

“THE DEVIL AND TOM WALKER”

BY WASHINGTON IRVING

GENRE: SHORT STORY

Folktale: an anonymous traditional story passed down orally before being written down

examples: animal stories, fairy tales, myths, legends and tall tales

Folktales have four distinct characteristics:

- 1-) an unrealistic situation
- 2-) stereotypical characters (represented by a collection of traits and mannerism)
- 3-) humor or satire
- 4-) evidence of a life lesson

LITERARY ELEMENT FOCUS

- **Direct and Indirect Characterization**

CONNECT TO TEXT:

Have you ever made a decision that you later regretted, or have you ever committed to do something and then changed your mind? Explain. *Answers will vary*

QUESTION GUIDE

- (1) p. 230 What does the following detail tell you about Tom Walker and his wife: *"They were so miserly that they even conspired to cheat each other"*? This shows that both Tom and his wife are so greedy that they even cheat each other. They appear to have no love for each other.
- (2) p. 230 Describe the spot where Captain Kidd's treasure is buried. Why did Kidd choose this spot? What later happened to Kidd? Captain Kidd's treasure is buried near an abandoned Indian fort under an oak tree on a high ridge near the swamp. Kidd chose this spot because it was easy to remember, was shielded from view, and was accessible by water. Kidd never claimed his fortune because he was captured and hanged.
- (3) p. 231 How does Irving's reflect the Romantic characteristic of an interest in exotic settings? Irving's description of the swamp shows nature in its wildest, most exotic state. Within the deep swamp, there's an Indian fort that's overgrown with foliage that forms a contrast to the dark pines and hemlocks. The actual fort also reveals his interest in the exotic.
- (4) p. 231 Describe the stranger Tom encounters. What clues lead Tom to conclude that he is speaking to the devil? Tom encounters a dark man dressed in primitive half-Indian clothing. He has wild black hair, wears a red belt, has red eyes, and carries an ax. Tom concludes that he is talking to the devil after the man identifies himself as the black woodsman, patron of slave dealers, and master of the Salem witches. The devil is also able to predict the death of a wealthy man, Absalom Crowninshield.
- (5) p. 232 Explain the comparison the devil draws between Deacon Peabody and the tree. Deacon Peabody, like the tree bearing his name, is "fair and flourishing without, but rotten at the core." The tree is about to fall, and the devil says that Peabody is just ready for burning because he is rich because he drove shrewd bargains with the Indians..
- (6) p. 232 Tom speaks to the devil in the swamp and tells him sturdily, "If I mistake not, you are he commonly called 'Old Scratch.'" What does the manner in which Tom speaks to the devil reveal about Tom's character? It reveals that Tom is comfortable talking to the devil in a casual manner because he is so corrupt that he finds nothing to fear in the devil himself.
- (7) p. 232 What offer does the devil make to Tom? What are the conditions of his offer? The devil gives Tom the pirate's treasure on the condition that Tom becomes a heartless usurer who extorts bonds, forecloses mortgages, and drives merchants to bankruptcy. Also, Tom just sell his soul to the devil.

- (8) p. 233 How does Irving use the attitudes of Tom and his wife toward the devil to develop their characters? **Their eagerness to make a deal with the devil reveals that they are only interested in personal gain.**
- (9) p. 234 Why does Tom's wife seek out the devil? What are some of the theories about her fate. **Tom's wife seeks out the devil to get the money for herself. Some say that she got lost in the swamp, others that she escaped with the fortune, and still others that the devil trapped her in a quagmire.**
- (10) p. 234 What does Tom find in the swamp wrapped up in his wife's apron? What is the significance of his findings? **Tom finds his wife's apron ties around a heart and a liver, believed to perhaps belong to his wife. This is significant because at the time, these organs were considered to be seats of emotion, and they were all that were left of the woman who aroused the devil's anger.**
- (11) p. 235 Why does Irving use humor to describe the disappearance of Tom's wife? How does this reflect on Tom? **Humor makes the disappearance of Tom's wife seem like no tragic loss. Tom is not distressed about his wife's disappearance; in fact, he is rather amused at the devil's struggle to capture her. His utter lack of affection for his wife shows Tom to be unloving and self-centered.**
- (12) p. 236 Explain what happens to Tom after his wife's death. Even when he is rich, how does his way of life reflect his basic stinginess? How does he treat his clients? Why is the narrator's statement about Tom's carriage wheels so unusually fitting? **Tom becomes a rich but merciless usurer. His basic stinginess is shown by the fact that he builds a great house but leaves it unfurnished. He keeps a carriage but practically starves the horses and doesn't grease the wheels. The narrator describes the sounds of the wheels as like the groaning and screeching of the "souls of the poor debtors he was squeezing." The comparison of the wheels with the clients' agony is fitting because Tom is being carried forward to his fate by the suffering he causes his clients.**
- (13) p. 238 What is the effect of including the details about the thunderstorm? **The thunderstorm reflects the power of the devil and makes Tom's abduction more frightening.**
- (14) p. 238 How does Tom try to avoid his eventual fate? What error leads to his seizure? **Tom tries to escape by becoming a noisy, conspicuous religious zealot. He carries a Bible in his pocket and keeps one on his desk to give the appearance of holiness and as protection from the devil. However, when Tom says dishonestly, "The devil take me if I have made a farthing!" he is seized instantly by the devil. Tom is caught in his morning gown without his Bible.**
- (15) p. 238 What is the effect of Irving adding that "the very next day [Tom's] great house took fire and was burned to the ground"? **Irving added this detail to highlight the impermanence of worldly wealth and the irony of life.**

LITERARY ELEMENTS

CHARACTERIZATION	DIRECT OR INDIRECT	EFFECTS
(1) "... a meager, miserly fellow, of the name of Tom Walker." (p. 230)	D	-foreshadows Tom's downfall -causes the reader to see Tom in a negative light (as greedy and selfish)
(2) "Anyone but he would have felt unwilling to linger in this lonely, melancholy place." (p. 231)	I	-Nothing scares him.
(3) Tom replies sturdily to the stranger, "You are he commonly called 'Old Scratch.'" (p. 232)	I	-He is comfortable speaking to the devil in a casual manner; he's so corrupt that he doesn't even fear the devil.
(4) "... but Tom was a hard-minded fellow, not easily daunted, and he had lived so long with a termagant wife that he did not even fear the devil." (p. 233)	D	-adds humor; suggests that Tom will clash with the devil -hard-headed; not easily intimidated
(5) "He leapt with joy, for he recognized his wife's apron and supposed it to contain the household valuables." (p. 235)	I	-He cares more about his valuables being found than he does about finding his wife. This shows his greed and selfishness.
(6) Tom uses humor in describing the disappearance of his wife, stating, "Old Scratch must have had a tough time of it!" (p. 235)	I	-His utter lack of affection or concern for his wife shows how self-centered and unloving he is.
(7) Tom states that he will go beyond what the devil expects him to do as the devil's usurer, saying, "I'll drive them to the d-!" (p. 236)	I	-This shows that Tom is more than willing to cheat people out of money.
(8) What does it say about Tom that to mark his place in his Bible, he would lay his green spectacles in his book "while he turned around to drive some usurious bargain"?	I	-It shows that he is a hypocrite; he pursues religious salvation but has sold his soul to the devil and steals people's money.

IDENTIFY THE ELEMENTS OF THIS SHORT STORY

- (1) Setting: **The story is set in the 1720s in Puritan New England in Boston, Massachusetts.**
- (2) Protagonist: **Tom Walker**
- (3) Antagonist: **the Devil**
- (4) Point of View: **third person omniscient**
- (5) Central Conflict: **external - man vs. supernatural (Tom vs. Devil);
other: external - person vs. person (Tom vs. his wife); internal - person vs. self (Tom vs. self)**
- (6) Theme: **Greed and selfishness will be punished in the end; those who pursue wealth and wealth alone strike a bargain with evil and will pay the price.**

(7) Plot

- Exposition: The narrator describes the setting and introduces Tom and his wife.
- Rising Action: Tom meets the Devil; Tom's wife goes to meet the Devil; Tom finds his wife's apron. Tom encounters the Devil again.
- Climax: Tom makes a deal with the Devil.
- Falling Action: Tom becomes a successful usurer and continues to do the Devil's work.
- Resolution: The Devil returns to claim Tom, and all Tom's possessions become worthless.

OTHER IMPORTANT LITERARY ELEMENTS

(1) Why is it **ironic** that Tom is more concerned about the disappearance of his property than about the loss of his wife? Normally, a husband would be extremely worried about his wife being missing for an extended period of time.

(2) Why are Tom's last words (stated to one of his customers who complains that Tom has already taken and made so much money from him) **ironic**: "The devil take me if I have made a farthing (money)"? He insists that he has made no money when he has in fact made a great deal of money. He's simply using a figure of speech, but the Devil takes Tom's words literally and comes to get him.

(3) What detail **foreshadowed** that Tom's wife would have trouble making a deal with the Devil? "He was sulky...and would not come to terms" is said about the Devil after Tom's wife went to meet with him for the first time. (p.234)

(4) What detail **foreshadowed** that Tom would be taken away by the Devil at the end of the story? "Still, in spite of all this strenuous attention to forms, Tom had a lurking dread that the Devil, after all, would have his due." (p.237)

(5) How can this story be seen as an **allegory**? Consider what the devil represents and is linked to in the story, what Tom represents, and what the theme of the story is.

The devil is associated with anything dishonest, cruel, evil or violent, and in the story, he is linked to pirates, slavery, and moneylenders. The devil appeals to Tom's greed and miserliness. Tom represents greed, stinginess and avarice (*an insatiable desire for wealth*). The message of the story is that greed and selfishness will be punished in the end.

(6) How would you describe the **mood** of the story?

The mood of the story could best be described as suspenseful, scary, ominous, and miserable.

(7) What do the devil, the trees, the Bible, and natural disasters each **symbolize** in the story?

The devil represents evil; the trees represent good on the outside but evil on the inside; the Bible represents safety and goodness; and natural disasters represent God's disapproval of human sins.

(8) Why is this story **suspenseful**?

The story is suspenseful because the reader is constantly wondering if and when will the devil get Tom's soul.

CONNECTION TO ROMANTICISM

(1) How does "The Devil and Tom Walker" contain elements of the supernatural and exotic settings?

- Elements of the supernatural include the appearance of the devil and Tom making a deal with him.
- His use of exotic setting includes the description of the swamp which shows nature in its wildest, most exotic state. This deep swamp contains an old Indian fort that is overgrown with foliage, and it contrasts with the dear pines and the tall hemlocks.

ANALYSIS OF A FOLKTALE

EVIDENCE OF AN UNREALISTIC SITUATION -“according to old stories” -the devil presided where money was hidden	EVIDENCE OF STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERS -a person who sells his soul to the devil
EVIDENCE OF HUMOR/SATIRE -humor in the story exists in the relationship between Tom and his wife -the story satirizes the Puritans	EVIDENCE OF A LIFE LESSON -the story shows what happens when the desire for personal gain replaces someone's devotion to God