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Through the Eyes of a Deaf-Mute

Author of *England* and one of Ezra Pound's lovers, B.M. Goold-Adams (Gould-Adams), or most commonly referred to as Bride Scratton, was a writer who drew from personal experiences to create short stories that "explores the lives of people from different classes, and backgrounds living in England" (England). The events in Scratton's life – especially the loss of her father, birth of disabled daughter, and divorce from Ned Scratton in 1923 – greatly influenced her writings and were key components in her short story "The Obsequies." This story was written in 1923 and published in *England*, a collection of Bride's short stories, and *The Criterion: A Quarterly Review Vol. I No. III*, a literary periodical edited by T.S. Eliot. In this story, Mr. Merton has just died and Mrs. Merton is left to tie up his affairs and plan his funeral. The narrative switches perspectives throughout the story jumping from Mrs. Merton, to her daughter-in-law Millicent, to the nurse, and to the other men and women who attend and are involved in the funeral events. Throughout the story, there is an interesting relationship between Millicent, the daughter-in-law, and the younger Miss. Merton, Mrs. Merton's deaf daughter. Through this tension, we see the story evolve from trying to figure out what's most important at Mr. Merton's funeral to who is most important as the deaf daughter is forgotten and Millicent gains popularity. The tension between these two characters gives readers an inside look into Scratton's life. I would argue that the deaf-mute daughter is the representation of Bride Scratton

and how she viewed herself regarding her then-recent divorce from Ned Scratton and how she coped with losing her father at a very young age. This story took elements from both of those experiences in her life and portrays it through the eyes of a disabled child.

To understand the tension between the two characters, Millicent and the younger Miss. Merton, I decided to start with a digital analysis of the word “daughter” in the story. Out of the seven times “daughter” is used, only once is it referring to the younger Miss. Merton (in section 4 as “deaf daughter”) and the other six times it refers to the daughter-in-law Millicent (see Figure 1). When comparing the word frequencies of “Millicent,” “Daughter,” and “Deaf” in Figure 2, it looks like “deaf” and “daughter” follow more similar frequencies than “Millicent” and “daughter.” This is interesting because even though the trends of “Millicent” and “daughter” are different, when referring back to the text, there is more association and even replacement of “daughter” with “Millicent” than there are of “daughter” and “deaf.” Based off basic familial expectations, one would think “daughter” would be used to describe Mrs. Merton’s child, the deaf-mute, but instead throughout the story the word “daughter” increasingly begins to represent Millicent as she becomes less of a daughter-in-law and takes on the role of the actual blood-related daughter (Figure 2).

This is also interesting when looking at the names associated with the two characters. The younger Miss. Merton is referred to as the deaf-mute two times, and is also referred to as the deaf girl, the younger Miss. Merton, the young woman, and deaf daughter once. This character does not have a consistent characterization and is without a proper name, which can be seen in Figure 3. Throughout the story, she is characterized according to the different people describing her. She is “the young woman” to her distant uncle, the “deaf-mute” to much of the household, and the only time she is referred to as “deaf daughter” is when the seamstress is sizing Mrs. Merton

and her for their funeral dresses, seen in section 4 of Figures 1 and 3. In contrast, Millicent is the fifth most common word in the story, used nine times, and she is referred to as daughter/daughter-in-law six times (see Figure 4). As a character, Millicent is an individual who has ties with her in-laws but also has an independence to think, describe, and be herself. She is not dependent on the characterization of daughter, like the deaf-mute who is continually an afterthought in the story, rather it is another way for Millicent to establish her role and dominance in the Merton family. This data exposes two very interesting relationships in the story. First, this data shows how the story defies reader expectations. From the relationship of frequencies between “deaf,” “daughter,” and “Millicent” to the actual textual analysis, the expectations of a daughter and daughter-in-law are defied as the deaf-daughter is pushed to the side and Millicent takes precedence in most situations in the story. Second, this data contributes to the autobiographical portions of the text. Despite the deaf daughter being characterized as an afterthought, the data shows that she is used as a means to defy reader expectations of familial relationships and show how Bride Scratton viewed herself and coped with the death of her father and divorce from Ned Scratton.

When “The Obsequies” begins we find out that Mr. Merton had been battling edema for two years and has finally died of heart failure. The scene opens up by describing the house, driveway, even the animals near the lake. As it transitions from the exterior of the home to the interior we first meet the deaf daughter and Millicent, “In the low-raftered hall the deaf-mute sat beside a hissing acrid smoking wood fire, scarcely visible, apathetic, red-eyed, holding a shivering griffon on her knees. Millicent passed” (Goold-Adams). In the opening, neither character’s relation to the Merton’s is known. But interestingly, the deaf daughter is sitting while Millicent is moving. This sets up a theme throughout the story that the deaf daughter is a passive

being, whether or not she wants to be, in contrast to Millicent who is an active character in the action of the story. As the story continues we see the familial relations of the females revealed and how they are treated by Mrs. Merton and the rest of the household. This beginning is important because according to *Ezra Pound in London and Paris, 1908-1925*, Bride Scratton's father "was killed by the tragic explosion of a shell in a peacetime accident in 1885... Bride had been born three years earlier to the handsome captain and his ill-tempered, frigid wife, Evelyn, who quickly married another man with money after the funeral. Bride then grew up in their house as an unloved stepchild..." (Wilhelm). Bride was only three years old when she lost her father and because of his death, she was an afterthought to Evelyn and her new family. As a young child, Bride didn't have a say in the events after her father's death. Rather, like the deaf-mute in the story, she was a passive character in the action. Choosing to characterize herself as a deaf girl is interesting as we never find out in the story how old the deaf daughter is and we never get to hear her thoughts. This metaphor of disability exposes how Bride coped with losing her father at a young age. Disability is often linked with the association of being infantile and lacking self-representation. But as explained in *Literature and Disability*, "To represent disability is to engage oneself in an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of 'recognizable' human experiences. Making comprehensible that which appears to be inherently unknowable situates narrative in the powerful position of mediator between two separate worlds" (Hall, 35). By inserting a deaf character in the story, Bride is expounding on the "unrecognizable" experience of losing her father and becoming a forgotten daughter. It exposes how she was unable to express herself without a voice, like a deaf person without sign language, and how as a child she was ignored because of her age rather than her mental capabilities,

similarly to how disabled persons are thought to be less intellectually capable than abled persons, at least in this time period.

This passive and forgotten characterization of the deaf daughter continues throughout the story and is seen most prominently during the lunch before the funeral. In this part of the story, Mrs. Merton is hosting a lunch for all the people who have come to the funeral, but both Millicent and the deaf daughter have not come down to eat rather they have requested their food be brought to their rooms. The story continues:

She [Mrs. Merton] also had to be reassured that etiquette presupposed her daughter-in-law too incapacitated by grief to make a public appearance until after the arrival of the hearse, before consenting to cold salmon, veal pie, and whiskey and soda, on a tray in her boudoir at a quarter-past one. The younger woman, agitated and neuralgic, ordered tea and biscuits in her room for the same hour. Two o'clock had struck before an apologetic housemaid appeared with black coffee, three *èclairs*, and a macaroon (Goold-Adams).

In this moment of the story, we see how the deaf daughter, referred to as the younger woman, is completely forgotten by her mother and the servants, even in a moment of being active by following the proper etiquette of mourning by ordering tea and biscuits to be sent to her room allowing her to mourn alone. But this moment of active participation is overwhelmed by the influence of Millicent, leading the others to forget the deaf daughter and returning her to her passive place as she waited for her late lunch. We also see the climax of tension between these two characters, as Millicent takes on the familial role of daughter-in-law and the deaf daughter becomes just another person in the story. In addition to the feelings surrounding the loss of her father, this story also gives us an insight into Bride's loveless marriage and divorce. Ned Scratton was an unfaithful husband, but Bride stayed with him because he could support her and

their children. After World War I, Bride met Ezra Pound and began an affair with him. When Ned and Bride divorced, Ned accused Bride of having an affair and won custody of the children (Wilhelm). Two weeks after the divorce Ned remarried and Bride was officially replaced. The themes associated with the deaf daughter of passiveness and being forgotten offer an insight to how Bride viewed her marriage and divorce. She was a passive participant while her husband philandered widely, but once she started to actively work towards love with Ezra Pound she lost it all. Her children were taken away from her, she didn't have the luxury of a husband's income and had to work to pay for her living, and she was quickly forgotten as a new woman took her place only two weeks later. Bride uses the characterization of the deaf daughter in this way to highlight the difference between Bride during her marriage and after the divorce. Alice Hall in *Literature and Disability* explains, "The presence of disability creates a different picture of identity – one less stable than identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class – and therefore presenting the opportunity to rethink how human identity works" (Hall, 39). With her divorce being within months of the publishing of this story, Bride's identity was challenged and needed to be reconfigured. Through the deaf daughter, Bride is able to explain what her identity was and from there show that maybe there is hope to change it.

Towards the end of the story, Bride offers hope for change for the deaf daughter. When deciding who to put in each carriage following the hearse, Mrs. Merton, forgetting her own daughter, asked if Millicent would ride with her in the first carriage. Mr. Ford, the undertaker responded, "First carriage, Mrs. And Miss Merton. Second carriage, Mrs. Charles Merton [Millicent], Mr. John Merton, Lieutenant Merton, Mr. Filey. Third carriage –" (Goold-Adams). Despite the deaf daughter continuing to be passive in the decisions made regarding the funeral arrangements, there is hope at the end when she is not only remembered but also put in a place of

high honor, that being the first carriage after the hearse, by the undertaker. Similar to how the deaf girl cannot change her impairment, Bride is unable to change the circumstances of her divorce and losing custody of her children. But the hope of being remembered, even though she cannot actively make the changes she wants in her life, is what Bride yearns for. And three years after this story was published, Ned Scratton died, and Bride was able to gain custody her children. Even though it seemed like someone had replaced Bride, like Millicent tried to replace the deaf daughter, in the end her relationships and ties were remembered and upheld.

In addition to the data analysis and autobiographical portions of this text, “The Obsequies” was written within 3 interesting frameworks. First, the story was published in only two places: *England*, a collection of Bride’s short stories, and *The Criterion: A Quarterly Review Vol 1. No III*. The Criterion was edited by T.S. Eliot during its 17-year run from 1922-1939. Eliot wanted The Criterion to “be an outlet for his poetry and criticism,” a place to establish what he called “the European idea – the idea of a common culture of western Europe,” and where he could help promote new writers to his highly influential audience. (Harding, D.J.). The periodical published writers such as Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, and W.B. Yeats and aimed for highbrow readership rather than focusing on commercial success, which might have led to its end in 1939 after not meeting its quota. Eliot published Bride’s short story due to her relationship with Ezra Pound and other literary figures at the time as well as writing on obsequies, or funeral rites, which would have meaning to the audience that had just survived the first world-war and could relate to the disillusionment that came with funerals after the casualties of soldier and civilians and overall magnitude of the war. The second framework the story worked in is the Modernist period. The writings from the Modernists set out to defy reader expectations, expound on the paralysis and constraint of society, and describe difficult familial relationships. “The Obsequies”

works with these different motifs using the deaf character – from the familial relationships that defy reader expectations, to the motif of paralysis based on disability, to the genre of a short story published in a periodical.

The third framework is feminist disability studies, a recent development in the literary world but fits the story perfectly. This literary theory of study encompasses the two most important character traits of the deaf daughter, having a physical impairment and being a female. Alice Hall in *Literature and Disability* explains, “Just as early feminists called for a distinction between biological ‘sex’ and cultural assumptions about ‘gender,’ first wave disability scholars often distinguished between physical ‘impairment’ and the socially constructed category of ‘disability’” (Hall, 41). This combined study of feminist disability theory works to create distinctions between both sex and gender, as well as impairment and disability – problems that the deaf girls in the story is passively faced with. Focusing on disability studies, scholars argue that disability is a social construct where as impairment is a physical attribute. Hall explains, “... A person with a hearing impairment only becomes disabled when no-one else in the room can communicate using sign-language” (Hall, 21). Focusing on this lens gives an insight as to why Bride chose to use a deaf girl to represent her in “The Obsequies.” The deaf daughter has nothing wrong with her, except her physical impairment. But that physical impairment does not mean that she is any less capable or intelligent than someone without the impairment. The daughter is then only characterized as disabled because of the society that she is placed in. Hall summarizes, “Society ‘disables’ individuals by excluding or discriminating against them and creating affective, sensory, cognitive or architectural barriers” (Hall, 21). Although Bride is not physically impaired, society “disabled” her throughout her life because she was different. Those differences being a fatherless child, in an unfaithful marriage, divorced woman in the 1920’s,

and working and raising children on her own. I would argue that those “physical impairments” made Bride disabled, an outcast, in society.

The usage of the deaf daughter, disabled only by the society she lives in, helps us to understand how Bride Scratton felt her entire life as an outcast. As seen with the digital and textual analysis, the deaf-daughter in this story is more than just an afterthought. She is used to explain the feelings of constraint and paralysis that Bride experienced with the death of her father, and marriage to and divorce from Ned Scratton. The deaf daughter is also used to enable the Modernist agenda and expose the difficulties within and defy the reader’s expectations of familial relationships.

Figures: (see works cited, Finlayson)

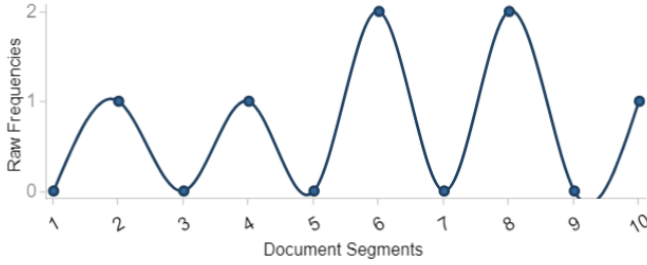


Figure One – Digital Analysis – Daughter

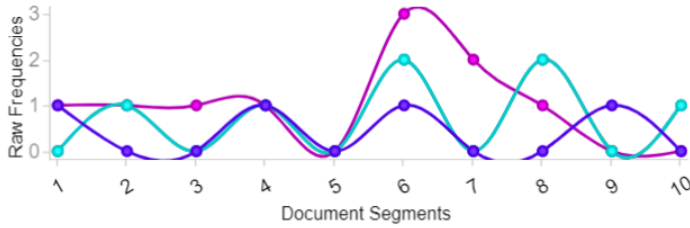


Figure Two – Digital Analysis

Daughter – Light Blue, Millicent – Pink, Deaf – Purple

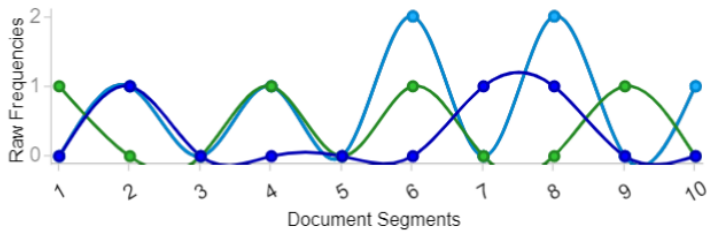


Figure Three – Digital Analysis

Daughter – Light Blue, Deaf – Green, Younger – Dark Blue

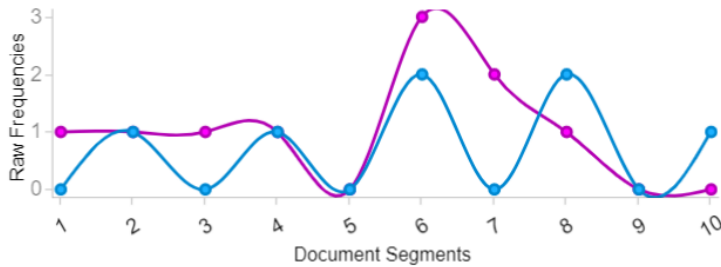


Figure Four – Digital Analysis

Daughter – Light Blue, Millicent – Pink

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