

**THE IRONY OF CELIA'S DESIRE FOR THE HONOR AND GLORY OF  
"MRS." BEFORE HER NAME IN COOKE'S "HOW CELIA CHANGED  
HER MIND"**

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**Abstract**

*Marriage, in the nineteenth century, was seen as the destiny of women who were raised to be mothers and helpers but not providers. But women, little by little, began struggling to be recognized, to become visible, to have equal rights.*

*The short story How Celia changed her mind, written in 1891, shows through Celia Barnes, the protagonist, how distressing it is when a woman does not follow the pattern of subordinate women that society requires thus, it deals with up-to-date facts very much present in many women's lives nowadays, even having been written more than a hundred years ago.*

Key-words: Marriage. Feminism. Rose Terry Cooke

This story is apparently very simple: Celia Barnes, of about fifty years old, is a tailoress of a little country town who succeeded her teacher Polly's business after her death. Celia was left by her mother when she was ten and did not have much education: "... early left an orphan, without near relatives or money, she had received the scantiest measure of education that our town authorities deal to the pauper children of such organizations..." (COOKE, 1994, p. 460).

Celia had an enormous preoccupation: not to be a single woman but a married one.

*How Celia changed her mind* is a well organized story because it opens and closes as a circle with an unexpected *denouement* linked to the themes marriage versus singleness which are always present.

Celia and Mrs. Stearns, the minister's wife, are a round and a flat characters respectively. According to Cândida Gancho (1999, p. 16-20), a round character is the one who changes throughout a story while a flat one does not. Celia is a round character because she undergoes some changes which brings evolution to the text, for example: Celia at first, expresses her desire of getting married saying: "... Thank goodness, I sha'n't hev [sic] to die an old maid!" (COOKE, 1994, p. 470) which contradicts with her happiness at the end of the story for not being married anymore: "... I'm so thankful to be an old maid ag'in!" (COOKE, 1994, p. 477).

On the other hand, Mrs. Sterns is a flat character, because besides being conscious of a wife's duties: "... But married women have more troubles and responsibilities than unmarried, Miss Celia, she (Mrs. Sterns) said..." (COOKE, 1994, p. 458), she follows the expected pattern of a subordinate woman throughout the story without any change.

Celia was unhappy and unsatisfied. Although she was an old maid, she hated them all: "If there's anything on the face of the earth I do hate, it's an old maid!" (COOKE, 1994, p.

457). In her opinion maids were seen as a despised class, they were not even considered as people. Besides that, she also complained about her loneliness and of not having anybody to share the day-by-day battle: “ There ‘t is! Nobody to home to care if you live or die; nobody to peek out of the winder to see if you’re comin’, or to make a mess of gruel or a cup of tea for you, or to throw ye a feelin’ word if you’re sick nigh unto death.” (COOKE, 1994, p. 458).

Celia viewed married women as the ones who had names eventhough those names came from the husbands. For her, while maids were considered second class citizens, married women had their husband’s identity. In her opinion, married women had all the advantages that lacked in maids, they had an identity: “...A woman that’s married is somebody; she’s got a place in the world; she ain’t everybody’s tag; folks don’t say, ‘Oh, it’s nobody but that old maid...” (COOKE, 1994, p. 458). Consequently, she began looking for the honor and the glory of being a married woman, that is, she fought for her own identity.

It is not by any chance that Celia wanted to marry anyhow. Celia’s idea of marriage was a romantic one which is still present in our culture nowadays. Western culture reaffirms that we have to find out our soul mates and Celia is an example of the cultural values we internalize. Thus, she could not get rid of it. Only marriage, in her point of view, could give her the security that she was seeking for.

Celia’s romantic view of marriage is also shown when Mrs. Stearns, introduces different ideas about marriage: “... even married life had its own loneliness...” (COOKE, 1994, p. 458). The Parson’s wife also mentions some problems by married women and responsibilities such as having children to bring up, to do the duty for the family and to control the supplies needed.

In one of her writings Virginia Woof introduces the concept “the angel in the house” for those submissive women within marriage and Mrs. Stearns embodies this image:

*... intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (WOOF, 1979, p. 59)*

Mrs. Stearns acted as “the angel in the house” in relation to her husband who, besides being a minister, was a man and as such, he expected his wife to be always ready to serve him as a slave does.

Taking into consideration Fuller’s comment on the slavery behaviour of men: “Knowing that there exists in the minds of men a tone of feeling toward women as toward slaves” (FULLER, 1994, p. 65), we can assert that Mr. Stearns’ feeling of slavery was also present when his wife, accepting that treatment, had to keep everything well done, organized and the food warm not to irritate him:

*...Mrs. Stearns poured out her husband’s tea in the kitchen, replenished his plate with stew, and cut for him more than one segment of the crisp, fresh apple-pie, and urged upon him the squares of new cheese that legitimately accompany this deleterious viand of the race and country, the sempiternal, insistent, flagrant, and alas! Also fragrant pie.(COOKE, 1994, p. 459-460)*

Besides acting as a slave, the minister’s wife is said to be a fairly happy woman in her relationship with her husband. This happiness can be understood as contradictory when she uses St. Paul, an important apostle, as a supporter to the idea that it is better to be single than

to be married: "... she was, on the whole, inclined to agree with St. Paul, that the woman who did not marry 'doeth better' " (COOKE, 1994, p. 457). If one is satisfied with marriage, how can that same person agree that it is better not to get married? Isn't that contradictory?

Such contradiction shows itself as an irony. Take for instance "irony as saying the opposite of what one thinks but letting the statement being understood" (MASSAUD, 1999, p. 295). Mrs. Stearns says she is happy but agrees that it is better to be single than to be married making us understand that she is unhappy.

While it is stated that in the nineteenth century there were "...strategies invoked to keep women subservient to men" (MOI, 1985,p.21), a man, ST. Paul, is introduced at the beginning of the story as someone who was able to understand women's condition and knew what was better for them. If men expected women to be submissive, they would never defend women by showing what was better for them. This statement can also be understood as irony.

Trying to avoid a relationship in which a man commands a woman, although Celia's dream was to get married, she had rejected some opportunities for marriage in the hope of having a husband with whom she could share her life:

She had been asked to marry an old farmer with five uproarious boys, a man notorious in East Bassett for his stinginess and bad temper, and she had promptly declined the offer. Once more fate had given her a chance. A young fellow of no character, poor, "shiftless", and given to cider as a beverage, had considered it a good idea to marry some one who would make a home for him and earn his living...(COOKE, 1994, p. 461)

Celia reaffirms her romanticism in relation to marriage all the time. She really internalised the western cultural values of marriage as a synonym of sharing, companionship, happiness and identity. As she had that romantic view, Celia believed that any man could be prosperous if he wanted to. Then, she decided to help Rosabel, one of the minister's daughters, against Mr. Stearns command, to marry Amos, a poor man. Celia encouraged the couple and helped them planning their elopement.

When the parson knew about Celia's help to Rosabel, he looked for Celia and mistreated her on a highway: "And I never want to see you again inside of my house, you confounded old maid!" (COOKE, 1994, p. 468). Celia became too upset with that argument and thought that she had been insulted only because she did not have a husband to defend her in a situation like that. And she expressed her feelings muttering to herself: "...Ef I was n't an old maid, you wouldn't no more have darst to "a"talked to me this way than nothin'. Ef I'd had a man to stand up to ye you'd have been dumber 'n Balaam's ass a great sight". (COOKE, 1994, p. 468).

After quarrelling with Mr. Stearns, Celia went away with the idea of vengeance. She felt miserable. Soon, she began thinking about marrying someone who could fight that man when suddenly Deacon Evert, a senior deacon of the church, who had the "power to make the minister extremely uncomfortable if he chose." (COOKE, 1994, p. 469), approached and offered her the opportunity to get married: "... I'm real lonesome sence [sic] I lost my partner [he meant his wife] (...) so if you'll have me, Celye, here I be" (COOKE, 1994, p. 469).

Deacon Evert needed a person to take care of his house. He was rich, had no children, no near relations and had been a widow for the last two years. Celia Barns had in mind her revenge towards Parson Stearns and the thought that "...the cooking and the indoor work for two people could not be so hard as to sew from house to house for her daily bread..." (COOKE, 1994, p. 470).

Deacon proposed her a *marriage de convenance* which she accepted. It was time then, for her dreams of becoming a married woman to come true: "...Thank goodness, I sha'n't hev [sic] to die an old maid!" ( COOKE, 1994, p. 470).

But as a married woman, Celia began suffering the consequences of her mistep. It was difficult for her to accept being treated as “the angel in the house”, because passivity, the Puritans’ most important virtue for women (ROMERO, 1991, p. 123), definitely was not one of Celia’s characteristics. She was too much outspoken, and “...had a will of her own, quite undisciplined...” (COOKE, 1994, p. 474) which made Deacon Everts find dissatisfaction in their union. He was not able to control her because she disagreed with the culture pattern, that is, she deconstructed the standard pattern of the female role in society, mainly in marriage.

Celia’s life became so distressing that she forgot about her revenge, which was possible neither before nor after her marriage due to the conflicts she was facing in her relationship with her husband. Marriage had been transformed into the negation of her romantic view towards it.

Culture ideology made Celia believe that husbands and wives were like a team. However, she was forced to realize that her husband was not her defender, hence she had to fight her own battles. In fact, it was frustrating to discover that she did not have an ally in her husband because women in general never got partnership within marriage as they were considered inferior human beings. Joyce Carol Oates said in an interview “... that we achieve our salvation, or our ruin, by the marriages we contract” (SHOWALTER, 1994, p. 19) and Celia was discovering that her dream had been transformed into a nightmare which made her become depressed:

*But this is only a mild specimen of poor Celia’s life as a married woman. She did not find the honor and glory of “Mrs.” before her name a compensation for the thousand evils that she “knew not of” when she fled to them as a desirable change from her single blessedness. Deacon Everts entirely refused to enter into any of her devices against Parson Stearns. (COOKE, 1994, p. 472)*

When Celia married, she thought she had found the salvation for her problems. She thought Deacon would be a defender, a provider, in other words, a saver. All her problems would disappear. But things went wrong. He never defended her, he acted as if she did not exist and he complained a lot because he said she was too much free handed. He started making reference to his first wife frequently to show his dissatisfaction with marriage: “My first never cooked half what you do. We shall come to want certain, if you’re free-handed” (COOKE, 1994, p. 471). But Celia also showed her regret: “... I don’t want to hear no more about your ‘first’. I’m ready to say I wish ‘t she’d ha’ been your last too” (COOKE, 1994, p. 471).

Celia’s suffering made her to regret of being “Mrs.” And thus she was obliged to develop a new understanding of married life: “... She discovered how few among them were more than household drudges, the servants of their families, worked to the verge of exhaustion, and neither thanked nor rewarded for their pains” (COOKE, 1994, p. 472). Suffering came as a must to make Celia change her mind completely. Her change about being a wife, being married was drastic, and it led her to “ ... look woefully back to the freedom and peace of her maiden days” (COOKE, 1994, p. 472).

The institution of marriage is seen as unbroken by religion. This might be one of the reasons why marriage is portrayed as a cage and thus as prison for women. There is strong emphasis on sacrifice and self-denial for the sake of marriage. These ideas were very strong in the nineteenth century America.

As women had a capacity to stand suffering that man did not, Celia, as a religious person, did not evade her responsibility. She went on married for four wretched years up to the day her husband died. She received a life-insurance policy for five thousand dollars and “she had a right to her support for one year out of the estate, and the use of the house for that time” (COOKE, 1994, p. 476).

Above all, she did lie neither to herself nor to the community and this explains her attitude of not mourning her husband and of attending his funeral in her usual gray Sunday gown and bonnet. She showed only what she was feeling: "... I won't lie, anyhow!" She answered to Mrs. Stiles's remonstrance! "I ain't a mite sorry nor mournful. I could ha' wished he'd had time to repent of his sins, (...) I wish 't I'd never married him, that's all!" (COOKE, 1994, p. 476).

Celia's change towards marriage and the condition of married woman is shown in many ways throughout the text. However her decision to celebrate Thanksgiving Day dining with all the seven spinsters of the town, and her acknowledgement that: "I'm free to confess. I feel as though I could keep Thanksgiving to-day with my hull soul. I'm so thankful to be an old maid ag'in!" (COOKE, 1994, p. 477), functions not only as Celia's freedom of body and soul, but mainly as her catharsis, as her full awakening.

Therefore, we can conclude that lots of cultural aspects are mentioned and questioned from the beginning of this text as follows: married women being much more respected than the single ones; man as a provider, that is, the one who gives money and security. The theme of marriage versus singleness is also stated at the beginning and developed along the text.

The end of the story is a closing one to all aspects principally when Celia becomes a person with a different point of view she had at the beginning of the story because she went through the experience of getting married.

Finally, one can assert that irony presents itself in Celia's experience for two meaningful facts for Celia, herself. Firstly, she was led to realize that her marriage and her place as a wife, both of them, were a disaster, and she fully understood the meaning of the phrase "single blessedness". Secondly, her strong desire to become Mrs. turned herself and her world unbearable, because she had a mind and a will of her own.

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