

2202235 Reading and Analysis for the Study of English Literature Name

Semester II, 2018

Thursday, April 4, 2019

Section

Quiz 3: "There Was Once" (40 minutes, 10 points) **Discussion**

There Was Once

—There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the forest.

—Forest? *Forest* is passé, I mean, I've had it with all this wilderness stuff. It's not a right image of our society, today. Let's have some *urban* for a change.

—There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the suburbs.

—That's better. But I have to seriously query this word *poor*.

—But she *was* poor!

—Poor is *relative*. She lived in a house, didn't she?

—Yes.

—Then socioeconomically speaking, she was not poor.

—But none of the money was *hers*! The whole point of the story is that the wicked stepmother makes her wear old clothes and sleep in the fireplace—

—Aha! They had a *fireplace*! With *poor*, let me tell you, there's no fireplace. Come down to the park, come to the subway stations after dark, come down to where they sleep in cardboard boxes, and I'll show you *poor*!

—There was once a middle-class girl, as beautiful as she was good—

—Stop right there. I think we can cut the *beautiful*, don't you? Women these days have to deal with too many intimidating physical role models as it is, what with those bimbos in the ads. Can't you make her, well, more average?

—There was once a girl who was a little overweight and whose front teeth stuck out, who—

—I don't think it's nice to make fun of people's appearances. Plus, you're encouraging anorexia.

—I wasn't making fun! I was just describing—

—Skip the description. Description oppresses. But you can say what color she was.

—What color?

—You know. Black, white, red, brown, yellow. Those are the choices. And I'm telling you right now, I've had enough of **white**. Dominant culture this, dominant culture that—

—I don't know what color.

—Well, it would probably be *your* color, wouldn't it?

—But this isn't *about* me! It's about this girl—

—Everything is about you.

—Sounds to me like you don't want to hear this story at all.

—Oh well, go on. You could make her ethnic. That might help.

—There was once a girl of indeterminate descent, as average-looking as she was good, who lived with her wicked—

—Another thing. *Good* and *wicked*. Don't you think you should transcend those puritanical judgmental moralistic epithets? I mean, so much of that is conditioning, isn't it?

—There was once a girl, as average-looking as she was well-adjusted, who lived with her stepmother, who was not a very open and loving person because she herself had been abused in childhood.

—Better. But I am so *tired* of negative female images! And stepmothers—they always get it in the neck! Change it to *stepfather*, why don't you? That would make more sense anyway, considering the bad behavior you're about to describe. And throw in some whips and chains. We all know what those twisted, repressed, middle-aged men are like—

—*Hey, just a minute! I'm a middle-aged—*

—Stuff it, Mister Nosy Parker. Nobody asked you to stick in your oar, or whatever you want to call that thing. This is between the two of us. Go on.

—There was once a girl—

—How old was she?

—I don't know. She was young.

—This ends with a marriage, right?

—Well, not to blow the plot, but—yes.

—Then you can scratch the condescending paternalistic terminology. It's *woman*, pal. *Woman*.

—There was once—

—What's this *was, once*? Enough of the dead past. Tell me about *now*.

—There—

—So?

—So, what?

—So, why not [here](#)?

—Margaret Atwood

1. (2) What words should go into the two blanks in the story?

[white, here](#)

2. (6) List **three** criticisms made in the story about storytelling and briefly explain the narrative issue they are critiquing.

- [outdated setting: the forest as a setting is not current; most people live in urban areas now](#)
- [inaccurate class description of main character: poor is not true of the character if she has a house with a fireplace](#)
- [female gender pressure: beautiful should not be a feminine physical appearance requirement as it creates unhealthy body-consciousness](#)
- [characterization, white racial hegemony: author self-identifies as white and creates stories only centered from that worldview, creating unrepresentative narratives; "your" color is imposed on the reader](#)

- characterization, using moralistic dichotomies: judgment of who is **good or wicked** is dependent on context and taught values, using them as absolute labels to assign worth to characters is counterproductive
- characterization, stepmother stereotypes: unrealistic portrayal of **wicked stepmothers**; contextually a wicked stepfather would be more plausible
- female character stereotypes, ageism: adult women are unfairly described as **girls**, never given the chance to be portrayed as mature or independent while adult males are called men
- formulaic plot: tale predictably **ends in marriage**, especially when a man takes the girl as wife
- cliched past setting: telling stories of the removed past ("**was once**") seems irrelevant when there is so much to speak about in the present
- cliched distant setting: telling stories of exotic distant places seems less relevant than telling stories about local places ("**here**")

3. (2) Explain the statement "Everything is about you."

One's writing necessarily reflects one's style, experiences, identity and beliefs. This is a criticism of the middle-aged white male storyteller who thinks that his specific characteristics are natural and universal. This mainstream voice has internalized his particular views to the point that he does not realize that they are particular or subjective, and does not question his belief that everyone else should see and think that way as well. He projects himself onto everything; the world is reflected in his image, yet he is unaware.

