

ANALYSIS

"The Betrothed" (1941)

Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1881-1941)

"The Betrothed' is a wonderful psychological study, seen from inside the mind of Rhody, of her doubts and panics at the prospect of impending marriage to the man she loves. Her old grandmother gives her a desperate shock by reading her fortune in the entrails of a hog: 'She prodded into the wet and bloody mass, muttering. It would be thus and thus, she said. The beast, turned wrong side out, danced still his life dance, blood having run into pans on the ground. Life sat, as a dismembered bird, in the vat of the entrails, still throbbing within itself. You are thus and thus, the grandmother said.... She would begin a story of mortality, of bloody bearings, the origin of life acting thus alone in a rub of entrails. She leaned over the mass muttering, the mole on her chin beating lightly with the working of her mouth, it uttering jaunty prophecies of blood. For a moment Rhody wanted to push the old one into the tub of quivering intestines, to thrust her forward and downward into the medium of blood and fat.'

Overcome with revulsion, Rhody leaves home to visit her married sister, determined to break off the match. She finds herself an upsetting element in an already tense marriage. Joe, her brother-in-law, is attracted to her, and there are ugly scenes. Rhody flees home and discovers at last that she truly loves her betrothed, Kirk Brown, when her younger sisters burn a letter from him which she has not opened. 'Me and you, Rhody,' that's what it says in the letter,' they jeer. And then everything is all right again. 'Life seemed very simple to her when Kirk was near, as if only those things of which he took account had reason or being. Now value was thus focused at the point where his hand closed upon her own, and as he walked he looked at her continually.'

Nature can be a nightmare, as when an old witch of a woman grabs in a pig's entrails, or a sister sleeps with her idiot half-brother, or a man commits rape, but peace can follow nightmare if a proper adjustment is made between man and his natural physical environment. What is hard to understand is why the form of the short story did not strike Miss Roberts as a better tool for her purpose than the allegorical novel. 'The Betrothed' expresses all that *My Heart and My Flesh* attempts to say.

Still, Elizabeth Madox Roberts accomplished in the best of her fiction, long and short, the object that she set for herself, which should keep her name permanently in the front rank of American novelists: 'If I can, in art, bring the physical world before the mind with a greater closeness, richer immediacy than before, so that mind rushes out to the very edge of sense--then mind turns about and sees itself mirrored within itself.'

Louis Auchincloss

Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 134-35

"The Betrothed' analyzes a girl's lack of faith when her lover is called away. Rhody loses confidence in him largely as a result of the cynicism of her grandmother. In a remarkable scene in which both women search the entrails of slaughtered swine for sweetbreads and other glands, the grandmother insinuates that human relationships--especially the primary functions of sex and gestation--are as sordid as the offal in front of them. Rhody's disillusionment is augmented when she visits her sister whose marriage has been violent and whose children are unwanted and unloved. When Rhody discovers on her return home that her family is preparing for the wedding and that her lover's arrival is imminent, she learns that she must shape for herself her own patterns of life and must relegate the influence of others to the periphery of her consciousness."

Frederick P. W. McDowell

Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(Twayne 1963) 35

Michael Hollister (2021)