones: she's here, she's human, they *know* her, it isn't fair. However, her efforts are fruitless; Tessie's very personhood is dismissed before tradition as the villagers hand her young son pebbles to help stone her to death. This death is not only painful, but dehumanizing: is she nothing but an offering to some undescribed god? Both Connie and Tessie are forced to sacrifice themselves for the sake of another's comfort or tradition, and are given a front-row view as their humanity is stripped from them piece by piece.

When danger and fear culminate in vast consequences for the women, they find themselves caught in the web of victim-blaming and name-calling that follows. As Arnold continues to make advances, Connie demands for him to leave, saying her father will be returning soon, and that she's busy washing her hair. Arnold quickly interrupts her, stating, "No, your daddy is not coming and yes, you had to wash your hair and you washed it for me. It's nice and shining all for me" (Oates 673). This exchange is particularly unsettling, as Arnold implies that Connie's self-care is a placeholder for consent; that she finds pleasure in his ghoulish presence. In assuming this, he erases Connie's agency, instead forcing himself and his opinion on her. After all, who will they believe? As the lottery progresses, The Hutchinson family is chosen for the penultimate round. When Tessie Hutchinson protests, saying it's unfair, her husband, Bill interjects: "Shut up Tessie" (Jackson 394). Such a brazenly unkind comment is not expected between husband and wife, and certainly not in small-town, blue-jean-wearing America, with its sunny weather and disposition. It brings forth the irrationality of The Lottery, as well as the hysteric stereotype they cast onto Tessie as she begs for her life. She is just a frenzied woman, making it harder for everyone to get on with their afternoon, making it harder for everyone to put her to death. How *dare* she want to live. As they try to reason with their abusers, Connie and Tessie find themselves trapped in the hysteric, foolish perception others have of them.

A woman's life is a never-ending cycle of trying to prove the validity of one's personhood. Always crazy, always wrong, always stupid. Campbell, Oates, and Jackson intertwine the idea of stolen agency in their short stories and reflect on how, in dire circumstances, this aspect of misogyny can be fatal. Even when it isn't, readers see characters gaslit, kidnapped, and pitied to such an extreme that they cease to see themselves as capable. All of these views are informed by the identities Campbell, Oates, and Jackson hold as women: they

have lived this story their entire lives and will live it every day until they die. Whatever boundaries they set are crossed; whatever they say is cast aside; whatever they need is second to the wants of a man. This phenomenon appears everywhere: from the workplace, to the doctor's office, to the home; it's inherently inescapable. Sexism's tendency to discredit anything a woman says has vast consequences, in both fiction and reality. Women have died due to medical malpractice, been left waiting at police stations, and are not believed when they are in real danger, all because their pain is cast aside as dramatic. Jill, Connie, and Tessie portray the fearful reality of womanhood, and demonstrate the disastrous aftermath of the dismissive nature of misogyny.

Works Cited

Campbell, Bonnie Jo. “Boar Taint.” *The Art of the Short Story,* published by *W. W. Norton & Company, inc., 2009*, pp. 151-67.

Jackson, Shirley. “The Lottery.” *The Art of the Short Story,* edited and published by Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn, 2006, pp. 390-96.

Oates, Joyce Carol. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been.” *The Art of the Short Story,* edited and published by Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn, 2006, pp. 664-75.