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IB English Literature SL

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A Literary Commentary on Christine West, “Blaze”

A dissatisfactory, dull relationship can bring about the negativity in ourselves, looking for stimulation and satisfaction in even traumatic tragedies. Such emotions of a married stay-at-home wife are described in an ironic, bland tone, in Christine West’s poem, *Blaze*, as her changing emotions are narrated while a fire encapsulates and destroys her house, as well as her monotonous life.

The wife’s dissatisfaction in her familial life is established throughout the poem as the third-person narrator traces her routine to the moment of the fire. The ironic tone is immediately established as the poem opens with her talking to the insurance man, immediately before the fire starts—the situation recollected later as an “unfunny [...] family joke” (1). The use of enjambment: “at the door with / —of all people [...]— / the insurance man” (2-4) builds this ironic tension, and its release, as the insurance man is introduced, further emphasizes the irony of the whole situation. The sly tone, indicated by the alliteration “s”, “how she’d stood gossiping,” (2) is additionally stressed in the sarcastic description of the insurance man’s “Providential shoulder,” (5) the “half-known caverns of her children’s bedrooms,” (10) and the “treacherous toaster,” (33) despite her presumable role as the homemaker, revealing her disinterest in her work at home.

Such discontent regarding her familial role is implied in her various actions before the beginning of the fire. Her “gossiping with [...] the insurance man” (2-4)—who is clearly here for professional purposes, being easily distracted with “half her attention on her white border,” and “[waving] to a neighbor” as she “chats, smiles at nothing much,” (6, 8, 11) reveals her disinterest in her current dull lifestyle. The alliteration of the “h,” “half her attention’s on her white border [...] behind the half-known caverns,” (6, 10) alludes to her half-heartedness towards her role as a homemaker, while the discrepant phrases—the “dull

safety” of her house, (9) or the “caverns” that are “her children’s bedrooms,” (10) — additionally reflect her displeasure and irritation in her role as the stay-at-home spouse and the children’s caretaker. These descriptions of her disregard is further enhanced by slight connotations of traditional familial roles, as the narrator mentions “her white border” (6) of the house fences; the “kitchen,” (32) where the fire begins; and her neighbor’s “pram” (8) passing by—all of which reference her role as a “housewife.” On the other hand, the description of the neighbors “sailing out,” (8) reflects her envy towards breaking out of the “white border”—the borders of her house; showing her yearning for change in her tedious life.

The change she desires come in the form of the “blaze,” which forms a striking contrast from the previously peaceful descriptions. The sudden change in tone as “the mordant reek of smoke [...] reaches him, than her,” (12) is accompanied by the use of short sentences and frequent commas that speed the narration—“reaches him, then her. / Next, the clutch of panic checking all responses.” (13-14) —, diverging from the spanning sentences of the previous stanzas and establishing the change in atmosphere. Her quick actions are described in short phrases with alliteration—“What to save for whom / Photographs, toys or letters?,” “she scoops [...] his one last little life,” (17, 19) —that build the rhythm and thereby an atmosphere of urgency, while also hinting at an inept feeling of excitement. The “heat, [the] hungry fire” (21) that she speaks of, also opposes the tactile image of the “cool blooms” (7) of the flowers in her garden, further revealing how the abrupt fire that contrasts with her daily life, will further cause a sharp turn from her dull routines.

Her strange positivity and affection towards the fire can be observed through various visual images as well as the extravagant, or even enthusiastic choice of words—indicating her excitement as she breaks from her tedious routines, while also hinting at the cause of her dissatisfaction in life. The fire “patterning her eyes” are described with alternating visual images of “brightness, then black,” (16) reflecting her excitement towards them. The emphasis towards its “raging beauty [...] the glorious energy,” (23) reveals her admiration and wonder towards this fire, which “run lovingly over everything” (15) that she is tired and sick of. Her abnormal reaction, as she excitedly speaks of “the heat, [...] the hungry fire,” to her “stone-faced husband,” (21, 22) shows her lunatic pleasure towards the destruction of her

house—an symbolic of the demolition her dull life. Her husband, however, does not appear to share the same sentiment, suggesting a cause of her erratic behavior—a failed family relationship. While his wife is clearly disturbed, shouting that “It was like drowning in light!,” he evidently does not console her or acknowledge her traumatic experience, “[finding] no excuses for her.” (24, 25) A rhetorical question, “Does her survival mean a thing to him?” (26) is then asked, confirming his lack of interest in her well-being, and insinuating that the reason for her negative sentiment towards her household, is her husband’s indifference.

The incident is finally concluded as the family eats the “cold meals from the garage freezer,” (29) that contrasts with the heat of the fire from the day before, denoting an ending, a conclusion. The auditory image of the children’s innocent laughter is juxtaposed with the “[molten] Tupperware and glass,” (28) showing the destructiveness of the disaster, as well as a hint of hope—a sense of an end to her boring life, and a prospect of change.

The symbol of a brightly shining “blaze” is simultaneously that of destruction and re-birth. This is indeed the wife’s interpretation of the fire—her dissatisfaction—which is fueled by her fatiguing role in her household, as her husband remains uninterested in her emotions. Such sentiment is expressed in the final lines, in her “trembling,” as she recollects the events of the previous day, somewhat hopefully suggesting that it is now, for her, “Time for a re-fit,” “Time to re-think her life.”

Word Count: 1008