

How effective is the ending of Terence Rattigan's 'The Browning Version' essay sa...

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A darkening room, a darkening marriage – these appear to be the settings for the end of Terence Rattigan's public school tragedy; but are things turning for the brighter? The way the script cuts off whilst casserole is being served, leaves the audience speculating over Arthur and Millie's future. But does leaving questions unanswered benefit the play as a whole? Does the anticlimax and lack of 'happily ever after' leave the audience feeling unfulfilled, confused, or even annoyed? Just how effective is the ending of the play?

As already stated, the play leaves questions open.

One of the effects of this is the creation of a hunger for more amongst the audience or reader. The play that has gripped them for the last hour has just 'vanished' at a rather mundane point of the assumed plot. There is an element of catharsis:

Will he swallow his old-fashioned pride and stand up for himself? The telephone conversation with Frobisher suggests a renewed confidence in Andrew and give us hope:

"..... I will now speak after Fletcher as is my right....."

- Andrew

One hopes that his speech will not be an anti-climax and that he will leave a better legacy behind him, yet he seems to have more faith in his ability now.

What will become of Millie and will she redeem herself? After years undermining her husband, surely a phrase as simple as 'I am sorry' wouldn't be too much would it?

Can he leave the school with his head high? Whilst he does not appear to have the respect of the students he doesn't appear to have their admiration. But, as he wisely puts it

".....One small success can atone, and more than atone for all the failures in the world....."

Taplow embodies this by presenting him with an inscribed copy of 'The Agamemnon' the gesture greatly moves Andrew and he is overwhelmed by this one small success. That and Taplow's admission of his secret admiration for Andrew, confirm that one person's life has been changed - something to be proud of.

With these questions come pity, and a sense of the tragedy of the story. The audience now sees the full picture, and pity for Andrew is strong - he has been henpecked, deceived undermined and openly abused by his wife for many years. Surely he deserves better? - he has done little wrong, yet he has convinced himself that marrying his wife has in the first place makes him as bad as her. Millie has also savagely grilled him about his failure as a schoolmaster and inability to fulfil his potential.

We as the flies on the wall, can only hope for a brighter future if he does actually leave his wife (is he still proud to stand up for himself?). There is

also an element of catharsis: Rattigan asks questions of human relationship that affect the reader's lives. The audience leave the theatre wondering whether the people they love will betray them, or if they will make the most of their talents. This play has a poignant and meaningful effect on audiences.

An added tension is provided by the social historical context. 'The Browning Version' is set in 1949 in a post-war Britain that is feeling the brunt of a costly war. Rationing was still taking place and money was tight. Nazi Germany, Hitler and all associated with them are delicate matters - this makes Frobisher's remark about Andrew being 'The Himmler of the Lower-Fifth', however throw-away the remark, or foolish the speaker may be, far more hurtful and undermining than the audience might perceive it to be originally. The economic downturn has led to changes in the lifestyle of the once more well off classes of society, and although Millie makes out differently (emphasising her 'close' relationship with Sir William Bartop) this is mainly in order to 'social climb', and there are signs of changes in their financial position in the play:

"..... We haven't had a maid for five years..... these days we've all got to try and do things we weren't brought up to do....."

- Millie

To add to this, the winter of 1948 was the coldest year on record resulting in further food shortages and harsher economic times as families tried to stay warm.

We learn a great deal about the characters in this story. They shape the plot therefore they must take roles for the story to progress. As a result our opinions of them vary throughout the play. Millie first appears to be a quick-witted, powerful woman who, perhaps not so surprisingly by her accounts of her 'failure'

".....Why is he (Gilbert) a schoolmaster....."

"..... You can't hurt Andrew. He's dead....."

and 'emotionally dead' husband, is having an affair. However, we learn that she is a cruel and deceitful woman, who has betrayed Andrew many times, who enjoys spitefully picking away at her husband's self-esteem. Likewise, before Andrew is on stage we can believe Millie's accounts and the idea of a tyrannical 'Hitler of the Lower-Fifth' (as he is later named) comes to mind. However as soon as he is introduced we meet a modest, hardworking man who is heartbroken through a combination of Millie's hatred of him, and a failure to inspire his Classics pupils, in the way he was inspired. In both cases the introduction of other people changes their character. Taplow, who seems devious and unaware of people's feelings at the beginning, redeems himself and turns out to be honest and more kindly-disposed towards Andrew than any other character. The changes that we observe show that no one should be judged on sight.

Throughout the play there is reference to Robert Browning's (hence, 'The Browning Version' as the stories almost different era parallels of each other) translation of the Agamemnon - an ancient Greek tragedy by Aeschylus,

which Andrew is slowly teaching to Taplow. There are parallels between the two works. Andrew (Agamemnon) has come home from fighting the long (Trojan) war against his classics pupils. He is then killed brutally, (as in the Agamemnon) but only emotionally by Millie (Clytemnestra) for ruining her life (Murdering her daughter). Afterwards, she declares proudly that Andrew a once brilliant Classical scholar (leader and fighter) is now 'dead'.

Whilst they are not described as different period versions of the same story, and there are some differences - Millie only 'kills' one person, Andrew is helped back onto his feet and he eventually does show his feelings - there is definitely intent by Terence Rattigan to link this tragedy into his own.

Another in which they differ is the style: Whilst Modern tragedy focuses on ordinary people in a tragic situation - the awful end that meets Captain Ahab's crew after when they try to destroy something in their arrogance that they don't understand in 'Moby Dick', Greek tragedy focuses more on the struggles of heroes to achieve a goal - Oedipus attempting to escape his destiny in 'Oedipus Rex' - that sometimes is never completed. In my opinion 'The Browning Version' is a combination of the two.

Some of Rattigan's plays were successful enough to become films and TV dramas 'The Browning Version' was no exception. The first film (Asquith version) came out in 1951 and starred Michael Redgrave as Andrew. Whilst it stuck the script and looked from around the right period, in terms of costume and set and stuck almost perfectly to the script and showed Andrew finally standing up to Millie, it did not show his redemption in the eyes of the students like the more recent film does to its credit.

The second film (Figgis version) was released in 1994 and starred Albert Finney as Andrew, and Greta Scacchi as Millie (or Laura as she is referred to), Michael Gambon also made an appearance as Frobisher. This was set in more modern times (filmed at Milton Abbey School) and gave the story more depth by acting out parts of the story which are just hinted at briefly in the play. Whilst not staying to the script as far as it felt almost like a different story, this film was easier to relate to than any other format of The Browning Version that the class has studied.

The acting was superb, and the redemption firstly of Millie who, in classic Hollywood style, apologises for her behaviour saying that Taplow's impression 'wasn't very good' and her arrival at prize-giving after announcing she wouldn't be attending confirms this. The redemption of Andrew at prize giving doesn't weaken the story and in my opinion is much more fulfilling than the ending of the play. The films both do well to interpret the story, and make it more visually interesting, as the stage version is set in one room, with no scenery change, and an hour of almost uninterrupted dialogue.

I was moved by the ending of 'The Browning Version'; and in my opinion, whilst it is frustrating for the audience it is effective to use an anti-climax for three reasons. Firstly, it is unconventional and this attracts more viewers than a standard tragedy. Furthermore, if Andrew completely overcomes Millie in a final fit of rage and emotion the ending will be decided there can be no element of catharsis and it wouldn't be a tragedy. And finally, if the

audience walks away without asking questions or speculating the play will be less memorable or interesting to discuss.