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Interpretation von
John Wain: *A Visit at Tea-Time*
David Campton: *Then...*
William Shakespeare: *Sonnet No. 12*

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John Wain: „A Visit at Tea-Time“

This short story was first published in 1966.

The title „A visit at teatime“ suggests some friends chatting in the afternoon while having tea. These harmonic and pleasant expectations of the title are not at all fulfilled in the short story which is full of conflicts and disharmony. Therefore, the title seems ironic after one has read the short story.

This short story can be split up into three subdivisions: The first part which takes place in front of the Edmundsons' house (page 1/ line 3 - page 2/ line 34), the second part that takes place in their house (page 2/ line 34 - page 4/ line 51) and the last part in the back garden (page 4/ line 51 - page 6/ line 40). A closer look at these settings shows the element of progress: in front - in - behind the house. Surely this stands for the protagonist's inner, psychological progress that he makes during the short story. In front of the house means before the conflict, in the house the conflict takes place, and after the conflict, behind the house, a hint of the solution to the conflict is given.

The element of contrast is also present throughout the story. The life such as nature and the boy David in front of and behind the house form a contrast to the cold, drabness and sterility inside the house. The past that Williams clings to contrasts with the present, reality with imagination, Williams' beloved old housekeeper Frances with the new unfriendly housekeeper, the trees in the back garden with the imaginative eskimos and eccentricity with reason and common sense.

There is no statement made about the historic time. This implies that this short story deals with a general human problem that is transferable and timeless, and not tied to any historical frame.

It is autumn in the story, and teatime, during dusk. There is a rather short span of time described in the story, about thirty minutes of acting time. However it is a very important moment in the protagonist's life. Therefore

the narrator confronts the readers with a snapshot situation, a short but very special situation.

The story takes place in Great Britain, there is no specific region implied. The house is detached and roomy and there is a lot of place outside. This suggests upper middle class. Since it is known that Williams, too, had lived in this house, the short story does not deal with a clash between different social strata.

When we take a closer look at the characters in the story, Williams can be seen as the protagonist of the story, he is the main character. However, he can also in a way be considered as one of the antagonists because he has to deal with a struggle in himself, and especially at the beginning of the story he fights with himself. On the one hand he wants to see the tree which was planted at his birth and finds this wish „*perfectly reasonable*“ (p. 1, l. 8), on the other hand he feels that it is quite eccentric to ask the new owners of the house to have a look in their back garden. There is a fight in himself between common sense and eccentricity.

Mrs Edmundson is the short story's second antagonist. While Williams clings to the past, she is the one who tells him to forget the past and live in the present. She stands for modernity (according to the furniture of the house), the present and reality, whereas Williams is connected to the past and imagination. This comes out very succinctly when Williams describes his „*dream game*“ in the attic (p.1, l.15-26).

Mr Edmundson, Mrs Edmundson, the housekeeper and David are flat characters, they are stereotyped and stand for certain types of people. Williams is a round character. He is shown in a more individualized way, develops and changes during the story.

The narrator in „A visit at teatime“ is a third person observer. Everything he tells the reader is filtered through the protagonist's consciousness. There is, however, one exception: On page 6, line 38: „...*he went up the path for the*

last time...“. The third person observer becomes an omniscient narrator in this statement, there is a break in the pattern. This break might have been used to highlight the fact that Williams has torn from the past and will not cling to it again.

It comes out in some statements during the story that the narrator is not always reliable. William judges, for example, Mrs Edmundson without knowing her.

I am now going to take a closer look at Williams' individual development which he goes through during the short story.

At the beginning of the story, Williams' inner struggle can be seen very clearly. On the one hand he has this strong wish to see „his“ tree that was planted for his birth, on the other hand he does not feel comfortable to let this wish come true because he is afraid that other people could see him „*behaving in an eccentric way*“ (p.1, l.6-7). He feels not sure about himself, is self-conscious and cares a lot about other people's opinion.

His thoughts at the beginning are very self-centered and they are centered around the past. He keeps on thinking about things that he used to do in his childhood. When he describes the „dream game“ in which he used to „*imagine his own world and live in it for hours at a time*“ (p. 1, l. 26), it comes out very clearly that Williams likes imagination and rejects reality. When he rings the doorbell, he imagines his old housekeeper Frances opening the door. He remembers how it was when he came home from school as a child and actually hears Frances' footsteps coming closer: „*He heard Frances coming to the door. Her slow footsteps.*“ (p. 1, l. 49). Then reality comes to his mind for a while: „*Of course it could not be Frances. She was dead...*“ (p. 1, ll. 49-50). However it can be seen very clearly that Williams clings to the past, „*Why did we have to leave this house,[...], why did it all have to come to an end?*“ (p. 1, ll. 53-54). He refuses to accept the present and reality.

This can furthermore be noticed when Williams' feelings inside the house are described. When the new housekeeper opens the door, Williams uses the old-fashioned expression „*Is [...] the master of the house at home?*“ (p. 2, l.

11), which was used in his childhood in the past when the servant opened the door. Williams shows negative emotions towards this new housekeeper. To him, she „*seemed futile and yet full of menace.*“ (p. 2, l. 19). Williams rejects her. With the words „*Frances, Frances, where are you?*“ (p. 2, ll. 23-24) it comes out very succinctly that Williams wishes he could turn back time and cannot accept the changes of the present.

The interior of the house is „*modern, with that dead, unreverberating modernity that seems to belong to the laboratory and the machine shop, never to humanity.*“ (p. 2, ll. 44-45). This modernity, full of the present, shows a clear contrast to Williams present rejecting attitude and his clinging to the past. It is also contrasted to the warm atmosphere in the house that he felt as a child.

Mr and Mrs Edmundson lead a life in the present and reality. Especially Mrs Edmundson finds it a little ridiculous to have a relation to a tree, just because it was planted for one's birth. This becomes clear when she says: „*I don't quite understand,*‘ *though she obviously understood perfectly. ‘D’you mean Mr Williams wanted to see how his tree was getting on?’ Her phrasing was intended to show, and did show, a Nanny-bright disapproval of childish whims.*“ (p. 3, ll. 49-52). Mrs Edmundson tells Williams not to cling to the past but live in the present, to get rid of „*all the clutter and the junk that one's apt to cling to instead of just living one's life in a straight line.*“ (p.4, ll. 22-23). Mrs Edmundson shows no emotion, she is against imagination and memory. In this way she is contrasted very clearly from Williams.

Williams gains self-assurance during his stay in the Edmundsons' house. He suddenly notices weak aspects of Mrs Edmundson who has actually acted in a quite confident way: „*Her skin was bad, he noticed, full of open pores and already, at her age, rather loose fitting.*“ (p. 4, ll. 30-31). He dislikes her attitude towards „his“ tree: „*But if that were so, of course, she would have understood that living things matter, that they are not simply objects that give shelter or don't give shelter.*“ (p. 4, ll. 34-36).

When Williams leaves the house, he is self-confident enough to walk into the back garden without having asked for permission. He is not afraid

anymore to act eccentricly and feels that he has the right to see the leftovers of his tree: „*He owed it, at least, that final salute - to locate the patch of air, if it were still living...*“ (p. 5, ll. 12-13). Williams meets David in the garden who helps him to gain more self-confidence. In the beginning of their conversation Williams says „*Yes, I need help.*“ (p. 5, l. 24). This shows that he has realized his problems and the process of healing can begin. David explains to him a dream game, a kind of game that he used to play when he was a child. David's fight against the Eskimos stands for the fight against coldness, death, the rational adult world and the utilitarianism and the rational attitude of Mrs. Edmundson, David's mother. It comes out that winning the fight against the Eskimos is not impossible: With the help of trees, living things, one can find shelter from the Eskimos' weapons. David therefore imagines a „*dense forest*“ (p.5, l. 52) to protect him from the Eskimos. Since the Eskimos, and so the Edmundsons, do not use their imagination, they are unable to leave their cold, rational world and cannot enter the forest.

When Williams is left alone in the garden, he does not feel silly anymore to make sounds like a walrus to keep the Eskimos away. He also recognises the negative effects of eccentricity. This can be seen when he imagines his cut down tree in front of him and talks to him: „*I'm back. I still exist. But it isn't I who matter - it's David.[...] Let him win his battle against the Eskimos.*“ (p. 5, ll. 31-33). He switched from egocentricity to the care for others.

Williams is not longer looking back into the past but in the future. The sentence „*as he went up the path for the last time*“ (p.5 , l. 38) suggests that Williams leaves the past, walks into the future and never comes back. Williams has found his own identity and has matured. His wish is that David preserves his emotions, his memory and imagination.

The story shows the negative aspects of egocentricity and selfishness and pleads for the care for others. It is better to tear from the past and accept the present. On the other hand the story tells that emotions, memory and imagination are still important to be able to accept the present. Furthermore,

to care for others does not mean to forget about oneself but still to be self-confident and to express one's own feelings.

David Campton: „Then...“

The play was written in 1957. It had its premier in 1958, in the time of the cold war. It is the fourth play in a quadruple bill. The nuclear thread was present at that time and it is what the play deals with.

There are two actors in the play. It comes out very soon that these two characters represent certain types and attitudes. Phythick and the Girl represent two totally different types of people. Phythick, the science teacher, stands for people who think rational and hardly show any emotion, the typical „egghead“. He represents the educated. Phythick is presented as uncertain and frightened. The Girl, a model and beauty queen is a stereotype for naive, not too intelligent women, so called „dumb blondes“. She represents the less educated.

The characters change during the play. Phythick falls in love with the Girl and becomes emotional. The Girl loses some of her naivety and becomes critical.

The action takes place at Piccadilly Circus. There is dust everywhere. It comes out during the conversation that a nuclear weapon called „hydrodynamic deterrent“ has killed the whole world except for Phythick and the Girl because they are wearing paper bags over their heads. Eros, the

famous statue at Piccadilly Circus, is missing in the scenery. This indicates that the scenery is transferable to any place in the world, it could be anywhere and you cannot tell where the actors are. It implies the transferability of the action. The nuclear thread is present anywhere in the world. The piles of dust stand for the total destruction which is around the two actors. The different colours of the dust might stand for the different coloured people in the world which indicates that the nuclear power has destroyed not only London but the whole world and that Phythick and the Girl actually are the only people in the world.

The action takes place at night. There are no time jumps during the play. As it is mentioned in the instructions, the time of the action is the „*immediate future*“ (p.6, l.10). There is no historical fixed date. The danger of nuclear power has always been present since the invention of nuclear power weapons and will stay present in the future. It is not tied to any specific time. When we take a close look of the plot of the play, there can be seen that the actors' inner action is stressed throughout the play. The units of action get shorter in the end, the tension becomes stronger. The ending is open.

As mentioned above, the two characters stand for two totally different types of people. In the beginning of the play, Phythick is rational and does not show any emotion. One of his pupils was responsible for important developments in „*heterodynamic deterrents*“, so Phythick is indirectly responsible for the world's destruction. However, he cannot take this responsibility in the beginning. This comes out when he tells the Girl about his work: „*I am not responsible for my pupils though. I merely pass on knowledge, you understand. It is up to them what they do with it. [...] I am not responsible if they advance their careers in heterodynamic deterrents.*“ (p. 8, ll. 21-24). He rejects responsibility on the surface but he fears the guilt, he is somehow aware of it. This can be seen when, after his statement about responsibility and after the Girl obviously agreed with him, he asks the Girl: „*Do you think so? Do you really think so?*“ (p. 8, l. 26). One could get the impression that Phythick himself does not believe what he has just said.

The Girl is not willing to take decisions on her own. She accepts the hydrodynamic deterrents because the television presented it as a „clean bomb“. She does not think herself but lets other people think for her, like her manager, the people on television and Phythick. She dieted and exercised to become a model because other people told her to. (p. 8, ll 38-47). She wears a brown paperbag because she heard it in the television.(p. 9, ll. 6-9). When Phythick asks her if she really thinks that he is not responsible for the world's destruction, she replies: „*Of course. You just told me so.*“ (p. 8, l. 27). Later, she mentions that she had not eaten in a long time because nobody had told her it was eating time. (p. 8, ll. 56-59). The Girl is a stereotype for a naive Girl from a lower social stratum.

The two characters come from different social strata, and this is why they talk on two different levels. Phythick uses hard words that show that he is well educated. The Girl makes short and easy-structured sentences and keeps her language simple. Phythick and the Girl talk cross purposes sometimes. This happens, for example, when Phythick, in love, quotes literature: „...*Behold thou art fair,*...“ and the Girl replies: „*I'm a brunette.*“ (p. 11, ll. 54-56). Therefore comedic elements can be found throughout the play.

The characters go through a development during the play. Phythick falls in love with the Girl and he switches from the rational attitude to being very emotional. He also admits his guilt. He says: „*I locked my study door, and devoted myself to figures. It was wrong of me.*“ (p. 10, ll. 7-8). However, he still rejects responsibility and the Girl still cannot make her own decisions. They are talking about taking off their bags because they want to kiss, but then realise that this could kill them, too. The Girl asks: „*Then I must keep it on?*“ and Phythick answers: „*You must decide that for yourself.*“. The Girl: „*But I can't. I can't.*“ (P. 11, ll.42-44). It becomes clear that Phythick does not want to be responsible in case taking off her bag would kill the Girl. The Girl, on the other hand still refuses to decide herself.

There is a stalemate situation at the end of the play. Both are in paralysis. They want to kiss but no one wants to make the first step to take off the

bags. Phythick is afraid of the responsibility and the Girl is afraid to make a decision. To overcome this stagnation, they have to change. Phythick does this by making the final decision indicated by the word „*Then...*“ (p. 13, l. 50). One could finish the sentence like „Then let's take off our bags:“ Phythick breaks through the stalemate by taking over the responsibility for taking off their paper bags. In the end, the two people have decided to overcome their problems and weaknesses.

The subtitle of the play is „A comedy of menace“. It indicates a mixture of comedy and threat. There actually are a lot of comedic elements in this play, despite of the threat which is hanging over the actors with an ominous power. The subtitle means a combination of ridiculousness and seriousness.

The play shows how people in the world deal with nuclear power. The ones who create nuclear power weapons deny responsibility for their actions (Phythick), the rest of the world is not critical, stays passive and believes everything (the Girl). The last word of the play „*Then...*“ (p.13, l.50) implies that Phythick finally makes a decision to remove the brown paper bags from their heads. This is where he starts taking over responsibility. This final decision is very essential. This comes out by the fact that the title, too, is named „*Then...*“

The play is trying to get across that people should think more critically and independently. It shows how the media propaganda manipulates the language. Expressions, such as „hygienic“ and „clean bomb“ are created, they show how words can influence people and make them think that nuclear power is something positive. The play wants to make the auditorium aware of the danger of nuclear power and that this danger is timeless and present everywhere. People should speak up and become critical towards progress in the field of nuclear research. Both the researchers who make a nuclear power weapon possible, as well as the people who accept this development, are responsible for the consequences. The end of the play is hopeful. The actors overcome the stalemate and take responsibility.

William Shakespeare: *Sonnet No. 12*

The sonnet contains of four units of meaning. There are three quatrains and a couplet.

Each quatrains consists of alternating rhymes.

Iambs are used as a metre, with one exception in the first line of the second quatrain:

„*When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,*“ (p. 14, l. 5).

This is a break in the pattern.

The four quatrains are end-stopped lines whereas the couplet consists of a run-on line. It means that one thought is taken over from one line to another, in this sonnet from 13 to line 14. This run-on line emphasizes the couplet.

The subject of this sonnet is the transitoriness of human life.

The first quatrain deals with four different concepts of time. In line one a clock is mentioned, thus this line is about minutes and hours, the shortest time units. The reader can feel the time ticking away, there is a movement towards death.

Line two centres around day and night. The image of the fight between light and dark, between life and death comes out very succinctly here. As mentioned above, the first line in this quatrain contains a break in the pattern when one looks at the metre. The word „barren“ has first a stressed and then an unstressed syllable, instead of an unstressed syllable at first and then a stressed one. The word „barren“ means „infertile“. This break in the pattern highlights the infertility of trees in the winter. The interruption in the sonnet implies the interruption of life.

The same happens in line three. It is about seasons. Death comes closer „*past prime*“.

The first quatrain ends with mentioning the end of human lifetime.

A progress can be seen in these four lines because the length of the time units grows line by line.

The second quatrain is about autumn and harvest time. It tells about trees losing their leaves and harvest time on the corn fields. Autumn in nature is

the preparation for winter. Winter is connected with death, therefore autumn means in this context growing old and facing death. Connection of human life and death can be seen very clearly. In the second quatrain, too, the movement is made towards death.

In the third quatrain, the reader is addressed: „*Then of thy beauty do I question make*“ (p. 14, l. 9). One could think that the reader should be made aware of the fact that beauty and life is transitory. Youth and beauty passes and will not stay forever. The idea of the cycle of life comes up in line 11: „*And die as fast as they see others grow.*“ There will still be human life after we die.

The three quatrains deal altogether with the aging of human life.

Images of nature are used throughout the sonnet to describe the human cycle of life.

Shakespeare uses a lot of metaphors in his sonnet. In line one, the ticking of a clock is a symbol for people's lifetime „ticking“ away. The day is described as „*brave*“ (p. 14, l. 2), it stands for the human youth. Harvest time stands for the aging human life. Two images, corn and human life, are mixed. The idea of the cycle of life becomes clear. This image is used in the second quatrain when the sheaves are tied together. That the sheave is „*borne on a bier*“ (p.14, l. 8) shows a connection to the human world. The ears of the corn are described as „*white and bristly beard*“ (p. 14, l. 9), an image of the human world.

An anaphor is used in line 12 and 13 of the sonnet. Both lines begin with the word „and“. This builds up tension. The tension dissolves in the last line when the conclusion is given.

Alliteration can also be found in the sonnet. It connects certain images, as in line one the words „count“ and „clock“, in line four the words „sable“ and „silvered“ and in line eight „borne“ and „bier“.

The colon at the end of the third quatrain implies a summary.

This summary is given in the couplet. This is where the reader finds the final conclusion of the sonnet. Aging and death is described as an inescapable

event (l.13). Time is personalized, nobody can „*brave him when he takes the hence.*“ (p. 14, l. 14). Nobody can escape from time ticking away. The only thing one can do is keep the cycle of life going. Having children is the only way to do this (l.14: „*save breed...*“). People can live on in their children.

