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Cynical Indictment or Genuine Elevation? Ethel Smyth's "An Adventure in a Train"

Ethel Smyth's short story, "An Adventure in a Train," was featured in the *London Mercury* in 1920. As the journal tried to "help bridge the gap in discussion of literary criticism that was made during the first world war... reconnecting the learned public to literary spheres," anyone acquainted with the periodical would assume that Smyth's "An Adventure" would contain literary richness and social commentary (Hipol). Interestingly, however, the plot of "An Adventure" is quite straightforward and lacks any vivid action that is usually associated with any "adventure" story. Indeed, the narrator gets on a train, talks to a middle-aged woman, and records the conversation. It seems to be much more of a regular travel log rather than an adventure.

However, Smyth's biographical information helps us understand what this piece of literature is trying to say. Dame Ethel Mary Smyth, who violently resisted her father's plea for her to get married, had the rare opportunity of receiving a high education. She went to other countries in Europe and studied music composition, a career she pursued for decades. Soon after she learned that she was turning deaf, she resorted to writing books and essays about women's rights. *Female Pipings in Eden*, for instance, was a book about the lack of opportunity for women in the field of music composition. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography tells us that Smyth's "writings expressed her increasing conviction that her career had been stunted by sex discrimination, a belief that verged on an obsession in her old age which she never tired of

expounding” (Kertesz). She donated her talent in music composition and writing to the cause of the women’s suffragist movement in England.

So, what does that tell us about “An Adventure?” The middle-aged woman, who is the narrator’s chief subject of observation, is certainly not in the ideal state of education or culture for any woman. For instance, she is unable to perform a simple mathematical calculation when she complains, “Isn’t it dreadful to see our dear English people thrown out? There’s a family o’ Jews pays 13.5. For four rooms, and *me*, and English person, has to pay 75. For two rooms!” (671). The narrator quickly does the math and object that the pricing is fair, but the middle-aged woman disregards the math and keeps on relishing her prejudice against the Jewish people. The narrator thus implicitly points out that the middle-aged woman’s ignorance led to her unwarranted intolerance of the Jews. Another lady in the train, the “philanthropic lady,” who is presumably well-educated, says that “One can’t blame people for wishing to abide by their own customs.” Rather than trying to learn or understand, the middle-aged woman jeers at the remark and continues to talk about how “weird” the Jewish traditions appear to her.

Through this story, it seems that Smyth is trying show the world the consequences of the lack of education or power for women. However, she is doing so in one of two ways. My first theory is that, straightforwardly, Smyth is portraying an average, uneducated English woman and elevates her ordinariness by observing beauty in it. This is evidenced by a few observations made from Voyant tools. On the other hand, the alternative theory is that Smyth is taking a cynical, almost dark, sarcastic tone in the story to indict those who are responsible for the downfall of women. In this case, subtle hints of seemingly sarcastic observations serve as evidence.

When we consider the first theory that “An Adventure” is telling a story to genuinely elevate the middle-aged woman by seeking beauty in her ordinariness and commonness, we

should consider also Virginia Woolf's assertion that writers should capture the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms... as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday" (*Modern Fiction*). Woolf's choice of Monday and Tuesday rather than Friday or the weekend is possibly rhetorical, because those days are usually associated with the boring, mundane, and uneventful. Even in the seemingly unremarkable occurrences in life, Woolf wants writers to capture every particle for the greatest effect.

Likewise, the narrator of "An Adventure" begins the story by explaining that she has done her very best to relay all of the facts of her experience as accurately as she could. She notes that "Circumstances enabled me to take down, then and there, each golden word that fell from her [the middle-aged woman] lips without my indiscretion giving offence" (667). Therefore, the major Woolfian value in the story lies in the narrator's attempt to convey reality as it occurred, rather than as she reconstructs them in her mind. That is why she "took out a notebook I had just bought in town" to jot down the remarks made in conversation (669). Furthermore, the narrator acknowledges that there are observations she misses to make while she writes things down. For example, when the middle-aged woman's "voice died away gradually, and, much as I longed to hear the end of that sentence, there was so much to write down" (671). The narrator records even the gaps and distractions that are particles of her experience with the middle-aged woman.

The Voyant Tool "Dreamscape" yielded a remarkable aspect of textual analysis. This tool detects, without the user's specific input, any geographical location mentioned in the story. The program will even try its best to show the movement of characters in an arrow linking up two or more geographical points. The tool produces a map with dots and lines to indicate such information. When I ran "An Adventure" through "Dreamscape," I learned that the so-called "Adventure" was a very short train ride. I had to zoom into Europe from the globe, into Great

Britain, and then far into the southeast corner of England to see that the two points, Woking and Aldershot, were actually two separate locations. Before having to zoom in so much, I could not tell because the two points were so close to each other.

This tool yielded an insight that would never have occurred to me if I were analyzing the text on my own. Voyant actually illuminated an element of reality that went over my head. It was then that I understood that Smyth's choice to call this story "An Adventure" had some literary significance. Compared to the rest of the world, the narrator's train ride with the middle-aged woman was anything but an adventure. There were such historically shocking things as the Great War, sexual "freedom" and experimentation, and the rise of advanced technology. But Smyth chose to write about a conversation with an average English woman and entitling it "An Adventure."

Smyth employs other gestures that evidence her genuinity towards the middle-aged woman. Through the "Summary" and "Context" tools, I found that the word "philanthropic" appeared the most frequently (15 times). Except for one case, the word was always followed by the word lady, which appeared second most frequently (14 times). Here I realized yet another technique that Smyth was using for characterization. In the train, there was yet another lady, always referred to as the "philanthropic lady." I would never have pondered upon the significance of why she was *always* called the "philanthropic lady" were it not for these Voyant Tools. This surprised me, because although she played *a* role in the story, the middle-aged woman was clearly the main focus and subject of the narrator's interest. By calling the character by the same name perfectly consistently throughout the story, Smyth comments on the standoffish, semi-pretentious Christian archetype who was uninteresting, predictable, and unremarkable.

Thus, the “philanthropic lady” serves as a backdrop against which the middle-aged woman’s beautiful ordinariness can shine. The middle-aged woman is, on the other hand, referred to by several different names. As the narrator gets to know more and more about her, she calls the woman “the middle-aged woman,” “the newcomer,” “my neighbour,” and the intimate “my friend.” Especially as the story proceeds and as the narrator is enthralled by her, this woman is portrayed as dynamic, interesting, relatable, and kind. Although she was much more of a commoner than the philanthropic lady, the narrator finds much more “excitement” in learning about her life and her struggles (676). In this way, Smyth elevates the “common” by juxtaposition to the predictable high society.

However, some evidence suggests that “An Adventure” could be a cynical polemic that criticizes society for having let the common women descend so much in terms of intellect. The narrator often takes a sarcastic tone when describing the middle-aged woman. For instance, the narrator describes, “And I may say here that I never met any individual who commanded a greater variety of moods, or whose facility in passing from one to the other was more bewildering” (669). Here the narrator seems to make a mere observation, but one could not help entertaining the possibility that she is making fun of the woman for her emotional instability and her vulnerability to exaggeration. When the middle-aged woman enters the train, the narrator notes with humor that she “hoisted herself into the carriage and sat down—partly beside me, partly upon me” (668). One could feel the narrator hinting that this was an obnoxious woman.

When the philanthropic lady tries to pay the fares for a man who had gotten on without a ticket, the middle-aged woman criticizes the lady for encouraging him to do worse. The philanthropic lady states calmly that she is a Christian, and that she is willing to help anyone who goes wrong. Here, the narrator observes, “My friend’s enthusiasm over this sentiment knew no

bounds. Hurling herself forward in a fervour of acquiescence [she said], “God bless you, dear!... So do I! And what *I* say is, you *must* have ‘em, good... *and* ... bad!”” (670). The middle-aged woman betrays her previous stand almost in an instance when there are religious stakes involved. Even so, her praise and changed mind do not seem to have any logical or intellectual substance. At this point, the narrator sees that the middle-aged woman is spitting out words to seem Christian herself.

In this rather cynical reading of the story, we sympathize much more with the philanthropic lady, who is composed, patient, and charitable unlike the loud and even annoying middle-aged woman. When the philanthropic lady attempts to initiate an actual conversation about religion and law, saying, “We must take into consideration *hereditary law*,” the narrator writes that “My friend was not at all impressed,” suggesting that the middle-aged woman did not comprehend what was said (670). In response, she airily avoids actually talking about it with “the unmistakable diction and cadence of the informal prayermeeting” (671). Religion, for the middle-aged woman, has clearly been a superficiality without any profound intellectual understanding.

To say that Smyth was simply making fun of common women would be completely incoherent with her active involvement in the women’s suffragist movement. If anything, it would be consistent with the idea that Smyth was trying to show how serious the consequences of uneducated women could be. It is truly remarkable that either interpretation that I have presented serves a common purpose, which is reform for women, the feminist cause. It is also amazing how a digital textual analysis, which is based on factual patterns, and a reader’s literary analysis, which is based on the catching of subtle voices of the text, could lead to reverse interpretations.

Works Cited

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