

Final Draft

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Fulfillment or Failure? Marriage in A Secret Sorrow and "A Sorrowful Woman"

In both the excerpt from Karen van der Zee's novel A Secret Sorrow and in Gail Godwin's short story "A Sorrowful Woman," the plots center around ideas of marriage and family. However, marriage and family are presented in very different lights in the two stories. Karen van der Zee presents marriage with children as perfect and totally fulfilling; it is what Faye, the protagonist of A Secret Sorrow, wants and what is necessary for her happiness. For Godwin's unnamed protagonist marriage and family are almost the antithesis of happiness; her home life seems to suffocate her and eventually leads to her death. A Secret Sorrow directly endorses and encourages marriage, whereas "A Sorrowful Woman" indirectly questions and discourages it.

Both of the female protagonists in the two stories experience a crisis. In A Secret Sorrow Faye's crisis comes before the marriage. She is distraught and upset because she cannot have children and fears that this will prevent her from marrying the man she loves. Both she and her beloved, Kai, desire marriage with children, and van der Zee suggests that only with these things will they truly be happy. Faye feels that her inability to have children is a fatal flaw that cuts her off from Kai's love. "Every time we see some pregnant woman, every time we're with somebody else's children I'll feel I've failed you!" (35). Faye's anxiety and fear are based on the thought of losing her man and never having children. In "A Sorrowful Woman," however, the crisis comes after the marriage, when the woman has already secured her husband and child. Unlike Faye, who would be ecstatic in this woman's situation, the protagonist of Godwin's story is not. Inexplicably, her husband and son bring her such sorrow that eventually she is unable to see them at all, communicating only through notes stuck under her bedroom door. Godwin's character has a loving husband and child, yet she is still filled with grief. This sense of defeat would be unimaginable in a Harlequin

Introduction comparing plots of both stories

Thesis contrasting treatment of marriage in both stories

Discussion of crisis in A Secret Sorrow with textual evidence

Discussion of crisis in "A Sorrowful Woman"

Statements contrasting crises in the plots of the two stories

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romance because it goes against one of the most popular formulas of romance writing: the plot always ends with a wedding, with the assumption that the rest is happily ever after.

Discussion
contrasting
function of
marriage in
both stories

In *A Secret Sorrow*, marriage is portrayed as the goal. Van der Zee works to let the reader know that only in this way will Faye be fulfilled and happy; it is what the entire story, with all the plot twists and romantic interludes, works toward. Marriage is also the end in "A Sorrowful Woman" but not as in the goal: it is quite literally the end of the woman's life. Though we don't see what her life was like before her emotional crisis, there are hints of it. When she moves into a new bedroom--away from her husband--she mentions seeing the streets from a whole new perspective (41), suggesting the previous monotony of her daily life. In addition, in the final paragraphs of the story--when the character bakes pies and bread and washes and folds the laundry--her son says, "She's tired from doing all our things again," (42) giving us an idea of what "our things" were and what the woman did with her time before her crisis.

Textual
evidence
supporting
analysis of
"A Sorrow-
ful Woman"

This monotony of marriage is absent in *A Secret Sorrow*. Faye's inability to have children does not end Kai's love for her, and the two go on to marry and adopt children. Faye's married life is described in a very idyllic way: she raises her son and two daughters in a "white ranch house under the blue skies of Texas" (37). Once she is married and has children, there is no more anxiety because the plot leads us to the conclusion that marriage solves all problems and is a source of unending happiness. This greatly differs from Godwin's tale, which takes place in winter and maintains a sense of cold. Whenever Godwin describes the family, it is in terms that suggest weight, guilt, or failure. The child's trusting gaze makes the protagonist begin "yelping without tears" (39), and any sign of life or love increases her sorrow and makes her want to be alone. For example, when the hired girl brings her son to visit her with a grasshopper he's found (40)--something both alive and from the outside world--she gets very upset and forces her husband to fire the girl. Apparently, the girl is too much of an infringement on her space, too much of a reminder of what she can no longer be.

Discussion
contrasting
married life
and family
in both
stories, with
textual
evidence

Never is the difference between the two authors' portrayals of marriage more apparent than when both women are viewing their families. Faye, sitting

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with her husband and watching her children play, feels that “life was good and filled with love” (37). Godwin’s protagonist, on the other hand, says, “The sight of them made her so sad and sick she did not want to see them ever again” (38). When Kai, now her husband, embraces Faye, she feels, “There was love in his embrace and love in his words and in her heart there was no room now for doubt, no room for sorrow” (37). When Godwin’s heroine feels the loving touch of her husband’s arm and the kiss of her child, she cannot bear it and cuts off all direct contact with them. The situation of her marriage pushes her into a self-imposed imprisonment and lethargy. She feels unbearably sad because she can no longer be who they want and need her to be. She avoids them not because she does not love them but rather because she loves them so much that it is too painful to see them and feel her failure. The epigram to Godwin’s story tells us that “Once upon a time there was a wife and a mother one too many times” (38). The addition of “one too many times” to this traditional story opening forces the idea of repetition and monotony: it suggests that it is not that state of being a wife and mother that is inherently bad but rather the fact that that is all Godwin’s character is. Day in and day out, too many times over, the woman is just a wife and a mother, and it isn’t enough for her.

In van der Zee’s story there could be no such thing as too much motherhood or too much of being a wife. When Faye’s fears of losing Kai are assuaged, and she is happily married, it is as though a great weight has been lifted off her. Godwin’s character, on the other hand, feels her marriage as a great weight pressing on her and immobilizing her. When she leaves her room for a day and puts out freshly baked bread for her husband and son, they express their happiness in the notes they write to her that night, and “the force of the two joyful notes . . . pressed her into the corner of the little room; she hardly had space to breathe” (42). Faye can be a traditional wife and mother, so her family is a source of joy. Godwin’s character can no longer be the traditional wife and mother, and so her family represents her own failure, and the guilt presses her further and further into herself until she can retreat no further and ends her life.

The endings of the two stories are powerful illustrations of the differences between them. In the end of *A Secret Sorrow* the author shows us Faye feeling “beautiful, complete, whole” (38) in her role as wife and mother. Godwin, on the

Analysis
contrasting
emotions
of pro-
tagonists
in both
stories, with
textual
evidence

Analysis
contrasting
pro-
tagonists’
experience
of tradi-
tional roles,
with textual
evidence

Analysis
contrasting
conclusions
of the two
stories

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other hand, shows us her protagonist dead on her bed. Godwin seems to give the reader hope by showing all that the woman has done and saying that “the house smelled redolently of renewal and spring” (42). This makes the blow even harder when we then discover, along with the husband and child, the woman’s death. The ambiguous way the death of Godwin’s unnamed protagonist is dealt with reinforces the author’s negative portrayal of marriage. It isn’t explicitly written as a suicide, and Godwin seems to encourage her readers to see it as the inevitable consequence of her marriage.

Van der Zee creates a story full of emotional highs and lows, but one that leads up to and ends with marriage. After the marriage all of the plot twists and traumas come to a halt, replaced with peace and happiness. Faye is brought to new life by her marriage and children; she finds fulfillment of all of her desires in them. Godwin’s story, however, is full of postmarital anguish and confusion. The character she creates is stifled and most definitely unfulfilled by her marriage. A burst of creative energy right before her death produces, among other things, “a sheath of marvelous watercolor beasts accompanied by mad and fanciful stories nobody could ever make up again, and a tablet full of love sonnets addressed to the man” (42). It is clear that the woman had talents and desires not met by the routine duties of her marital life. For Faye, the protagonist of *A Secret Sorrow*, marriage is the happily-ever-after ending she has wanted all of her life; for Godwin’s protagonist, on the other hand, marriage is just a monotonous and interminable ever after.

Conclusion
summariz-
ing paper’s
analyses