

The Other Side of the Story: Women's Literature



Entry about "The Legacy" by Virginia Woolf

I liked the way the text was written because it was easy to follow. Already in the very beginning I got the feeling that the Angela's death might not have been an accident and when her husband mentioned the way the driver had seen her stepping straight of the kerb I was almost certain that she had committed suicide.

Still, I wanted to know the reason for it because to me at first there was none. What I noticed was, that in the beginning of the text the fact that Angela was the wife of a politician, was made really present, also in her diary entries. She often wrote how much she admired her husband and I got the feeling, that she also defined herself mostly by being his wife and not by her actual personality or her own character. But I really liked the way the text gave you the feeling how she started to feel neglected and building up a life of her own.

B.M. was a really interesting character for me and after he appeared for the first time I immediately wanted to find out more about him, especially after he appeared more and more often. The ending of the text was also interesting for me, because though it is actually a sad ending, since Angela decides to committ suicide, it didn't seem that sad to me at all, which is actually shocking.

What I'd really like to know, is, how Gilbert is going to react to the fact, that his wife committed suicide to escape from him and be with her lover. I wonder how he keeps on living his life, if he will marry again, continue to do politics and so on. I'd also like to know, if Sissy Miller knew, that her brother was having an affair with Angela.

Additional comment after class: I liked that we discussed all the characters in the last session, because it made me think again much more in detail about their personalities. Especially about Gilbert I noticed some character traits that I had overlooked while reading the text for the first time. At first, I got the impression, that he was really in love with his wife, but when we talked about it again, I realized, that she was nothing more than a pretty accessorize for him.

Entry about "A Room of one's own" by Virginia Woolf

I liked the way the text began, because while reading it also made me think about the question of woman in ficiton and literature. As I read on I was a little confused because I only knew two or three of the woman in literature and female authors she mentioned, so I started asking myself who all those other women were, whose name's I had never heard before.

The story about Shakespeare's sister also made me think, because though Virginia Woolf definitely exaggerated a little I guess that her main point is true. Woman didn't get the same education and acceptance in Shakespeare's times, even if the had the same talent as men. The phrase that genius "is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people" is somehow true to me, because it is hard for people to make use of their talent, if they were never able to find out they have it. However, in my opinion there are definitely also

exceptions to this rule, because not all geniuses, male or female, come from a highly educated family.

Additional comment after class: Virginia Woolf showed the difference between women as literary figures and women in real life at that time really convincingly. The title "A room of one's own" expresses the luxury for a woman of having a place to herself, either because she is rich enough or respected enough by her husband so that he gave a room to her. The room is the symbol for independence and the freedom to decide yourself what you want to do in that room, whether it is writing or something else. However it is also made very clear in the text, that the independence of a women at that time was rather unusual.

Entry about "Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin

For me, the story ended quite unexpectedly, unlike Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" where I already knew from the beginning onwards that Angela had committed suicide. Here, I had no clue that Brently Mallard was still alive.

I liked the way the story developed in a quite unexpected way, because in the beginning I was sure that Louise had loved her husband and that she was devastated because of his alleged death, but then the author showed really convincingly that she now felt that she was free.

To me the story is extremely sad, not only because Louise dies in the end, but also because of what happened before the actual plot. The last sentence "of joy that kills" shows clearly, that nobody knew how Louise really felt in her marriage because to the reader it is clear, that she died of the shock that her husband is alive and not of joy. That Louise dies in the end makes the story and its development even more shocking.

What I really liked was the way, the author at first makes us believe that the tragedy is the death of Brently Mallard and that while reading you find out, that the actual tragedy is exactly the opposite - that he survived. I really liked this for me unexpected plot twist though it makes the story much more sad and shocking.

Additional comment after class: When we drew the plot diagram, it turned out, that the story developed in the exact opposite way of how you might expect it. From the beginning onwards the author gives us the subtle feeling that something is different about this story, for example when she describes the rain ("The delicious breath of rain was in the air.") at a point of the story where actually everything is supposed to be miserable and sad. By using the rain to create a rather positive impression, it gives you somehow a weird feeling when you read the text for the first time because you don't notice it consciously. But when you read the story again, paying attention to those things, you realize that the author used these fine details to lead the story in a totally unexpected direction.

Entry about "A Pair of Silk Stockings" by Kate Chopin

When I read that Mrs. Sommers finds fifteen dollars I started to wonder what might be so great about this. But while reading this mystery is solved. I could really feel Mrs. Sommers pleasure when she bought the silk stockings and tried on the shoes and the gloves. In my opinion the author managed really well to make an everyday situation, like going shopping, a really special event.

However, while reading you also find out, that for Mrs. Sommers this is not at all an everyday situation, but rather something extremely extraordinary. When I read, that she had

never been in a restaurant before, or at least not in the one that is mentioned in the text, I was quite shocked, though I guess it wasn't at all unusual for the time the story is set in.

What made me wonder is, how much she could buy with just fifteen dollars. Silk stockings, shoes, gloves, a meal at a restaurant, a ticket to a theater...I'd like to know how much those fifteen dollars would be worth in Euros nowadays, so that I have a bit of a comparison.

I liked the ending and the way it is left open if Mrs. Sommers really goes home and back into her old life or if she fulfills her deepest wish and starts to change something.

Additional comment after class: When I read the story for the first time, I didn't notice the part where it said that Mrs. Sommers had been rich before. But when we discussed it in class I understood how the money unconsciously lead her back to her old life. When she bought the silk stockings it says in the text that "she was not thinking at all" and that she "abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility". This illustrates the fact, that she was "seduced" by the luxurious silk stockings without even realizing it and that she fell back into old behaviour patterns without paying actual attention to it.

Entry about "Sweat" by Zora Neale Hurston

In the beginning the way the characters talked really annoyed me because I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. However, when I read more and got used to it, exactly this strange way of writing made the text special and maybe also a little more authentic.

The story is somehow pretty different from the other stories we have read so far because Delia Jones is not only emotionally tormented by her husband but also suffers from violent physical abuse, unlike to the women we've read about before who may not have been happy in their marriage but were never physically attacked by their husbands.

It is hard to imagine what Delia had to endure in the fifteen years of "misery and suppression" as she describes her marriage. Still, it is clear that she once had feelings for Sykes but now she hates him just as much as she used to love him. Her husband does not only beat her but also always look for new ways to torture her mentally when he forces her to live with the snake which however ironically turns out to cause his death rather than hers.

While reading I got the feeling that Delia already has given up most hope of freeing herself from her husband's violent outbursts. All she does is letting herself be humiliated and scared by him, not much energy left to defend herself. Her biggest weapon against her husband is her patience and indifference with which she endures his physical and verbal attack and which help her to ignore them as far as possible and not let herself be provoked into a fight.

Entry about "Beauty: When the other Dancer is the Self" by Alice Walker

The main theme which is mentioned through the whole text is the way the author was affected by the incident that hurt her eye. For me this was the first story that had a kind of Happy Ending. However, this does not make the story unrealistic or ridiculous but I found it even more touching because of the way the story ends.

From the beginning onwards it is made clear that beauty was always very important for the girl in the story, which I guess is the author Alice Walker. One sentence that was also repeatedly mentioned was "You did not change." That's a pretty controversial sentence for

me because I got the impression that the incident with the eye changed everything for Alice. Even after the "glob" is removed, her biggest fear stays that her eye won't be straight.

Though the word "beauty" is often mentioned in the text I don't think that beauty is the main topic, it's rather what you make of beauty, what your personal idea of beauty is and how it influences your life and yourself when you have the feeling of not being beautiful. I loved the part where the daughter said: "Mommy, there's a world in your eye." For me that was the beautiful part of the story.

Additional comment after class: I have to admit that while reading I didn't realize that there were so many different feelings and emotions in the text but when we did the exercise in class I noticed it. Something that I misunderstood while reading the text for the first time is that I thought the family said "You did not change" because they didn't want to hurt her feelings. However, when we spoke about it in class it occurred to me, that they just said this because they didn't even notice how much she changed!

Another thing that became clear to me is that Alice Walker didn't resent her brothers for what they did because it was easier for her not to, since this would only have caused more problems and because she admired them so much, she lied about the accident.

Entry about "Fear of Flying" (Chapter 1) by Erica Jong

This text is very different from the ones we have already read. I don't know if I like the main character. I have to say that she spoke about the "zipless fuck" somehow in a convincing way. I could understand her arguments but still I don't think I could ever do it. I think that it is somehow unfair concerning her husband if she just fulfills her needs by cheating on him, though she does not see it in that way. Still, even though for her the zipless fuck is free of ulterior moves and it isn't about humiliating the husband or hurting his feelings I think that it is not as easy as that. Isadora Wing mentions that she can't talk about her desires with her husband because being with him just isn't what it used to be like but I think that is just an excuse so she can have sex with other men without feeling guilty. No matter how she justifies her actions, for me even the zipless fuck is cheating on her husband, even if she doesn't mean to hurt him with it.

I do agree with some of her arguments, though, like the one where she says that a woman is never left in peace when she is living alone. I think staying single as a woman is by far not as unusual or scandalous as it used to be, but if a woman stays alone for a longer time it is definitely discussed.

Another thing that definitely has a huge impact on our society is, like Isadora mentions as well, advertisement and the picture of the ideal woman who finds the ideal man by being perfect - Looking perfect, behaving perfect. I can understand Isadora when she wants to break free of these expectations, but I think the zipless fuck is not the right way to do this and as far as I've understood, Isadora also realizes this in the end of the book and returns to her husband.

Additional comment after class: Erica Jong wrote this book to cause a scandal. What was especially shocking about it was, that she wrote openly about the fact that women also have sexual desires and that maybe sometimes the husband isn't able to fulfill them.

I still don't like the fact that Isadora decided to cheat on her husband, but I can now understand why she did it. She just didn't see any other way out to fulfill her needs and the idea of the zipless fuck in her mind made her leave her husband to go and find it. I know

understand more clearly that the message of the book isn't to cheat on your husband but rather to find out what your needs are and not to be afraid to try to fulfill them.

Entry about "Downtown" (Beginning) by Anne Rivers Siddons

While reading the picture I had in my mind of the main character, Maureen Aisling O'Donnell, changed. When I read in the beginning that she grew up in a strict Catholic household and also the reactions of her father to the Civil Rights Movement and the dancer in the cage (though I think this is something every father would be sceptical about) made me think she is a naive young girl who knows little about the life outside the town where she grew up. However, my opinion changed while reading.

I think the personality of her father was described really well when she said that he had two sides, the one that was at home and cared for the family and the other one how he was like when his friends were around. Another thing that made these two sides of the people she grew up with really obvious was when she mentioned that everybody knew about sex and that it was always present, but nobody talked about it.

I think that Maureen will change a lot when she is living in the city and I also think that this is what she wants to, because here she can lead the life where it's up to her what she wants to do.

Entry about "Two Kinds" by Amy Tan

The girl who tells the story definitely had a complicated relationship with her mother. It must be incredibly hard if you know, that no matter what you do, you'll never be good enough and that your parents, or in this case your mother, will never be proud of you. In the beginning the girl still tried everything to make her mother proud, but the moment she decided she didn't want to do it any more, she basically decided how her future life is going to look like.

I do understand both sides, the side of the mother and the side of the daughter. I can see why the mother encourages the daughter to always try out new things and wants her to play piano and always try her best. She wants to show her that with practice and that if you want to you can achieve almost anything. However, the way she tried to show it to her daughter, she provoked exactly the opposite. The daughter just couldn't understand why she had to be someone she wasn't and why she couldn't just be herself. It is totally logical that eventually stands up for herself and decides that she's going to act how she wants and not what her mother expects of her.

Additional comment after class: The girl and her mother have a difficult relationship. The fact that the mother had to leave everything behind in China before she came to America made her expectations of the "American Dream" a lot higher and her daughter had to fulfill them. But of course the daughter can't understand why the mother can't just love her the way she is, because though the mother is hiding her behaviour under the excuse that she just wants the best for daughter, it is clear that the best the daughter can do isn't good enough for her.

They just live in two different worlds, the mother still remembers a lot of the old traditions in China, on the other hand what she wants to do most is integrate herself in the American society as you can see on the Formica kitchen table and the American magazines lying around.

Another thing that is important in the story is that the two songs symbolize the girl's life. The first part "Pleading Child" is shorter because her childhood was over soon, but it is also slower, which gives it more meaning and shows that for a child the time passes much slower. The second part is called "Perfectly Contented" which means that now she is happy with her life. That this part is longer shows that this part of her life will last much longer however, it will pass faster. That they are two parts of the same song shows that also her life had two parts and that she now is happy and satisfied with it.

Entry about “Magdalena Looking” by Susan Vreeland

I had the feeling that for the girl in the story one of the most important things was that she would be noticed by her father. She didn't want to be seen just as a thing an artist could paint, but as a living being with wishes, hopes and dreams. That her father didn't see her this way, and also didn't take her seriously concerning support when she wanted to paint really hurt her, that is shown clearly in the text, e.g. when she says “the only part she really wished for was that he would look and look and pay attention”. That “her father only smiled queerly when she told him she wanted to paint” was also quite offensive for her, since this was her biggest wish.

While reading I asked myself where the story was going to end up. I wasn't exactly fascinated by the plot, I was just wondering, what the author wanted to achieve with the story, what was going to happen in the end. The ending didn't totally satisfy me, to be honest I hoped it would be a little more dramatic, but I really liked the very last sentence: “People who would be that close to her, she thought, a matter of a few arms' lengths, looking, looking, and they would never know her.” I think this is a beautiful and at the same time sad way to express that she felt like no one really knew her, not even her family.

The scene where the father eventually decides to paint her is really well described, I could almost see her sitting in front of me, while the father was painting the portrait. After I read the story I looked the name of the painting up in the internet to see if it really existed and I have to say, my imagination of how it looked like wasn't so different from what it actually looks like.

What I'd really like to ask the author is, why she chose exactly this

particular painting, what fascinated her so much, that she wrote a whole book about it?

Entry about “Becoming a Woman” (Desert Flower) by Waris Dirie

This story is definitely the one that has shocked me most so far. The way the author writes is simple so that you understand everything, at the same time this makes it even more shocking. She describes all the horrible details about being circumcised and I have to admit that there were parts that I would have liked to skip because they were just too disgusting.

After I had finished reading the story I was shocked by the horrible things that had happened to Waris Dirie and at the same time really impressed how she was able to deal with it. I think it’s amazing how determined she is to show the world the horrible truth and how she managed it. I really want to hear more about her and her life, so I think I will read the whole book “Desert Flower” because her story really touched me.

Desert Flower

I just finished reading the book “Desert Flower” by Waris Dirie and I really liked it because the fact that the author herself has experienced all the things she writes about makes the book really extraordinary. I think if I knew that the story was fictional I wouldn’t like the book that much, because some coincidences were just too good to be true and other incidents were just too horrible and disgusting for anyone to invent them, but since I know that all the things she writes about are true I’m even more impressed by the story and most of all by the author and how she managed to overcome almost all of her problems.

I think she is a remarkable woman and I’m really thinking about reading more of her books and also watching the movie that was made, because her story fascinates me and I want to find out more about her. It’s hard for me to imagine what it must be like, actually experiencing all the things she writes about, the good and the bad ones, and unfortunately the bad ones were the ones that influenced her a lot, but also in a positive way, because they made her strong and determined to change something.

Additional comment after class: I think one major point why women and especially mothers want their daughters to get circumcised, is a lack of education. In the book it is shown really well, that they don't know any better. As a little girl, Waris Dirie blamed everything that didn't work out like she wanted it to on the fact that she hadn't been circumcised yet. The whole mystery that is connected to the process of circumcision is a major factor why many girls want to be circumcised. Of course they don't know the consequences of this ritual, but for them it means becoming a woman and building up a stable future, of course only concerning their social status and not their health or personal happiness. You could say that the women sacrifice their personal pleasure and well being

for their tradition and the societies view.

I think it is really difficult to stop the process of circumcision. In my opinion the only thing you can do, is make sure that people, especially women, learn about the consequences of this ritual and its risks. We can't force them to stop circumcision, but we can try to make them aware of what is actually happening and I really admire Waris Dirie for all she has done already in trying to help many girls and women confronted by this ritual.

Entry about "The Muscle Mystique" by Barbara Kingsolver

While reading I wasn't really sure what the story was about, only in the ending I finally understood why the woman who told the story visited the health club. I must admit that in the beginning I didn't really care why she did so, because she did it just for the ordinary reasons, but when she explained what she really wanted to achieve, I could understand her actions a little bit better.

Still, I'm not really sure what the message of the story is. I feel like I've read those few pages and understood every single word and at the same time nothing about the true meaning of the story, because it doesn't really make sense to me.

The woman goes to the health club not just to strengthen her muscles but more for the reason to achieve a feeling of strength, since she has always been a "ninety-eight-pound weakling" and this feeling of weakness and helplessness when it comes to the most basic things like opening a jar or the front gate really bothers her, so she decides to change something.

Additional comment after class:

With her text "The Muscle Mystique", Barbara Kingsolver makes fun of the American beauty ideals, for both men and women. The main character in the story somehow participates in the struggle to achieve these ideals, but she does it for different, personal reasons. For her, a stronger body is also a stronger self confidence and so for her the beauty factor doesn't play a major role in her motivation.

Entry about "Marrying Absurd" by Joan Didion

When I read the text it made me smile, because I could exactly imagine some of the situations mentioned in it. I think the way the author describes marrying in Las Vegas really is absurd but I think most people have this typical impression from movies or TV series that you get drunk in Las Vegas and then marry somebody you barely know. Of course I doubt that this is the case, but you can easily imagine it that way, because this cliché is often used.

I can understand why the author criticizes marrying in Las Vegas, but I like the way she

does it with subtle statements and cynical anecdotes so that the text is fun to read. Still, I somehow like the idea of marrying in Las Vegas, because you would for sure have a great story to tell, when you marry there. In my opinion you should choose yourself where your wedding should take place, and if you marry in Las Vegas it should count as much as a real wedding as if you get married somewhere else.

Additional comment after class: With her essay Joan Didion doesn't only criticize marrying in Las Vegas and the fact that the whole celebration loses its "seriousness" through the ridiculous procedure in Las Vegas but also generally the merchandising of "niceness" as she calls it, that's not only present in Las Vegas but in many different places all over the world.