

The five- forty eight



Peaceful Triumph in the Face of Evil Atonement can be achieved without vengeance. Revenge is so basic, so animal a reaction to evil; it takes a higher level of thinking to achieve redemption without hateful spite and revenge. Atonement is satisfying after the anguish of rancor and internal violence brought on by maltreatment. When the goal is to equalize one's enemy rather than destroy him, the end result is fulfilling. Although one immediately wants to take down his aggressor, in the long run, he will discover that this does not bring him the peace that they seek.

In the short story "The Five- Forty- Eight" by John Cheever, a businessman named Blake is kidnapped at gunpoint by his former secretary, Ms. Dent. She is mentally ill and angry with him for ignoring and promptly firing her after their one night stand, bringing him to a warehouse where she contemplates shooting him in revenge, but instead simply walks away. Having confronted the man that has wronged her without taking his life, Ms. Dent eventually leaves the scene, reborn without her anger.

Redemption found in the absence of revenge is far more fulfilling a solution to a problem than one found through vengeance and violence. "The Five- Forty- Eight" is a prime example of this philosophy. Ms. Dent feels that Blake's malice is the root of her unhappiness. While her mental illness has contributed to her deep inner turmoil, a great deal of it has been stirred up by his cruelly insensitive actions towards her. He preyed on her as he had other women, revealed through the narrator's assertion that "most of the many women he had known had been picked for their lack of self- esteem" (Cheever).

This gives us a brief glimpse into Blake's past treatment of women. It is meant to be assumed that the women that Blake has "known" in the past are others that he was intimate with in brief and loveless affairs. Having said "picked" allows the reader to recognize that these were not simply women he happened upon in passing, these were in fact women that he specifically chose amongst all others, having perceived them as the easiest targets. Most importantly, the narrator says that these women were picked for their "lack of self- esteem. This reveals Blake's true predatory nature. He wanted a woman he perceived to be weak and easy to manipulate for his own devices. Blake used Ms. Dents "oversensitivity" (Cheever) and "lack of self- esteem" (Cheever) in order to satisfy his own desires. Blake personifies evil within this story, and his actions against his secretary are the execution of aforementioned evil. Had Ms. Dent killed Blake and therefore vanquished evil, she would not have found peace with her inner demons. Ms.

Dent was quite ill to begin with, having spent eight months in a hospital prior to her work for Blake, and her handwriting giving "the feeling that she had been the victim of some inner—some emotional—conflict that had in its violence broken the continuity of the lines she was able to make on paper" (Cheever). The use of the word "victim" incites that she is suffering unduly by no fault of her own. The idea that there is "violence" in her illness lends to the reader the severity of her disease.

That the disease should have "broken the continuity of the lines she was able to make on paper" shows that the troubles of her disease are now pouring outward, evident through things so ordinary as her handwriting. Ms. Dent is quite ill, the impact of this illness becoming obvious long before she

kidnapped Blake. Shooting him and thereby expressing the violence and “ conflict” within her would push her over the edge and completely destroy her. Had Ms. Dent destroyed Blake, the evil in her life, she could never and been vindicated of the burdening emotional pain she felt.

She is quite capable of overcoming the sadness he caused without killing him. Ms. Dent successfully overcomes the reprobate, evil character in her life without killing him. After bringing him to the warehouse, Ms. Dent forces Blake to the ground, repeating several times, “ Put your face in the dirt” (Cheever). He is now beneath her, having been forced to bend to her will so far as to put his face against the dirty floor of a city warehouse. She then goes on to say “ I can wash my hands of this” (Cheever) several times as well.

The washing of hands is an allusion to the Bible, where Pilate, the Roman general who decided to hang Christ upon the cross, also claims to wash his hands of any fault he has in persecuting Jesus. In saying this, Ms. Dent cleanses herself of the “ filth” in her life that has caused her such misery. She then leaves Blake there on the ground, crossing a wooden footbridge and disappearing. This crossing of the bridge metaphorically shows that she is now beyond the obstacle that had impeded her ability to be happy, having done so without harming the obstacle itself, much like a bridge continues one’s path over a river without ever disrupting it.

The narrator goes on to say that “ he saw by her attitude, her looks, that she had forgotten him” (Cheever), and we finally know that she is ultimately at peace with herself, and has managed to find this peace without resorting to

the ultimate violence of murder. Ms. Dent had purged herself of evil without ever having to destroy its source. The root of nearly all great pain and emotional toil is evil. However tempting it may be to destroy this evil, to vanquish it, to kill it, this will never bring the peace he who suffers seeks.

Should Ms. Dent have killed Blake, she never would have found the redemption she sought. Forcing him into the dirt, lowering him below her, and therefore allowing her to elevate herself above evil gave her the fulfillment that she desired and alleviated the pain that she felt. John Cheever's "The Five- Forty- Eight" shows us that the destruction of evil is not necessary when overcoming it. It is in elevating oneself above evil, the realization that one is greater than that which has caused one such suffering, that peace is finally found.