

All Roads Lead to Rivalry: The Women of “Roman Fever”

Mia Rankine

General Education

Nominated by Tamara Migan, Lecturer of English



Mia Rankine, a native of Port Huron, Michigan, began pursuing teacher certification for mathematics and English at SVSU in the fall of 2011. She is a recipient of the President’s Scholarship and an active member of the Honors Program and Math Club. Mia currently works as a mathematics tutor at the Center for Academic Achievement and as a student employee for the Mathematics Department. She aspires to teach students in a low-income school after graduation.

Edith Wharton’s short story “Roman Fever” (1934) depicts the crumbling friendship between a pair of affluent middle-aged widows from New York. Sometime during the Prohibition era, Alida Slade and Grace Ansley become unexpectedly reunited in Rome while on separate vacations, each accompanied by her bachelorette daughter. While sitting on a restaurant terrace overlooking “the outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum” (Wharton 478), the mothers reminisce about their complicated past. Not surprisingly, their youthful rivalry renews over the course of the spring afternoon. By placing “Roman Fever” in a setting known for its storied and turbulent history, Wharton enhances the audience’s understanding of the theme: patriarchal civilizations force women to compete against one another for social positions.

In the opening passages, Alida and Grace are relatively secluded while they silently contemplate the view “with a sort of diffused serenity which might have been borrowed from the spring effulgence of the Roman skies” (Wharton 479). At first, the atmosphere is lighthearted as they lean against the parapet and offer broad observations about the world. However, as the sun sets, the subject matter of their conversation narrows in scope and becomes much more intimate. The day evolves into an unforgettable evening, as their waiter foreshadowed, but the night is not memorable for pleasant reasons. The terrace quickly becomes even more deserted as they both reveal dark secrets that threaten their friendship. Twenty-five years earlier, Alida forged a letter from her future husband, Delphin Slade, to Grace, proclaiming his love for Grace and arranging a tryst at the Colosseum. Alida sought to eliminate the competition for her fiancé in a similar manner as Aunt Harriet, who subjected her sister to a fatal case of Roman fever in order to procure a man. Alida confesses to the crime, but Grace counters with her own revelation: she replied to the letter and did indeed meet with Delphin that fateful night. Alida immediately trivializes the affair and claims she won in the long run because she was the one who married him. It is Grace, however, who has the last word as she conceived her daughter, Barbara, with Delphin.

In short, as a result of these devastating disclosures, the women discover the foundations on which they constructed their lives are built on false memories and that both were guilty of violating social norms: “Alida believes that her daughter is the only offspring of the man she loved, while Grace believes that Delphin initiated the events that would result in the birth of Babs, that he ‘loved’ Grace” (Bauer 685-86). These foundations have foundered, just like the foundations of Ancient Rome. For these reasons, scholar Susan Sweeney suggests “Roman Fever” can be read as a “cautionary tale” that exhibits the grave consequences for “venturing beyond the narrow confines of proper feminine behavior” (328). Moreover, the setting of Rome itself becomes a thematic device that Wharton uses to her advantage.

Because the work of fiction takes place in such a famous locale, the backdrop emphasizes the importance of the duo’s specific micro-conflict. That is, the “outlying immensity” (Wharton 484) of the Seven Hills of Rome bestows a greater sense of significance upon their interaction. No longer is it a simple conversation as the location places the dispute on a global scale. The placement escalates the dispute to the macro-level as a critique of patriarchy and its polarization of women in general. According

to expert Dale M. Bauer, the setting also creates an analogy comparing “the fortunes of civilizations and the fortunes of these two families” (685). Namely, the fate of the Eternal City suggests the future fate of the women. Like the “great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendour” (Wharton 485) that is Rome, the relationship between Grace and Alida will gradually collapse over time.

In addition, the exotic location highlights the social status of the heroines. Both Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade belong to the upper class and are able to indulge in an extravagant vacation overseas in an adventurous city. As members of an elite social group, these ladies struggle against each other for power throughout their lives, and their unplanned meeting that day is no exception. Alida has the upper hand for most of the afternoon as she directs the conversation, but Grace is the one who ultimately comes out on top. Bauer notes that during this time period females were only allowed to exercise their will through reproductive choice, a choice that the former erroneously believed she denied the latter by marrying Delphin (685). Alida had always incorrectly assumed Grace hastily married Horace Ansley “out of *pique*—to be able to say [she]’d got ahead” of her (Wharton 490). Thus, she is mistaken when she considers her marriage “the mark of social superiority over her rival” (Bauer 687). Once Grace reveals the truth, their roles reverse, and it is she who moves ahead of her rival in the end.

Because “Roman Fever” demonstrates the historical discord between all female homosocial relations, it follows that the short story can be interpreted as “an account of the curse of patriarchy, which turns women against each other and themselves” (Sweeney 328). The Roman ruins symbolize the origins of Western civilization—a civilization that is emphatically patriarchal. Academic Rachel Bowlby concisely observes that both protagonists experience “the conventional feminine lives of girl, wife, mother, and widow; their identities [are] primarily in relation to husbands secured, then lived with, then lost” (42-43). In other words, each lady is “a social appendage to her husband” (Bauer 686). Because they depend on men to solidify their social standings, women had to battle each other for prosperous partners who would provide for them. They were forced to do so to survive in the androcentric world.

Up until the Roaring Twenties, there had also been considerable expectations of morality in women. The enveloping action of this era therefore parallels the micro-conflict of the narrative as both women have behaved immorally: Alida contrived the love note, and Grace engaged in premarital sex with a betrothed man. The former assumes her rival is irreproachable, even though the latter warns her that “the most prudent girls aren’t always prudent” (Wharton 487). The final line of “Roman Fever” exposes “the grounds of this assumption—the unwavering belief in patriarchal authority and feminine complaisance—to be empty, as fragmented as the Roman ruins themselves” (Bauer 690). Furthermore, Rome is ambivalent with regards to morals. Critic Lawrence Berkove asserts the metropolis is “a place where a choice is made between the two extremes of pagan self-indulgence and fevered passion, on the one hand, and Christian submission to God’s laws and institutions, on the other” (59). Hence, the narrative fittingly reflects the crisis of morality that plagued pagan Rome and continues to afflict modern Western civilization.

In addition to immorality, the Eternal City also inherently possesses an aura of mortality as a *memento mori*, and its ruins allude to the inevitable deaths of Alida and Grace. This may explain their sense of urgency in finally telling the truth. Berkove reports that particularly during times of Roman fever “the ground on which the Forum and the Colosseum were built . . . [were] regarded as dangerous, even deadly” (57) at dusk. Alida unsuccessfully tries to exploit this knowledge to her advantage. As a historical site often associated with deadly conflicts, the capital of Italy provides an appropriate backdrop for “the emergence of long-buried stories” and “the gladiator violence” (Bowlby 41) between the female leads.

Indeed, Rome has always been a “powerful site of primal violence” (Bauer 681), and it is important readers note the story’s decisive act of betrayal is centered in the Colosseum. There, the lovers engaged in a covert affair that reflects the symbolic darkness of the Roman arena: after sunset, the Colosseum becomes damp and “deathly cold” (Wharton 486), and like the rest of the city, violence is “inscribed in the ruins of the Roman arena” (Sweeney 315). In fact, Berkove contends that Grace and Alida “‘continue the gladiatorial tradition’ of the Colosseum: They have been relentless and unscrupulous, using their bodies, their husbands, their daughters, and their lives of lies as weapons to score on each other. In the name of love, they have been rivals for twenty-five years and sought to kill each other, one literally and the other figuratively” (59). And so the “dusky secret” (Wharton 491) Colosseum and its similar surroundings prove to be a suitable stage that echoes the strife between the central characters.

On the whole, Wharton effectively conveys a crucial theme—patriarchy polarizing women—by

setting this piece of fiction in “the valued remains of a violent masculine civilization” (Bowlby 42). Instead of joining forces to challenge the sexism that pervades Western culture, Alida and Grace challenge one another for a man. As a result, they emerge as rivals to each other—not each other’s oppressor. In essence, women are divided—not united—by patriarchal societies like Rome. This city is a dangerous place, a place where morals are at a crossroads. Unfortunately, all roads lead to rivalry for the women of “Roman Fever.”

Works Cited

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