



A Reader's Morbid Digest of Being Misled

MIKE HIXSON

In this wry commentary on Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Margaret Atwood's poem "[You Fit into Me]," Mike Hixson likens the narrative structure of each work to a set-up and punchline, revealing how the authors satirically subvert reader's expectations of the love story and love poem. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

TODAY'S READER HAS an interesting sense of humor. Sometimes I think we are more morbid than older generations until I read works like "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin and "[You Fit into Me]" by Margaret Atwood. This short story and poem offer parallel styles in which the author misleads the reader. Once misled, the reader receives the punch line. I say *punchline* because, even though the topics are dark, I'm pretty sure you're supposed to be laughing. Of course, what completes the irony is that both the poem and short story revolve around love. The authors controvert the readers' expectations, creating surprise and in this case humor.

To begin, the author misleads the reader to set the stage for some classic irony. In "The Story of an Hour," a woman is being informed of her husband's untimely death. The woman has heart

problems, so they try to tell her in a slow and gentle way. She responds by going to her room and weeping “with sudden, wild abandonment” (93). In “[You fit into Me],” a short would-be love poem, Atwood begins:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

When someone is sewing, they must place thread through the eye of the needle, so this seems to be very affectionate. Both the short story and poem have supplied what the reader expects. A woman loses her husband and she's sad, and a love poem has said some affectionate words about the speaker's beloved. It's because of these standard plot conventions that the audience thinks they know what will happen next.

But does the audience actually know what is going to happen next? Probably not, since both works do a one-eighty. In “The Story of an Hour” the main character goes from grieving to essentially rejoicing. She sits in her room thinking about her life and what the rest of it will be like. She starts to repeat, “free, free, free!” because she enjoys the idea of living as a widow (94). This is ironic because you wouldn't expect the grieving wife with heart problems to be happy her husband is dead. Meanwhile, Atwood's poem parallels with,

a fish hook
an open eye

Similarly, this poem is not what it seemed. It can no longer be called a love poem when the speaker talks about a barbed hook going into an exposed eyeball. Both works have such a stark contrast to what the reader expected that the reader can only laugh. This comedic irony allows the authors to humorously approach the twisted nature of love that (in my opinion) most relationships have.

To continue, the short story actually offers a more profound example of this comedic irony. The wife has pictured her life without her husband, and she begins to look forward to life when “it was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long” (95). She is ready to start life and then her husband walks through the door, and *bam!* She dies. When she is autopsied by doctors, they think that she was so overjoyed at seeing her husband alive that her weak heart gave out. This time the audience does know. We know she was beginning to think very fondly of her future and that when she saw her husband she didn’t die of joy. She saw Brentley Mallard and died of sorrow. Writing it out definitely isn’t as funny as reading it. The truth we know, which contradicts the other characters’ assumptions, makes ending humorous and effectively gets the audience to laugh at death.

Finally, people love stories, especially love stories. Western literature has centrally featured love stories since Ancient Greece, and these stories have become clichéd to some extent. Here, Chopin and Atwood know as much and have used this information to mislead the reader. We might think this poem or short story is about love, but neither are. They both contradict the reader’s innocent outlook on love to make us laugh at the morbid nature of these two relationships. I used to think this newer generation was more into dark humor than any other, but I can see Kate Chopin has been making people laugh at death since the late 1800s, so I guess we’re all the same.

► ► WORKS CITED

- ATWOOD, MARGARET. “[You Fit into Me].” *Power Politics: Poems*, 2nd ed., House of Anasazi, 2005, p. 1.
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