

A Heart Turned to Stone

Margaret Atwood's "Stone Mattress" could be considered distinctive in its portrayal of societies dominated by patriarchy through the lens of a woman with deteriorated mental health resulting from having been sexually assaulted as a budding teenager. At first glance this short story may simply seem to be following a serial killer as she cleverly plans her next murder, but through careful analysis and the use of a moral and philosophical literary approach it becomes clear that Atwood intends to teach her audience the unavoidable effects of growing up female in an environment absent of feminism. As the main character, Verna enables readers of any background to understand certain common spread experiences shared by the generation of women who lived to see both the before and after of the feminist movement. It is deep within Verna's tragic backstory that Atwood subtly urges society to place high priority on ensuring that women aren't just treated equally to men, but more importantly that they be systematically-viewed as equals. When examined more closely it becomes apparent that although surviving rape was shattering in and of itself, what truly ripped Verna's subconscious apart was the grotesque inability of those around her to recognize her as a victim of sexual assault.

The aid of Verna's memories placed perfectly in conjunction to the unfolding present day tale illustrates how she was overly sheltered and stuck in a small town during the 1950s, pre-feminism. As the details surrounding her assault pour out it is obvious that Verna is continuously at war with herself and her feelings over the past, stuck between two vastly opposite trails of thought. On one hand she seems to be attempting to persuade herself that what happened to her was no big deal because of how much time has gone by since, as Atwood puts it, "Shouldn't she let bygones be bygones? Boys will be boys. Aren't they all just hormone puppets at that age? Why should any human being be judged by something that was done in another time, so long ago

it might be centuries?” There is a reoccurrence of this notion when Verna refers to her rape as “Paleolithic to still feel wounded by any of it” which forces the reader to wonder if she keeps on using these words and phrases to further repress this single recollection, hoping it might feel as though it happened more than a lifetime ago rather than during her childhood. This attitude leaves a sense of something familiar to the current universal truth in how men’s actions are still perceived today; essentially carrying a belief that, as a collective whole, the majority of males are incapable of evolving past the mannerisms of cavemen who can only understand sexuality as something almost entirely instinctual and out of their control. Although some things in this regard have changed over the course of the last fifty years, nothing can ever justify what so many women have suffered through up to that point and even still to this day. In her realization of how the times have reformed, Verna becomes conscious of the fact that if society was then like it is now she could have gone straight to the police and Bob would have been put in prison especially because she was underage, “but there had been no true words for the act then: rape was what occurred when some maniac jumped on you out of a bush, not when your formal date drove you to a side road in the mangy twice-cut forest surrounding a tin-pot mining town and told you to drink up like a good girl and then took you apart, layer by torn layer.” Now, on the other hand, it seems Verna is displaying a growing need for retribution to make up for the fact that these modern luxuries were not afforded to her as she begins questioning why exactly it was that she had to experience all of the actual negative consequences from the act. Atwood narrates “Why should she be the only one to have suffered for that night? She’d been stupid, granted, but Bob had been vicious. And he’d gone scot-free, without consequences or remorse, whereas her entire life had been distorted.” Successfully overcoming such trauma at an incredibly vulnerable age requires, at the very least, the love and support provided by family and friends and Verna was

left helplessly with the exact opposite. It is perhaps most disturbing that her town chastises her for having sex yet no one, not even her own mother, acknowledges the fact that an older male provided alcohol to a minor and proceeded to take advantage of that minor. Arguably this sheltered mentality was given an excess of room to grow through Verna being forced to carry out her resulting pregnancy at a church-run Home for Unwed Mothers where once again she was treated like a delinquent rather than the victim she really was. She, along with all the other inhabitants, were continuously reminded by the nuns in charge that “what had happened to them was justly deserved... because of their depraved behavior, but it was never too late to redeem themselves through hard work and self-restraint. They were told that they should consider it a miracle of God if any decent man ever wanted to marry them.” Beyond the group’s sorrows, Verna specifically recalls a snide remark from one of the personnel after she survives a painful labor leaving her with complications and scarring, “...but it was all for the best, she overheard one brisk nurse telling another, because those sort of girls made unfit mothers anyway.” Verna’s remembrance of the mental abuse she received while residing in the Home clearly exemplifies why she became who she is at her introduction in “Stone Mattress.” Witnessing such behaviors at her age from grown, seemingly trustworthy adults lead to her never even attempting a “normal” family life, which is evident in her decision not to return home but rather to run away and live carelessly because “if she was as trashy and worthless as everyone seemed to think, she might as well act that way.” However, with this newfound defiant attitude Verna’s only means to access an education was to receive it as compensation for regularly having sex with an older, married man whom she implies taught her many things beyond what school could teach her explaining that “she learned a lot from him, how to walk in high heels being the least of it- and pulled herself up and out.” This could perhaps be the beginning of Verna repressing her

memories of Bob with an attempt to replace them through educating herself and finally feeling a sense of control over her body in dictating how and who she will have sex with.

Examining Verna's present life after her vivid flashbacks establishes her actions and personality as almost completely shaped by how she wants men to perceive her, and what she can justify to herself as justice for the traumatic experiences she survived. Despite claiming from the start that this vacation is for her to relax and ignore men, as soon as she meets with her peers she immediately begins to "ear-tag the male members of the flock," and reassure herself about her appearance and quality flirting skills. Atwood's depiction of Verna as subconsciously obsessed with men's attention to her can be picked up in bits and pieces from the lies she tells about different meanings behind her name to seem more appealing to different kinds of men, to being overly concerned with her diet as she lines up to get her first meal of the trip and "...won't eat much of it, not in public: a piggy, gobbling woman is not a creature of mysterious allure." It is through this continual façade that Verna became gifted at seeking out and marrying various wealthy men, each time aiming for those of particularly bad health above anything else. Murdering these types of men with her "accidental" procedures is possibly both an outlet for her stifled aggression over being raped and justifiable as she believes "she did those men a favor: surely better a swift exit than a lingering decline." It is at this point that one could argue for Verna's character as simply being heartless, but at the same time how could she ever be certain of what real love was after never given the chance to experience or understand it herself? Atwood describes Verna's thought process saying "When it came to love, wasn't believing the same as the real thing? Such beliefs drain your strength and cloud your vision. She's never allowed herself to be skewered in that tiger trap again." Thus it can be concluded that Verna associates love with weakness; if she were to fall in love she would once again be weak just like

she was when Bob took advantage of her. Whereas Bob, in a way, rekindles the raging fire within Verna because neither his mental health nor any part of his life was affected by what happened that night fifty years ago as evident in the fact that he ended up with his college sweetheart, raising children, and now having grandchildren. But even after discovering so much about him, Verna still gives herself added personal justification in “making things fair” by allowing Bob two chances of escape. If he recognizes her spontaneously she won’t kill him, or if he recognizes her after she reveals who she is and sincerely apologizes then she won’t kill him. These ultimatums prove to be pointless during the final, isolated interaction between Verna and Bob as his sole reaction is to smirk at her in the same way he did years and years ago which brings to her mind “a vivid picture of Bob capering triumphantly in the snow [after raping her], sniggering like a ten-year-old. Herself wrecked and crumpled.” Bob’s still unaltered temperament after decades of opportunities to come to terms with his past actions expose truth behind the gender roles still forced onto individuals today. Specifically in regards to sex there remains a communal reoccurrence of males raised with the belief that such deeds are inconsequential and revolve around “just having fun” while their female counterparts are only allowed a much more narrow perspective in which an emotional emphasis is attached alongside the idea of purity being the “right” choice.

Verna’s ability to rationalize murder is unreal, and this lack of lucidity was produced uniquely through the mixture of being raped by someone she trusted immediately followed by being subjected to a society that continually glorified her rapist while simultaneously ignoring her as a victim of sexual assault. Her capacity to kill without remorse, as calm as ever in all parts of the process, was debatably learned as a result from Bob effortlessly “killing” who she was as Atwood explains “The Verna of the day before [the rape] had died, and a different Verna had

solidified in her place: stunted, twisted, mangled.” The way in which “Stone Mattress” is written, with these aforementioned reoccurring details, puts an almost required duty on society as a whole to reevaluate how men and women are separately viewed. Margaret Atwood influences her readers to think about the difference it could make raising all genders with a serious understanding of sex and sexual consent. The general public must continue to fight for moving away from coercing the idea that sexually active males are just “boys being boys” whereas females indulging in the same pleasure are promiscuous and “should know better.” In addition, high importance is placed on consistent action towards rapists receiving full and just punishments and towards putting an end to such victim-blaming mindsets as “her skirt was too short,” or “well, she was drinking.” Above all else it is crucial that, instead, victims are given the appropriate support and trauma aftercare. Had Verna been fortunate enough to experience such treatment, conceivably with time she could have grown into a stable young woman and lived a normal life.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Stone Mattress - The New Yorker." The New Yorker. 19 Dec. 2011. Web. 19 Sept. 2015. <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/12/19/stone-mattress>>.