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Intro to Literary Analysis

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Compare/Contrast: "Happy Endings" and "The Littoral Zone"

Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings" is a deft piece of metafiction which highlights the monotony of its eponymous happy ending. Its themes echo those of Andrea Barrett's "The Littoral Zone," a short story detailing the extramarital affair of zoologists Ruby and Jonathan. Although both stories express cynicism about long-term romantic fulfillment, "The Littoral Zone" evokes empathy for the bittersweet lives of its protagonists, whereas "Happy Endings" seems to mock its characters' fatalistic strivings.

In style and structure, neither story remotely resembles the other. "Happy Endings" is told through six plots, labeled A through F. B through F are filled with drama, infidelity, natural disasters, and even espionage, but fortunately, every story loops back to A, a fairy-tale happy ending in which John and Mary have "stimulating and challenging" jobs, a "stimulating and challenging" sex life, and "stimulating and challenging" hobbies. Of course, the repetitious nature of this ending is anything but stimulating and challenging for the reader, who remains uninvested in the face of Atwood's perfunctory descriptions of the characters' "fun vacations" and children who "turn out well." This produces in an ironic dissatisfaction in the reader with what is supposedly the happiest possible ending. The irony only intensifies in the story's epilogue: "The only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*" With this assertion, plot A is re-contextualized. Atwood is not claiming that every person's marriage will end well, but rather that every possible ending leads

to death. The notion that the happiest ending is death is, to speak mildly, discomfotingly cynical.

“The Littoral Zone” expresses a similar cynicism, albeit told in a more traditional narrative structure. Ruby and Jonathon meet on an island in New Hampshire, where they are embarking on a scientific venture with a number of other zoologists, marine biologists, and oceanographers. During these weeks, Ruby and Jonathon, who are both married and have families on the mainland, begin an affair which continues off the island through letters and phone calls. Finally, Ruby and Jonathon divorce their respective spouses and marry each other. However, they eventually become bored with their marriage, just as the reader does as in Atwood’s ending A, and think wistfully of the passion they cannot seem to recapture. They have become trapped in the littoral zone, “that space between high and low watermarks where organisms struggled to adapt to the daily rhythm of immersion and exposure.” The story ends as Ruby reflects on the night when they first made love, implying that she may believe they were meant to remain apart: “Then she woke Jonathon and they tiptoed back to their rooms, where they were supposed to be.”

Although both stories are concerned with disillusionment in marriage, “The Littoral Zone” casts a much more sympathetic light on its protagonists than “Happy Endings” does. Ruby and Jonathon are fully fleshed-out characters. The way that they are even drawn to each other’s imperfections, such as Jonathon’s bitten fingernails and Ruby’s blotchy calves, gives their relationship depth, rejecting the shallowness of mere lust. The narrative emphasizes their guilt and the ways that each attempts to resist their mutual attraction; this makes them more sympathetic to the reader than if they had no internal conflict about the affair. Both characters attempt to minimize the negative effects of their divorces; they arrange responsible custody

agreements with their children and keep their answers about the island simple and basic, avoiding torrid speculation that could hurt any party. When their marriage begins to stale, they attempt to spare each other the truth of their respective regrets: “Alone in the house, they sit quietly near each other and struggle to conceal their disappointments.” They’re sensible people, the narrative explains. They were aware that their passionate love affair would fade with age, and “they never reproach each other.” When the story’s final, bittersweet reminiscence about the island concludes, the reader has sympathy for the characters and an understand of why they made the mistakes that they did.

“Happy Endings” could not be more different. By intentionally making the characters as paper-thin as possible and undercutting the most emotional moments with humor, the narrative does everything it can to lampoon its characters’ struggles. We know nothing about most of the characters, rendering them as little more than stick figures. The characters that receive some characterization are distasteful to the extreme with no sympathetic details, such as John in plot B, who “merely uses [Mary’s] body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind.” Occasionally, the narrative openly pokes fun at the characters. When Mary commits suicide by taking pills and drinking sherry, it remarks, “You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it’s not even whiskey.” Similar jokes and asides often accompany characters’ deaths. When John purchases a handgun to shoot two people and himself in plot C, the narrative adds that “this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later.” After systematically reducing whatever propensity the reader may have to sympathize with the characters, “Happy Endings” concludes: “You’ll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don’t be deluded by any other endings, they’re all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.”

Ultimately, “Happy Endings” and “The Littoral Zone” share many of the same themes, but express them through very different methods. “The Littoral Zone” is a straightforward narrative, while “Happy Endings” is a complex piece of metafiction. “The Littoral Zone” takes a nuanced look at a flawed couple and the mistakes they must learn to live with, whereas “Happy Endings” offers its characters little clemency, preferring instead to use them as ironic object lessons about the transience of romantic fulfillment. Both stories provide cynical perspectives on fidelity and marriage.