THEME OF HARMONIOUS RELATIONS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF SHERWOOD ANDERSON

Dr. B. Mohan*

*Associate Professor,
S.V. College of Engineering and Technology,
Chittoor, A.P, India.

ABSTRACT

Sherwood Anderson dealt about the perplexities, turmoils and confusions in the relationship between men and women, who are stifled in the claustrophobic atmosphere, is discussed. This paper is focused on the tangles and convulsions of the relationships between married men and women and those which depict the loneliness, isolation, frustrations, disappointments and thwarted potentials of adult men and women, married and single alike. Anderson was deeply concerned about human relations, about the relationship between men and women, and more often than not, about the failure of understanding between them, especially between the married. The world of married men and women in Anderson’s stories seems in general to be dimly lit world. Enduringly happy and harmonious marital relations are rather rare there. Whatever the causes be, personal, social, psychological, an almost impenetrable wall seems to keep most husbands and wives apart, making any understanding and communication between them almost impossible.


INTRODUCTION

The Man’s Story of Sherwood Anderson tells the story of an unusual and unconventional relationship between a man who is a poet and a married woman who runs away with him from her uninteresting and suspicious husband to live happily in Chicago despite their ramshackle
apartment and rank poverty. But their brief spell of happiness suddenly ends with her murder by a half-crazed man. Both happen to be peculiar and unusual characters and their relationship challenges ones understanding. Many of Anderson’s characters, as we have seen already, are in search of something that would give them a sense of purpose in life and the feeling that they have lived their lives. More often than they are disappointed and frustrated, the causes being several. They are left lonely, isolated estranged with few who can understand them. Though called a Man’s Story, this piece is equally a woman’s story despite the focus being on the man. Her name is not revealed but she is decidedly the more powerful and determined personality, and as long as she is alive, she proves to be the prop and mainstay of the man Edgar Wilson. She sustains him till the end of her life and remains self-effacing, self-sacrificing and in her own way heroic. With her death Wilson virtually collapses.

The narrator of the story is a newspaperman and an amateur poet. He is both observant and naïve. He frankly admits that he is puzzled by Edgar Wilson the man and his poems, which fascinate him and at the same time make him “feel just a little woozy”. He is impelled to tell the story of this poet and the strangeness in the relationship between him and his woman companion in the hope that he may himself understand. This modesty of the narrator leaves the reader free to form his own views about them. The narrator gets interested in Wilson during his trial on the charge of having murdered his wife and after he is cleared of it through the confession of the crazy little man who actually committed the murder. It is his indifference to the entire process of trial and the possibility of his being hanged to death, his abstracted air, and his indifference even after he is released, that attract the narrator to know more about him. Wilson does not even care to give a consistent account of his life, true or false. What is known about him in Chicago is that he had come from a town in Kansas running away from that town with another man’s wife.

The narrator has comparatively more information about the woman. Her life before she met Wilson was rather “messy”. Her home background was somewhat insecure. Her father, a small official, accused of misappropriating some money and jailed, killed himself. Her mother had already died. She happened to marry a man, a druggist, honest, frugal but rather uninteresting. She had something about her, which appealed strongly to men. Several men of the seedy little town smitten by her wrote her unsigned letters inviting her for a tryst. She made the mistake of telling her husband about one of the letters. He grew silent. They did not have any children. When Edgar Wilson came along and stopped in the town for a couple of days, they got acquainted with each other. Her neighbours saw this woman who had grown habitually silent talking to this stranger for two hours. Suddenly she had become articulate in his presence. Gathering her few belongings she walked with him to the railway station. They came to Chicago, took shelter in the anonymity of the city and lived there together “apparently very happy”, though they could not be married. As Wilson did nothing bowls with young towards earning, they were miserably poor and had to live in the upper room of an old farm house. To make both ends meet she managed to get a place as ward robe woman in a theatre nearby. She was literally the breadwinner.

As for Wilson, he wrote poetry of a sort, which is “Greek” to the narrator, as he honestly admits. When he reads it at leisure, every line of it seems “crazy stuff”, and yet fascinates him in a way. It is all about walls and deep wells and great bowls with young trees erect in them. It is not
surprising that he feels “a little bit woozy”. But when he reads through several verse of Wilson’s he finds running through them a particular theme obsessively:

That men had erected walls about themselves and that all men were perhaps destined to stand forever behind the walls on which they constantly bet their fists, or with whatever tools they could get hold of--- Men had themselves built the walls and now stood behind them, knowing dimly that beyond the walls thee was warmth, light, air, beauty, life in fact-while at the same time, and because of a kind of madness in themselves, the walls were constantly being built higher.

Loneliness, isolation, estrangement and failure of communication and the resultant frustration are recurrent themes in Anderson’s stories, early as well as late, as noted already on more than one occasion. These acquire a sharpness and intensity in the lives of married men and women of several Anderson stories. In The Man in the Brown Coat, which is more of a sketch than a short story, the protagonist who is an historian and has written three histories of peoples, which stand up like sentries on the shelves of libraries, cannot communicate meaningfully with his wife, nor can she with him. His agonized confession is:

We sit together in the evening but I do not know her. I cannot shake myself out of myself. I wear a brown coat and I cannot come out of my coat,. I cannot come out of myself. My wife is very gentle and she speaks softly but she cannot come out of herself.

Both are trapped in their narrow, limited selves. As man and wife they hardly know each other, though they have been living together. Theirs have been unlived lives. That is precisely what the historian protagonist says:

Why do I not say a word out of myself to the others? Why, in all our life together, have I never been able to break through the wall to my wife?--- Are there no words that lead into life?

To return to The Man’s Story, Edgar Wilson the poet holds people themselves responsible of this state of affairs, and for the “going away” of “the light and the warmth of life” because of their “blind refusal---to understand each other”. In one of his verses, which the narrator cites Wilson expresses his quiet confidence in man’s ability to cut down “all the falseness” in people and “cut and rip through all the ugly husks in which millions of lives are enclosed”. In another piece he says speaking for himself: “My fruit shall not be my fruit until it drops from my arms into the arms of the others over the top of the wall”. Edgar Wilson seemed to have won this confidence in himself and in man during his association with the woman of Kansas who had risked running away from her husband defying convention and living with him violating accepted codes of married life. in her company, moreover, and let in light and warmth to their lives.

Theirs was a strange kind of relationship, romantic no doubt but in a special way without any of the paraphernalia usually associated with conventional romance. Theirs was not just a domestic household either, which was a little down in its luck. As may be gathered from his poems cited by the narrator, despite their woolliness and vagueness, Wilson was obsessed with the
relationship of all people, not necessarily between himself and his companion. He had “a half-mystic conception” about it. He felt the need for a helping hand to explore it further. Before he met the Kansas woman, he “had been going aimlessly about the world looking for a mate”, and when he found her things cleared for him, or so he thought. He had other curious notions too, not easy to understand. He believed “that in the field of poetry he had something to express that could not be expressed until he had found a woman who could, in a peculiar and absolute way, give herself in the world of the flesh-and that there was to be a marriage out of which beauty come for all people”, and that woman “had to be untainted by self-interest”. In the wife of the Kansas druggist he had found such a person.

Disappointed and frustrated in life, and perhaps deeply hurt by the baseless suspicious of her husband’s the Kansas woman must have felt drawn to Wilson. He was a powerful personality to fascinate and attract people, especially women. Not only the Kansas woman but the hunchback girl to whom two little backroom in Wilson’s flat had been sublet, also had felt a sort of romantic attachment to him. They are all admiration and devotion to him. The narrator too felt his power so much that he was urged from within to tell this crazy poet’s story. The Kansas woman was so completely involved in Wilson that “she was absolutely and wholly happy with him in a strangely inexpressive sort of way”. If he “wanted her quite absolutely” for himself, “she was in her own way greedy”, and had her hold on him. She helped the poet in Wilson to realize himself by her self-effacing understanding and loving companionship.

The woman’s death came about rather unexpectedly. A half-crazed stagehand, who worked in the same theatre where she was employed, had fallen in love with her and written many silly letters to her which she ignored. One evening when Wilson and she were walking across the city, he totally abstracted in thought and she walking beside him, silent and satisfied as always in his company, the stage hand appeared out of the fog, shot her and ran away. But it made no impression on Wilson who walked along as though nothing had happened. The woman, with remarkable presence of mind, gathered herself and managed to walk beside him without saying anything. When a policeman came there, strangely she told him a lie and sent him away in the wrong direction. She managed to lead Wilson to their apartment, walked to the fireplace and lit a fire with the bits of waste paper “making a little flare of beauty” filling the room with light. While this almost ritual like act was on, the poet stood, “blind with his own purpose”. Then she walked softly and silently towards him and fell dead at his feet. If she struggled before she died, she struggled in silence. This was the climax to her three-year long, silent self-sacrificing, loving devotion to him and his poetic endeavour. Setting the fireplace ablaze in the context of her life with him, has the force of a symbolic gesture to impress upon him that he must keep the poet in him alive and ablaze, to articulate his deepest feelings and convictions.

Wilson’s behavior at the time of her death is both shocking and “inhuman”, to say the least. He stood for sometime, as if looking into nothingness, oblivious of what had happened to the woman he had loved. On an impulse he walked out of the room into the street, stepping awkwardly over her body. He walked for some blocks calmly and nonchantingly, and even stopped on the way to buy a cigarette as if nothing had happened. Then he strolled on until he walked into the midst of a crowd. Then he “looked anxiously about for a moment, and suddenly began shouting in a loud voice”, “shouting, and trying to tell the story of what had happened”. This he did once again until he was taken into custody by a policeman. During and after his
trial for murder, and acquittal he continued to behave for a time as if he had nothing to do with what had happened. That was strange indeed. But inwardly the man had collapsed. It took some time for him to become aware of the significance of what had happened to him. The narrator assesses properly the impact of the death of the woman on Wilson. Before he found the woman he “had been sunk far down into a deep sea of doubt and questioning. Before he found (her) no expression had ever come from him”. He had wandered from place to place looking at people’s faces wanting to come close to them, but did not know how. “The woman had been able to lift him up to the surface of the sea of life for a time, and with her he had floated on the surface of the sea, under the sky, into sunlight”. She was the boat in which he had floated, “and now the boat had been wrecked and he was sinking again, back into the sea”.14 Once he began to be aware of what had happened he started talking to people in the street, in their houses, perhaps in “an effort---not to sink back forever into the sea”. “It was the struggle of a drowning man”.15

The woman from Kansas gave her all to Wilson and became the anchor of his life, expecting nothing in return for herself except the satisfaction of sustaining him and his art. She found the fulfillment of her life in helping him. She made the poet in him possible by taking him under her protective wings. She made the poet in him possible by taking him under her protective wings. Though not married to him in the sense society understands it, her love and devotion to Wilson were not only exceptional but far more than any married wife could give. Secure under her care he could afford to be absorbed and abstracted in the world of poetic creation. However, all said, Wilson cannot escape the charge of being an egotist who took the woman and her service to him for granted. There is no indication in the story that he ever thought of her. But for her he could not have come anywhere near self fulfillment. His life became a “lived life” as long as she was alive and with him. Had her life not been cut short, may be, Wilson’s story would have been different and had taken a different turn. Viewed as a whole, their unusual relationship remains a puzzle. However, during a short spell, each experienced a sense of fulfillment and of living a worthwhile life.

Instances of long happy married life, of enduring happy relation between man and woman are very few in the stories of Anderson, especially among those considered in the present study. If it is a happy one it is invariably short-lived. In Paper Pills of Winesburg, Ohio Dr. Reefy marries a deceived young woman who seeks his help as she has none to help her, she discovers in him, the “sweetness of twisted apples”. But she dies after an illness, ending their all too brief married life. Instances of frustrated and disillusioned married life in Anderson’s stories have already been pointed in the earlier chapter. Mrs. Wife, (published in Redbook 70, December 1937) and justly called “one of the best of Anderson’s later stories” by Modlin66, stands apart from all the other stories of Anderson’s which are concerned with the theme of man-woman relationship among married people. For, it seems to be the only story among those selected for study, in which a harmonious, enduring and happy relationship between husband and wife is a mark of true maturity. It is possible only in the basis of mutual respect, understanding, transparent honesty (free from any guile, hide and seek). This relationship is based on integrity, and has to be striven for and earned. It has to be kept in constant repair, if it should endure, by both man and wife. This view of mature relationship is borne out by the manner in which the story is told at a steady, unhurried pace and a quiet voice. The story concerns a doctor and his wife. A friend of the doctor’s to whom the doctor himself tells his story, particularly about a crucial and revealing experience in his married life, narrates it. When a version of this story of Anderson’s was first
published, it was given the title A Moonlight Walk. But the author while publishing the final
version of the story gave it its present title, Mrs. Wife, a most appropriate one. Etymologically
the word ‘wife’ meant ‘help-mate’, which fits most aptly the doctor’s wife, Martha. She remains
his helpmate through thick and thin.

The doctor practiced in a country town and his patients, whom he visited, lived over a wide
countryside, valley and hills. He was a sensible and sensitive man of deep and true culture, full
of true feeling. Human, humane and honest in his approach to his patients, competent and
unpretentious, he was naturally popular. He was “a rather large, very strong and very handsome
man”, “so very male, virile,---naturally quick and even affectionate in all his relations with
people and particularly with women”. In his practice he came into intimate contact with a
good many women. He could have been easily a women’s man had he chosen to be. But he
resisted it though it was a great struggle for him and despite some neurotic women patients being
very persistent and determined not to be put off. He loved his wife and was very much devoted
to her, though he did not speak much about her. “She was rather small and dark, a woman very
beautiful in her won way---the way---of a good deal of suffering”. The doctor and his wife had
known much suffering in life. Their daughter, the only living child of their marriage was a
cripple, as she was a victim of infantile paralysis, and moved moving about with great difficulty
in a wheel chair. The two sons born to them had both died in the outbreak of the same dreaded
disease, which had paralysed their daughter. There were no secrets between the doctor and his
wife. Such was the transparency of their relationship built on mutual
respect and trust. He had a
gift for laughter, loud and hearty, while she only smiled. Whenever she smiled her great beauty
came to life. In joy and sorrow they stood together.

The doctor had very little money. He was indifferent to either saving or accumulating it. His wife
undertook the job of sending bill, as he was very careless about it. Often he “forgot”,
“purposely”, to report to his wife many calls he received, one of his patients, a very rich woman,
who came from a city for a short stay in the country town of the doctor, took a fancy for him and
urged him to come to the city where he could succeed as doctor and also get rich. When he
would not see her in his office, she wrote letters to him and sent flowers in big boxes to his
office. He threw them out of the window into the alleyway. Everyone, including his wife, knew
it. But she was not perturbed by it. As the doctor told his friend, “---my wife has a head. She
knew well enough I was not be caught by one of that sort”. The city lady was not the
kind to give up easily. Once she wrote to him making a fantastic offer of a hundred thousand dollars,
provided he moved to the city, became a doctor to rich women, and agreed to see her daily as his
patient though not as her lover. The doctor was not taken it. He knew that at best he could only
be fairly good country doctor. The city woman tried yet another bait very difficult to resist. She
suggested in a letter that with plenty of money at his disposal possibly he could sent his crippled
daughter to some famous physician and get hr cured. The understanding between the doctor and
his wife and their mutual trust was such that when he showed the letter to her “she read it and
smiled”. He vowed solemnly to himself, “By this woman, hard or soft, hurt or unhurt, I will
stand until I die”.21

As if to challenge and test the doctor’s resolve, another woman seemed to enter his life and
create a real crisis in his married life, It happened unexpectedly. A city manufacturer of sorts,
came into the country for the summer with wife, his only child a crippled daughter like the
doctor’s own, and a nurse who was a Pole. On the instruction of his city doctor, the manufacturer engaged this country doctor to visit the crippled girl on his regular rounds and be at hand in case of an emergency, although there was precious little that any doctor could do to help the sick girl. It was the Polish woman that completely held the doctor’s attention. She was perhaps thirty years old, a very strong woman, “in every way physically full and rich”. He who was forty-seven years old at that time, physically very strong, became “subject to very direct and powerful sex calls which were similar to the “storms” suddenly descending on “peaceful fields”. Later he learnt from the nurse herself that she too had a similar, equally intense and explosive experience on seeing him.22

The doctor describes this crucial experience frankly to his friend, the narrator of the story, in a quiet voice without any exaggeration melodramatisation. He felt spellbound in her presence. It was “pure lust” in him and nothing else, as he himself realized. He never had a like experience. “It was almost as though (he) had, in that moment, in the child’s (i.e. the sick girl) presence, actually taken the woman. It seemed to (him) that she was something (he) had all of (his) life been wanting with a kind of terrible force-with (his) entire being”. During that spell he had become completely oblivious of his wife, her love for him, and the suffering he and she had gone through together over the loss of their sons and the incurable sickness their only surviving child. For the time she was utterly out of his life. it was a terrible struggle within him to resist the temptation. He was in a muddle and failed to attend to his patients. It seemed to be a desperate situation to him. While describing this situation to friend while they were fishing together the doctor, seemingly going off at tangent, recalls significantly a fishing trip he took alone on a moonlight night in a wild mountain stream, “on the night after he had buried his second son”. “himself fighting all the night, not to be overcome” by the loss of his son.23 the fight was “to save himself from despair”. Was he doing the same thing now in this struggle between the Polish woman and himself,24 he wondered.

The doctor’s wife was perhaps “deeply aware” of the confusion he was in and the probable cause for it. Having waited for a few days he went out again to meet the nurse. He had thought out a plan to take her out. He lied to his wife that though there had not been any call for his service, some voice had been calling him to go to the crippled girl. Whenever he went out at night to answer a call, it was his custom to go to his wife and kiss her before he left. Such was his obsession with the nurse that he forgot about it that night. When his wife reminded him of this omission, as he was hurrying through her room, he retraced his steps but could not bring himself to kiss her. But he could not help telling her, their relations being always transparent, “I cannot explain. This is a strange night form me. I will perhaps explain it later, I cannot kiss you now”.25

The doctor got the Polish woman. She told him plainly that she too had felt when she saw him as he had felt about her. A woman of independent judgment and sensitiveness, he knew her mind. She had made enquiries about him and found about his crippled daughter, the loss of his two sons, and about his wife. While she was ready to oblige him on that occasion, she had other thoughts also. She told him candidly: “I do not want you to be unfaithful to her--- you are not going to take me. I am a woman of thirty and have never been taken by a man. I had never wanted to be until I saw you. It may be that now I never shall be”.26 Although he had nothing to say in reply, he realised the maturity and wisdom of her remark. “It was the great moment of his life’, making him feel that her remark had made him a matured man.27 After returning home he
gave his wife the kiss he had denied her that night, which was a most regard for his wife: “I was in love with her as I had never really been with the Polish woman and in the same way. In a way until after that time I never had been”.28 Not only did it bring him closer to her, but brought him a better awareness of her character and its strength.

The doctor’s wife’s reaction to the entire episode, summed up in the concluding paragraph of the story, is even more illuminating and sheds light on their relationship. After receiving the reassuring kiss form him that night, she told him: “we have been through it again, haven’t we?”. Then she, who generally only smiled, for some reason “laughed”, a laughter very different from that of the hearty laughter for which the doctor was known. To him, “it was the nicest laugh (he) had ever heard from her lips”.29 It seemed to come from the depths of her being. It was obviously an expression of her sense of tremendous relief from the anxiety and tension she had been experiencing, and of her joy. Ever a woman of few words, her quiet laughter could express her happiness of the moment. The few words she said to him (cited above) hint that there were probably in their married similar experiences of suspense and anxiety for her, the doctor being a very attractive, virile man open to temptations. They had successfully tided over them. the latest episode with the Polish woman was perhaps the most challenging, from her point of view. Luckily she had regained what she feared she had lost forever. Her laughter, far better than demonstrative gestures and words, suggested her renewed understanding, trust and confidence in her husband whom she loved deeply. It was the reaction of a person of real maturity. But for her restrained and mature response their relation would have been strained beyond recovery. It is to the credit of the doctor that he realized and respected her integrity and his own indebtedness to her. She was, as he tacitly acknowledges to his friend the anchor of his life and thought and his moral being.

Mrs. Wife is not only a refreshing departure from the other stories of disappointed and frustrated husbands and wives, but also a true love story. This point has to be emphasized. The doctor and his wife Martha emerge as mature husband and wife, who have grown gracefully with age and experience, discovering the meaning and significance of married love.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Man’s Story, Certain Things Last, P.105.
2. Ibid., P.107.
4. Ibid., pp.100-101.
5. The Man’s Story, Certain Things Last, P.108.
7. Ibid., P.112.
8. Ibid., pp.112-113.

9. Ibid., P.113.

10. Ibid., P.118.

11. Ibid., P.120.

12. Ibid., P.118-119

13. Ibid., P.121.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid., P.273.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., P.274.

20. Ibid., P.275.

21. Ibid., P.278.

22. Ibid., pp.278-279.

23. Ibid., P.280

24. Ibid., P.284.

25. Ibid., P.285.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., P.286.

28. Ibid., pp. 286-87.