Student’s Name

Professor’s Name

Course

Date of Submission

The Central Theme of “Why I Live at the P.O.” by Eudora Welty

The story “Why I Live at the P.O.” is one of the short stories in “A Curtain of Green and Other Stories,” a collection of short stories by Eudora Welty. The story is a first person narration by the protagonist, a young anonymous woman known only as sister. It revolves around two sisters trying to outweigh each other before the family. In the end, both sisters are hurt and a family is half broken. As one sister leaves the house, she still hopes for the redemption for the other sister and her eventual return back home. The story is filled with jealousy, malice, propaganda, and conflict between two sisters. As the two sisters try to win the favor of their parents, the family, and the rest of the community, they hurt each other emotionally, and it is surprising how a holiday back home for Stella- Rondo (one of the sisters) could turn sour in such a short time. The themes of the story include jealousy, sibling rivalry, conflict, independence, escape, isolation, and honesty. Despite the number of themes discussed in the story, it is evident that isolation is the central theme. This paper will use the characters in the story to highlight instances that show how the theme of isolation was developed in the story.

In this short story, the characters feel isolated, and therefore decide to live such a way. Although they all live in the seemingly nurturing confinement of the family, most of them take refuge in silence. Almost all the characters have been shown by the unreliable narrator as hiding in isolation, deciding to work out their differences privately than with the support of the family.

THE NARRATOR

The narrator, only referred to as sister, is accused of doing so many wrongs that she cannot defend herself. When Stella –Rondo accused her of insulting her father’s beard, she claimed it was a lie but no one believed her. Secondly, when uncle Rondo was told by Stella- Rondo that sister has been sneering at his ridiculous appearance, he decided to believe Stella and ignore Sister’s cries for justice. It is sad that sister was so isolated from the family that no one bothered to find the truth behind Stella’s accusations, and they all believed her allegations, and blamed sister for being spoilt. However, this raises doubts of whether the narrator’s cries were real. The isolation in the family led the people to believe the words of someone who has been away from them for a while against someone who has been with them the whole time.

In addition, it could be because of isolation that sister decides to steal her mother’s sewing machine engine although she knows she will not be able to use it without the sewing machine attached to it. This could be seen as a cry for attention and a trial to remove herself from the cocoon that her family has built. Furthermore, it is because of isolation that sister does not know how her family will react when she comes back home in the same circumstances as Stella. She blames her family of favoritism and claim that they would not welcome her warmly into the family if she was in Stella’ shoes.

Instead of the family fighting to break the vicious cycle of isolation, they do not back her up, and she decides to leave her home. When sister decides to leave her family and live alone at the post office, she intensifies the isolation further. Although she does not have the family support, she would have stayed and tried to build their relationship. She decides to leave and isolate herself from the family, something that the family members prefer. By doing so, she ensures that her relationship with her family will never be fixed again.

FAMILY

When sister leaves the house, she takes along with her the small radio that the whole family listens to. By doing so, Welty shows that the family will leave in isolation from the rest of the world. They will not know what is going on with the outside world, and they will only live in their own dysfunctional group. The radio was the only contact the family had with the rest of the world, and therefore with its absence they will be in ignorance with the rest of the world. Furthermore, as long as sister still works at the post office, they vowed never to send or receive any mail just to spite her. This shows that the family once again cuts all ties with the outside world. Since openness and honesty has proven to be a challenge for the insular family, they have decided to embrace a more intense isolation. As they insist on not keeping in touch with the narrator, and the narrator swears not to listen to their apologies, it is evident that the isolation will never reverse but rather make the thins worse. In the last paragraph, the narrator states, “If Stella-Rondo should come to me and attempt to explain the incidents, I’d simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen”.

SHIRLEY-T

Shirley-T is the daughter of Stella-Rondo who she allegedly adopted. The young girl is all but mute, prompting sister to accuse her of having developmental disorders. As young as she is, the little girl has adopted the family habit of isolation. After everything she was going through, she was in the room when her mother said to her grandmother, “Why, mama, Shirley-T is adopted, I can prove it”; she decided to keep quiet and run away instead of finding out the information about her paternity. Her mother leaves her matrimonial house in controversial stories as she claims she left her husband while the narrator claims that Mr. Whitaker left Stella. Although Shirley-T is in a better position to clear the allegations, she is mute through it all and does not utter even a single word in favor of her mother or against her. The little girl is faced with many dilemmas and challenges such as the separation of her mother and father, moving in to a new area and her mother’s allegations that she is adopted. All these challenges make her build a security bubble around herself that will protect her from the messed up family she belongs to, and thus she decides to be mute (Moran, 2008).

STELLA-RONDO

On a hot summer day with the stifling heat, Stella keeps herself away from the rest of the family and world by keeping her bedroom windows shut and locked. She seals herself from the world around her trying to escape people’s judgmental comments and questions. Since arriving at the house, she has been faced with numerous questions about her recent past, and she has been faced with several allegations. She has been accused of taking a child from her father whereby she counteracted the allegations by claiming the child is adopted.

PAPA-DADDY

When everyone is arguing and fighting in the house, papa-daddy removes himself from the proceedings and goes to the hammock yard. Sister believes that papa daddy is deaf or intentionally ignores the people around him. After facing his dysfunctional family, papa-daddy becomes fed up, and all he wants to get is peace and quiet. He decides to isolate himself from the family so that he can enjoy the peace he so desperately craves for.

CONCLUSION

Welty’s short story focuses on many themes that most families go through. As every family has squabbles, different families use different ways to overcome the problems they face and move in their lives. However, sometimes, the mitigations do not favor the family, and instead break it further. In Welty’s short story, the family deals with their squabbles by isolation, however this does not fix anything but breaks the future.

Work Cited

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