

Sample Character Analysis

A Character Analysis of Mrs. Jake Grimes in Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods."

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The Value of a Person

The value a person places on himself or herself is largely determined by the value others give to that person. Those who grow up loved and cherished learn to feel worthwhile and develop a healthy sense of self. Such a background of love and caring can even sustain a person through periods when he or she feels unloved and insignificant. But those who have never known love, who have never been given any human warmth, soon come to see themselves as worthless. Such an emotionally starved person is Mrs. Grimes of Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods." **Mrs. Grimes is a woman who has been denied any vestige of love or tenderness, she exists only to be used. (thesis)** (transition)**From her childhood on**, Mrs. Grimes has been trapped in a cycle of exploitation. As an orphan, she became a "bound" girl, legally contracted to work as slave labor for a farmer who terrified her with his lust, and for his wife, who frightened the girl with her jealousy. The girl's only escape from this prison was marriage to Jake Grimes, a shiftless farmer who beat her and expected her to work the farm alone (Sherwood pg. 1). When the couple's son grows up, he joins the father in abusing the mother. They demand that she feed them, and somehow she must also sustain the animals of the farm:

How was she going to get everything fed? – that was her problem. The dogs had to be fed. There wasn't enough hay in the barn for the horses and the cow. If she didn't feed the chickens how could they lay eggs? Without eggs to sell how could she buy things in town, things she needed to keep life on the farm going? Her life is nothing but an endless battle to meet the demands of the animals – and men – who devour her strength and youth, turning her into an “old woman when she isn't even forty yet (Sherwood, pg. 2)”

Trapped by life, Mrs. Grimes never thinks of fighting back. Because she had always been brutalized by the world, she learns to expect nothing from it. Life, to her, is merely survival. As the narrator says, “Whatever happened she never said anything. That was her way of getting along (Sherwood pg. 3).” Even her death is not a conscious suicide; it is just a surrender to circumstances that dominate her, as events have always dominated her. She dies, dreamily fading into the cold, “softly and quietly.” Even her dreams could have provided no escape, for she had no happy past to dream of because “not many pleasant things had happened to her (pg 4).” In dying, as in living, Mrs. Grimes knows of no way but to give in, because she has never seen herself as someone worth fighting to save.

Deprived of the love that teaches one she is valuable, Mrs. Grimes places little value on her life. As the narrator of the story says, Mrs. Grimes was “one of the nameless ones,” the insignificant ones, but, after her death, others began to notice her, to see her value (Sherwood pg 5). Lying frozen in the snow, the body of Mrs. Grimes seems somehow transformed into “the body of some charming young girl (pg.6).” The townsmen who cover her body regard it with a kind of respect and awe, and they want to

avenge her mistreatment at the hands of her husband and son. The sight of the dead woman creates a “strange mystical feeling” in the minds of the adolescent narrator and his brother (pg.6). Too late, someone sees the beautiful person inside of the mistreated, broken woman.

Mrs. Grimes died as she lived – exploited, for “even after death [she] continued feeding animal life,” her sack of scraps is ripped open by her dogs (Sherwood pg.6). Treated not as a person but as a thing, Mrs. Grimes died without ever seeing her own value. Her tragedy is not so much the account of her death as it is the story of her life, lived without love or even respect, and of attention paid, too late.

Work Cited

Sherwood, Anderson. “Death in the Woods” The Guttenberg Project.

<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400491h.html>. 1994.