

War and womanhood in rudyard kipling's mary postgate (1915)



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There is a scene within Rudyard Kipling's *Mary Postgate* (1915), within which the experience of the titular character is narrated, whilst she incinerates the belongings of 'Wynn' - a recently deceased British soldier who Mary, the caregiver of Wynn's aunt, had helped raise from a young age - she discovers an injured German airman. The extract only marginally precedes Mary's refusal to get medical attention for the airman, who subsequently, (potentially because of Mary's deliberate inaction), dies of his injuries. Because of this positioning within the text, the extract is crucial for an understanding of Mary's ensuing treatment of the soldier, however rather than giving one, definitive explanation for Mary's actions, Kipling's construction of the passage lends itself to numerous different interpretations. Many of these, as will be explored in this essay, concern themselves with investigating the effect of war on womanhood.

The first of these interpretations relies on Mary's role as a 'mother' to Wynn; that is, the extract sets up a reading where Mary's later neglecting to help the airman is an act of revenge from a grieving mother. In addition to the significance of Mary's name, (with surely the most infamous Mary being the biblical Virgin Mary - a woman who, like Mary Postgate, did not conceive the child she mothers), there is plentiful evidence of this in the extract.

From the offset, for example, the detailed description of how Mary ignites the destructor, ('she lit the match', 'threw in the fuse', and '[stepped] back from its blaze', once 'the pyre went up in a roar'), exploits traditional associations between fire, passion, and rage, to suggest that the pyre is a symbolic testament of Mary's love for Wynn, and anger over his death.

Kipling reinforces the intensity of these emotions through his personification
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of the 'roaring' pyre, where in attributing life to the fire there is both a suggestion that the emotions have taken on a life of their own, and through this, a sense of foreshadowing; if readers accept that Mary's feelings are enough to evoke life, they must accept the implicit suggestion that they can also evoke death - as is possibly later discovered by the airman. Readers also see this foreshadowing of death in the metaphor that begins the extract, 'the match that would burn her heart to ashes', which likens Mary's destruction of all that is left of Wynn - his possessions - to committing suicide, indicating an almost fanatical love; without him she regards life as no longer worth living. This metaphor can be furthered through a reading which compares Mary's 'burning her heart' with Indian 'suttee' rituals - the suicide of a wife by self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre. Kipling, with his years spent living in India, would have been aware of this - and though there is no evidence of romantic love between Wynn and Mary in the extract, it's undoubtedly an interesting contribution.

However, Mary's feelings are not just a result of her position as a grieving mother, but as a woman grieving her motherhood. Readers are informed prior to this particular segment of the text that Mary was thirty-five when Wynn arrived at Miss Fowler's. To be thirty-five, unmarried, and childless, Mary violates the expectations of an archetypal woman of the twentieth century - expectations made even more apparent through war-time propaganda emphasising the importance of wives and mothers. Wynn, if only a surrogate son, provided Mary with a chance to be a mother, meaning when he dies, Mary is faced with the prospect of reverting back to a woman who, given contemporary opinions and attitudes towards female identity, could be

considered to have hardly any tangible identity at all. In this reading, Mary 'burning her heart to ashes' is a symbolic suicide of her maternal identity, and Mary's refusal to help the German is not only in response to Wynn's death, but to the resulting death of this identity.

Furthermore, the scene suggests that this act of revenge is also on behalf of Mrs Gerritt - another mother now without a child - with Kipling textually reducing the man to body parts, (' his head', ' his body', ' his chest', ' pinky skin', ' his lips', ' his hands'), mirroring the way Edna was physically reduced to body parts prior to the extract. This is emphasised by use of dashes, (' his lap - one booted leg'), which ' break up' the words in the same way Edna's body was broken by - so Mary believes - this man.

Contrastingly, the extract can also be read as Mary's symbolic rejection of motherhood, achieved through Kipling's likening of the wounded aviator to a baby. This is overtly seen in the simile ' this man's [head] was as pale as a baby's', however references to the man being ' bareheaded', with hair ' so closely cropped that [Mary] could see the disgusting pinky skin beneath' reinforce this through depicting the man's head as unprotected, which readers can associate with the posterior fontanelle, or ' soft spot', of babies' heads, which leaves their skulls vulnerable. Moreover, Kipling's descriptions of the man's ' head [moving] ceaselessly from side to side', and in other editions of the story, ' his horribly rolling head', generate ideas of a lack of bodily control comparable to those of a baby's. Similarly, his inability to effectively verbally communicate with Mary, (' his lips moved... " Laty! Laty! Laty!"'), can be perceived as equally infantile. The result of this is that the soldier becomes representative of the demands of motherhood, meaning <https://assignbuster.com/war-and-womanhood-in-rudyard-kiplings-mary-postgate-1915/>

that when Mary leaves him to die, she is leaving the concept of maternity to die also. Contextually, there's a notable link between this rejection of a traditional pillar of femininity - motherhood - and contemporary anxieties over effects on femininity that would arise from an unprecedented number of women not only working, but working historically male jobs, during the war.

A final interpretation of the extract suggests that Kipling's description of the German soldier is designed to draw comparisons between the soldier and Wynn, with the intention of suggesting that Mary allows the man to die in order to vicariously witness Wynn's death. These comparisons - the soldier is 'in a uniform something like Wynn's', and Mary initially believes him to be 'one of the young [British] flying men that she met at the funeral' - are underpinned by the shared occupation of Wynn and the soldier, with both being airmen. Furthermore, Mary first notices the soldier immediately after referring to Wynn, ('how Wynn would have loved this!'), establishing an association between the two. When questioning why this association is drawn, it's useful to consider that theorists such as Edmund Wilson (1964) have suggested that 'a first principle of Kipling's work is revenge; the humiliated must become the humiliator'. When Mary dismisses the groan or grunt she hears as a sheep, it mirrors Wynn's dismissal of Mary as a sheep prior to the extract, ('a sheep would know more than you do, Postey'), and reminds readers of the years of mistreatment - in some cases extreme enough to 'reduce Mary to tears' - directed at Mary by Wynn. It is for this reason, that Mary associates the soldier with Wynn; when she later refuses him medical attention, she is vicariously inflicting an act of cruelty on Wynn, in retribution for the cruelty he has aimed at her. This - a woman responding

to male aggression with equal aggression – defies contemporary gender roles, which contrastingly, placed high value on a woman's submissive nature. As such, it is indicative of the level of anti-German sentiment present in British society at the time; Mary could never have responded to the real Wynn's bullying with such anger, but a substitute, German Wynn, is acceptable.

' Ambiguity, when consciously and artistically employed, offers alternative explanations – any of which can fit the context of the work – with the aim of stressing the complexity of reality', states William Dillingham (2005). It is with this kept in mind that one should, in concluding, examine Kipling's development of numerous interpretations, and his methods of doing so. Through use of similes, metaphor, symbolism, and listing, Kipling explores the effect war has on motherhood; through baby-based imagery he explores the rejection of motherhood; through comparing the characters of Wynn and the airman, he explores the effect anti-German sentiment has on gender roles. What's more, the ambiguity that allows for so many different interpretations of the extract – and indeed, of Mary Postgate overall – acts to provide a commentary on the ' complexity of reality' experienced by women during the war.

Primary Sources:

Rudyard Kipling, ' Mary Postgate', *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories*, ed. by Barbara Korte and Ann-Marie Einhaus (London: Penguin Books, 2007) pp. 179-194.

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