

The Painted Door



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SINCLAIR ROSS

Sinclair Ross was born and raised in a rural part of Canada's Saskatchewan province. His parents divorced when he was young, and he lived with his mother on a series of farms until he left school at the age of sixteen and took a job at a bank. Ross continued to work for the same bank for over 30 years, moving to the larger city of Winnipeg and eventually cosmopolitan Montreal. He also spent four years stationed in London during World War II. His most famous work is the novel *As For Me and My House*, originally published in 1941. Although that piece did not initially receive much public attention, Ross had won several awards for his earlier short stories and by the mid-1950s was widely recognized as a significant writer of Canadian fiction. His writing is known for its nuanced, powerful portrayals of the reality of life in small Canadian towns. Ross suffered from Parkinson's disease and died in Vancouver, Canada at the age of 88.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Depression began in the United States in 1929, when a huge stock market crash threw the global economy into chaos, and continued through the 1930s. Canada suffered severely during this period, with extremely high rates of unemployment. Farmers like John and Ann struggled due to the drop in price of the crops they depended on for survival. "The Painted Door" was published just after the worst of the Depression had passed, at a time when the people of rural Canada continued to struggle but could begin to dream of a better future. John's focus on saving money would not have been unusual for someone in his position, having only recently emerged from a period of extreme, widespread economic hardship.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

This story is an example of Canadian "Prairie fiction." This genre of writing appeared in the early twentieth century, and was characterized by realistic, highly observant and unsentimental portrayals of life in the farming communities of the Canadian prairies. Frederick Philip Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* are influential examples of this genre, as are Sinclair Ross's novels *As For Me and My House* and *Sawbones Memorial*. John Steinbeck's [The Grapes of Wrath](#) is a very famous example of Prairie fiction from the United States, as are many of Willa Cather's books, including [O Pioneers!](#) and [My Antonia](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Painted Door
- **When Written:** 1939
- **Where Written:** Saskatchewan, Canada.
- **When Published:** 1939
- **Literary Period:** Modern Canadian Literature
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction – Short Story
- **Setting:** Saskatchewan, Canada
- **Climax:** Ann's infidelity
- **Antagonist:** Steven
- **Point of View:** Third-person, focalized through Ann

EXTRA CREDIT

Movie short. "The Painted Door" was adapted into an Oscar-nominated short film in 1984.

In the closet. Ross is one of Canada's most famous gay authors, although he kept his sexuality hidden for most of his life.



PLOT SUMMARY

It's the middle of winter on the Canadian prairies, and a storm is brewing. John, a farmer, tells his wife Ann that he is going to check on his aging father before the blizzard hits. This means walking five miles each way over hill and dale in the deep snow, and Ann doesn't want him to go. She doesn't want to be left alone to care for the animals, and she's worried about his safety. John is kind but firm, insisting that he has to go. He offers to stop by their friend Steven's house on his way, saying that he will tell Steven to come keep Ann company, and join the two of them for supper and a game of cards when he returns in the evening.

John and Ann have been married for seven years. John is big, strong and quiet. He adores his pretty, lively wife, and wants to give her all the nice things she could ever want. He works day and night and refuses to hire a helping hand so that they can pay off the mortgage on the farm, move to a bigger house, and Ann can have some pretty clothes. Ann loves her husband, but she gets bored and lonely living on their farm. She knows that it will take many years before their mortgage is paid off, and she wishes they could have some fun and enjoy each other's company while they are still young. She feels guilty for not appreciating all the things John does for her, and yet she cannot help but feel trapped.

When John leaves, Ann sets about tidying up the house for

Steven's visit. The snowstorm outside quickly reveals itself to be just as violent and extreme as she had suspected. Ann **paints the bedroom door** to keep herself busy and tries not to think about her frustration at being left home alone. She begins to wonder if John will really return that night, considering how bad the storm is looking.

Steven arrives in the afternoon, and Ann is overwhelmed by his presence. Although she has known him for almost as long as she has known John, this evening feels different. He is handsome and talkative, and she sees him as the opposite of everything that frustrates her about her husband. Steven takes care of feeding the animals, and then they sit down to eat and play cards.

Steven insists that John will spend the night at his father's house rather than return to join them, but Ann protests. She says no blizzard has ever kept John away from her, but it's unclear whether she is trying to convince Steven or trying to convince herself. As the tension between them grows, it is clear that Steven wants to sleep with Ann and that Ann is open to the possibility. Although they never speak openly about their intentions, eventually Ann decides that John will be away all night and sleeps with Steven.

Ann spends a restless, guilty night awake while Steven sleeps soundly. She imagines that she sees John, then wakes up to find it's just the shadow cast by the fire. Ann realizes that although Steven is attractive, she loves John and would never consider cheating on him again. She silently re-commits herself to their marriage, feeling grateful for the life they share.

The next morning, John is found frozen to death just a little ways beyond the house. The neighbors decide that he must have gotten confused by the wind and wandered past his house, before getting caught in a snowdrift. Everyone is surprised that he even attempted to walk home in the blizzard, but Ann says that she knew in her heart that he always came home no matter what. When Ann is left alone with his body, she notices that on one of his hands is a little smear of the same white paint she used to paint the bedroom door.

decision to cheat on John. When faced with the idea of leaving him, she realizes that she loves her husband and she will be happiest sharing a life with him. Unfortunately, John discovers her infidelity in the night and kills himself before Ann has a chance to make amends.

John – John is Ann's husband. He is a strong, quiet farmer who thinks he is lucky to have a wife like Ann. He has a single goal in life: to provide Ann with the material comforts he thinks she deserves. Because of this, he works long hours and pinches pennies year after year so that he can pay off the mortgage on the farm and buy them a bigger house—but at the same time, all his devoted work means he doesn't pay much attention to Ann in the present, and doesn't notice her unhappiness. John is unfailingly loyal and self-sacrificing, and sees only the best in people. When he returns home late at night to find his wife in bed with their friend Steven, he chooses to quietly kill himself by walking back out into the blizzard rather than confront them. Even in his death, John is self-sacrificing: he is careful to make his suicide look like an accident, which means that Ann's infidelity remains her secret to keep.

Steven – Steven is Ann and John's friend and neighbor. Ann and John both enjoy Steven's company—they see him fairly often for a game of cards or a shared meal. Ann describes him as young, good-looking, sociable, and altogether very different from her hulking, silent husband. It is at John's suggestion that Steven comes over to keep Ann company while John is away for the day. When he arrives, Steven seems very confident, even arrogant, and initiates a subtle flirtation with Ann. He seems to be aware that she is frustrated and lonely, and successfully convinces her that the blizzard outside will keep John away for the night. Steven is presented as a reflection of Ann's desires, always in contrast to John. Steven never directly states that he wants to sleep with Ann, and he expresses no anxiety or guilt around their transgression. Although he is the catalyst for the action which destroys their marriage, it is the tension between John and Ann's personalities and desires which drive the events of the story.

The Neighbors – John, Ann and Steven live on very isolated farms, but they do have neighbors who live close enough to be familiar faces. Ann refers to them as a group, without discussing any particular names or personalities. At the end of the story, the neighbors are described discussing John's death. Their comments confirm that his death looks like a tragic accident, and that it was foolish of him to try to come home with the **double wheel around the moon** in the sky.



CHARACTERS

Ann – Ann is John's wife. The two of them have been married for seven years, and live together on a farm. Ann is youthful and energetic. Although she loves her husband and appreciates how hard he works, she dislikes the repetitive, isolated nature of life as a farmer's wife. At the beginning of the story and until after she has slept with Steven, Ann demonstrates a strong internal conflict. On the one hand, she thinks that John is a good husband and that she should be grateful for the things she has. On the other hand, she is restless and feels that she is wasting the best years of her life working to pay off their mortgage. After she sleeps with Steven, Ann quickly regrets her



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LOYALTY AND SACRIFICE

The characters in “The Painted Door” are defined by their loyalties and the sacrifices they make for the people they love. John is deeply loyal to his wife

Ann, and he expresses this by working hard year after year in the hopes of providing her with a better life someday. Ann has been loyal to John throughout the seven years of their marriage, but she secretly resents some of the sacrifices that being married to him has required of her, particularly the social isolation of their farming life. For John, sacrifice is the ultimate expression of love and loyalty. Ann understands the necessity of some sacrifice, but she sees it as a necessary evil and something which makes it more difficult to remain loyal to her husband.

Because of the sacrifices he makes for a better future, John unintentionally drives Ann away from him. John is too focused on the idea of saving money for their future to see that she is unhappy in the present. When Ann feels she can no longer stand the sacrifices required of her marriage to John, she commits an extreme act of disloyalty by sleeping with Steven. Ann’s attempt to “have it all” by remaining married to John while exploring the excitement of Steven ends in a harsh reality check. In the end, Ross shows us that loyalty always involves a sacrifice of some kind. Each of the characters must give something up to hold onto whatever they feel is most important. When Ann betrays her husband, she gains the attentions of Steven and the possibility of a more exciting life, but she loses the love and security of her marriage. When John kills himself, he gives Ann the freedom she seemed to want and avoids all conflict with her, but he loses everything in the process.



MEN AND WOMEN

Although Ross does not explicitly condone or criticize the traditional gender roles that define his characters’ lives, the tension between male and

female perspectives is a central source of conflict in the story. Ann feels that as a woman, she should be grateful and happy just to have a kind husband who provides for her material needs. She feels guilty for wanting a more varied, entertaining existence. John, for his part, does not understand Ann as an individual. Instead, he treats her the way he imagines that a woman would like to be treated. He believes that she will be happy if he is a hard-working breadwinner and can eventually buy her nice things, despite Ann expressing that she would rather enjoy their youth together.

The tension between the way Ann is supposed to act as farmer’s wife and the way she actually feels causes her to bottle

up her feelings of frustration and resentment. John’s traditional understanding of gender roles prevents him from seeing how unhappy his wife has become. When Ann turns to a physical relationship with Steven, she is seeking comfort by trying on a different version of stereotypical femininity and embracing a different version of stereotypical masculinity—the confident, handsome man instead of the hardworking, loyal one. Instead of acting like a perfect, self-sacrificing wife, she temporarily acts like a seductive sexual object. Unfortunately, she does not feel fully satisfied in either role, or with either man. In the end, the strict gender roles which John and Ann feel they must fulfill are what prevents them from communicating effectively to resolve their differences.



ISOLATION VS. CONNECTION

“The Painted Door” takes place in a very isolated physical environment. Personal connections in this kind of harsh, rural setting are not something to be

taken for granted. Ann is lonely in their little farmhouse, and dreams of going to local dances or of having friends over to play cards. In order to care for his aging father and make sure Ann has company during a storm, John must walk many miles in a raging snowstorm. Maintaining any kind of connection requires extreme sacrifice.

In the end, personal connections are revealed to be subjective and fleeting. No matter how strong we believe our personal relationships to be, Ross suggests, ultimately we live and die alone. John chooses to visit his father rather than stay home with Ann, which results in him losing her forever. Ann chooses the brief comfort of sleeping with Steven over her relationship with John, which results in her losing her husband forever. Ann’s treasured friendship with Steven is likely to have been destroyed as well, because she chose her desire for a physical partner over her need to maintain their card-playing, meal-sharing non-sexual relationship. The wild isolation of the prairie is ready and waiting to claim any relationship, even one as close and established as Ann and John’s marriage.



TIME AND AGING

For Ann, her awareness of time passing is torturous. It always moves either too slowly or too quickly for her. She feels that she is constantly

waiting for the next season to come, and constantly waiting for each year to pass so that she and John will be a little closer to paying off the mortgage on the farm and being able to enjoy their life together. Ann sees herself as young, but feels that she will be too old to enjoy nice clothes and a big house by the time John has saved enough money to buy her these things.

Because Ann feels trapped by the passage of time, she takes many small actions in an effort to control it. She **paints an old doorframe** in an effort to make it new, and sleeps with Steven

in an effort to feel young and free. Nothing she does manages to change the relentless march of the clock and calendar, however. She knows the paint will crack and peel, and isn't enough to really make the house new anyways. Her night with Steven leaves her feeling guilty and sad, doing nothing to hasten the arrival of spring or a paid-off mortgage.

Both Ann and John focus so much on the future, each in their own way, that they fail to make a life for themselves in the present. The only character who seems to live fully in the present is Steven. He is only interested in enjoying a night next to Ann, and is unconcerned with the future consequences of his actions—however selfish or immoral this might be. The tragedy portrayed in “The Painted Door” shows us that the future is never certain and can disappear in an instant. Relying on the possibility of future happiness only ends in disappointment, and it is through living in the present (no matter how bleak and brutal it may seem) that we can find joy.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE DOUBLE WHEEL AROUND THE MOON

The night before the story takes place, a “double wheel” appeared around the moon. This double wheel (which is usually caused by ice crystals high in the atmosphere) is taken by all of the characters to represent a coming storm. The “storm” it predicts, then, is not only the actual blizzard, but also the dramatic events in the story which end in John's death and the destruction of a marriage. Ann at first tries to use the double wheel to convince John that it is too dangerous to leave the house, then to convince herself that he won't come home. At the end of the story, the neighbors are surprised that John left the house even though he saw the double wheel. John's disregard for the double wheel is representative of his blindness to the problems in his marriage, but also his dogged devotion to Ann. Likewise, Ann's obsessive desire to believe that John will pay attention to the double wheel represents her inability to recognize the extent of the disconnect between her and her husband.



THE PAINTED DOOR

The painted door of the story's title represents Ann's desire for both control and excitement in her life. Ann wishes that she could have new, pretty things and live a more exciting life, but she feels unable to do anything to make that happen. She paints the bedroom door when John leaves her home alone to keep herself busy, and to make their little

house seem new and exciting. This seems to work at first, but later she acknowledges that the weather is too cold which means the paint won't dry nicely, and that it has only distracted her from her boredom for a short amount of time. When first she, then John smudges the paint, it not only provides a crucial plot point to the story (as the paint from the door on John's hand shows that he *did* come home and see Ann in bed with Steven) but is also representative of moments in which the true nature of their marriage and their feelings for each other is revealed.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dell Books edition of *Great Canadian Short Stories* published in 1980.

The Painted Door Quotes

“You said yourself we could expect a storm. It isn't right to leave me here alone. Surely I'm as important as your father.” He glanced up uneasily, then drinking off his coffee tried to reassure her. “But there's nothing to be afraid of—even supposing it does start to storm.”

Related Characters: John, Ann (speaker)

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The roots of John and Ann's troubles are evident in this brief exchange. John has made what he feels is a pragmatic, self-sacrificing choice to check on his elderly father. The coming storm compels him to make sure his loved ones are safe. Although Ann can see his reasoning, she cannot help but feel that he is abandoning her. Although she protests that she feels unsafe, what she really fears is not the snowstorm but the loneliness and boredom of spending a long day and evening alone in the house. John can see that she is unhappy, and that worries him, but he misunderstands the reason for her unhappiness. His intense focus on physical and material safety blinds him to her emotional turmoil.

●● In the clear, bitter light the long white miles of prairie landscape seemed a region strangely alien to life. Even the distant farmsteads she could see served only to intensify a sense of isolation. Scattered across the face of so vast and bleak a wilderness it was difficult to conceive them as a testimony of human hardihood and endurance. Rather they seemed futile, lost, to cower before the implacability of snow-swept earth and clear pale sun-chilled sky.

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), The Neighbors

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Someone else might see the glittering, pure snow outside the window as something beautiful. For Ann, however, it only serves as a reminder of how isolated and lonely her life is. The landscape reflects her emotional state. Much as the neighbors' distant houses seem like desperate, futile attempts to resist nature, John's endless self-sacrifice seems like a desperate, futile attempt to build a fulfilling, happy life for them as a couple. It is clear from this description that Ann does not love the place she lives, and that she does not have a significant support system or social life outside of her marriage. When John leaves her for the day, she feels as though he is abandoning her to face this bleak land alone.

●● She stood at the stove motionless a moment, then turned to him uneasily. "Will you shave then, John—now—before you go?" He glanced at her questioningly, and avoiding his eyes she tried to explain, "I mean—he may be here before you're back—and you won't have a chance then." "But it's only Steven—he's seen me like this—" "He'll be shaved, though—that's what I mean—and I'd like you to spend a little time on yourself." He stood up, stroking the heavy stubble on his chin. "Maybe I should—only it softens up the skin too much. Especially when I've got to face the wind."

Related Characters: John, Ann (speaker), Steven

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 98


Explanation and Analysis

Although Ann and John seem to speak comfortably and openly with each other, their communication is heavily restricted by their gendered perspectives. Ann tries to behave in ways she thinks are befitting of a good farmer's wife. When John fails to understand how his leaving makes her feel, she tries a different tactic to assuage her frustration. When she says she wants him to spend a little time on himself, she is trying to tell him that she wishes they could relax and enjoy each other more in the present, instead of only focusing on practicalities and planning for a distant future. Yet Ann feels that if she were to express her frustration fully it would sound selfish and ungrateful, so she only hints at it by asking John to shave in preparation for Steven's company. John's practical, literal interpretation of her request completely misses this important subtext. This also foreshadows (perhaps in Ann's mind as well) the comparisons Ann will make later between Steven's boyish, youthful looks and John's weathered, bearded face.

●● "Warm and safe—I'm a fool. It's a good chance when he's away to paint. The day will go quickly. I won't have time to brood." Since November now the paint had been waiting warmer weather. The frost in the walls on a day like this would crack and peel it as it dried, but she needed something to keep her hands occupied, something to stave off the gathering cold and loneliness.

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), John

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Even when she is alone, Ann tries to make sure she is keeping up the role of the good wife. Painting the door and the rest of the kitchen is a way for her to keep herself busy, and also an attempt at bringing something fresh and new into their dull, repetitive home life. She knows that whatever distraction or pleasure the paint brings her will fade quickly, but she decides to paint anyways because she doesn't know what else to do. This is similar to her superficial attempts to get John to change by asking him to stay home or shave, when she knows that she has not addressed the deeper problem of their different wants and needs.

“It’s better with four, but at least we can talk. That’s all I need—someone to talk to. John never talks. He’s stronger—he doesn’t understand. But he likes Steven—no matter what the neighbors say. Maybe he’ll have him come again, and some other young people, too. It’s what we need, both of us, to help keep young ourselves...And then before we know it we’ll be into March. It’s cold still in March sometimes, but you never mind the same. At least you’re beginning to think about spring.”

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), The Neighbors, Steven, John

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ann acknowledges out loud the main source of her frustration. She knows that she is lonely and needs someone to talk to, but rather than see this as a legitimate need she identifies it as a weakness. She thinks John is “stronger” than she is because he doesn’t seem to get lonely. Ann’s hint that the neighbors gossip about John not liking Steven shows us that the neighbors are not a sufficient source of friendship and social life for Ann (and also perhaps suggests past tensions or jealousies). She sees them as part of her frustrations, not part of the solution. This is also an example of Ann attempting to control the passage of time. She thinks that the slow change of the seasons is to blame for her unhappiness, and focuses on the idea that spring will bring happiness.

For spring was drudgery again. John never hired a man to help him. He wanted a mortgage-free farm, then a new house and pretty clothes for her. Sometimes, because with the best of crops it was going to take so long to pay off anyway, she wondered whether they mightn’t better let the mortgage wait a little. Before they were worn out, before their best years were gone. It was something of life she wanted, not just a house and furniture; something of John, not pretty clothes when she would be too old to wear them. But John of course couldn’t understand. To him it seemed only right that she should have the pretty clothes—only right that he, fit for nothing else, should slave away fifteen hours a day to give them to her.

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), John

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Here the difference between Ann and John’s worldviews is made explicit. John is happy to work hard in the present as long as he knows that he is being responsible and saving up to give his wife a comfortable life in the future. Ann doesn’t mind making sacrifices, but she would rather enjoy her youth and keep working into middle age than work herself to the bone now and be “too old” to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Both John and Ann want the best for each other, and both of them are obsessively focused on the future. These features draw them together, but a fundamental difference in what makes them happy has driven them apart. This is further exacerbated by the gender roles that keep them from communicating—John assumes that Ann just wants a house, furniture, and “pretty clothes,” when she really wants “something of life” in the present.

But now, alone with herself in the winter silence, she saw the spring for what it really was. This spring—next spring—all the springs and summers still to come. While they grew old, while their bodies warped, while their minds kept shriveling dry and empty like their lives. “I mustn’t,” she said aloud again. “I married him—and he’s a good man. I mustn’t keep on this way. It will be noon before long, and then time to think about supper...”

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), John

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102


Explanation and Analysis

By now Ann cannot even manage to convince herself that the turning of the seasons will relieve her of her anguish. Just moments after she expresses excitement about the arrival of spring, she changes her mind. The future can hold no hope for her as long as it is just a chain of days exactly like those she is living out in the dull, stifling present. Ann does love John, and feels an intense loyalty to him. Unfortunately, she feels that she can only express this loyalty by repressing her own frustrations. Even though she has just said that the coming of spring reminds her that she is one season nearer to death, she tries to comfort herself by imagining that this particular day, at least, will pass quickly.

●● She was young still, eager for excitement and distractions; and John's steadfastness rebuked her vanity, made her complaints seem weak and trivial. She went on fretfully, "If he'd listen to me sometimes and not be so stubborn we wouldn't be living still in a house like this. Seven years in two rooms—seven years and never a new stick of furniture... There—as if another coat of paint could make it different anyway."

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), John

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Because of the stereotype that young women can be frivolous and want silly things while men are frugal and practical, Ann sees her own desires as embarrassing and invalid. On some level, however, she knows that they are more than just silliness. Ann believes that by spending a little more and saving a little less, they could both be enjoying life in a larger space. All she can do is express her thoughts gently to John, however, and he does not feel obligated to listen to her. Painting the inside of the house is Ann's attempt to take control of something she doesn't want in the first place, and she feels frustrated by the feeble amount of agency she is limited to.

●● But she felt little dread or uneasiness at the prospect of spending the night alone. It was the first time she had been left like this on her own resources, and her reaction, now that she could face and appraise her situation calmly, was gradually to feel it a kind of adventure and responsibility. It stimulated her.

Related Characters: Ann (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 104


Explanation and Analysis

When she thinks that neither John nor Steven will be able to make it through the storm, Ann is surprised that she feels liberated. Without a male presence in the house, she feels she is allowed to do things which she would never normally do, like venture outside to feed the animals. Ann craves a change in routine and control over her own destiny, and the

idea of being left alone for the evening gives her a little taste of both those things. The loneliness she struggles with is not necessarily the result of a lack of company, but a lack of company combined with a lack of freedom. Even though being left behind by John initially made her angry and afraid, having to survive on her own makes her feel slightly more powerful and free.

●● He was erect, tall, square-shouldered. His hair was dark and trim, his lips curved, soft, and full. While John—she made the comparison swiftly—was thick-set, heavy-jowled, and stooped. He always stood before her helpless, a kind of humility and wonderment in his attitude. And Steven now smiled on her appraisingly with the worldly-wise assurance of one for whom a woman holds neither mystery nor illusion.

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), John, Steven

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Ann defines herself in relation to the men in her life. When she is with John, she feels the burden of living up to his wholesome, hardworking, dull personality. Steven's youthful arrogance and handsome face give Ann the feeling that she can be something more than just a farmer's wife. When Steven looks at her, he understands her vulnerability and is seemingly contemplating the idea of sleeping with his friend's wife. Although she does not necessarily want to be seen as vulnerable or sexually available, Ann is desperate for understanding and connection of any kind.

●● Looking down at him as he slept, half smiling still, his lips relaxed in the conscienceless complacency of his achievement, she understood that thus he was revealed in his entirety—all there ever was or ever could be. John was the man. With him lay all the future. For tonight, slowly and contritely through the days and years to come, she would try to make amends.

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), Steven, John

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114


Explanation and Analysis

Having briefly tried on the role of being Steven's mistress, Ann realizes that this was a mistake and she prefers being John's loyal wife. This is yet another example of Ann focusing entirely on the future. She doesn't discuss whether or not she enjoyed being with Steven or prefers his company. Instead, she makes the accurate observation that John offers moral depth and a stable future, while Steven offers only momentary distraction—he is portrayed as relatively shallow and arrogant. The circumstances in which she lives prevent Ann from building her own future, so she must rely on the men in her life for structure and stability. By cheating on John, Ann has also created a new kind of balance in their relationship. Previously, she had not felt that there was a good enough reason for the intensity of the sacrifices she was required to make. Now, her guilt over this episode of infidelity makes her feel as though she owes John more than ever, and will be happy to work hard for many years beside him.

“He was south of here,” they said wonderingly when she told them how he had come across the hills. “Straight south—you’d wonder how he could have missed the buildings. It was the wind last night, coming every way at once. He shouldn’t have tried. There was a double wheel around the moon.” She looked past them a moment, then as if to herself said simply, “If you knew him, though—John would try.”

Related Characters: Ann (speaker), The Neighbors, John

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Up until this point at the very end of the story, Ann has portrayed herself and John as in opposition to or disconnection from each other. Although they love each other, their individual perspectives and desires have driven them apart. After his death, however, Ann is able to acknowledge the depth of their connection. The neighbors, like Ann early on in the story, mention that the double wheel around the moon would have warned any reasonable person that a horrific storm was on its way. Although she had previously denied it, here Ann admits that she knew John would never let anything prevent him from reaching his loved ones. We see that she and John knew each other better than anyone else knew them, and that although she has just slept with Steven and is surrounded by the neighbors, Ann is more isolated than ever before.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE PAINTED DOOR

John and Ann are sharing breakfast one cold winter morning in their small farmhouse. There is a blizzard coming, but John insists that he will walk the five miles through the hills to his father's house to check on the old man. Ann gazes through the frosty window at the bitter weather and asks him not to go, saying she doesn't want to be left alone in the storm. She mentions that they both saw the **double wheel around the moon** the night before, which means that the storm will probably be a bad one. John insists that he has taken care of everything, and will be back by seven or eight pm at the latest.

Ann relents, saying that she should be used to staying alone after seven years as a farmer's wife. She continues to stare out the window, watching one of their horses drinking water, hunched against the cold. The sun glitters on the vast, snowy expanse of bleak prairie, dotted with the occasional farmhouse. Everything about the scene before her seems harsh and isolating. John offers to stay when he sees the brooding look on her face, but Ann insists that he should go visit his father. John reminds her that he has never broken a promise to visit her, even during the worst blizzards.

John is described as slow and simple. We learn that he was surprised and confused, during the beginning of their relationship, that someone like Ann could love him. Now, however, he is just proud and happy to have her as his wife, and takes her continued affection for granted. She finds it impossible to say no to his trusting, honest attitude, and offers to wrap his scarf up tightly for the long journey.

John says he will stop by their friend Steven's house on his way and tell Steven to visit Ann. Then when John returns in the evening, the three of them can share a game of cards and a social relief from the grinding isolation imposed by the winter weather. Ann protests again, saying that Steven's house will add miles to a journey which is already too long. She says she will keep herself busy enough by painting the kitchen. John insists again, saying that Ann needs someone other than him to talk to.

The fact that John must walk five miles in the snow just to check on his father is evidence of the extreme isolation of his and Ann's farming life. Further, that he insists on making this difficult and dangerous journey shows his willingness to make sacrifices for the people he loves. John is only concerned about Ann's physical wellbeing and does not seem worried about her loneliness or potential anger at him for leaving her behind, because he sees her primarily as fulfilling the traditional role of "wife" rather than as a complex human being.



Ann feels guilty for failing to support John's decision to visit his father, because she believes a wife should always be grateful to have a kind, hard-working husband. The landscape out the window reflects and seems to reinforce Ann's feelings of isolation and frustration. John's offer to stay is yet another example of his loyalty (to Ann, in this case). Ann makes a sacrifice of her own when she declines his offer to stay.



John's intense loyalty to Ann over many years has blinded him to the evolving challenges in their relationship. The fact that Ann believes a woman should be primarily grateful and self-sacrificing towards her husband has prevented her from communicating the intensity of her feelings of loneliness and boredom to John.



John demonstrates his self-sacrificing nature again by offering to walk an extra two miles to make sure Ann has Steven to keep her company. The fact that a game of cards and an old friend coming over for dinner is a treat for Ann shows just how starved she is for human connection. Ann indicates that she wishes she could make time move faster by painting the kitchen.



Ann asks John to shave, if he is going to invite Steven over. She tells him that Steven will have shaved, and that John should spend a little time on himself. John says that he would, but that his unshaven face will keep him warmer for the long walk. Ann helps John dress, and he tells her to have dinner with Steven if he isn't home by six.

Ann attempts to connect with John through nurturing, caring actions which she feels are appropriate for a good wife. She also indicates that she is dissatisfied with the way John expresses his masculinity with his unshaven face—and it seems like she is comparing him unfavorably with Steven. John does not notice any of this, and remains focused on practicalities.



With John gone, the house feels oppressively cold and silent. Ann tells herself that she's being silly, and that she just needs to keep herself busy by painting the house. Talking to herself, Ann tries to convince herself that having someone more talkative than John around will make her feel less alone. She imagines that having more visitors over would help keep her and John young, and help them pass the brutal winter until spring comes along.

The emptiness and chill of the house reflect Ann's feelings of emotional isolation. She thinks of ways to alter the passage of time, imagining that she could hurry along the arrival of spring while simultaneously slowing the process of aging if only they had more young visitors. Ann's unhappiness with the way time passes shows that she would rather blame an external force for her unhappiness than confront the disconnection which has developed between her and her husband.



As she continues to paint and tidy the house, Ann remembers how spring brings its own struggles. The hopeful blooming of flowers after winter is quickly overshadowed by the long, exhausting days of farm work which leave John too tired to talk, much less take Ann into town. John refuses to hire someone to help him with his work, because he is saving up money to pay down the mortgage as quickly as possible so that he can buy Ann a new house and pretty clothes. Ann knows that it will take years to pay off the mortgage anyways, and wishes that John would spend more time with her instead of working day and night. Although he sees his work as a pure expression of his devotion and love for Ann, she feels that every year of sacrifice makes him a little uglier and less appealing to her. She wishes that she didn't resent him for the sacrifices he makes, but she can't help it.

John has a very simplistic understanding of his wife, one that is largely based in traditional gender roles. He believes that she will be happy if he can buy her nice things someday, and he cannot understand that this attitude makes her feel as though they are wasting the best parts of their lives in the presents. Their respective attitudes show that the passing of time is subjective—For John, it is steadily ticking away towards something better. For Ann, it seems to be racing towards old age and death.



Ann describes how even though in the winter they have time to relax and socialize, both of them feel anxious and guilty when they aren't doing work. She wishes she had someone to talk to, but finds the conversation with John or even their neighbors boring and repetitive—it's just crops, cattle, and the weather, over and over again. The thought occurs to her that each spring really just marks another year closer to death, but she shakes it off. Ann returns to painting and tending the fire, with the heavy ticking of the clock providing an ominous soundtrack. She watches the gathering storm out the window, and reassures herself that John will be on his way back soon.

Both Ann and John feel in their own way that sacrifice is an important expression of love and loyalty. This means that they both feel guilty when they relax and take time to enjoy themselves, even if there is no actual work to be done. This obsession with work contributes to Ann's feeling of isolation, because it means that she has very few interactions which are purely social. It also is one cause of her uncomfortable awareness of time's passing.



Ann starts to complain to herself about how stubborn John is, but stops herself. She knows he is doing his best, and that her complaints seem silly. Still, she can't help but feel frustrated by having lived in a two-room house full of the same old furniture for seven years. She glances out the window at the increasingly violent weather, suddenly worried for John's safety. She tells herself he won't risk the journey home and will stay with his father, because he knows better than to set out in this kind of weather. She doubts whether or not Steven will even make the one-mile trip to visit her.

Ann finds the prospect of spending the night alone exciting. She imagines braving the wind and snow to feed the animals, thinking how this small adventure will add a bit of much-needed drama to her life. After spending an hour trying on warm clothes and planning her strategy, she ventures out into the raging storm. The wind is powerful enough to knock Ann off her feet, and she finds herself buried in a snow drift almost instantly. After panicking and struggling for a few moments she realizes with overwhelming certainty that she cannot withstand this brutal storm, and retreats into the house without ever reaching the stables.

Steven then arrives and Ann lets him in. He comments on how shaken and cold she looks, and Ann bursts into tears. Steven comforts her in a slightly condescending tone, and Ann immediately feels embarrassed by her outburst. She dwells on Steven's boyish, almost insolent smile, and the strong contrast between his looks and John's. She remembers with distaste how John seems to almost bow before her, whereas Steven looks at her as though nothing about a woman could ever intimidate him.

Ann is surprised to find herself in a flirtatious mood. Steven's condescension has inspired her to use her femininity in a way that John's kindness never does. She describes a feeling of excitement which she can't quite identify. Steven goes outside to feed the animals and do the other farm chores before the sun sets, and Ann changes into a nicer dress and fixes her hair.

Ann comments that John will be home for supper soon. Steven disagrees, saying no man would risk a walk home in a storm like this. Ann insists that John has never failed to come home, no matter the weather. Steven seems to find it almost funny that she is so adamant about John's return, and Ann is suddenly self-conscious that she has made herself look nice for him. She feels an intimidating energy, something dangerous and exciting in the way he smiles at her.

Ann struggles to fully express her frustration with John, even when she is alone. She goes so far as to police herself for mentally stepping outside the boundaries of the "good wife" role. The storm makes her isolation feel even more extreme than usual, and causes her to imagine that she will be abandoned by both John and Steven.



Spending the night alone is a rare opportunity for Ann to take action and make decisions which are not purely in support of her husband. Because feeding the animals is necessary, she feels it is acceptable to do something which, as a woman, she would never normally do. When she tries to go outside, however, she is physically defeated by the violent wind and snow. Ann's isolation is now proven to be complete—she knows that she cannot survive outside, so she must wait for Steven and John to come find her.



After this intense experience of isolation, Ann reacts very strongly to the presence of another human. She collapses gratefully in the face of Steven's reassuring male energy. While around John she is calm and reliable, around Steven she is hysterical, then just nervous. She has taken on a new kind of female role in response to a different kind of masculinity.



Ann embraces this new way of relating to another person. Flirting with Steven is a welcome relief from sitting in silence with her husband. Steven's arrogance and attention make Ann feel wanted and understood. She does not admit to herself that she is being flirtatious, as she still feels a strong loyalty to John. When she thinks about his sacrifices for her, however, she is only more attracted to Steven's confidence.



Steven's presence continues to excite Ann, which causes her to insist even more aggressively that John will be home eventually. She is very uncomfortable with her own attraction to Steven and tries to deny it by talking about John.



Ann and Steven play cards, but Ann is distracted and anxious. Steven's presence and the idea that John may not return have awakened a feeling which she hesitates to name or fully acknowledge. They pin blankets over the door to keep out the draft, and Ann accidentally smudges the **freshly-painted doorway**. As Steven continues to insist that John will not risk the storm to come home, Ann realizes that she has been attracted to their young friend for many years.

Ann remains resistant to Steven's subtle advances, while beginning to acknowledge to herself that she might consider his tacit proposition. The painted door represented Ann's dedication and care for the life she and John are making together, and when she smudges it going through the doorway it shows that Steven's presence has caused her to forget what is usually so important to her.



There is a break in the text, and then the narrator describes Ann lying in bed next to Steven, who is sleeping quietly. She watches the flickering light of the wood-burning stove through the bedroom door. As she dozes off, the shadows transform into an image of John standing over her in bed. She feels a hand on her throat, then catches a glimpse of John's face in the moonlight. His expression is not angry, but rather calm and hopeless. Ann begins to protest that the situation isn't what it looks like, and then jolts awake. John's presence was just a guilty nightmare. Awake now, she tries to comfort herself by listing all of the reasons John couldn't possibly come home tonight.

The break in the text suggests that Ann and Steven have given in to temptation and slept together, though Ross never states it outright. Although Ann has chosen to do this, she feels intensely guilty about it immediately afterward. Her dream (which may not be a dream at all, as we see later) shows us that she is not worried about John's anger, but rather her own guilt at having betrayed his loyalty. She tries to comfort herself by imagining that he will express his usual loyalty by staying safe at his father's house tonight.



Ann can't sleep, and rises to make a fire. She is wracked with guilt at the thought of her infidelity, and feels that she has wronged John unfairly. She is terrified for a moment that John will in fact arrive home and discover what she has done. Gazing at Steven's peaceful, sleeping face, she decides that she is just being paranoid. Ann realizes that Steven does not feel guilty about what they have done, and believes that because of this it is her responsibility alone. She feels sure that John is the man she wants to spend the rest of her life with, and decides she will spend the days and years to come trying to make up for having cheated on him. She spends the rest of the night standing in the cold draft from the door, listening to the clock ticking away.

Ann understands that the youthful, exciting elements of Steven's masculinity were momentarily attractive, but that they do not offer any depth or future. She tried on the role of flirtatious young woman, and has discovered that she feels safer as the good, loyal wife. For the first time in the story, she mentions the passing of time without feeling anxiety about it, when she says that she is sure she wants to spend the rest of her life with John. This indicates that her anxiety about time is a result of her feeling dissatisfied with her own life.



John is found the next day, frozen to death. His body is just a little ways beyond the house, and the neighbors assume that he must have been confused by the wind and walked right past it. When Ann kneels next to his body and holds his cold, frozen hand, she notices something. There is a little smudge of **white paint** on his palm.

This ending gives the story its "twist" and makes Ann's epiphany and decision of the night before—to stay with John and renew her commitment to him—all the more tragic in its futility. When Ann tells the neighbors that anyone who knew John wouldn't have been surprised that he tried to return home in the storm, she is admitting that she knew all along that he would probably come home. The smudge of paint on John's hand shows that he returned home safely, but then saw Ann and Steven asleep in bed and chose to walk back out into the snow to die. He sacrificed his own life in despair, but also so that he would never have to confront Ann and be anything other than loyal and supportive to her. His suicide only isolates Ann further, however, by forcing her to live alone with the knowledge that her infidelity drove John to kill himself.





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