

**“Sad and happy at once...”:
Intolerance and Hypocrisy in Shirley Ann Grau’s “The Homecoming”**

by Derek W. Foster

Shirley Ann Grau on writing: “In brief, I spend half my time trying to learn the secrets of other writers—to apply them to the expression of my own thoughts.”

Shirley Ann Grau’s works deal with the South, notably Louisiana, and reveal the contemporary complexities and similarities of the female character’s search for self. Pamela Parker argues that as a Southern woman, Grau reveals the tragedy of the resuscitated myth of Southern woman as Southern belle (1-2). The search for the self should ideally lead to a distinctly feminine consciousness. Grau’s female protagonists’ attempts to realize their feminine selves are thwarted by their conventional Southern society (1-2). As a result, the female’s search for self suggests that her choices and decisions have sufficient causes. Therefore, the female’s fate begins to appear predetermined by both her real and her fictional self. By showing the reader how to fail in the search for autonomy does Grau suggest simultaneously how to succeed—to be “[...] sad and happy at once [...] (162)” as Grau describes the protagonist in “The Homecoming.” In her short story, Grau creates an autonomous individual who understands that intuition and reason complement one another.

Grau’s “The Homecoming” (from her 1973 collection of short stories *The Wind Shifting West*) continues in the same fashion as do so many of her other works, characters fighting to keep away from the constricting nature of domestic life. While many critics consider Grau as feminist or regional, the author herself objects to the label of a “[...] ‘Southern woman writer’ for what she considers to be its pejorative connotation” (Spaniol 457). However, so fascinating about Grau’s work is that her themes fail to circumscribe gender. Yes, while many of her works have a uniquely feminine

ideology at their core, Grau stresses the individual more than sexuality, which we see in “The Homecoming.” The short story is a thought provoking tale of Susan, an adolescent-turned-young-adult who grapples with her reactions to a young soldier’s death. In this piece of short fiction, Grau makes evident her “[...] precision of [...] language, [...] depiction of nature, and [...] ability to arrive at a story from divergent points of view” (Spaniol 457). Vacillating between Susan, her mother, and the townspeople’s points of view, Grau narrates Susan’s refusal to allow Harold Carter’s memory to become part of her own existence. Grau recounts: “She drank her tea slowly; she was sad and happy at once. Harold was a young man who had died. He didn’t leave a memory behind, he didn’t leave anything. He was just gone and there wasn’t even a mark at the place where he had been” (162). Such a sparse description of Susan’s feelings toward Harold and his memory may seem bleak to the reader—that Susan does not even care about Harold. Nevertheless, as Grau makes evident later in the short story, when Susan comes into her own, her removal of his memory from her reality serves as a sort of spiritual exile. In doing so, Susan feels that she *must* shut him out from her memory. Susan is more than just a southern belle. Rather, she develops her own feminine conscience where she feels that she does have sufficient cause to do as she does.

Susan’s plight is typical of Grau’s fiction, where the author resolutely examines evil and isolation among American Southerners, notable Louisianians. What we see as we read and consider Grau’s fiction is that, the more the taboo the subject, the more Grau makes her own social commentary about the issue, just as she does in “The Homecoming.” Through Susan’s character, Grau examines the effects that society can have on the

human person—the individual’s *personal* reaction to his or her own society. Grau tells us as readers that the townspeople have gathered at her mother’s house in standard Southern tradition to help Susan and her mother “mourn” Harold’s loss. Grau notes: “Susan heard them come, heard their voices echo in the high-ceilinged hall, heard the boards creak with unaccustomed weight. She could follow their movements in the sounds of the old boards” (152). Critics have often hailed Grau’s usage of scenery and of place as a hallmark of her style. In a 1987 interview with John Canfield, Grau states, ““But I think I probably started out in the fashion of the late ‘40s and ‘50s as more or less a regionalist with heavy, heavy emphasis on place as dominating character”” (par. 4). As author and artist, Grau “[...] clearly believes in the importance of place and its ability to reveal, enrich, and make character credible” (Pelazzi 51). Anthony Bukoski in his 1987 article “The Burden of Home: Shirley Ann Grau’s Fiction” (considered to be the polemical discussion of setting in Grau’s fiction) argues that “because in Grau’s fiction the houses that shelter inhabitants are so regularly a party to, and a symbol of, the inhabitants’ psychical, emotional, and physical distress, one must conclude that her patterns of imagery and symbolism, or at least her house symbols, derive from the subconscious” (181-182). Susan is indeed a product of her environment, yet she refuses to allow the conventional ways of her town to dictate how she should act, as well as *what* she should believe. In many ways, Susan is just as strong as the house in which she lives. By shutting Harold out of her memory, and physically retreating into the house, Susan symbolically retreats to her subconscious, where she is truly “at home” with herself. The reader is able to meet an entirely changed protagonist who has fought against the constricting regimen of stereotypical domestic life.

Grau informs us that Susan and Harold had just met each other at the local high school prom, just weeks before he left for Vietnam. Describing

their friendship *per se*, Grau writes, “She hadn’t even known him very well. He was just a nice boy from school [...] He was just a boy she knew who went in the army” (155-156). Set in the stereotypical northern Louisiana town, the story chronicles rampant indiscretion, much to Susan’s disdain. Susan’s intolerance for such hypocrisy lies at the very core of “The Homecoming.” The lack of privacy drives Susan to feel as she does. Although for most of the short story Susan attempts to deal with her struggles internally, Grau as author invites her to confront the source of her angst. In doing so, Grau provides a picture of a uniquely feminine consciousness where Susan deals with a people whom she would rather avoid. Grau notes that Susan’s black dress, true to mourning protocol, suddenly “[...] was too hot and too tight. She was perspiring all over it. She would ruin it, and it was her good dress. ‘I’m so hot,’ she said. ‘I’ve got to change to something lighter”” (154). Her reaction as to how her community interprets what she *should* do—how she *should* act—drives her to question what *she* should do—not the people around her. In doing so, Susan comes to understand her own struggle. She learns that she should follow *her* own intuition. *Her* sense of logic—complemented with her uniquely feminine intuition—allows her to become the independent person whom she desires to be, free of domestic constraint.

Susan is a powerful female since she relies upon herself. The relationship between Susan and her mother exists as one of most defining elements in Susan’s eventual refusal to allow domestic life to entrap her. Grau makes known to the reader that Susan’s own mother had lost her own husband due to war, yet she was able to reconcile her own loss. Grau’s usage of Susan and her mother as foils draws the reader into their own experience and allows them to understand what Susan goes through. Susan tells her mother, “‘I’ve nothing to control”” (154), to which her mother politely replies, “‘Are you alright?”” (154). Susan sarcastically replies with “‘I’m fine, [...] I’m great”” (154). The reality

that she is her mother's daughter lingers with Susan, much to her chagrin. At one point in the short story, as Susan is learning to work through her own feelings, Susan questions her own actions—should she mourn Harold's loss? Grau narrates Susan's struggle: "It was a foolish thing to think. Very foolish. She never seemed to have the proper thoughts or feelings. Her mother now, she had the right thoughts, everybody knew they were right. But Susan didn't..." (154-155). Susan's weakness in her character allows her to develop into the free-thinking individual she so much desires to be. Grau narrates that Susan and Harold really had not talked that much that night at the prom as they danced in the arms of each other. In other words, Susan did not *know* Harold; he was not a part of her life, of her existence in the natural world. Susan admits that she cannot even remember what Harold looked like, much less admit any kind of affection for him. How can she love a man whom she did not know? Therefore, to Susan's notion, feeling regret for his loss would result in her being nothing shy of hypocritical, an idea of which she loathes. Hypocrisy and intolerance bother Susan so much that she would rather not even exist than to allow herself to fall prey to such attitudes. In fact, as Susan passes through the hall, looking at her fellow community members who have gathered at her mother's home, she bluntly states, "I'm just passing through" (Grau 158) as she makes her way to the kitchen to fix her cup of tea. Again, she is retreating from the community. This psychological composition that we encounter through Susan's first-person account of *her* story—a very much private story at that—aligns her with other females in Grau's fiction.

As Susan journeys toward her own epiphany that her own intuition and reason can complement each other, Grau invites her to confront and to work through her naïveté. In a scene in which Susan confronts the townspeople who have gathered, Susan replies to a comment, "All the young men are so brave." Susan replies, "No [...] not Harold.

They weren't brave, they just got caught" (159). Susan makes her own informed decision as she tenaciously maintains her sense of independence *because* she learns to cope with other people who are indifferent to her. Susan's maintaining her independence merits rewards for her, which we as readers come to understand by the end of the short story.

Because of his death—as well as cuppled with the fact that Susan's mother had lost her own husband because of war—the townspeople opine that Susan should mourn Harold's loss, regardless. Grau narrates Susan's descent to the first floor where the community is gathered: "On this particular afternoon, as Susan came downstairs—slowly, reluctantly, hesitating at each step—she glanced toward the sound of men's voices [...] Looking through the screen in the light, she saw no faces, just the glaring dazzle of white shirts" (153). However, in dealing with her own need for autonomy, for privacy—in addition to her own intolerance for the actions of her fellow Louisianians—Susan for a moment questions if she *should* feel loss. Grau narrates: "And this whole thing now, her mourning for Harold, it was wrong. All wrong. She hadn't even known him very well(155)." While Susan's actions here may unnerve the reader, this seemingly epiphanic moment is crucial for Grau's protagonist in "The Homecoming." What the reader then notices here is that Grau as author fashions her characters to be real and raw as they deal with the community, their natural world, around them. We as readers are able to meet a "new" world in "The Homecoming," where we can encounter a literary natural world that regulates the lives of the characters within it (Pearson 48).

As an individual, Susan lives in tune with her own nature, for she allows her own intuition—her sense of self—to guide both her principles *and* her convictions. Through no fault of her own, Susan simultaneously falls victim to the violence of nature in dealing with her community, but she

heroically defies its destructive forces. At the end of the short story, Susan whispers, “Good-bye [...] You poor bastard” (Grau), and proceeds to go back into the house—her safehaven—as she resolutely shuts the door behind her. Grau’s protagonist returns to that nature with which she is most comfortable, that which she knows best. In her house—her refuge—Susan can be free to be herself, where she does not have to worry about what other people think, say, and do. Grau narrates:

I’m beginning not to mind, she thought, but it’s still all mixed up. He was the sort of boy I could have married, but I didn’t even know him. And that’s lucky for me. Otherwise I might be like my mother. His being dead doesn’t really change anything for me. I’ll get married after a while to somebody as good as him or even better.... (162)

At this point in the story, Susan becomes an informed observer of life. And, thus, exemplified best in the metaphor of Susan’s closing the door and returning to that which is “home” for her, Grau’s usage of setting as symbol is central to “The Homecoming.” For Susan, the “homecoming” is more than just a bittersweet memory of a dead soldier, where she is “sad and happy at once.” Rather, it is her ability to accept beyond question the august reality that intuition and reason complement each other. Thus, we as readers can appreciate Grau’s technique in this short story. Weaving together social commentary, symbolism, and point of view, Grau gives us an example of short fiction successfully blended with her own unique sense of female imagery in a rich Louisiana world of detail.

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