

ENGLISH: *IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS*

‘Our deepest sympathies in this novel lie with Kathy Wade.’ Do you agree?

“They would feel the trapdoor drop open, and they’d be falling into that emptiness where all the dreams used to be,” the narrator’s words allude to the crux of Tim O’Brien’s novel, In the Lake of the Woods, where the dreams of both Kathy and John Wade are wrecked after John’s unsuccessful political career. Silhouetted against a backdrop of post-war, O’Brien delves deeply into the complexities of the couple’s marriage, revealing that John’s perception of happiness is different to Kathy, exhorting readers to sympathise with the helpless Kathy. Moreover, readers also sympathise with Kathy as she does not truly know who her husband is as evident by the secrecy of the My Lai massacre. Nevertheless, O’Brien exhorts his readers to sympathise with John too due to his psychological trauma and inability to live in reality.

In In the Lake of the Woods, O’Brien elucidates that the dreams of Kathy Wade are in fact different to the dreams of John. As the intricacies of the plot unfold, readers are invited to acknowledge the John’s perception of happiness is succeeding in his occupation whereas Kathy’s definition of happiness is merely a happy family and exploring the world. This notion is crystallised throughout the novel where Kathy, who “wanted desperately to be happy”, admits to John that she dreams to travel to Verona and have a family. Although John “promises” to live out Kathy’s dream, his dreams were in fact crushed when he failed to succeed of his political career which, in turn, leads him into insanity. Ultimately, both dreams were flawed as “they envisioned happiness as a physical place on the earth”. However, readers feel obliged to sympathise with Kathy as her definition of happiness was far more realistic and simple when compared to John, and John’s secrecy and insecurity ruined their marriage. Thus, the novel dwells on the notion that Kathy’s happiness was never attempted to be achieved, and hence, readers express sympathy.

Furthermore, John’s inherent secrecy and insecurity diminishes the remnants of the couple’s marriage. In embellishing John as a “secretive boy” who is “obsessed with secrets”, readers observe that because he is so concerned with his own reality, he feels as if he cannot trust his own wife and hence the couple’s marriage became flawed. This is evident when O’Brien elucidates that Kathy only learnt about John’s involvement in the My Lai massacre when the media released information about it, and was forced to believe the media’s truth as John was too insecure to admit his wrongdoing. As a result, Kathy could no longer trust her husband, and started believe that he “just kept everything buried”. Moreover, this sense of John’s insecurity is also displayed after he returns from war. Suspecting Kathy was committing adultery, John spied on his wife and could not find any traces of infidelity. It is later revealed that Kathy knew that John was spying on him, and hence the couple’s relationship became more distant. Indeed, the mistakes John made unfairly affected Kathy despite the fact that “he was lost without her...she was his compass...she was his stars and sun.” Thus, we, as readers, feel obliged to sympathise with the helpless Kathy who “belongs to the angle”.

However it would be remiss to for readers to only sympathise with Kathy, as the complexities of the novel largely affect protagonist John Wade. John Wade’s unhappy childhood and alcoholic father forced him to become obsessed with magic, distorting his sense of reality as he believed “everything was a trick”. After his father’s death, Wade expressed immediate anger, believing that “the death of a parent is deliberate abandonment.” Subsequently, Wade’s involvement in the Vietnam War, particularly in the My Lai massacre, also contributed to his psychological state. Wade, delirious to the situation around him, was forced to murder innocent families and readers express both empathy and sympathy for his harsh reality. Additionally, Wade put all his efforts into his particularly career and “hoped he had one more miracle up his sleeve.” However, this too failed, and both his happiness and dreams were diminished. O’Brien implores his readers to sympathise with John Wade too as he also lived in a harsh, unfair reality.

Ultimately, In the Lake of the Woods critically examines the characters of Kathy and John Wade and their inherent problems. O'Brien exhorts his readers to deeply sympathise with both protagonists, but particularly with Kathy due to her not being given the chance to live out her dreams. Indeed, this is solely due to the fact that the couple had different perceptions of happiness, envisioning it as a physical place on earth. In lieu of O'Brien's intended message, it seems fitting to recall the narrator's poignant words: "Soon...they were swallowed up and gone. Not a footprint, not a single clue. All woods and water. A place where one plus one always came to zero".