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3 March 2014

ENGL 4570

Paper 1 "Love and..."

Love, Race, and Sexuality in "Indissoluble Matrimony"

Rebecca West's short story "Indissoluble Matrimony" is about a man and his wife as they struggle through their vast differences in the way they conduct themselves. The story is told with a focus on George Silverton's thoughts of his wife and his marriage, leaving no room for reader-identification with his wife, Evadne, who has some black decent in her heritage. The main plot of the story begins with George and Evadne having an argument over whether she will speak at a Socialist event—George is Radicalist—causing Evadne to run off in search of relaxation. George follows Evadne thinking she has run off to meet another man and hoping he can get evidence to use in a divorce case, but eventually runs into her swimming alone. He gets angry and they fight again, and he resolves that he must kill her. After George believes he has drowned his wife, he goes back to his house, along the way contemplating what he will do now that she is dead. When he arrives at his house he finds Evadne asleep in his bed, and realizes that she must have just swam under and gone to shore, though the reader is lead to believe he imagined the whole thing. Through much of the story, there are several references to Evadne's race, in some ways portraying her as an animal, which he seems to blame on the "black blood" in her. George Silverton in "Indissoluble Matrimony" attributes his wife's sexuality, and therefore his lacking in love for her, to her difference in race.

This story is written so that we only hear George's thoughts, meaning that the reader only sees his side of the story, rather than allowing for Evadne's thoughts to seep through. Bearing that in mind, the story opens with a description of the room: "[w]hen George Silverton opened the front door he found that the house was not empty, for all its darkness. The spitting noise of the striking of damp matches and mild, growling exclamations of annoyance told him that his wife was trying to light the dining-room gas" (1). The description of the room with no light and his inability to see his wife alludes to her darkness, which is then confirmed when the narrator states that "she had black blood in her" (1). The narrator later states that she hums in "that uncanny, negro way of hers" (2), which is the first indication that he attributes her difference in the way she acts to her "black blood."

George describes Evadne as animalistic several times throughout the story: "...she seemed like a grotesquely patterned wild animal as she ran down to the lake" (8). Her grotesque patterns are created by the colored shines off her skin, something he only notices because she is dark and the moonlight reflects off her. What's interesting in this description, however, is that most people would think of shine reflecting off one's skin to be "sexy," but George is repulsed by it. At the end of the story the narrator described Evadne as "a great lusty creature" (13), this time attributing her animalness to not her race, but her sexuality, which he seems to attribute to her race anyway.

One of the first indications that George doesn't particularly like his wife or want to be married to her is when he describes their relationship in its younger days: "with loathing he

remembers how in the days of their engagement she used to gaze purely into his blinking eyes and with her unashamed kisses incite him to extravagant embraces. Now he cursed her for having obtained his spiritual revolution on false pretences” (3). Not only does the narrator describe George’s distaste for his wife with words such as “loathing,” “cursed,” and “false,” but he also describes her sexuality at the time to be almost too much for George, using words such as “unashamed” and “extravagant.” George not only loathingly remembers his experiences with Evadne, but he also thinks she was too forward in their earlier days and he goes on to analyze how her younger sexuality leaked into her current.

George Silverton makes it very clear in his statement of Evadne’s enjoyment in sexual things: “[y]ou’ve always been keen on kissing and making love, haven’t you, my precious? At first you startled me, you did! I didn’t know women were like that.’ From that morass he suddenly stepped on to a high peak of terror. Amazed to find himself sincere, he cried – ‘I don’t believe good women are’” (5)! George first points out to her that she does like these things that most women do not (or at least don’t admit to), which leads him to wonder implyingly if she might cheat on him, which makes him insecure. That he was “amazed to find himself sincere” indicates that he never truly thought of his wife sleeping with another man, and is surprised at the fear it strikes in him.

George Silverton’s various descriptions of his wife, Evadne, signal his distaste for her. It is very clear throughout the story that he doesn’t like her and wants to be rid of their marriage. His reasons for not liking her, though, seem to be connected with her race and sexuality directly.

After pointing out her black heritage, the narrator connects her to an animal, and furthermore a sensual animal who often acts on her animalistic sexual instincts, which George is constantly disapproving. In this story, George Silverton does not love his wife because she is sexual, which he considers to be directly related to her partially-black race.