

God and Guilt in Parsons' Place

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Ruthie Parson, more than any other character in Bev Marshall's Right as Rain, is markedly influenced by feelings of religious guilt in relation to premarital sex. Though Ruthie goes through many changes and evolutions throughout the novel, one constant is her longing for an intimate relationship with God. She believes that He has turned His back on her because she has sinned. Both chasing this elusive connection with God and escaping the accompanying guilt define Ruthie's character.

Blood is a recurrent theme accompanying Ruthie's associations with guilt, sex, and religion. When Ruthie is abandoned and trapped at her church, she calls upon help first from Jesus, then from God. Ruthie thinks God is punishing her for masturbating and promises never to do it again, to which she hears the miraculous reply, "You break your promises Ruthie" (75). The image of Jesus appears with this voice, terrifying Ruthie, but she resolves to show true repentance. After fainting and puncturing her forehead on carpet tacks, she wrongly misinterprets her bleeding temples as a sign of stigmata, leading her to believe that God has singled her out for sainthood. Additionally, the first time Ruthie witnesses her own parents having sex as a child, she witnesses a degree of violence: "His head was thrown back, her mother's arms were around his shoulders, her nails digging so deeply into his flesh that drops of blood were visible on his back" (159). Seeing her normally reserved parents engaged in the carnal act of sex set the precedent for violence she would later endure in life. This does not mean Ruthie believes that her husband Dennis' abuse is normal or that her father ever harmed her mother in that way, but

merely that sex can be violent. When Ruthie engages in sex for the first time, Marshall again uses images of blood and violence: “She remembered Dennis’ teeth biting into her breast...She remembered the moment of pain she felt inside as he pushed his way into her...She remembered, too, the blood that Dennis had wiped away with his briefs, proof that she was a virgin no more” (171). This event marked a turning point for Ruthie. She now bears the guilt of having premarital sex though it is expressly forbidden by her religion. She believes this sinful act causes God to turn his back on her and allows her ailing mother to die.

Ruthie’s future is open and wide before Mrs. Parsons falls ill. Though she had previously promised not to, she ventured to touch herself, but her devoutness has prevented her going “all the way” with Dennis, though she has the typical urges to act on her sexuality. These desires conflict with Ruthie’s religious convictions. Before it is revealed that Mrs. Parsons is terminally ill, Ruthie is irritated by and resentful of her mother. Sensing her mother’s disappointment, she concludes that Mrs. Parsons treats her this way “because she wanted everyone’s sympathy...She acted like there was something wrong with her; like she was going to die, and, Ruthie knew, that if her mother found out...she probably would die from shock” (155). Here, Marshall sets up Ruthie’s following grief-based guilt with the character’s resentment and ignorance of her mother’s disease.

Ruthie is torn between the guilt and pleasure sex brings for the duration of her mom’s illness, and Marshall says, “sex was the antidote for her own despair” (224). Praying does not make her feel any better, but sex does. In Mrs. Parsons’ last hours in the hospital, Tee Wee, the main servant, does her best to comfort Ruthie, but Ruthie says of her mother, “Well, she wouldn’t have been [proud] if she had really known me. But she didn’t want to know me and now I’m glad” (226). She makes one final attempt to atone for her sins with God and prove to

Him that she truly is repentant for sinning and having sex. In Ruthie's mind this is her last chance to stop God from taking her mother to punish her. She goes to a Catholic church to pray and wait for a sign from God, "But God had abandoned her. She was a sinner, not a saint" (227).

One cannot help but notice Ruthie's father's absence throughout her mother's illness. She does not seem to care much if she's disappointed him or his expectations of her. Nor does she rely on him for consolation or reassurance following Mrs. Parsons' death. Rather, it is God she is worried about displeasing. Turning to Dennis for solace, Ruthie suggests they get married. She clearly sees his flaws and shortcomings as a man and notes that "He wasn't good husband material" (228). Sadly, this is not enough to dissuade Ruthie from marrying him. Dennis has already shown signs of a quick temper whenever he is inebriated. Still, Ruthie stubbornly thinks this is the only way to redeem herself with God. Now her sins will be washed away by the sanctity of marriage. Unfortunately, this pivotal decision will haunt Ruthie throughout the duration of her marriage. Marrying Dennis is a self-imposed punishment for enjoying sex.

In the third part of Marshall's novel, Ruthie has been married to Dennis for about ten years. She has a daughter, Annie Ruth, and also a terrible secret. Life as Dennis' wife is less than idyllic. He regularly gets drunk and beats her. Ruthie puts up a facade of normalcy for Annie Ruth's sake and alternates between pretending that nothing happened and downplaying the situation. She fools herself into believing that her daughter does not realize what is going on under their roof. Repression and denial are behaviors Ruthie learned from her own family; revisiting a scene from their dinner table, Mrs. Parsons is too ill to eat, but pretends to anyway. Browder, her brother, and Mr. Parsons play along as though everything is normal. Ruthie certainly was not fooled into thinking her mother was fine just because the family acted like it, but this refusal to acknowledge the blatantly obvious is a familiar coping mechanism. Likewise,

Annie Ruth is not deceived. Ruthie catches her looking for Dennis' bottle of alcohol to dump down the drain. Her child is not blind to the abuse within their own home.

It is not a secret that Dennis is a mean and brutal husband. Dimple, Tee Wee, and Browder all ask Ruthie probing questions about Dennis and offer their help, but Ruthie stubbornly turns them down. She cannot admit the truth to herself, so there is no chance of her admitting it to others. Any time she is offered assistance, Ruthie cites God and says she does not need help. She tells Tee Wee, "I've told you over and over there's nothing to worry about. God looks after His flock. You don't have to be our shepherd" (304). Dennis maintains his control over Ruthie by playing on her intense feelings of guilt and uses them as justification for beating her. Assuming the martyr role, Ruthie forgives Dennis over and over because this is her deepest desire: forgiveness and atonement for her sins. Like a good Christian, Ruthie continually turns the other cheek and takes what she perceives as her punishment from God, proving to Him that she is repentant for her sins and willing to endure whatever hardships He throws onto her.

Another pivotal moment in the novel for Ruthie comes when she agrees to help J.P. Weathersby, TeeWee's son, by testifying on his behalf though warned by Dennis not to. This choice undoubtedly means severe backlash from her husband and possibly financial ruin for her family. Also, this is the first time Ruthie will outwardly defy Dennis and is her initial step toward liberation. Ruthie finally admits to Tee Wee that Dennis hurts her, though Tee Wee already knows. Ruthie decides at last to do what is right, "God would have to forgive her" (352).

After fleeing her home and marriage to seek refuge at Parsons Place, Ruthie sneaks home for one final fateful trip, the last and most brutal beating she will receive from her husband. Waking up in a hospital bed with first and second degree burns does not deter Ruthie from wanting to forgive Dennis. Dimple is incredulous at the notion, but Ruthie reminds her that,

“There’s a book in that drawer that tells me I must forgive him. God doesn’t want me to have hatred in my heart. Forgive thine enemies; do good to them that persecute you” (381). It is not until Dimple reminds Ruthie of her obligations to Annie Ruth that Ruthie realizes her marriage must end for the sake of her daughter. Tee Wee puts Ruthie’s remaining guilt to rest. She reminds Ruthie that, “God is good, and He don’t want his children on earth to suffer. It’s that husband of yours who made you suffer, not the Good Lord” (401). Ruthie asks God, “Please release me from my promises...Give me a sign to let me know You understand” (402-03). Seemingly, He responds through a gust of wind that blows the scarf from Ruthie’s head. For Ruthie, this is a release from the guilt that has bound her for so long. Ruthie finally feels a connection to God that she has been so sorely missing for years.

Ruthie Parsons is defined by both her strong religious beliefs and the guilt she harbored for engaging in premarital sex. Ruthie struggles to free herself from this guilt throughout the novel. From her mother’s death to her failed marriage, Ruthie extricates her self-condemnation. In the end, with help from Dimple and Tee Wee, she at last forgives herself and finds her way back into God’s arms, right as rain.

Work Cited

Marshall, Bev. Right as Rain. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004.

Dr. Louth’s comments: *Ms. Hamilton has a great thesis and uses great details throughout her paper. She has a deep understanding of each character. It is simply outstanding. This is one of the best papers I’ve read--ever--from an undergraduate.*