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Love, Loss & Looking Back

Building a character is necessary in creating a successful story. Being able to create a fictional person so relatable to the readers is never as easy to do as one might think. Creating flaws in a character instantly brings a level of humanity within the fictional person, changing our minds to accurately see them and create their development easier. Knowing that characters are created with such flaws and scars that seem to dip into our reality from their utopian or dystopian cultural background gives us the opportunity to live vicariously through their life, whatever may be thrown their way. With Russell Banks' "Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story", the flaws with both characters, one being completely opposite to the other, are so vividly real that it dealt a level of uncertain pain and cringe when I read the article.

The man in the story, Ronald, or Ron, as he is called, is a successful, well-dressed, sort of conceited lawyer, recently divorced and shockingly handsome, even for your average health nut. He, telling a story about a homely lover named Sarah Cole that took place 20 years prior, gives the impression of his beautiful state compared to her less-than-desirable appearance in an attempt to subconsciously divide the two physical appearances within themselves. Introducing Sarah Cole as "the homeliest woman I have ever known. Personally, I mean.", Ron had instantly created some sort of barrier between him, his looks and his initial attitude towards her. I don't think he consciously meant to fantasize over her over-the-top unattractiveness, but throughout

the story, he tends to fall back towards expressing his fascination with her lack of beauty, especially “to himself that he is speaking to the most unattractive woman he has ever seen, a fact which fascinates him, as if instead he were speaking to the most beautiful woman he has ever seen or perhaps ever will see, so he treasures the moment”. Knowing his complete lack of valued judgment can only mean one thing: him being classified as a member of the “bourgeoisie” whereas Sarah more accurately fits within the “proletariat” lifestyle. Being a “capitalist merchant”, Ronald seems to live “above and beyond” with many of the materialistic views in his life.

Why does Ronald seem to be interested in Sarah and her obvious unattractive state when his apartment has a complete opposite direction? His minimal decor, neat and orderly, the glistening silver bike that Sarah seems to regard as an object worth more than her life, the fitted three piece suits he wears for his career...all of these things point more towards Ronald and the way he sees himself, maybe even pushes himself above others. Even choosing the word “career” over “job” to describe an aspect of Ron’s life seems to be more fitting because of its *sophistication*. But at the same time, I can’t help but wonder if Ron really noticed that Sarah, being his lover of three months, helped him see the struggle of social changes, of how different their worlds really were, yet so similar in terms of sticking to a pattern, a sort of *routine*, even.

Sarah’s connection to Ronald that he fails to make until later in his life, from her packing TV Guides in boxes to him picking up a TV Guide while surfing through the channels in his home sort of tells me that his failure to acknowledge until much later could be a sign of his inadequacy within himself. “He’ll think of the connection some other night, but by then the

connection will be merely sentimental. It'll be too late for him to understand what she meant by 'different' ” (Banks).

Reading the part in Banks' story where Ronald and Sarah make love for the first time in their rocky, somewhat based-on-ulterior-motives relationship, the brief touch of human interaction at its very core should have felt natural, wanting even. Instead, it gave me such cringe-worthy connotations in regards to Ron as a person and I found myself concerned for Sarah. I sympathized with her more, and maybe that's why she's pictured as such.

On page 223 of “How To Interpret Literature”, the phrase *alienation of labor* struck out to me during this passage. Parker tends to lean more towards this phrase in its literal term, “Factory workers, by contrast, work on only one small part of a product and may never see the finished product, let alone use it themselves”. With me, reading Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story, I felt that *alienation of labor* was more emotionally shown through both Ron and Sarah. First, when he's introducing us to the main woman in his story, he states that Sarah Cole is dead (which we later learn she is not). He is embarrassed, maybe even ashamed, to be seen in public with her, and that could be the reason he is so hesitant to respond to her wanting to leave the house after their love-making.

Towards the end, talking about his love for her to one of Sarah's old friends from her factory, I begin to understand why Ron was so weary in terms of being with Sarah in public, hanging out with her kids or even going to the same bar he used to go and coincidentally, having met Sarah there for the first time. In the moment, knowing his fear and almost a sense of trepidation towards letting her in - only choosing to be vulnerable and open while they are having sex - could be seen as a fear of *exchanging value*. Knowing many things about Sarah, as

she would drink her White Russians away and open the door to her inner world, while Ron kept to himself and allowed his fascination to get the better of his common sense, created that diversity and total alienation between the two. Only once Ronald fell away from it, leaving his phase of transforming this once-hideous woman to the most beautiful woman he felt (in those final moments of their “break up”) he had ever seen, I could see his loss, his understanding of what he failed to grasp until many years after, and that, my fellow audience, was the value she had in her life he could never grasp, that of simplicity.

Works Cited

Banks, Russell. *Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story*. The Missouri Review, 1984.

Parker, Robert Dale. *How To Interpret Literature*, 4th ed., Aug. 2019.