

Introduction to look for a young virgin



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Introduction

The title “ The Shunammite” preempts the details of this particular short story because it is derived from the Bible in the book of 1 Kings 1: 1-4.

Here, King David had grown old and his years on earth had been long. He was constantly sick and always cold. His servants therefore decided to look for a young virgin who would lie beside King David in the hope of fulfilling and inducing some of the old King’s deepest desires.

After looking throughout Israel, Abishag; a Shunammite woman was found and she was brought to the king to comfort him. From the beginning of the short story, Licha embodies purity and innocence when she comes to attend to her Uncle. However, she soon gets entangled in an incestuous marriage in order to meet her family obligations. It is through characterization that one gets to understand the predicaments of the protagonist Licha who must struggle with her own wishes and family duty.

Character in the Shunammite

Through characterization, readers are able to empathize with Licha. One can feel what she is feeling and hence feel the sense of reality projected in the narrative.

One way in which characterization can be depicted is through the kind of dialogues that Licha has with the other people in the story. One realizes that she has the noblest intentions and often wants to look out for the interests of others before herself. On the other hand, as one continues on, one sees the helplessness she is in. For example, when her uncle talks to her about the

Polish jewelry, Licha realizes that this is an important family treasure that must be relished. Her uncle quickly insists that she should have the jewelry and immediately turns his head away from her (Arredondo, 4).

This kind of bullying continues on in the rest of the story even when Licha is told to get married to her uncle. One therefore sees the kind of victimization that plays out in the story's setting. Nonetheless, the protagonist is not just a two dimensional character; she has her own motivations and ideas. One cannot help but see her as a victim because she was unable to speak against the unfairness imposed upon her by her family members. The author often talks about Licha's inner thoughts. For example at the beginning of the story, the protagonist says that " I was certain I had the power to domesticate passion, to purify everything in the burning air that surrounded me without consuming me" (Aredondo, 4). These inner reflections continue throughout the story and they often bring out Licha's motivations.

For example, when Licha is required to get married to her uncle, she obliges because she was concerned about his well being. Later on when he miraculously recovers, she still continues to live with him because of her strong sense of loyalty. The author has put the protagonist in a difficult situation and the manner in which she handled this situation is what endears her to readers. Licha often struggles to place her experiences in context and sometimes she was not able to do that successfully.

The author successfully illustrates what it means to be defenseless as a Mexican woman through her protagonist. The author wanted people to understand the plight of women in her setting. She wanted individuals to

know that they were more than mere objects of male desires. Licha has dreams and ambitions; she is not a second class human being as most individuals had assumed in her culture. Perhaps another important role that Licha's character plays in the book is to illustrate how women in this society were slammed to a life of servitude. Licha was bound to her uncle's bedside after his recovery even though she had initially been married to him so that she could inherit his possession. She is one who submits under the domination of a male figure.

She is powerless even when the person exploiting her is physically weak. Licha is submerged in her circumstances and cannot do anything about it. Another interesting character in the book is Licha's uncle; Apoloni. He first comes off as a caring relative who wants to impart knowledge to his niece. In fact, at the beginning of the story, one would be forgiven to assume that the narrative would be about death and how Uncle Apoloni dealt with it.

He starts by talking about the past, some of the accomplishments made by the family, the year of hunger, the year of the yellow corn and many of his other memories during the past (Arendondo, 4). His arthritis has shriveled him up because he was now at a point where he was 'floating on his bed'. However, we soon realize that Apoloni is not a harmless old man. As his niece attends to him, he starts getting overwhelmed by incestuous thoughts. He longs for the purity and innocence that Licha so easily puts across. He harbors these thoughts even though it would result in an incestuous relationship and would literally put an end to Licha's hopes and wishes. As the story progresses and Apoloni recovers, he changes from being a vulnerable and weak individual to a predator and selfish being. The purity

that attracted him to his niece in the first place would be destroyed if she started something with him.

One can also see that this individual did not really care for his niece because if he did then he would not have made those demands. One can also see that this uncle started the incestuous relationship because he knew that he could get away with it. Other family members, including his wife, were too loyal to their family to ever oppose his actions. His wife cared too much about family honor and public perceptions of the family.

This was why she became an accomplice to his unforgivable behavior. Uncle Apoloni is therefore a manipulative and dominating character that puts his needs first even if it involves destroying the needs of another person. The author does not paint a picture of an innately bad character in Apoloni. He is multifaceted and has his strong points as well. Readers can identify with some of his struggles such as the arthritis and the impending death. One can also see that it is these insecurities about his own meaningless life that cause him to act out. He was missing something and hoped to find it in the fresh beauty of his niece. The character of this antagonist also reflects another critical component of the story.

He is engaged in an endless search for the supreme which is epitomized in the purity of Licha. His niece was a virgin and therefore represented an absolute state to him. The problem was that this search was relentless because uniting with such a pure being would result in her corruption rather than his purification. This illustrates the extent to which this individual was mistaken. The author therefore succeeds in characterization because she

has not portrayed a stereotype of a typical dying man. She complicates Apoloni's character by showing how he fell victim to his lustful thoughts.

Aunt Ponchita; Apoloni's wife was also another surprising individual. At the beginning of the story she seems like this caring character. Licha has very fond memories of her as she goes to see her ailing uncle. However, when Ponchita learns about her husband's wish to marry his niece, she does not react to it or oppose it in any way. In fact, she hides this fact because of her need to maintain a certain family image. Aunt Ponchita is therefore a representation of betrayal on the part of women. She should have been there for her niece but instead chose to help out her manipulative and predatory husband.

One can therefore see that she lacks the compassion characteristic of most aunts. Additionally, even a sense of dignity does not cause this woman to act morally. She is concerned about her own sense of well being and self preservation. She is not strong enough to speak out against this grave misdeed and she just watches as her niece's life gets destroyed.

Perhaps another important role that her aunt plays in the story is to demonstrate the degree of subservience that women in that Latin America society were expected to possess. They were not bold enough to confront elements of their culture that oppressed them. In this regard, Aunt Ponchita is a stereotypical image of a Latin American woman at that time. In essence the author to this short story does a good job of giving depth to her characters (Giona and Kennedy, 12). They are fully developed because they

have histories. They reflect upon or talk about their childhood memories, their ambitions and the like.

A lot of the story is rooted in providing backgrounds for the characters so that their actions can be interpreted thoroughly. Also, because of the dynamic changes that take place in the middle of the narrative, characters soon become dynamic as well. For example, Uncle Apoloni first appears to be weak and helpless. However, as the story progresses he changes and becomes this lustful individual who then defies expectation by causing his niece to lie with him.

That dynamism of the character adds a lot of flavor to the story and leads to much progress in the narrative. Additionally, realistic characters often help in making this story such a good piece of literature. It is possible to relate with all the individuals in the story because struggles, challenges and ambitions are common to all human beings which are depicted throughout the story. Licha is not a cardboard character; her subservience is testimony to her weakness while her sweet and caring nature is her main strength.

This intermingling of character traits creates superior individuals who make the story worthwhile. It can also be said that this story is more focused on character than plot. In other words, it is the characters that lead to developments in the story over and above the plot within the story. It is admirable the ease with which these characters have been developed even though it is a short story.

Since there is little room to give too much history about them, the author needed to be very careful about the information she picked out or chose to

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convey in the story (Stauffer, 35). For example, when she tells us about the fond memories that Licha had about the place where her uncle was located, one can relate that to the immense sense of loss that Licha felt when she was told that her uncle was ailing. Furthermore, one can also understand why she chose to submit to her uncle's incestuous wishes later on in the story.

It is also interesting that the author does not fall into the trap of creating flat characters whose main function is to offer information about the protagonist or other main characters. The beauty about this literary piece is that the main character is the narrator of the story. One therefore relates experiences in the novel to her point of view. This is why it is easy to understand why she chooses to make the decisions that she does in the story. Conclusion Characterization in this short story reflects the realism of this piece. Each individual has his or her own flaws thus depicting a rational image of the people in the story. Some of the developments in the tale are particularly disturbing and it is through characterization that members of the audience can feel as though those developments are happening to them.

Readers are also able to relate to these characters because of the inner dialogue that the protagonist keeps having and the external dialogues that she has with other people she interacts with. In the end, the story has become compelling and quite interesting. References Arredondo, Ines. Underground river and other stories: the Shunammite. NE: University of Nebraska press, 1996 Stauffer, Marilyn. Outline on literary elements.

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