

Cat in the Rain by Ernest Hemingway

Summary

The short story "Cat in the Rain" was written by Ernest Hemingway in the 1920's. It is about an American couple that spends their holidays in an Italian hotel. It is a rainy day and the American woman sees a cat in the rain, which she wants to protect from the raindrops. When she goes out of the hotel, which is kept by an old Italian who really seems to do everything to please that woman, and wants to get the cat, it is gone. After returning to the hotel room, she starts a conversation with her husband George, who is reading all the time, telling him how much she wants to have a cat and other things, for instance her own silver to eat with. Her husband seems to be annoyed by that and not interested at all. At the end of the story there is a knock on the door and the maid stands there holding a cat for the American woman in her hands.

Peculiarities of the introduction

The first thing that caught my eyes was the long description at the beginning. First there is a description of the environment in good weather, which means spring or summer, then a description of the momentary situation in the rain. This description creates an atmosphere that is sad, cold and unfriendly. To create this atmosphere Hemingway uses words such as "empty" or "the motorcars were gone". Later on, by looking at the relationship of the two Americans, you can see that this description was a foreshadowing of the state of the couple's relationship: First it was nice, the spring-time of their love, and now there is only rain, their relationship got cold and unfriendly. Another symbolic hint in this introduction is the war monument, which is mentioned three times. This maybe is done to tell us that a conflict is to be expected.

From girl to wife

The next thing I wondered about was the spontaneous reaction of the woman after she saw that cat. Usually only children want to protect cats or dogs from the rain, because a grown-up knows that rain does not do any harm to animals living on the street. From that point on you can find an interpretation which is quite complex and not that easy to explain: On the one hand the woman wants to protect that little cat, which now stands for something innocent and vulnerable, like a baby. So she wants to protect that vulnerable thing, which is more the behaviour of an adult. But on the other hand she acts like a little child by having this wish for a cat. Another hint for that is that the woman is referred to as "girl" in the following paragraph, not as "wife" like before.

The sequence in which we get to know that she likes the hotelkeeper a lot is next. She likes the way he wants to serve her. Why? Because it gives her the feeling to be grown up, to be treated like a lady. But the other reasons for fancying him originate from a more childish thinking, like the fact that she likes him because of his big hands. To underline this childish behaviour, all sentences in this part begin with "She liked..", which is the typical way of a child to want something: "I like cats, I like chocolate, I like bubble-gum" and so on. When she talks about the cat in this situation, she does not say "cat" but "kitty", which is usually a childish expression as well.

The next sentence that seems to be important to me is: "The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time very important. She had a momentary feeling of being of great importance." At this point we can see again the two parts of her personality. The child in her feels very timid because of the presence of this tall, old, serious man, the woman in her feels flattered by the way he cares for her. She seems to be like a girl of about fourteen, still being a child and now slowly noticing the woman inside her.

Marriage problems

When she comes back to the hotel room, her husband is still reading. She tells him that she does not know why she wanted that cat so much, but we know it: She feels the need for something to care for, to be responsible for, that makes her grow up, for example having a baby. George does not need all that anymore, because he already is grown up, which is shown by his serious behaviour and that he treats his wife like a child. And now we understand why they are having problems with their marriage - because they are on different levels: He already is a man, she is still a girl. They cannot find a mutual base for their relationship and that makes her bored by him and him annoyed by her. But George does not understand the problem of his wife and therefore of their relationship, because when she talks about letting her hair grow to make her become more female, he just tells her with disinterest that he likes it the way it is.

But her wish for longer hair is only the beginning. She tells him that she wants her own silver to eat with and candles and that cat, standing again for something to be responsible for and new clothes. I am sure that her new clothes would be very female, because all these things stand for the world of a grown-ups. So she utters, without really recognizing it herself, the immense wish to be an adult at last - as quickly as possible. And that is why she is now referred to as "wife" again.

The sentence that she wants it to be spring again stands for her huge wish for a new spring in her relationship, now that the process of her growing up has started and she might attempt to find a way to be level with her husband, which maybe will help them to finally find a mutual basis. In the end she gets a cat, brought by the maid on request of the padrone. It is not important if it is the same cat she saw on the street or not, the only thing that matters is that she finally gets something to take responsibility for and that symbolizes the first step in the direction of a grown-up life.

Conclusion

Altogether I would say that the theme of the story is the problems that a relationship has, when one partner becomes dominant or repressive and the other is trying to change and improve the situation. If they are aware of their problems they might be able to save their marriage, but if they do not recognize that their relationship will become more and more like the depressive weather in this short story, until there will be winter when their love will die.