

Too much commitment: the paradox of marriage in adventure



In “ Adventure” from Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, the protagonist, Alice Hindman, embodies the truth of marriage. As Alice’s story demonstrates, however, marriage leads to two seemingly contradictory traits when it is taken as a personal truth to be lived. On the one hand, marriage means that Alice is committed, because she is loyal to Ned Currie, even though he is not interested in her anymore, and she refuses to forget about him. On the other hand, her insistence on marriage also leads Alice to isolation, as she ages all alone, not allowing anyone to enter her life. Thus, Alice is a grotesque, according to Anderson’s definition of the term, because in trying to embrace marriage, Alice becomes both committed and isolated, portraying the paradox at the heart of marriage and showing that no truth is simple once it is lived.

In insisting on marriage, Alice embodies commitment in her approach to love and sexuality. At the beginning of the story, when Alice and Ned Currie become sexually intimate, Ned told her he loved her and that they would live happily together. Having that idea stuck in her head, Alice waits for Ned, feeling she is committed to him and never losing faith in being with him, even though he is far away. At first, Alice did not feel she was important to Ned, but once they become intimate she feels loved by him because he says, ““ Now, we will have to stick to each other, whatever happens, we will have to do that”” (Anderson, 99). Because Ned makes this promise, she has faith that Ned will come back for her; therefore, she waits for him. Feeling she has that commitment to Ned, Alice does not talk to other men, for she feels as if she would be betraying Ned. She tells herself, ““ I am Ned’s wife and shall remain his wife whether he comes back or not”” (Anderson, 100). Even

though she is not Ned's wife, she thinks if she dates other men Ned will be hurt and that is not the right thing to do if you are married to someone. Throughout "Adventure", there is no evidence of Alice talking to anyone other than herself. Alice goes to work every day, but she saves all her money for her and Ned. She wants to save it because she wants it for Ned rather than for herself: "' Ned always wanted to travel, I'll give him a chance. Some day when we are married and I can save both his money and my own, we will be rich. Then we can travel together all over the world.'" (Anderson, 101). Because Alice is very committed to Ned and does not see beyond him, she has no other attachments; we do not encounter Alice having any afternoon activities or family commitments. All Alice sees in her future is her life with Ned, remaining married to him in both her actions and her emotions. However, Alice's commitment leads paradoxically to its reverse as well, for Alice also becomes entirely isolated by her refusal to give up on Ned. Because she waits for Ned for a very long time, she does not focus on her own life, only concentrating on her imagined and anticipated marriage with Ned. Therefore, one day she realizes she has never been married to Ned and she has been all alone since he left; thus, she tells herself, "' It is not going to come to me. I will never find happiness. Why do I tell myself lies?'" (Anderson, 102). Becoming aware of the reality Alice has been living on, she realizes how long she has been waiting for Ned and how she was never happy while waiting for him. Seeing that Alice does not talk to any men, men start losing interest in her and stop talking to her. She then begins feeling the absence of men being she pushed them away because she thought she would be betraying Ned if she talked to them, but Ned had already forgotten

her. However, if she were to date other men, she would do it because Ned will want her and like her better; she tells herself, ““ I am becoming old and queer. If Ned comes he will not want me”” (Anderson, 103). Therefore, she tries to go out with a drug clerk, but later realizes she is governed more by the fear of being solitary than by true desire to be with Ned: ““ It is not him that I want, I want to avoid being so much alone. If I am not careful I will grow unaccustomed to being with people”” (Anderson, 103).

Alice, becoming aware that she is “ becoming old and queer” (Anderson, 103), is frightened by the loneliness of her position in life. Therefore, at age twenty-five, she becomes a member of the Winesburg Methodist Church, so that she does something else other than thinking of Ned. Time passes by very quickly and Alice becomes conscious of how in the past years she has been an isolated woman who has not accomplished anything in her life. She has no friends because she does not see beyond Ned, thus, has no life on her own because she has more interest in Ned returning and being with him than in her own personal life and goals. When Alice saves all her money for her and Ned, she is not fully aware that saving all that money affects her because she is not thinking on herself and on her necessities. Because Alice is extremely isolated and has no experience at socializing with other people; one cold, dark, rainy night; she runs outside, she runs towards a man who is unable to hear and shouts, for she wants the attention she had not received since Ned had left her. But before reaching the man, she becomes aware of what she is about to do, and feeling ashamed of herself, drops to the cold grass and crawls back home feeling penitent. She then thinks: ““ What is the matter with me? I will do something dreadful if I am not careful”, and began

trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg” (Anderson, 105). Because Ned left Alice, she did nothing other than wait for him; hence, she grew all alone becoming old and queer.

Thus, Anderson’s “ Adventure” portrays the paradox at the heart of marriage. Anderson shows that to be married is to be both committed and isolated because to be committed requires you to abandon some things for others, and if you leave all your priorities for someone else, you will become isolated and be left with nothing. Alice is thus a grotesque because Alice cannot be simply committed; Alice must also be just the reverse, becoming isolated in her efforts to assert the truth of marriage as her own personal truth.