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# Love and Loss

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## Set of Documents

### Document A

Marjorie sat on the blanket with her back to the fire and waited for Nick. He came over and sat down beside her on the blanket. In back of them was the close second-growth timber of the point and in front was the bay with the mouth of Hortons Creek. It was not quite dark. The fire-light  
5 went as far as the water. They could both see the two steel rods at an angle over the dark water. The fire glinted on the reels.

Marjorie unpacked the basket of supper.

'I don't feel like eating,' said Nick.

'All right.'

10 They ate without talking, and watched the two rods and the fire-light in the water.

'There's going to be a moon tonight,' said Nick. He looked across the bay to the hills that were beginning to sharpen against the sky. Beyond the hills he knew the moon was coming up.

15 'I know it,' Marjorie said happily.

'You know everything,' Nick said.

'Oh, Nick, please cut it out ! Please, please don't be that way !'

'I can't help it,' Nick said. 'You do. You know everything. That's the trouble. You know you do.'

20 Marjorie did not say anything.

'I've taught you everything. You know you do. What don't you know, anyway?'

'Oh, shut up,' Marjorie said. 'There comes the moon.'

25 They sat on the blanket without touching each other and watched the moon rise.

'You don't have to talk silly', Marjorie said. 'What's really the matter ?'

'I don't know.'

30 'Of course you know.'  
'No I don't.'  
'Go on and say it.'  
Nick looked on at the moon, coming up over the hills.  
'It isn't fun anymore.'  
He was afraid to look at Marjorie. Then he looked at her. She sat  
35 there with her back toward him. He looked at her back. 'It isn't fun any  
more. Not any of it.'  
She didn't say anything. He went on. 'I feel as though everything  
was gone to hell inside of me. I don't know, Marge. I don't know what to  
say.'  
40 He looked on at her back.  
'Isn't love any fun?' Marjorie said.  
'No,' Nick said. Marjorie stood up. Nick sat there, his head in his  
hands.  
'I'm going to take the boat,' Marjorie called to him. 'You can walk  
45 back around the point.'  
'All right,' Nick said. 'I'll push the boat off for you.'  
'You don't need to,' she said. She was afloat in the boat on the water  
with the moonlight on it. Nick went back and lay down with his face in the  
blanket by the fire. He could hear Marjorie rowing on the water.  
50 He lay there for a long time. He lay there while he heard Bill come  
into the clearing walking around through the woods. He felt Bill coming  
up to the fire. Bill didn't touch him, either.  
'Did she go all right?' Bill said.  
'Yes,' Nick said, lying, his face on the blanket.  
55 'Have a scene?'  
'No, there wasn't any scene.'  
'How do you feel?'  
'Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while.'  
Bill selected a sandwich from the lunch basket and walked over to  
60 have a look at the rods.

Ernest Hemingway. 'The End of Something' (1925). *The First Forty-Nine Stories* (1944). London: Arrow Books, 1993: 103-105.

## Document B

*During a family reunion at a place known as Arthur's Cave, Sally Maury, the narrator, two other girls and Cousin Tom went to the carnival: a fat man showed them Stella, whom he described in a song as "Not flesh, not bone,/But calkypirate stone/Sweet Sixteen a Hundred Years Ago/And Sweet Sixteen Today!" They are now having supper at a place called the Fork.*

We usually played a game when we were at the table. It was keeping something going through a whole meal, without the grown folks knowing what it was. Nobody knew we did it except Aunt Rachel, and sometimes when she was passing things she would give us a dig in the ribs, to keep us quiet.

That night we were playing Petrified Woman. With everything we said we put in something from the fat man's song; like Hilda would say, "You want some butter?" and I would come back with "No, thank you, calkypirate bone."

Cousin Marie was asking who the lady with the white hair in the blue flowered dress was.

"That is Cousin Olivia Bradshaw," Cousin Eleanor said.

"She has a pretty daughter," Cousin Robert D. Owen said.

"*Mater pulcher, filia pulchrrior*", Cousin Sidney Grassdale said.

"And they live at Summer Hill?", Cousin Marie asked.

Cousin Tom laid his fork down. "I never could stand those Summer Hill folks," he said. "Pretentious".

"But the daughter has a great deal of charm," Cousin Marie said.

"Sweet Sixteen a Hundred Years Ago," Hilda said. "Give me the salt."

"And Sweet Sixteen Today," I said. "It'll thin your blood."

Cousin Tom must have heard us. He raised his head. His bloodshot eyes stared around the table. He shut his eyes. I knew that he was trying to remember.

"I saw a woman today that had real charm," he said.

Cousin Eleanor heard his voice and turned around. She looked him straight in the face and smiled, slowly. "In what did her charm consist, Tom?"

"She was petrified," Cousin Tom said.

I looked at her and then I wished I hadn't. She had blue eyes. I always thought that they were like violets. She had a way of opening them wide whenever she looked at you.

40           “Some women are just petrified in spots,” Cousin Tom said. “She was petrified all over.”

          It was like the violets were freezing, there in her eyes. We all saw it. Molly Grassdale said something, and Cousin Eleanor’s lips smiled and she half bent toward her and then her head gave a little shake and she straightened up so that she faced him. She was still smiling.

45           “*In that case, how did she exert her charm?*”

          I thought, “Her eyes, they will freeze him, too.” But he seemed to like for her to look at him like that. He was smiling, too.

          “*She just lay there and looked sweet,*” he said. “*I like a woman to look sweet.... Hell, they ain’t got anything else to do!*”

50           Cousin Sidney’s nose was working up and down, like a squirrel I had once, named Adji-Daumo. He said, “Harry Crenfew seems to be very much in love with Lucy Bradshaw.”

          “*I’m in love!*” Cousin Tom shouted. “*I’m in love with a petrified woman.*”

55           She was still looking at him. I never saw anything as cold as her eyes.

          “*What is her name, Tom ?*”

60           “*Stell-a!*” he shouted. “*The One and Only Stell-a!*” He pushed his chair back and stood up, still shouting. “*I’m going down to Arthur’s Cave and take her away from that that fellow.*”

65           He must have got his foot in Cousin Marie’s dress, for she shrieked and stood up, too, and he went down on the floor, with his wineglass in his hand. Somebody noticed us after a minute and sent us out of the room. He was still lying there when we left, his arms flung out and blood on his forehead from the broken glass.... I never did even see him get up off the floor.

70           We moved away that year and so we never went to another family reunion. And I never went to the Fork again. It burned down that fall. They said that Cousin Tom set it on fire, roaming around at night, with a lighted lamp in his hand. That was after he and Cousin Eleanor got divorced. I heard that they both got married again but I never knew who it was they married. I hardly ever think of them anymore. If I do, they are still there in that house. The mockingbird has just stopped singing. Cousin Eleanor, in her long white dress, is walking over to the window, where, on moonlight  
75           nights, we used to sit, to watch the water glint on the rocks ... But Cousin Tom is still lying there on the floor....

Caroline Gordon. 'The Petrified Woman' (1947). *Collected Stories*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981: 13-15.

Document C

RUST

That was the sky up above, hot, with a fried egg of a sun stuck in the middle of it, and this was the ground down here, hard, with a layer of parched grass and a smell of dirt and leaf mold, and no matter how much  
5 he shouted there didn't seem to be much else in between. What he could use was a glass of water. He'd been here, what—an hour, maybe?— and the sun hadn't moved. Or not that he could see, anyway. His lips were dry, and he could feel all that ultraviolet radiation cooking the skin off his face, a piece of meat on the grill, turkey skin, crisp and oozing, peeling away in  
10 strips. But he wasn't hungry—he was never hungry anymore. It was just an image, that was all. He could use a chair, though, and somebody to help him up and put him in it. And some shade. Some iced tea, maybe, beads of moisture sliding down the outside of the glass.

"Eunice!" he called out in a voice that withered in his throat.  
15 "Eunice, goddamnit, Eunice!" And then, because he was old and he was angry and he didn't give a damn anymore, he cried out for help. "Help!" he croaked. "Help!"

But nobody was listening. The sky hung there like a tattered curtain, shreds of cloud draped over the high green crown of the pepper  
20 tree he'd planted forty years ago, the day his son was born, and he could hear the superamplified rumble of the TV from behind the shut and locked windows and the roar of the air conditioner, and where was the damn dog, anyway? That was it. He remembered now. The dog. He'd come out to look for the dog—she'd been gone too long, too long about her business, and Eunice had turned her parched old lampshade of a head away from the  
25 TV screen and said, "Where's the dog?" He didn't know where the dog was, though he knew where his first bourbon and water of the day was—right there on the TV tray in front of him—and it was 11:00 A.M. and plenty late enough for it. "How the hell would I know," he'd said, "you were the one let her out", and she'd come right back at him with something  
30 smart, like "Well you'd better just get yourself out there in the yard and see, hadn't you?"

He hadn't actually been out in the yard in a long while—years, it seemed— and when he went out the back door and down the steps he found

35 himself gaping at the bushes all in flower, the trumpet vine smothering the  
back of the house, and he remembered a time when he cared about all that,  
about nature and flowers, steer manure and potting soil. Now the yard was  
as alien to him as the Gobi Desert. He didn't give a damn for flowers or  
trees or the stucco peeling off the side of the house and all the trim  
40 destroyed with the blast of the sun or anything else. "Booters!" he'd called,  
angry suddenly, angry at he didn't know what. "Booters! Here, girl!"

And that was when he fell.

Maybe the lawn dipped out from under him, maybe he stepped in  
a gopher hole or tripped over a sprinkler head—that must have been  
45 it—but the long and short of it was that he was here, on the grass, stretched  
out like a corpse under the pepper tree, and he couldn't for the life of him  
seem to get up.

*I've never wanted anybody more in my life, from the minute I came*  
50 *home from Rutgers and laid eyes on you, and I don't care if you are my*  
*father's wife, I don't care about anything anymore....* Eunice sipped at her  
drink—vodka and soda, bland as all get-out, but juice gave her the  
runs—and nodded in complete surrender as the former underwear model-  
turned-actress fell into the arms of the clip-jawed actor with the ridge of  
55 glistening hair that stood up from his crown like a meat loaf just turned out  
of the pan. The screen faded for the briefest nanosecond before opening on  
a cheery ad for rectal suppositories, and she found herself drifting into a  
reverie about the first time Walt had ever taken her in his arms.

T.C. Boyle. 'Rust'. *After the Plague* (2001). London: Bloomsbury,  
2002: 140-142.

## Analysis

### Introduction

"Isn't love any fun?", asks the female protagonist in the text by Hemingway. This short quotation encapsulates two of the main themes of the three documents, namely the uneasy love relationships between men and women, and their deviation from what may be regarded as archetypal love stories. As suggested by the paratext, the documents are taken from short stories published at different periods, which also prompts readers to

pay attention to the requirements of the genre, usually characterized by semantic density, achieved through imagery, and the interplay with the implicit.

Document A deals with one of the famous adventures of Nick Adams, Hemingway's persona, a projection of himself when he was young, and is actually an initiation story. Thanks to other well-known stories such as 'Up in Michigan', one may suppose that the scene takes place in the same state. 'The end of something' is about the end of the love relationship between Nick and Marjorie, and fishing may also be read as a metaphor for the quest, the quest of 'something' that is not explicitly named: elusiveness pervades the extract which offers room for interpretation as it is mainly based on implication and a dialogue that sends us back to drama.

The title of document B may bring back the reader to a short story by Eudora Welty, 'Petrified Man' (1939), which also refers to a freak in a traveling picture show. The homodiegetic narrator, Sally Maury, then a young girl, is herself mesmerized by the petrified woman, whose sight actually results in a breakdown between Eleanor and Cousin Tom; as mentioned at the end of the text, which constitutes in fact an epilogue, the fallout leads to divorce and to destruction by fire. Like Nick in the short story by Hemingway, Sally can be regarded as Gordon's persona and is initiated into the requirements of marriage and implicitly physical love, which remain enigmatic to her; Caroline Gordon is sometimes better known as the wife of Allen Tate, the author of 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' (1928), and is a Southern novelist and short story writer whose career was overshadowed by her husband's. Some details of the text, such as the family reunion, the references to the moonlight or the mocking-bird, may send us back to the Southern tradition, and more precisely to the moonlight-and-magnolia cliché of Southern romance.

The title of T.C. Boyle's short story also expresses a form of end and entropy: it is tempting to say that as the husband lay dying in his yard, his wife was watching TV. T. C. Boyle is an American contemporary writer who, as a satirist, focuses his attention on the failure of American ideals and whose weapons are, among others, caricature and structural irony. The heterodiegetic narrator presents us with an old couple, Walt and Eunice, whose relations show some kind of wear-and-tear, to say the least. One may suppose that the scene takes place in the West of the USA, and especially under the burning sun of California, as suggested by the pepper tree.



These documents all deal with a confusing love relationship and have intertextual echoes, especially with the Bible, fairy-tales or forms reminiscent of Southern romance in document B or TV series in document C. Love is linked with frustration, loss and even death, whether real or symbolical. What lies behind this negative vision of love is actually the widening gap between men and women for whom marriage or ‘that something called love’ is a form of entrapment or leads to a contest ending in death, petrification or liberation.

The first part of this commentary is aimed at showing that literally or figuratively, the main protagonists in the three stories ‘fall out of love’, either through their failure to communicate or through some weariness they can hardly account for. In the second part, this loss of love shall lead us to unveil the reasons for this construction of love as a losing battle between men and women, which is sometimes the outcome of some latent rivalry between genders, or of some passivity or reification exploding the concept of love or Eros as a creative force opposed to death or Thanatos. Finally, in the third part, we shall probe into the cultural fabric of love and attempt to make out the links between the documents and archetypal love stories or architexts written about love, which are obviously rewritten and even debunked.

### **The end of something called love**

#### *Slippage in communication and in meaning*

The failure to communicate is itself mirrored by the narrative technique. A sense of elusiveness is produced by the title of document A, the relationship between the characters being mentioned as ‘something’: the story is told by a heterodiegetic narrator who is far from being omniscient. The text is written basically in external focalization, according to Hemingway’s traditional objective or nearly impersonal technique; the characters’ feelings are rendered by dialogue or gestures, so that the scene is dramatized. The minimalist spare style, which relies on the use of single clauses, can remind us of stage directions. This minimalism does not preclude the use of repetitions in the characters’ short cues or in the depiction of the setting built around a kind of elemental configuration, especially fire and water, and binary oppositions such as light and darkness, but such referential details can but convey a kind of ambivalence and a sense of in-betweenness: it is twilight (line 4). Marjorie remains unreadable – only her back is perceived – and the reader is given no real clue as to her response to Nick’s rejection. Nick is at a loss what to say finally and does not even manage to sort out his feelings and to give a

meaning to his malaise: he keeps repeating that he does not know (line 28). He feels alienated from Marjorie, but from himself as well, suggesting that falling out of love can be as mysterious as falling into love. Love – and ‘un-love’ – to some extent, is happenstance<sup>1</sup>. Such indeterminacy generated by the lack of what Dorrit Cohn calls psycho-narration compels the reader to probe beneath the dark surface of the text, which is itself a *mise en abyme* of the dark waters where Nick and Marjorie are fishing.

Similarly, in document B, the story is filtered through the little girl and the information can prove unreliable, for the girl seems to inhabit both reality and the realm of fancy or imagination, as implied by her perception of Stella at the carnival or her reference to Adj-Daumo, a reference to Native American legends<sup>2</sup>. Eleanor and Tom’s inner life remains unknown to the reader. Moreover, the narrator has to leave the room after Cousin Tom’s ‘physical fall’ and in a rather short epilogue, she gives only secondhand information. Her critical distance towards the event is increased by a sudden shift from the past to the present: Eleanor and Cousin Tom’s divorce is expressed matter-of-factly. Yet, because of this retrospective narration from the perspective of a child who is now an adult, the reader is likely to understand more than the narrator, which creates some effects of dramatic irony. The narrative proves all the more ambivalent and unstable as the dialogue, or rather the polylogue, encompasses multiple voices and is characterized by fragmentariness. The little girls interweave their own quotations from the fat man’s song with the adults’ conversation by “playing Petrified Woman” (line 12), creating thus a code deciphered only by two adults. The communication becomes a comic game which itself triggers off a crisis that has tragic consequences but is not devoid of farcical episodes, when Tom, the drunkard, falls because of a Southern Belle’s dress (lines 61-63). The ambivalence of the tone itself contributes to the ambiguity of the text and to the elusiveness of its possible meanings which is also typographically reflected by punctuation, especially dots (line 65; lines 75-76).

Conversely, document C may give the feeling that the heterodiegetic narrator entirely controls his story; internal focalization, free indirect speech, which nearly sounds like a narrated monologue at times (lines 5-6

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] far from being the endless enchantment of romance, love is only one among the mysterious and uncertain ‘somethings’ which make up the natural facts of human experience” (Burhans 22).

<sup>2</sup> “Adj-Daumo”, indeed, refers to a squirrel in the Chippeway language (Chamberlain 48).

and 10-14), and quotations from TV series in italics, give us deep insights in each character's mind and experience. Yet, the man, Walt<sup>3</sup>, does not even remember the circumstances of his fall and fails to analyze the origins of his rage; such a feeling of misunderstanding and otherness toward oneself is conveyed by the repetition of "angry" and modals (lines 44-46). Walt and Eunice have become alien to each other, all the more so as the narrator introduces them to the reader separately. Eunice, who is glued to her TV series dealing with the clichés of Hollywood romance, does not hear her husband's call for help: this tragic flaw that leads to his agony ironically symbolizes their increasing failure to communicate despite their apparent closeness throughout the years.

This slippage in communication literally leads the male characters 'to lose their balance'. Feelings of weariness and disillusionment are also inscribed in the extracts.

*Weariness and disillusionment*

No clear definition of love is given in document A and the reader may be amazed at the association of "love" with "fun" (lines 33 and 41), as if love were just a form of pleasure or hedonism, or even a childish game. However, although Marjorie seems satisfied with the relationship, Nick is overwhelmed with grief, 'knocked out', and is a prey to confusion and disillusionment. Thwarted love can lead to addiction to alcohol, as shown in documents B and C. Alcohol is even a kind of 'comfort drink', a way of filling the emptiness caused by the lack of physical love. Cousin Tom seems to be suffering from. The consumption of alcohol can even be perceived as a substitute for sexual consummation. In document C, the husband keeps voicing his physical and emotional weariness, suggested by the fact that he is no longer hungry (lines 10-11) and has thus lost any interest in life. The object of his quest was the dog and he is actually the victim of the dog days. The dryness of his daily life seems to reverberate on the setting, and the word "parched" is also used to describe his wife whose head is humorously compared to a lampshade (line 25), turning her into a caricature and a grotesque figure. Ironically, what he needs is some "shade", protection from the sun, and only Eunice could rescue him. The text abounds in images of fragmentation and disintegration, the sky being in fact a shroud for his "corpse" (line 46). What prevails in this document, apart from dessication, is a sense of physical decay and entropy

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<sup>3</sup> The onomastics may be ironical: "Walt", the antihero's name, is a possible reference to Walt Disney. TV, indeed, plays a major destructive role in the short story.

exemplified by old age and the fear of skin cancer (lines 8-9). In fact, in the three documents under study, the male characters seem to embody impotence and weakness.

*Falling out of love*

In each document, the fall is an extended trope for the loss of love: men are lying on the ground or on the floor, as if they were defeated; even in Hemingway's text, the woman whom the man lets down finally stands up: Nick takes refuge in the blanket as if he were a little child. In document B, Cousin Tom, who is expected to stand for order and authority, looks like a crucified figure, shedding blood, losing substance, and blood is a run-on metaphor throughout the passage (lines 27, 28 and 64); he then becomes a ghostlike wanderer (line 69) who seeks to destroy the memory of his love through some purifying fire. In document C, Walt goes through the same hardships as Tantalus and drawing one's inspiration from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, one might be tempted to say: "Water sprinklers everywhere but not a drop to drink". His unquenchable thirst may also be construed as a punishment for having neglected his garden (lines 36-40), just as Nick and Cousin Tom may be paying the price for their inadequacy as lovers; yet they can also be perceived as the victims of women's "petrifying" attitude.

**Love as a losing battle: the widening gap between men and women**

*Competition between men and women*

In document A, Nick lays the emphasis on the fact that their love hinged on a teacher-pupil relationship. Nick as Pygmalion is ironical towards the knowledge Marjorie has acquired thanks to him. Fearing what he perceives as a kind of rivalry, he gets separated from his creation which may threaten his manliness; moreover, his friend Bill's intrusion upon the scene and his questions (lines 53 and 55) show that he knew about Nick's intention to split off with Marjorie. This revelation may lead the reader to wonder whether the exclusion of the woman is not a way of celebrating male comradeship and brotherhood: Bill seems to win the competition and is asked to look after the "rods", a symbol of phallic power that should not be left in a woman's hands. Bill and Nick may stand for male bonding, for what Eve Sedgwick defines as "male homosocial bonds" but in the text, the woman is excluded from the triangular relationship and is forced out of "the male homosocial circuit" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 56). This can be confirmed by onomastics: Nick suddenly uses "Marge" (line 38), the diminutive form, which may be construed as a play upon words: is Marge

in the margins ? Or does “Marge” evoke tenderness and intimacy ? Such ambivalence testifies to Nick’s inability to read his own feelings (lines 37-39). In document B, cousin Tom feels disparaged by his wife who probably disapproves of his drinking and his rebelliousness. Moreover, he expects a wife to be “sweet” and “petrified”, that is to say only a voiceless object of beauty (lines 48-49), which is also required by social conventions: the Latin quotation conveys this transmission of beauty from woman to daughter (line 20). His remarks are imbued with misogyny and inevitably result in scathing remarks and a confrontation with his wife. Likewise, in document C, Walt remembers his ‘heated’ exchange with Eunice concerning their missing dog, a pet that usually bridges the emotional gap between them but widens it through her absence. Symbolically the pet is a female, a bitch, and she indirectly causes the man to slip. Like the Southern Belle in document B, the caricatured actor and actress in the TV series, who are a counterpoint to the ageing couple, are also required to match the requirements of some standardized beauty that is supposed to arouse love and even passion. Furthermore, in the three documents, geographical and physical isolation marks the apex of tension between men and women.

*Separation between men and women*

In document A, separation is physically symbolized by the fact that Nick can see only Marjorie's back. There is neither eye nor physical contact, whether with Marjorie or Bill, whether with a lover or a friend. Significantly, like Walt in document C, Nick is not hungry and does not want to share the food provided by Marjorie, who is thus clearly linked with domesticity. Nick withdraws into himself and prefers seclusion, as if he were alone on an island. In document B, the Fork, standing for two directions, is a metaphor for both unity and division, family reunion and then disintegration. In document C, the division of space proves even more blatant: the man is trapped in his own yard whereas the woman is confined to the house; even sounds are opposed, since his faint voice is drowned out by the noise of the TV. Outside and inside, the atmosphere, both shrinking and stifling, reifies the couple mired in a long-lasting relationship: Walt and Eunice have outlived their ability to love and Eunice remembers with nostalgia their first encounter just after an advertisement for rectal suppositories, which is structurally ironical.

*Petrifaction or liberation ?*

Actually, one may wonder if the so-called love relationship is not likely to end in petrifaction or liberation. Marjorie is finally liberated from her mentor, for she is rowing, holding the oars: she has achieved a form of self-reliance. Far from drowning, like Ophelia for example, she is "afloat" (line 47). Nick feels so weak that he is "afraid to look at Marjorie" (line 34), as if she were a kind of Medusa. Even if her crossing of the water may send us back to Charon and the crossing of the Styx in Hades, her passing through the mouth of Hortons Creek may imply delivery and rebirth. In document B, Arthur's cave is the womb where Stella, the petrified woman, can be found, but the womb symbolically belongs to an unknown man, Arthur – maybe an ironical reference to King Arthur. Stella is owned by an ogre – the fat man – and seems to be here for the "taking", showing men's power over women<sup>4</sup>. Cousin Tom is yearning after such power but the blood he is shedding may refer to emasculation, for he perceives his wife as a castrating woman, "petrified in spots" (line 39). Although Sally, as a young eye-witness, does not grasp the meaning of the subtext of her own story, these words can be read as a double entendre raising the

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<sup>4</sup> "Actually, Sally's attention is drawn to the ways traditional gender roles can isolate individuals. Tom (literally, it seems) embraces the petrified woman who remains passive and self-prostituting. And he rejects Eleanor, who cannot—will not—stay still" (Fritz-Piggott 213).

question of Eleanor's frigidity, also evoked by the use of the verb "to freeze" (lines 41 and 46). Tom expects a woman to be passive, nearly dead in fact; yet Eleanor resists the petrifying process required by a conception of love that is only fabricated by men. By standing up against her husband, she bends gender roles and questions social codes. In document C, the husband's burning and dessicating body visually echoes the body of the petrified woman – the couch potato – in front of the TV set: their life has actually been reified and they are now obsessed with elements central to the American way of life, such as food. References to the latter pervade the text, particularly as the vehicle of major metaphors or similes: the sun is compared to "a fried egg" (line 1), Walt's skin reminds him of a turkey – a reference to the traditional Thanksgiving meal – and the actor's hair is "like a meat loaf just turned out of the pan" (lines 55-56). Comparisons are borrowed from a shrinking universe, characterized by rust, entropy and some destruction accelerated by the use of modern appliances such as the air conditioner. The yard, a grotesque version of the garden, also echoes with the Biblical intertext. The three documents, indeed, are palimpsests of other architexts dealing with love.

### **The rewriting of archetypal love stories**

#### *From Eden to Hell*

In document A, Nick, through his surname, is associated with Adam while Marjorie, blamed for her knowledge, conjures up the figure of Eve. Like Eve, she is punished for eating the apple symbolizing knowledge and has to leave Paradise. Ironically enough, the garden of Eden is now only peopled by male fishing friends, and Nick, initiated into the vagaries of love, feels as miserable as if he had been also banished from the garden. In the Old South, according to Patricia Bradley, intermarriage between cousins was aimed at preserving the plantation, perceived as a kind of Eden. The text hints at this tradition through the numerous references to cousins. Yet, the Southern Eden is disintegrating, all the more so as the Fork is set on fire by Tom, who should preserve it. In document C, the garden, a yard neglected by its owner, has been turned into a hellish wasteland by the scorching sun and paradoxically the pepper tree, a Californian substitute for the apple tree, does not protect Walt from such hostile Nature.

#### *A parody of the fairy tale*

Unlike the two other stories, the story of the "petrified woman" told by a girl and written by a female writer, is more specifically a rewriting of fairy-tales, especially *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* the heroines of

which are both petrified and then saved by princes. Cousin Tom wants to liberate Stella from the ogre by playing Prince Charming and in the last portrait drawn by Sally, Eleanor is framed or frozen as if she were a vestal virgin waiting for Prince Charming, standing at the window. Yet, during the domestic crisis, Eleanor proves to be Medusa, because of her freezing eyes which mesmerize and symbolically kill Tom. Even Stella, the star, is a desecrated version of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, for her crystal palace is but a wagon in a cave. Actually, her exploitation by a fat man also brings her back to the mundane and proves finally a disaster, the fall of a star. The carnivalesque dimension of the story results in the subversion of the fairy-tale and, more generally, of romance.

*The end of romance*

In documents A and B, the references to the moon, a symbol of womanhood, may plunge us into the realm of romance, which, in both cases, turns out to be fallacious. In document B, the author plays with the topos of Southern romance through her narrator who compares Eleanor's eyes to violets, the Southern Belle being a flower idolized for her beauty and purity. The final image of Eleanor sends us back to the moonlight-and-magnolia nostalgia and the pastoral tradition. Eleanor seems to be the prisoner of a crystal palace where reality takes on a threatening metallic dimension, suggested by the words "glint" and "rock" (line 75). The narrator may be unwilling to surrender the vision of a woman as a romanticized and passive object of beauty, a vision passed down by a tradition she refrains from violating. The opposition between two visions of 'women in love', either passive or active, is staged during a social and family ritual which leads to public exposure and outrage: the Southern context leaves little room for real emotions and sensations, especially Eros. The petrification entailed by frozen sexual stereotypes is detrimental to the experience of genuine love and even to its physical, erotic expression. The oscillation between the comic and tragic modes shows the ambivalence of this approach to stock characters and scenes the Hollywood romance is suffused with, as shown by the references to the TV series in document C. The quotation in italics is typical of love stories in which the lovers are faced with obstacles leading them to transgression, like incest in Greek tragedy. Yet, the narrator's irony consists in juxtaposing the husband's agony and the Hollywood romance that fabricates clichés about love and encourages voyeuristic viewers to love vicariously. This romance is all the more debunked as scatological elements are constantly intermingled with Eunice's feelings (lines 53 and 57) and emphasize the sheer physicality of the female body. Eunice does not even question the fallacy of romance:



like the actress surrendering her body (line 54), as a TV viewer, she actually surrenders her mind and her ability to have a critical approach to the fiction she is watching (line 53). One may think that the text provides a *mise en abyme* of the reception process: as readers, we also have to question the patterns and contents of archetypal stories and, to some extent, T.C. Boyle's text may sound like a cautionary tale.

### Conclusion

This analysis has thrown light on approaches to love and marriage bonds which, despite the different writing contexts, show quite a few similarities, especially regarding the links between love, loss and exhaustion and the failure to communicate which is deep-rooted in gender relations and their perception. Finally, beyond the clichés of fairy-tales and several forms of romance, the very definition of love remains elusive and maybe as fallacious as the petrified woman who is probably a living woman exploited to earn money. Yet some differences are worth noticing: in document A, which is imbued with melancholy, the young man is expected to pursue his quest symbolized by fishing whereas the woman is excluded and vanishes from the text, which is all the more significant as, in 1927, Hemingway published a collection of short stories entitled *Men Without Women*. In the other two documents, the treatment of men and women is more ambivalent, as suggested by the comic and tragic overtones. The universal theme of love is explored more or less obliquely thanks to minimal strategies, especially in documents A and B the elliptical dimension of which is food for the reader's thought; on the contrary, document C, through structural irony and its webs of imagery, gives a feeling of semantic density and completeness. The three documents thus epitomize the multiple facets of the short story as a protean and inclusive genre.

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