

Analysis of the Main Characters of Short Story “Roman Fever” by Edith Wharton

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was famous American writer, the first woman, who won the Pulitzer Prize. She was born in a rich family and grew up being surrounded by gossips, hypocrisy, deceit, and other typical signs of rich female society at the end of the nineteenth century. The main hobby of those women was knitting, not only with silk but with little “intrigues”. Certainly, they needed some ways to improve boring lifestyle of women who could not study, work and had to wait for their darling husbands every evening, and there was nothing else to do. Sometimes they drank tea or played bridge, etc. Edith Wharton left this society, became successful, famous, independent and the first female owner of Pulitzer Prize. Nevertheless, she was a child of those times, events, people, she was a part of that small world of American women, namely “Stepford wives”. Therefore, this connection was reflected in Edith Wharton’s stories. Her bright characters personify the rich society of that time which she was a part of. One of her short stories, *Roman fever*, is about two widows who have a conversation on the flat roof of Roman Restaurant in the moonlight. They speak not only about their lives, even not about their society and times. The problems mentioned by Edith Wharton in this short story refer to all times and societies. What does phrase “Roman fever” mean? Is it malaria or the universal disease, which may be caught by anybody, which causes all evil things we do? “Roman fever” is an innate sinfulness of the human beings. Through the dialogue between two old friends the author shows the uncertain human nature and deceitful friendship, love and marriage, etc.

The characters are changing during the narration, they act as foils to one another. Therefore, when we know something about one lady, this information concerns another one. The reason is that they are alone on the roof (without mentioning the head waiter). Thus, all characteristics are comparative: Mrs. Slade “was fuller, and higher in color, with a small determined nose supported by vigorous eyebrows”, while Mrs. Ansley was “smaller and paler”. When their daughters joked about their mothers, Mrs. Ansley “shook her head and colored slightly”, while Mrs. Slade “gave a good-humored laugh” (Wharton 1997). Edith Wharton does not compare only the main characters with one another but also with their children and parents, who also struggled using such methods as slyness and deceit. She indicates figuratively that all generations are captured by “Roman fever”. It is shown through the words of Mrs. Slade when she speaks about duties of mothers in different times:

"I was just thinking," she said slowly, "what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers—how we used to be guarded!—to our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main Street. They don't know it—but how much they're missing!"..."I always used to think," Mrs. Slade continued, "that our mothers had a much more difficult job than our grandmothers. When Roman fever stalked the streets it must have been comparatively easy to gather in the girls at the danger hour; but when you and I were young, with such beauty calling us, and the spice of disobedience thrown in, and no worse risk than catching cold

during the cool hour after sunset, the mothers used to be put to it to keep us in—didn't they!" (Wharton 1997).

In addition, the author shows this connection of generations while comparing Harriet (Mrs. Ansley's great-aunt) and Barbara (Mrs. Ansley's daughter):

Great-aunt Harriet. The one who was supposed to have sent her young sister out to the Forum after sunset to gather a nightblooming flower for her album. All our great-aunts and grandmothers used to have albums of dried flowers...

Mrs. Slade nodded. But she really sent her because they were in love with the same man...

Well, that was the family tradition. They said Aunt Harriet confessed it years afterward. At any rate, the poor little sister caught the fever and died. Mother used to frighten us with the story when we were children... (Wharton 1997)

Harriet and Mrs. Slade used false letters, since they were rivals and wanted to hurt each other, but only the first one was successful. The author offers to think about the future of Barbara and Jenny. Jenny Slade is beautiful but she does not possess charisma of her mother. In addition, there is Barbara Ansley who behaves as Mrs. Slade being vivacious and charming. She laughs at both mothers: "Let's leave the young things to their knitting. "Oh, look here, Babs, not actually knitting", - answers quiet Jenny (Wharton 1997). Comparing these characters, it is interesting to know the result of the "competition" between Jenny and Barbara, if they follow their mothers' behavior. There is no answer, only assumptions. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are between old legends and young future. They are actually not old and not young, the average women of higher class.

The main reason for this old struggle and antagonism, which connects Harriet and Barbara more than any other feeling, is their spiritual misunderstanding and incomprehension of the other people. "So these two ladies visualize each other, each through the wrong end of her little telescope" (Wharton 1997). This ignorance is an old disease of all times, which is figuratively named as "Roman fever". Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley don't know each other, since they are too different persons. Active and jealous Mrs. Slade versus cunning and sly Mrs. Ansley show their real faces when their daughters laugh. Mrs. Slade laughed too, because it is typical for her, a full woman, speaking loudly and vulgar to some extent. But Mrs. Ansley, being short and thin, "drew from her handsomely mounted black handbag a twist of crimson silk run through by two fine knitting needles" (Wharton 1997). She likes her knitting with silk or with "intrigues". Certainly, she is guilty, more than Mrs. Slade, since she warped motivations and perceptions. She lies always; moreover, it is her lifestyle.

Works Cited

Wharton, Edith *Roman Fever and Other Stories*. New York: Scribner, 1997. Print.