

Wasted lives and the "no name woman"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Hidden within "No Name Woman" are many underlying symbols and motifs, or reoccurring patterns, that work to shape the story into what it is and to help craft not only the characters' personalities but also the overarching plot of the story. One motif that seems to be prevalent throughout the story is the reoccurrence of the idea of waste: waste of livestock, human life, and even waste of birth. This symbol of waste seems to exaggerate the theme of shame which influences every decision made in the story and not only shapes the No Name Woman but also shapes the narrator's personal life.

Throughout "No Name Woman", the idea of something being "wasted" surfaces repeatedly. "On the night the baby was to be born, the villagers raided our house," says Kingston's mother. "The villagers broke in the front and the back door... their knives dripped with blood of our animals."

(Kingston 569). Not only did the villagers slaughter the livestock, but they also destroyed many perishable goods and household objects, such as bowls, pots, rice, fruits, and vegetables. "They ripped up her clothes and shoes and broke her combs..." as well as overturning "great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs, pickled fruits, and vegetables" (Kingston 569). The villagers ransacked the house and everything inside of it. They did not come into the house with the intent to loot or steal goods, but purely to destroy everything that the No Name Woman and her family owned. They spared no goods while destroying anything and everything in the house, purely to shame the No Name Woman because she was pregnant with a baby whose father was not the No Name Woman's husband.

How the No Name Woman got pregnant is left a mystery. At the time, in 1924, her husband was in America; she became impregnated by a man other

than her husband, whose identity is left undisclosed. She was either raped or had an affair, neither of which are directly confirmed in the story, but one of which can be interpreted through certain context clues hidden within the text. Kingston's mother is telling her this story as a cautionary tale; a tale meant to persuade Kingston to conform to her parents' values. It is meant to discourage young Kingston from engaging in premarital sex and, in the future, sex outside of wedlock. Kingston's mother tells her this tale because, hopefully, the fear of humiliation, ostracism, and death will serve adequately as warnings against the consequences of sexual promiscuity. Because Kingston's mother is telling her this story to persuade her to act in a manner congruent to her parents' principles, it can be concluded that the No Name Woman became pregnant by committing adultery.

The main appearance of this ubiquitous motif of waste deals with the waste of the No Name Woman and her daughter's lives when she commits suicide in response to feeling shameful about the actions and choices she made. The No Name Woman both kills herself and takes her child along with her when she jumps into the well. " She had taken her child with her into the wastes" (Kingston 576). Her life and her child's life were both completely wasted because of the decisions that the No Name Woman made. This is the chief manifestation of waste in this short story. Two lives were wasted due to shame, one of them with no chance to choose for himself or herself.

One very important question is raised in the No Name Woman's decision to bring her baby down the well with her: " Carrying the baby to the well shows loving." (Kingston 576) But does deciding for another human being that death is the best choice for it in fact show loving? The baby didn't have a

choice, the mother decided for it. “ Mothers who love their children take them along,” (Kingston 576) argues the narrator, but is this in fact a moral absolute? A mother who deliberately commits the act of filicide cannot be sane; deciding the life or death of another human being without that human being having the ability to understand what it wants is iniquitous. In theory, the idea of a filicide-suicide, such as that committed by the No Name Woman, sounds like an act of dramatic tragedy. Yet when one truly processes that what the mother is doing is against the child’s will, one sees that it is far from romantic: it is reprehensible, at least outside of the No Name Woman’s culture.