
Capitalism in Sherwood Anderson's "Mother"

In Sherwood Anderson's "Mother," Tom Willard takes centre stage as the role of the obnoxious, vain husband who shamelessly blames his wife, Elizabeth Willard, for his own unhappiness. He views her with blatant contempt and finds her existence unbearable to the extent that her very presence is regarded as "a reproach to himself." But for what reason does Tom vehemently loathe his own wife? It is not simply because of the illness that had taken away her spirit and beauty. The only explanation provided to readers to justify his animosity is the superstitious conviction that Elizabeth's illness is somehow linked to the hotel's financial decline.

Tom may, indeed, have been a fortune hunter. He had been one of the many "traveling men" who were "guests at her father's hotel" whom Elizabeth "paraded through the streets with." It was always evident that Elizabeth would one day inherit her father's hotel, and on top of that, she had been a beautiful young woman, full of ambition and vivacity. Thus, in addition to marrying a woman of her passion and charm, Elizabeth's husband would obviously be blessed with the added bonus of inheriting her parent's business. So it is implied that Tom's marriage to Elizabeth had not only been explained by some "wild emotions" driven by physical intimacy, but also by his interest in her wealth.

Unfortunately, now that the business is "forever on the edge of failure," Tom detests the hotel and selfishly holds his wife accountable for its fate. Anderson states how hopeful Tom had been to begin life with the hotel business, and yet now it has disappointingly turned into "a mere ghost of what a hotel should be." Similarly, Tom sees his wife as a "tall ghostly figure," as she is no longer the lovely wife he had married. Elizabeth's appearance therefore reflects the state of the hotel. She is no longer a beauty, but has become so frail and lifeless that she is compared to a ghost. Age has taken its toll on her, just as the hotel is now "disorderly" and "old," with "faded wall-paper" and "ragged carpets."

Due to poor health, Elizabeth has been unable to do any exacting work for the hotel. The business probably deteriorated as a consequence of her lack of contribution. Tom therefore sees her as the cause of the hotel's financial failure. Now he despises his wife and the hotel alike, both of which are "things defeated and done for" as both marriage and business had once made him hopeful of satisfying his ambitions.

The fact that Tom objectifies his wife, seeing her as a "thing" which is useless unless generating some income, has affected Elizabeth's self-esteem tremendously. From a tall young woman who had once been brazen enough to cycle down "Main Street" clad in men's clothing, Elizabeth Willard has been depreciated to such an extent that her confidence has been

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extinguished along with her health and youth. She has grown to feel unwanted and unneeded. Her low self-esteem is emphasized through elements of the narrative such as her room, which is “tucked away in a corner of the Old Willard House,” and her “chambermaid” work, such as cleaning the “beds soiled by the slumbers of fat travelling men.” These descriptions prove Elizabeth’s tendency to isolate herself and hide from the eyes of others by doing work that removes her from the presence of other people.

Tom’s behavior only encourages the depths of Elizabeth’s lack of confidence, with his “slender, graceful,” and well-dressed figure coupled with the brazen condemnation of his wife. Besides that, his passion for politics and his strong desire to achieve a prominent status of leadership have caused him to develop a sense of capitalism. This ideology is the foundation of the American Dream: the notion that every man must work for himself to achieve greatness – and that such greatness is plausible regardless of circumstances. It also inspires Tom to find Elizabeth worthless, as the idea constitutes to the belief that unless she works, she is useless to him. His outlook therefore reflects capitalism. Hence, Tom believes that Elizabeth’s illness is the illness of the hotel. Getting rid of his wife may eliminate his business problems. He may perceive his wife as the useless cog in the wheel, getting in the way of success. However, ideally, he mentions his desire to be rid of both burdens and to start fresh, as the hotel and his wife are markedly linked in his mind.

From Tom’s point of view, capitalism is what will aid him in achieving his goals. However, Anderson has conspicuously presented this idea in an unpleasant and repulsive manner, thus challenging the notion of capitalism by portraying its supporter and activist as a pompous husband with idealistic ambitions. Tom harbors the hope of turning “the tide of things political” by changing the “strongly Republican community” into a Democratic one. His dream of changing the minds of an entire society reflects the magnitude of his aspirations. Capitalism is therefore illustrated in a negative light in this story, since it drives a man to selfishness and greed. After all, if Tom had truly married Elizabeth for her inheritance, then this action only proves his persistence in achieving the American Dream, and shows how little he values emotional sincerity in attaining his goals.

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