Student Name

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English III (H)

Day Month Year

Article Review: “An Overview of ‘The Devil and Tom Walker’”

In her article “An Overview of ‘The Devil and Tom Walker,’” Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton focuses primarily on the allegorical nature of Washington Irving’s short story, published in 1824. Written not quite fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Irving’s story suggests that the author is not altogether pleased with the direction the young nation has gone. Piedmont-Marton notes that Irving spent much of his life overseas and wrote this particular story while living in England. Using a style of writing more like that of the British, Irving believed that the traditions of the Old World were better than the so-called progress of the new one.

One aspect of Irving’s allegory is the setting itself. The story occurs in New England during Colonial times, conjuring images of the strict Puritanical religion that Irving criticizes. He alludes to an Indian massacre and suggests that the people would rather “bury and forget old atrocities” (para. 6). Additionally, the dark forest and swampland through which Tom Walker travels represents that moral wilderness in which people often dwell. Piedmont-Marton also notes that Tom Walker travels this path as a short-cut, implying that people’s efforts to profit themselves by compromising their morals are corrupt.

Piedmont-Marton’s overview uncovers a deeper level of meaning to the story beyond a simple ghost story warning against greed, the major theme of the story. A superficial reading of the story may stop at the level of the individual; however, Piedmont-Marton’s explanation of the historical context of the story and Irving’s personal views reveals that Irving’s criticism extends beyond the individual to the American culture as a whole. Irving does not subscribe to the Romantic view of America as an Eden; he uses the dark setting and the literal character of “Old Scratch” not only to create a creepy mood but also to reflect the corruption inherent in a society led astray by materialism.

Additionally, Piedmont-Marton’s explanation of Irving’s use of the fictional narrator demonstrated that this device was not merely a creative technique but a device Irving used for specific purposes. The narrator creates distance between the inventor of the story, who may be too superstitious, and the author of the story, who may wish to appear more realistic; the story may seem unrealistic, but this concern is inconsequential. The readers do not have to accept that Tom Walker literally met the devil in the forest; rather, their meeting can hold significance as a representation of humans’, or society’s, as a whole, openness to corruption when the deal appears to offer personal gain.

All in all, Piedmont-Marton’s essay moves beyond a mere plot summary to a brief discussion of some of the more sophisticated elements of the story, such as allegory and satire. Much more could be written on each of these topics; however, as the title of the article suggests, this “overview” offers an enlightening glimpse into the story’s aspects that make it an American classic.

Works Consulted

Piedmont-Marton, Elisabeth. "An overview of ‘The Devil and Tom Walker.’" *Short Stories for Students*. Detroit: Gale, 2002. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 12 Oct. 2014.