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Current Date

An Analysis of “A White Heron”

Sarah Orne Jewett’s short story, “A White Heron” centers on a few days in the life of Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl spending the summer in Maine with her grandmother. Having left the hustle of the city, Sylvia enjoys spending much of her time in the woodland, as “there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors”. One summer evening as Sylvia is walking the family cow home, she is approached by a handsome young stranger who is seeking to hunt, kill, and stuff birds, specifically a white heron. Sylvia is attracted to him and agrees to help in his quest. Although the first day’s search proves fruitless, Sylvia climbs a massive pine tree on the next day and locates a beautiful white heron, its mate, and nest. At that point, she realizes that she cannot give the bird’s location away. Although wracked with guilt to the point of “a sharp pang,” Sylvia’s conviction holds firm. Her attachment to nature and the beauty of the white heron proves stronger than her desire to please the hunter.

Theodore R. Hovet, university researcher and scholar, analyzed Jewett’s tale, comparing the short story to a fairy tale, in “‘Once Upon a Time’; Sarah Orne Jewett’s ‘A White Heron’ As A Fairy Tale.” Identifying various components of a typical fairy tale, Hovet pointed out that the same facets exist in “A White Heron”. In fact, his analysis dissects Jewett’s tale, elaborating on twenty functions that are often found to be present in a fairy tale—functions that are also present in “A White Heron”. Hovet borrows the definition of a function from Vladimir Propp, author of “Morphology of the Folk Tale”, who describes a function as “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action”. For example, a villain appearing, and the use of a magical agent are both examples of functions in a fairy tale. Hovet’s analysis is an eye-opening approach to interpreting “A White Heron” as a fairy tale.

A typical fairy tale includes a hero and a disguised villain. The villain plunders or causes harm to others, often entreating the hero to trust him and unwittingly assist him in his scheme. Conflict often occurs as the hero fights back, usually defeating the villain in the end, as the world returns to a happy place. So it is in “A White Heron” where the villain is the young hunter, whose underlying motives are hidden from Sylvia, who is the heroine. In his analysis, Hovet suggests that Jewett’s tale is not unlike fairy tales that incorporate common functions such as villain and hero roles, direct combat between the hero and villain, and the use of magical agents. Combat between Jewett’s heroine and villain is not physical, but is instead psychological when the hunter attempts to bribe Sylvia to help him locate the heron. Hovet notes that when Sylvia, “despite great internal agony, successfully withstands the young man,” the two are in combat with a resolution in favor of the heroine. A magical agent, almost always evident in a fairy tale, takes the form of the tree that Sylvia climbs, on which “the least twigs held themselves to advantage” and “stood still and frowned away the winds that June morning” so that Sylvia could easily scale the tree. Hovet’s analysis logically identifies elements of a fairy tale in “A White Heron”.

On an even deeper level, Hovet explores possible societal influences that are thinly disguised in the wording of “A White Heron.” For example, Hovet suggests that Jewett was a feminist who painted her heroine as an opponent of feminine submission to the physically stronger sex. Symbolic connections between the seemingly mundane images of a hunter and his prey and those of a woman coming to terms with her place in a world dominated by men are evident throughout. The young hunter embodies male strength and dominance, whereas Sylvia’s refusal to give up the heron represents her decision not “to place herself at the disposal of the masculine will”. As he continues his analysis of Jewett’s tale, Hovet explores the story’s connection to “the imperialistic bent of industrial America”. The hunter’s money and gun represent the power and influence of a materialistic society in which capitalism rules. Jewett attempts to illustrate that such is not always the case, as suggested when Sylvia refuses to assist the hunter in destroying nature by killing the white heron. She turns her back on technological influences, and is not swayed by a lucrative reward.

The analysis provided by Hovet encouraged me to give more thought to possible underlying influences that the author might have intended to convey. Upon initially reading “A White Heron,” I was entertained by the story of a young girl who stands strong in her conviction to save a heron from destruction. I was impressed by her willingness to withstand pressure from someone to whom she was attracted. On the surface, the tale was a simple story that held my interest. However, the review provided by Hovet was an eye-opener to me, as it forced me to think about the story on an entirely different level. Whether or not Hovet’s analysis is a true depiction of Jewett’s intentions, the parallelism to a fairy tale, and the possible symbolic connections to a feminist attitude and an aversion to materialistic influence, are obvious conclusions. It is always interesting to explore another viewpoint related to a literary piece; however, each reader must ultimately make his or her own determination with respect to any underlying meaning or symbolism. After all, only the author can know for certain what was intended.