

Critique

Short stories can be difficult little monsters to tackle directly. Whether it's due to the eccentricity of the topic, a convoluted plot, or flawed techniques on behalf of the writer, the truth is that sometimes a short story can simultaneously be a guilty pleasure and uncomfortable experience. With regards to Dylan Mendoza's short story "Red Lipstick", this is very much the case. Featuring a plot that is as mentally unstable as its protagonist and a venomous message towards the comfortable world of normality, "Red Lipstick" is a train wreck concoction of pleasure and poison, and despite its flaws of ignorance towards theoretical structures of gender and the plight of minority women in America, is a hot mess one cannot help but stop and observe.

The first defining feature of "Red Lipstick" that requires attention is the borderline psychotic nature of the plot and its events. Although short, Mendoza takes the reader on a trip into the mind of someone everyone knows but does not care to investigate further. Specifically, the story is of the plight of an attractive classmate or coworker, someone who seems to have it together, but is slowly cracking down into pieces. The transformation of these cracks into fissures appears to be the central focus, and as soon as the reader bites into the opening paragraph, Mendoza relentlessly kidnaps and drags them into his world. Regarding his motivations for writing this story, Mendoza says: "In writing this, I wanted to force readers to open their eyes and look at things they normally would not want to see. Everyone has secrets, and I wanted to drag those out of someone I feel every college student would know." And for the reader, exploring the secrets of protagonist Catherine Yamamoto is guaranteed to be an uncomfortable experience. From the dramatics of the opening scene, to Catherine's monologues on contemporary romance, Mendoza is not afraid to say things that not many would want to say and go places most would probably rather not go. Taking these words into account, it is perhaps more appropriate to compare reading "Red Lipstick" to a brief albeit violent tryst with a jilted lover, for it definitely seems Mendoza is out to punish the very societal values and structures he takes issue with. Truly, as much as one may want to stop reading, the reader will not be able to stop until the climax of the story is reached, where the insanities of

the plot and protagonist are explained and probable to leave the reader wondering what just happened and what they just read.

However, as exciting and intriguing "Red Lipstick" may be, it does possess its flaws, which are mainly ones of ignorance. When writing about women and ethnic minorities in America, it is especially important to keep in mind the oppression they face on a daily basis, as well as the unique space in American society they occupy. Failure to address these issues can lead to the utilization of minority women as a tool, reducing them to mere tropes or objects, and one could possibly argue this is the case of "Red Lipstick." However, before drawing this conclusion, one has to wonder, why does Mendoza choose an Asian American protagonist? Nowhere in the story are any kind of stereotypical or orientalist images of dragons, cherry blossoms, or martial arts present, and furthermore Catherine herself does appear to be a "geisha girl" or "dragon lady" as well. So what exactly is her role in the story as a minority? Perhaps ultimately Catherine's race is something that simply takes a backseat to the main events of the story of the deterioration of her own mind. Mendoza presents her as just another person, and not once is she "otherized" or "exoticized" throughout the story. Rather, Catherine's struggles with loving herself and getting through life represent everyone's struggles with societal beauty, and Mendoza seems to be suggesting this by not making her race an issue of contention. That is of course, until the story's conclusion, when it is revealed that "Catherine Yamamoto" was actually born "Jacob Landry", revealing that for the whole story the protagonist was actually a white male to female transsexual in transition. Examining this development critically, it appears to be nothing more than a copout to avoid advanced critiques on race and gender performance. While it is lamentable that Mendoza chooses to avoid such critiques, perhaps his next work will address such matters.

Furthermore, it needs to be said that Mendoza blatantly and ignorantly misrepresents the transsexual community. When it is revealed at the end that Catherine is actually a transsexual living in transition, he is implying that her mental issues of self-love and identity stem

from this procedure without an in-depth explanation as to why. This is dangerous for many reasons, mainly because undoubtedly for transsexuals life is not only really difficult, but also immensely complicated. It is perfectly fine on Mendoza's end to utilize this as a plot twist, but in doing so he needed to address the various social issue and pressures of the demons plaguing this community to provide an accurate portrayal. Otherwise, what the reader is stuck with is a shallow portrayal of the transsexual community that does not help at all in removing the oppression and stigma faced by said community. It is a shame he did not take this opportunity to help and explain, for it would have been a fantastic insight into a group so often abused as objects of entertainment and humor.

However, beyond all the good and evils surrounding "Red Lipstick", what is perhaps most important to note is the message it conveys about society. What can ultimately be observed from Catherine's journey is the decay and breaking down of an individual due to society's strict and often unattainable standards of beauty. However, the biggest message "Red Lipstick" carries with it is what it says about gay men in America. In the end, the protagonist is not Catherine but Jacob and his plight as a gay male. Several times throughout the story, issues of beauty and desire are brought up, and upon examining her flaws Catherine often mentions her desire to just be "beautiful" and "normal." Living life as a man attracted to other men caused Jacob so much pain that he went as far as to change his sex in order to join the heterosexual majority. This is a clear example of the effects of homophobia and social stigma on gay men in America, and it demonstrates the extent to which some will try to escape this oppression. It is of course necessary to say, however, that this is an extreme example, but seeing how Mendoza has a flair for stories and plots as flamboyant and crazy as he is, it is perhaps to be expected.

All in all, "Red Lipstick" is an entertaining trip to the heart of debauchery and depression bogged down by issues of racial and gender ignorance. Here, Mendoza has crafted a beautifully demented guilty pleasure one would be caught reading in secret of the romance novel section of their local Wal-Mart. However, as fun as it may be, the topics it covers definitely require more

thorough research and explanation, and perhaps in his next work Mendoza will deliver a deeper work combining his knack for the explicitness of sensuality with a well-thought out commentary on society, race, gender, and sexuality. Until then, "Red Lipstick" provides a peculiar escape for those who seek it.