

The character of mr watts essay



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Tom Christian Watts, known locally as Pop Eye, is an elderly white man living in the village with his black wife, Grace. Grace is from the village and now suffers from an undisclosed mental illness. He and his wife are local eccentrics, providing the children with entertainment on occasions when Pop Eye, wearing a clown's red nose, pulls his wife along the village in a trolley. In turn, she stands regally looking at no-one. Matilda is keen to understand what this behaviour means, 'sensing a bigger story', but the adults 'looked away' as if embarrassed by the sight. Only at the end of the novel is the 'bigger story' made clear.

At the start of the story Matilda only knows what she sees of Mr. Watts: he wore 'the same linen suit every day'; 'his large eyes in his large head stuck out further than anyone else's' and hence his nickname; 'he was white as the whites of your eyes, only sicker'; he lived with Grace in 'the minister's old house' beyond the village. Matilda comments that by the time she was born the Watts had: 'Sunk out of view of the world'.

Obviously this white man has little power or influence, unlike most whites in Matilda's life.

However, because Tom Watts is 'the only white for miles around' the village children are interested in him, staring at him 'until their blocks of ice melted in their black hands' and ask to do school 'projects' on him. He is 'a source of mystery' to the village children, as well as the reader.

Once the blockade has taken hold, and all of the white folks have been evacuated off Bougainville, including the local teacher, Tom Watts, the only white man left, volunteers to teach the village children in an effort to

maintain some schooling. It is at this point that Matilda gets to know Mr. Watts.

Mr. Watts wants the children to broaden their horizons beyond village life and culture: ‘ I want this to be a place of light’ He is honest with the children and treats them as equals. He lets them know their future is uncertain.

Mr. Watts turns out to be a modest man who is honest with the class: ‘— whatever we have between us is all we’ve got’ He makes no claim to have any special expertise that fits him to be their teacher and tells the children this. However he has a love of the Victorian writer, Charles Dickens’ work, and shares this and his copy of ‘ Great Expectations’ with his class.

He is also a polite, respectful man who does not use his superiority as a ‘ white’ to claim status: ‘ I’m very pleased to meet you, Mabel’. As Matilda remarks: ‘ Away for Mr. Dickens and England Mr. Watts was lost’. Mr. Watts ‘ was aware of his shortcomings’ and so invited the village adults to share their knowledge with the children to share the burden of educating them. Again he is unfailingly courteous with the adults too, even when Dolores makes a veiled attack on his lack of Christian faith.

Mr Watts prides himself on being a gentleman. When Matilda enquires whether poor people like Pip can be gentlemen his reply is: We are talking about qualities—-. A gentleman will always do the right thing.’ Matilda realises he is also referring to himself and judges his actions as gentlemanly thereafter.

Mr. Watts was, according to Matilda, 'more comfortable in the world of Mr. Dickens than he was in our black-faced world of superstition and mythic flying fish'. In the novel he was among those of his own culture and this reminds us of the cultural differences and suspicion of him felt by the adults of Bougainville.

Of course Mr. Watts is simply an elderly white man trying to survive modestly on this island. One day on the beach Matilda sees this for herself: he is 'terribly thin', 'stooped', wearing 'baggy old shorts' and looking for food on the shoreline. In private he is in contrast to the 'gentleman in the white linen suit'. He explains his interpretation of Pip to Matilda: 'He is like an emigrant. He is in the process of migrating from one level of society to another. A change of name is as good as a change of clothes.' He then trusts Matilda with Grace's secret about her name: 'Everyone here knows her as Grace, of course. But she changed it. Her name is Sheba.' The reader now thinks of Pop Eye with his clown's nose pulling along his queenly wife on the trolley. Why did Grace feel the need to change? What had she moved from and to?

Later on Mr. Watts comes into open conflict with Dolores over her disapproval of Mr. Watts' teaching of a work of irrelevant fiction, as Dolores sees 'Great Expectations', instead of God's word and His influence on Matilda's thinking. Dolores challenges Mr. Watts to deny the Devil's existence in a story of her own. His response is: 'Pip is an orphan — emigrant's experience. Each leaves behind the place they grew up in. Each strikes out on his own. Each is free to create himself anew. Each is also free to make mistakes—' While we recognise the similarity of explanation given

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to Matilda earlier in the story we begin to understand that he is talking to Dolores about Grace and that some of Dolores's hostility towards Mr. Watts has to do with his wife, a childhood friend of Dolores. By the end of the novel the reader understands he may be referring to himself.

When the redskins finally arrive at the village looking for rebel soldiers there is confusion caused by seeing Pip's name in the sand. Daniel tries to be helpful by explaining ' Pip belongs to Mr. Dickens, sir', pointing to the school and the officer misinterprets this to be Mr. Dickens instead of Tom Watts. Mr. Watts causes further confusion by owning up to being Mr. Dickens to protect Daniel: ' Yes, I am that man.'

The reader feels Mr. Watts' motive for accepting this identity is also he has a chance to be his idol, and he enjoys playing roles. However this will lead to tragic events later in the plot.

While the villagers accept their fate of losing their possessions they feel Mr. Watts should share their discomfort and in a mood of vengeance burn all his possessions too. ' Now he had the impossible job of accepting responsibility for the fire and the lost possessions of the village.' He watches his worldly goods go up in flames as if what was happening seemed ' necessary and acceptable.' Tom Watts is a fair man and accepts he is in part to blame for the misfortune of the villagers. He is a gentleman. He is happy to be equal in owning nothing with his black neighbours. However the reader notices that he had other books at home which he did not share with his class, leaving us wondering about his motives. Is he all he appears to be?

Soon after, Grace dies from a fever. The village gather on the hill to support Tom Watts at her make-shift funeral. In turn the villagers share with Mr. Watts their memories of Grace as a girl, before he knew her, and he is moved by their thoughtfulness: ' Thank you everyone. — Now she will know she was beloved.' Here we see that Mr. Watts understands that by living with him he had separated her from her community. Mr. Watts is stricken by the loss of Grace but he soon returns to the class to fill his days. He is frequently seen by Matilda visiting his wife's grave where he talks to her, telling her of events. Grace's grave has been tidied up by him: ' I took in the improvements — the bits of white coral set around the edges—'. Matilda is ' invited to join him and Mrs. Watts' one day when she meets him on the hillside. It is clear he misses Grace very much.

After the redskins leave the rebels arrive and act in a hostile manner towards Mr. Watts as he is white, threatening to sexually assault him; ' You will do nothing of the sort.' Pointing back at the ground from where the Rambo had sprung, he said, 'You will sit down there and you will listen.' Here he asserts his natural authority as a white man and these wild boys comply. When asked his name he replies: ' My name is Pip.'

The children are shocked but Matilda observes that ' it was as if the word was already on the tip of his tongue - ready for that question'. Although this name means nothing to the rambos, it would appear that Mr. Watts has planned for the next visit of the redskins and is prepared to give himself up as ' Pip' for the good of the village. Although it is never stated, we infer that his motive is to sacrifice himself for the villagers because he feels responsible for their predicament, having introduced ' Great Expectations'

into the village, and that as Grace is dead he feels no further reason for living.

As he is white he is suspected by the rambos of being a spy and is questioned. The villagers abandon him and Matilda believes 'we would never see him again.' However things turn out differently and Mr. Watts strikes a bargain with the rambos: 'You have asked me to explain what I am doing here', he said. 'In a sense you are asking me for my story. I am happy to oblige but I have two conditions. One, I do not want to be interrupted. Two, my story will take several nights. Seven in total.' The symbolism of seven nights may be an allusion to God creating the world in a week and Mr. Watts intends to 'create' his life story in a similar time frame. Does he intend to tell the rambos a story or the truth? June Watts later remarks 'Tom told lots of stories'.

The villagers, as well as the rebel soldiers, are eager to hear Mr. Watts' story: 'Most of us had come to hear about a world we had never seen. We were greedy for that world. Any world other than this one, which we were sick of – sick of the fear it held'. Because the rebels 'had not heard a storytelling voice for years' they listened as eagerly as the villagers. Mr. Watts' story proves to be as 'compelling as 'Great Expectations' had to us kids.'

However Mr. Watts blends episodes from 'Great Expectations' with his own life story and fictionalises some of that too. He tells his audience, like Pip, he was an orphan but his exaggeration of the circumstances are clues to the more discerning of the audience that his story is to entertain the rebels. Later when Matilda goes to Wellington in search of the real Mr. Watts she

discovers that he used real people in his story but embellished the details, for example Miss Ryan, an elderly neighbour, becomes his fictional guardian, a lady like Miss Havisham. Lloyd Jones uses a metaphor in Mr. Watts' description of a fictional hot air balloon trip where the twelve year old Tom / Pip soars over Miss Ryan's overgrown garden ' where he was amazed to discover a pattern in the garden.' We feel that Tom Watts is taking the opportunity of telling his nightly stories to impose a pleasing pattern on his life.

We are told of his meeting with Grace when she was a dental student and his infatuation with her, how she ' gave me great happiness' and none greater than when 'she gave me a child, a baby girl—'. He talks of the battle of the spare room – the baby's room – where Tom and Grace gathered their worlds side by side and ' leave it to their daughter to pick and choose what she wanted'. Instead of wallpaper they write what is important from their cultures and backgrounds on the white walls: now the audience hear ' fragments that our mums and uncles and aunts had brought along to Mr. Watts' class'. Tom Watts is so carried away by his powers of storytelling that he becomes drunk on his stories which lose some of their sense, taken as they are from island stories, Dickens, his life, his imagination, but they charm both his village and rebel audience as well as the reader. Moreover we get to find out about Grace's personality, if not the facts of her life: ' There was spunk in Grace's voice – and humour –'

This was to change when the baby, Sarah, died of meningitis. He describes Grace's ' descent into depression'. He accuses himself of being a negligent husband in ' the May Fly Story' which poignantly describes Grace's suicidal

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behaviour and his attempt to understand and help her. This story helps heal the conflict between Dolores and Mr. Watts as it explains what happened to the once vivacious Grace: ‘ see Mr. Watts seek out my mum with a smile.’

He then explains to the audience that ‘ the only way to mend his beloved Grace was for her to reinvent herself’. She is renamed Sheba in the hope that the ‘ wise black woman’ from the Bible story has the answer to Grace’s problem. This will link to a later finding of Matilda’s.

The reader has to pick out, as Matilda did, the fact from the various fictions Mr. Watts uses as a basis of his story. As Matilda comments: ‘ it was a made up story to which we’d all contributed. Mr. Watts was shining our experience of our world back at us. — I have come to think that Mr. Watts was giving back something of ourselves in the shape of a story’. Here Matilda understands that everyone has a voice and a tale to tell.

Matilda is worried that Mr. Watts does not mean to extend his invitation of an escape from the island to her mother: ‘ Don’t tell Dolores until I give you the word’. Matilda’s loyalties are torn: Mr Watts does not trust Dolores and she believes she is being told not to trust her either. This incident casts a potential shadow on Tom Watts as it places Matilda in a very difficult position which the reader feels she should not be subject to.

However her dilemma is resolved for her by the sudden return of the redskins, angered by the fact the villagers have harboured rebel soldiers and that Pip is in the village. The Rambo who had pointed out Mr. Watts as Pip is seen ‘ dragging the limp body of Mr. Watts towards the pigs. — They chopped Mr Watts up and threw him in pieces to the pigs’. In this climax we

are shocked and numbed by the sudden killing of Mr Watts – the soldiers' retribution is decisive and quick. We can only hope Mr Watts was shot instantly.

Once the redskins leave, the villagers slaughter the pigs and bury them, 'the only thing we could think to do to give a decent burial to Mr. Watts and my mum.' This incident ends Tom Watts' story – his earlier life is uncovered by Matilda later in the novel.

When Matilda joins her father in Townsville, Australia she immediately goes to the school library to read 'Great Expectations' for herself. She is initially confused and disappointed that the novel she reads is more detailed and complex than the version read by Mr. Watts. Gradually she appreciates that Mr Watts 'pulled the embroidery out of Mr Dickens' story to make it easier on our young ears'. As Matilda matures she learns to love Dickens' works and thanks Mr. Watts for his influence. Once she has completed her degree in literature she decides to study Charles Dickens for her thesis. We see that even years after his death Mr Watts has influenced Matilda.

It is because of this enduring influence that Matilda decides to research Mr. Watts and because her curiosity about him had not been satisfied – there had been no final instalment of his story; 'If Mr Watts had held back certain characters from 'Great Expectations', who from his own life had he held back from us.' Matilda tracks down June Watts, his wife, in Wellington, a lonely, elderly lady. Tom Watts had abandoned her for Grace but had not divorced her. Her perspective on Tom's character is very different: 'I

married a weak man — he should have left me rather than carry on the way he did.'

June tells Matilda that Tom Watts worked in an office, a young man with 'dark hair and a lively face', who 'told lots of stories.' He had been having an affair with their neighbour, Grace, which June had been unaware of. Tom was involved in amateur dramatics and he and Grace acted together in a production of 'The Queen of Sheba'. Matilda is shown a photograph of them in this play: 'The director thought Tom should wear a red clown's nose and the Queen of Sheba should stand in a trolley pulled by Tom to show some meeting of minds had been achieved.' Matilda's curiosity is partly solved by June. June tells Matilda that Grace had later been placed in a mental hospital for severe depression.

Later Matilda muses on who Tom Watts really was. To Matilda he bore no resemblance to the man June Watts recalls. She believes she has 'fragments' but not the whole story: Pop Eye, Mr. Watts, Mr. Dickens, Mister Pip. Initially she questions his sincerity: 'Was this Mr. Watts, or an actor playing Mr. Watts the school teacher?' Recalling his gestures of staring to the back of the room and rolling his eyes, Matilda wonders whether he was only play-acting. He seemed to have needed a more stimulating life than the one he lived with June in Wellington.

Later she thinks that it is possible for people to have lots of facets to their character: 'To sort of fall out of who you are into another, as well as to journey back to some essential sense of self.' People don't always remain constant, we grow and change, and of course others perceive us differently.

In spite of her research Matilda states ' Mr. Watts was as elusive as ever.' However Matilda is grateful for meeting Mr. Watts who ' taught us how to re-imagine the world'.

Matilda's final observations on the character of Tom Watts are generous: ' He was whatever he needed to be, what we asked him to be. Perhaps there are lives like that – they pour into whatever space we have made ready for them to fill. We needed a teacher. Mr. Watts became that teacher. We needed a magician to conjure up other worlds, and Mr. Watts became that magician. When we needed a saviour, Mr. Watts had filled that role. When the redskins required a life, Mr. Watts had given himself.' Whatever Tom Watts failings in life he more that made up for them in his final years on Bougainville, providing the inhabitants, especially children like Matilda, with hope to see beyond their limited and troubled lives. Matilda excuses Mr. Watts stories of his life by her comment: ' I learned there is a place for embellishment after all. But it belongs to life –not to literature.' She means that for our own sakes, as well as for others, it is excusable at times to make the truth more palatable and so make life easier to bear.

The character of Tom Watts is seen as the village eccentric, then the teacher, storyteller, father figure, gentleman and martyr. Later he is seen as a cheating husband, an actor and a weak man. Matilda, and the reader, wonder who the real Tom Watts is. Of course he is all of them and none, in that truth is subjective and dependent on one's perspective. It's like looking at a mountain from different sides.