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Review Paper

Simplifying the Text of (Strong Horse Tea) to ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper basically aims to provide a textual and thematic analysis for Alice Walker's short story (Strong Horse Tea) in order to make the story accessible to ESL learners, who confront enormous problems in comprehending the significance of the story due to linguistic, lexical and cultural gaps between their local cultural heritage and the Southern traditions inherent in the text in addition to other stylistic complications resulting from the author's use of black dialect in the story.

Summary: The story depicts the suffering of a black woman, Rannie Toomer, whose only baby son, Snooks, is dying from terrible pneumonia. Toomer begs a white man who works as a post office employee (mail-man) to bring a doctor from the nearest town to cure her sick child but he goes and never returns back. Toomer, finally, has to surrender to the superstitious prescriptions and diagnosis of Sarah, the local black magician. Toomer has no other option but to accept Sarah's treatment of her child by giving him (strong Horse Tea) which is the urine of the mare. After great suffering and pain, Toomer got the horse tea in her shoe, later she discovers that her child is already dead. The story is apparently grounded in superstitious and folklore medicine traditions in the American South during slavery.

Themes: The story deals with the tragedy of black women under slavery in nineteenth-century America. The story is feminist in tone and the whole emphasis is placed on the female figure protagonist. The protagonist of the story is a woman and the only white man in the text is a hateful racial figure. Walker delineates a touching picture of a young black woman facing the dangers of poverty, the dehumanizing pressure of a society which does not respect women in general and despises black women in particular. Toomer is a tragic, hopeless victim who is suffering and is being tormented to death because she sees her child dying without being able to save his life.

The Journey Motif: Toomer's short journey to bring the horse tea heightens the tension and suspension on the part of the readers. I think her journey to bring the horse tea marks the climax of the story's action and it is the story's highest point of tension.

Conflicts: Toomer is torn between the desire to get her child cured by a real doctor and her fear that the doctor may not come. The conflict is also connected with her resistance to the folk medicine of Sarah and her desperate desire to get her child cured through any method of treatment. In the story there is also a conflict between Sarah and the mailman who may bring the real doctor from town. Sarah, in this sense, represents a group of old, worn-out and superstitious beliefs inherited from the past which contribute to the dehumanization of black people. The doctor, who will never come, is an epitome of the dark future awaiting the black folks who depend on the white man. In this context, Walker argues that the superstitions and ignorance of blacks and the worn-out traditions of the past will not change the status-quo of the black people. Equally, the hopeful future, blacks aspire to, will not be brought by the white folks. The underpinning note of the story urges black people to liberate themselves from the bondages of the past and the slavery of the white man.

Irony: The death of the child, Snooks, is ironical because he passed away while his mother was struggling to bring the horse tea for him. It is the denouement, the moment of illumination, in the story. Snook's death shows that all the efforts of blacks to survive in a society dominated by slavery and superstitions are futile.

Location of the Story in Time and Place: The story is located in nineteenth-century American society, in the South. The incidents of the story take place in one of the plantations of the South. There are many indications in the story to support this allegation.

Style: Walker writes efficiently and economically and her short story, to me, is a long, sad, prose poem. Her syntax is easy and she skillfully captures the impression and inner feelings of her characters. She often uses black dialect to remind the readers that the story is basically about black communities. The author reflects both the physical external appearance and the inner life of her characters.

Narration: The narrator expresses bad feelings simultaneously towards Sarah and the racial white mailman because both figures take part in the victimization and dehumanization of the black folks. The narrator, in this sense, is the speaking voice of the writer. There are many passages in the story to emphasize the narrator's antagonistic attitudes towards Sarah and the mailman alike.

Tone: The story is characterized by its pessimistic tone and gloomy tempo. The suffering, weeping and pain of Toomer are reflected in expressive vocabulary which intensifies the gloominess of the story's atmosphere.

Narrative Techniques: Walker employs the flashback technique in this story which, is reminiscent of William Faulkner's narratives. In the beginning of the story, the reader was introduced to the sick child. Then, the reader witnessed to the talk over the folk medicine between Sarah and Toomer. Later, the reader was informed that Snooks has been ill for five days. Afterwards, the reader realized that Toomer was still waiting for the white doctor, and that the mailman has gone to fetch him. Then we have a flashback scene between Toomer and the mailman in which she implored him to fetch the doctor.

The Journey motif: The journey of Toomer to bring the strong horse tea is a central feature of Southern literature. The journey is similar to the journey of Phoenix in one of Eudora Welty's stories. Both journeys are purposeless and they end in futility.

Universal Issues: The story does not only depict the life of three characters in a regional Southern environment in America but it has some significant universal issues which connect it with the literature of writers such as Beckett, Camus, Kafka and other existential literature narratives. In the story, we have a pessimistic existentialist vision of humanity. Man is viewed as a hopeless creature thrown into a godless universe. In this story, nature is hostile to humanity and the rain and the thunderbolts motifs are amplified during Toomer's journey indicating that humanity is facing a hostile universe and a cruel nature. Moreover, we do not have any effective communication between characters in this story. Sarah does not understand Toomer and vice versa. The mailman turns deaf ears to Toomer's tears. On the other hand, the doctor who will never come is a Godot figure, similar to the one we have in Beckett's plays. The innovation of Walker here is that she, like the American feminists, has attempted to revise the myth adopted by Euro-American male writers associated with absurd literature. In the Myth of Sisyphus, and in the Myth of Tantalus, we have male figures as protagonists. In this short story, the dominating figure is a woman who becomes a symbol of all humanity living in alienation.

Rannie Toomer: She is the protagonist of the story. The writer draws her physical appearance in a bestial way, which shows that Toomer is an animal, a subhuman, not a human being. In this sense, Walker draws our attention to the racial issues lying underneath the story. Toomer is described as a wet goat that smells badly. Her eyes are extremely dirty. The mailman is disgusted when she puts her nasty black hand on him. Toomer is, however, a pathetic figure and we feel sympathetic with her. She is a slave who has a child called Snooks. The child has no father. There are no indications in the story that the mailman is the father of the child, but we may think in this direction because it is a possibility. Her child could be the son of a white master who abandoned them. The narrative reveals that she is not married; however we can still identify the mailman with the child. Toomer does not believe in Sarah's magic. She thinks that if Sarah's magic were vital Sarah could have treated her own self. In her despair and disappointment, Toomer has to surrender to Sarah completely. She offers the baby to Sarah. She feels guilty that she believes the mailman and waits for the doctor who never comes. In a desperate endeavor to cure her feverish baby, Rannie paid tremendous efforts to get the strong horse tea but all her attempts end in smoke.

Sarah: Walker visualizes such a vivid image for Sarah that I could imagine this black witch, sitting in front of me. Sarah does not trust the mailman and she knows that the doctor will not come. She hates the mailman not because he is racial but because he may bring the doctor who will put an end to her profession and superstitions in the black community. Since the doctor is not attainable, Sarah wins the battle. After she touched the child, he died. Nevertheless, we have no signs that she is responsible for his death. Since the beginning Sarah has a desire to cure the child in her own ways. She shows no attention to the suffering of Toomer. She is also concerned with whether the doctor will arrive or not. She is afraid of the consequences if the doctor comes. Before the end of the story she is slightly metamorphosed and she undergoes a psychological change when she shows sympathy to Toomer as follows: "She had not been allowed near the boy on the bed, and that had made her angry at first, but now she looked with pity at the young woman who was so afraid her child would die. She felt rejected but at the same time sadly glad that the young always grow up hoping".

The White Mailman: He has got no name which shows that he is not a human being but a racial type. He embodies the racial dimension in the story. The mailman advises Toomer to go and use the medicine of aunt Sarah. At this point, the narrator comments that aunt Sarah's folk medicine would effectively work on blacks not on whites apparently because they are sub-humans. Ironically, the mailman brings pictures to Toomer, pictures and posters of luxuries in town and about other commodities and things she should not afford. The pictures arouse Toomer's appetite for things beyond her poor closed world. In this way, she feels inferior and the mailman keeps the master-slave relationship. Symbolically, the white mailman is an intruder who comes to keep the status quo in the South. The mailman only brings artificial pictures to tease Toomer but he does not bring a doctor to cure the sick child.

The Story and Southern Literature: Southern family is given a primary focus in Southern American writing. For example, in “Sonny’s Blues”, James Baldwin focuses on the economic problems of Sonny’s family and how these problems disintegrate the family from inside leading partially to the victimization of Sonny who falls a prey to drug addiction. In “Strong Horse-tea”, Alice Walker portrays a vivid image of the suffering of a black family in the American South. Toomer’s son, Snooks dies as a result of various economic and social factors. His death is partially due to the ignorance and superstitious beliefs of blacks. However, the white racial system, represented by the mailman figure, is also responsible for Snook’s death. Moreover, southern writing concentrates on major historical and cultural events in terms of time and place and how these events affect life in the American South. For example, William Faulkner, in his novels and short stories, refers to major historical events which shaped the social structure of the southern society such as the civil war between North and South. Equally, southern writing scrutinizes the life of the individual within the social context of the American South. Writers such as Eudora Welty, Alice Walker, James Baldwin and William Faulkner concentrate on individuals as Livvie, Toomer, Sonny and Emily making them the center of their short stories. Further, southern writing depicts the high drama of the soul focusing on human beings caught in difficult situations. Sonny, Livvie, Toomer and Miss Emily are all human beings facing different kinds of conflicts and miserable conditions. Apparently, southern writing depicts man’s alienation from society as tragic and hopeless. The private life of Emily, Sonny, Livvie and Toomer is drawn so tragically that the readers begin to sympathize with them all. From another perspective, southern writing is characterized by its diction of rhetoric and high style of discourse. Southern writers employ highly effective and elaborate style in terms of diction and imagery. Southern writing is characterized by its moralistic and religious nature. In "Livvie", we deal with a protagonist who has to make a moral choice at a certain moment in her life (either to remain loyal to her sick husband or to give herself body and soul to the young man -Cash).

Strong Horse Tea and Southern Writing:The story fits the southern tradition because of the following: The story is concerned with southern characters and is located in the American south in terms of time and place. Further, the story deals with the American past delineating black life in the south. Many cultural, racial and historical elements are interwoven in the text of the story. Equally, there is a concern with the individual and there is an emphasis on the lack of love and lack of spiritual values as well as shortage of solidarity and cooperation which, culminated in the death of Snooks.. By showing Rannie Toomer being trapped in a desperate situation, the story depicts the high drama of the souls of the black folks like other southern literary writings. As a whole, the author successfully depicts the inner agonies and conflicts of the central character and the story reflects the alienation and isolation of black humanity from society as tragic. Toomer gets no help from the white mailman and she is alienated and isolated because she is black, female, weak and helpless. Finally, the reader is left with the impression that the story delineates a primitive woman being cast out in a godless universe.

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