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What Happens When a Woman is Fed Up? The Portrait of a Woman in Willy Russell's

Shirley Valentine

What happens to a woman when she becomes fed up with her life and her relationship? What does she do when she begins to feel that she has no romance in her life, and she is simply unloved and unappreciated? Does she accept it, or does she seek a way to find the part of herself that has been lost? These are very important questions that both men and women should think about. Often times, a woman asks herself these questions, but by the time she has reached the point of asking, it is already too late; her marriage is already in hot water! In Willy Russell's play, *Shirley Valentine*, Russell uses the female protagonist, Shirley, to demonstrate that a woman who is discouraged with her life and her relationship will eventually seek an escape from that life, and she will search for a life that is more fulfilling while she hangs on to the hope that she will rediscover herself and regain the life that she once had.

At the beginning of the play, we are introduced to the female protagonist, Shirley Valentine Bradshaw. It is obvious from the start that Shirley is lonely because she often talks to the wall in her kitchen. Immediately, the audience is informed of the expectations that Shirley is faced with by her husband, Joe. Shirley informs the wall that she is preparing her husband chips and egg on a Thursday, which is not the usual dinner menu for that particular day of the week:

Well, it's Thursday, y'see. And on Thursday it has to be steak. It's the Eleventh Commandment. Moses declared it. 'Thou shalt give thy feller Steak every Thursday. And if thou doesn't, thy feller will have one big gob on him all night long.' (3)

This comical passage is significant because Shirley refers to her husband's dinner request as an additional commandment to the Ten Commandments established by Moses as the laws of God. This is really important because it establishes the role of both Shirley and her husband in their relationship. Joe is in the role of God, and Shirley is just the humble sinner. In other words, Joe's requests are really demands, and Shirley is expected to honor his demands. These types of expectations become old after a while, and Shirley begins to feel unappreciated. The following example demonstrates the way that Joe behaves when he does not get steak for dinner:

Is this it? Have you finally gone round the friggin' pipe? Look at me, I'm workin' from mornin' till night, pullin' out me tripe – and what do I find? You talkin' to the walls! Givin' me tea to any friggin' stray dog that comes along – and I'm expected to eat *this!* (37)

After Joe makes this outburst, he pushes both his and Shirley's dinner into her lap. This awful outburst, and the inconsiderate things that he says to Shirley, demonstrate the way that he disrespects her. He is not only unappreciative; he is downright insensitive and disrespectful. After being treated so horribly, Shirley makes up her mind to go to Greece in order to get away for a while. Russell establishes the fact that Joe is demanding and disrespectful, and that he feels as if he is the head of the household rather than Shirley's

equal. All of these things contribute to the alienation that Shirley feels; however, she is also disillusioned by the lack of happiness, romance, and love in the relationship.

As Shirley talks to the wall, she thinks about how uncommon it is for Joe to show any affection, or to show that he is happy: “[...] Well, he walked in one night with a smile on his face an’ we didn’t recognize him. Thought we had a lodger didn’t we? He used to laugh, Joe. We both did. [...]” (11-12). Shirley’s memories are significant here because as she informs us that Joe no longer laughs, she also informs the audience that her own laughter has subsided as well. In addition, she establishes the fact that happiness once existed in their relationship. Shirley goes on to remember a time when things were different for her and Joe. She remembers a time when the romance was still alive, and they were truly happy:

SHIRLEY. Aren’t we the darin’ young things, getting’ in the bath together? Does this mean we’re perverted?

JOE. You’re a nutcase, you are. ([...] they kiss). I love you... Shirley Valentine. (14)

These lines not only provide the audience with a depiction of the relationship Joe and Shirley once shared, they also specifically show the love that once existed between them, and they demonstrate that Joe was not afraid to express his love. The fact that he calls her Shirley Valentine is also quite significant. Of course she was married to him at the time, but he still refers to her by her maiden name. The fact that Joe refers to Shirley as Shirley Valentine when he is being affectionate towards her solidifies the fact that she is still the woman he fell in love with. When Shirley recalls this memory, she is reminded of the horrible fact that this type of love no longer exists between them. Shirley

continues talking to the wall: “Remember that, Wall? He used to *love* me because I was a nutcase. Now he just thinks I *am* a nutcase (15). Shirley’s comment to the wall reveals her innermost feelings. She feels as if Joe no longer respects her. The way that he treats her, and the things that he says to her, have convinced her that he no longer enjoys her company. Joe no longer looks upon her as Shirley Valentine, the woman he fell in love with; he simply looks at her as Shirley, his wife and the mother of his children. Joe has no interest in talking and laughing with Shirley, and as a result, Shirley feels lonely and unloved.

The lack of romance is another key factor in Joe and Shirley’s relationship. Shirley feels as if Joe has lost interest in her sexually. She recalls the time she and her friends discussed the newfound sexual discovery – the clitoris. Shirley remembers that she told her friends about how indifferent Joe was when she mentioned it to him. He didn’t even realize what she was referring to: “I said, ‘Joe’ I said ‘have you ever heard of the clitoris?’ He didn’t even look up from his paper. ‘Yeh,’ he said. ‘But it doesn’t go as well as the Ford Cortina’” (9). Although, Shirley pronounces clitoris incorrectly, Joe should have still caught on to what she was talking about; however, he simply has no interest. Another indication that Joe makes no effort to satisfy Shirley sexually is a comment that she makes about sex when talking with her friend, Jane: “I think sex is like supermarkets. You know – overrated” (19). Sex is not exciting for Shirley. She obviously doesn’t get much out of it, which leads to the conclusion that Joe is all about his own satisfaction. This conclusion is fitting because Joe is selfish in every other aspect as well. As a result, a key component necessary for prolonged happiness is completely

missing. A woman does not need romance all of the time, but she certainly needs it sometimes.

As the play progresses, it becomes quite obvious from Shirley's comments that she is fed up with her marriage and with her life in general. There are a couple of instances where Shirley mentions that she would like to leave Joe. In the following example, Shirley explains why she has not left Joe as of yet:

And, I know what you're thinkin'. Why don't I leave him? Well, I'm, terrified if you want to know. I'm terrified that if I left him there would be nowhere for me to go. No place for me in the life beyond the wall. [...].

(36)

Shirley's comment is significant because she shares her fears with the audience. She provides us with her exact reasons for putting up with Joe. In addition, she confirms her misery and unhappiness. Shirley is unsure about what to do with her life, but she is certain that she is not happy. In addition, Shirley is completely disillusioned about marriage. She feels that there is no way to make it work. She reveals this conclusion when she responds to Jane's comment that it is her "prerogative" to go to Greece, and that Joe should be okay with it because it is perfectly "logical." Shirley replies: "I know it's logical – it's dead logical. But you can't bring logic into this. We're talkin' about marriage. Marriage is like the Middle East. There's no solution" (20). The key word is "solution." Shirley views her marriage as a problem that she cannot figure out how to solve. She no longer sees the light at the end of the tunnel; it has disappeared, and Shirley Valentine has disappeared with it. She has allowed herself to slip away, and she

has become a new Shirley. The following lines provide the audience with Shirley's exact thoughts and feelings about her life:

I've lived such a little life. An' even that'll be over pretty soon. I'd allowed myself to live this little life – when inside me there was so much more. An' it's all gone unused. An' now it never will be. Well. Why do we get all this life if we don't ever use it? Why do we all get these... feelings and dreams and hopes – if we don't ever use them? (61)

Shirley's thoughts are extremely important because they summarize her feelings about her life and life in general. Shirley realizes that life is short, and that she only gets to live it once. She realizes that she has missed the opportunity to experience different things, and she feels that she has sold herself short. Basically, this little talk that Shirley has with herself is a reality check for her. When Shirley makes this statement, she is in Greece sitting alone by the sea. She has already taken the first step by going to Greece, but from this point on, Shirley makes decisions that will give her self-satisfaction and happiness. Shirley realizes that she must put herself first for once; so she does!

Shirley meets Costas, the Greek tavern owner, shortly after she comes to the conclusion to live life to the fullest. When he offers to take her for a boat tour of the island, she hesitantly agrees. This is an important step in the road to finding herself. On her boat trip with Costas, Shirley realizes how important the little things are such as being allowed to talk and express oneself. Costas allows her to do that, and he is a good listener:

SHIRLEY. You really know how to talk with women don't you?

COSTAS. Well I ... well.

SHIRLEY. I mean most fellas y’know they’ve got no idea of how to talk to a woman .

[.....]

SHIRLEY. They feel they have to take over the conversation. [...]

SHIRLEY. You don’t do that.

COSTAS. Well, I eh, I just like listen – also look. (67-8)

Shirley genuinely appreciates the way that Costas allows her to be herself and to express herself. Joe never listens to her. In fact, unless she is with Jane, Shirley is forced to talk to the wall because she has no one else to share her life with. She is so lonely; it is as if she is married to herself. For the first time in a long time, Shirley enjoys the company of a man. Costas makes her feel funny, sexy, and attractive. She laughs and feels alive again like she once did with Joe. Shirley reflects on her experience with Costas: “It’s marvellous to be with such a good man. I know whatever happens he won’t take anything from me. I know he’ll keep his promise. But the truth is ... I don’t want him to” (69). Shirley not only expresses her happiness about enjoying Costa’s company, she also admits that she would like him to break his promise, which is that he will not try to “make foak” with her (63). Shirley actually wants to have a brief love affair with Costas, and she does.

Shirley’s romantic love affair with Costas does wonders for her. She tells Jane that she has “fallen in love with the idea of living” (71). Shirley is happy because she feels special again. She feels that she is appreciated, and most importantly, she has found Shirley Valentine. When the trip ends, and it is time to return home, Shirley decides not to go. She remembers the life that she has back at home, and she asks herself: “Why

should I go back to being that woman? When that woman isn't needed anymore. I've done me job. There's nothing else for me to do" (75). She abandons Jane at the airport and returns to the tavern and asks Costas for a job. He is more than happy to grant her request; so Shirley is situated. She finally makes the right choice! Shirley lets go of the fear that she has, and she takes a leap of faith for the sake of happiness. Shirley decides to do something for herself. Naturally, Joe is devastated when Shirley does not return to England with Jane. While she has been away, he has realized how much he depends on her. However, he is still quite selfish. He makes several calls *demanding* Shirley to come home: "[...]. I've taken time off work because of you. Stop this arsin' round, and get yourself back home" (82). Joe still speaks to Shirley with disrespect as if he is in control of her life. As a result, Shirley refuses to go home, and she begins to hang up on him when he calls her. Shirley finally shows Joe once and for all that he has no control over her, and that she has the right to do as she pleases. Shirley does not stay in Greece to hurt Joe. She honestly stays because she is happy for the first time in a long time. However, she does love Joe. At the end of the day, all Shirley really needs in order to be happy is a little love, romance, respect, appreciation and consideration. She needs to feel like a woman again. When she was Shirley Valentine, life was good, and now that she is Shirley Valentine again, she feels complete.

Joe finally realizes that Shirley is never coming back unless he goes to get her, so he travels to Greece to find her. When Joe gets to Greece, he walks along the beach where Shirley is sitting, and he continues past her. Joe doesn't even recognize Shirley, so she calls out to him:

SHIRLEY. Joe

JOE. I didn't recognise you.

SHIRLEY. Hello, I used to be the mother, I used to be the wife. But now

I'm Shirley Valentine again. (89)

This scene is extremely important because Joe doesn't even recognize Shirley, which proves that she has changed significantly. It also proves that she has definitely found herself in Shirley Valentine. However, what is extremely relevant is the fact that Shirley specifically separates Shirley Valentine from the woman who is the mother and the wife, and she points out that she is no longer that woman; she is Shirley Valentine. Therefore, the play ends with a hint of hope for Shirley and Joe because Joe always loved Shirley Valentine, and he treated her like a woman. It is Shirley, the wife and the mother, that he has no time for. Therefore, Shirley has to find herself in order for Joe to recognize her for who she really is.

Russell does a fabulous job of depicting the life of a woman who is fed up. It is obvious to the audience that Joe takes Shirley for granted and that he mistreats her. In addition, the audience is exposed to Shirley's innermost thoughts. The audience gets the opportunity to experience what it is like for a woman who has lost herself, and they also get to witness the process of finding one's self. Therefore, the audience gets an eyeful of what this process entails – escape by any means necessary! Once Shirley makes up her mind that she is fed up with her life, she no longer cares about anything. She basically walks completely away from her life and from her marriage, and the key thing to note is that she has no regrets. In Joe's case, he is smart enough to come and look for her, and he finds the woman that he fell in love with; therefore, there is the possibility that he realizes what Shirley needs, and that he will remember how to treat her and win her back.

However, it is equally important to note that Shirley escapes in more ways than one. She allows herself to indulge in an extra-marital love affair, and she has no regrets.

Fortunately for Joe, Shirley does not fall in love with Costas. However, the danger exists. Although, this play ends with a chance for a new beginning, Russell points out that this may not always be the case. He warns men that they must appreciate their wives and make them feel loved. Men must realize that women have needs as well. The most important thing that Russell does is he gives males a glance in the mirror. He uses Joe's behavior towards Shirley to show men how they often behave. In addition, he allows the audience to hear Shirley's innermost thoughts so that men can fully comprehend the needs and desires of a woman. He wants to ensure that men are aware of the key components necessary for a successful marriage. Finally, he forces men to face the fact that a woman who is fed up will give up and flee. She will find someone who will give her what her husband is not giving her, and/or she will leave him for good. At the end of the play, Russell emphasizes that change is important, and it is certainly not impossible. Joe lets go of his pride, and he pursues Shirley. Therefore, Russell's final comment is if one identifies with Joe throughout the play, he is one who also needs to swallow his pride and make the necessary steps towards making his wife happy before he allows her to slip away.