The Widow's Might

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born in 1960 in Hartford, Connecticut but grew up mostly in Providence, Rhode Island. Gilman grew up in poverty after her father abandoned the family when she was just an infant, leaving her and her brother with their harsh, unloving mother who forbade them from reading books. She attended school only until she was 15. At 18, she enrolled in the Rhode Island School of Design, where she began a relationship with another woman, Martha Luther, who eventually left her for a man, which devastated Gilman. Shortly thereafter, Gilman married a man and had a daughter, and the post-partum depression she experienced afterwards was the basis for her most famous story "The Yellow Wallpaper." She left her husband and moved with her daughter to California, where she entered another serious relationship with a woman. Gilman is widely known for her feminist beliefs, which were considered progressive and unorthodox. She was a delegate for California at the National American Women Suffrage Association as well as the International Socialist and Labor Conference, where she advocated against capitalism. At odds with these progressive commitments, however, Gilman was an outspoken and virulent eugenicist, going so far as having published an article advocating for the reinstatement of slavery. This reality reveals the severe limits to her progressivism and is at odds with how she is remembered broadly as a feminist icon. Gilman was an advocate for assisted suicide, and after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she ultimately died by suicide, which for her was preferable to dying from the cancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gilman was living and writing in the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era sought to alleviate many of the social ills that resulted from increasing industrialization, with a focus on worker's rights and the regulation of businesses. Gilman was one of many political writers of the time who critiqued capitalism. For example, Jacob Riis's well-known *How the Other Half Lives* highlighted the horrible living conditions of immigrant workers in a rapidly industrializing New York City. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* highlighted how unchecked and unregulated capitalist enterprise resulted in an unsafe and unsanitary meat-packing industry. Additionally, the end of the era would mark the end of first-wave feminism, when women gained the right to vote in 1919, just eight years after "The Widow's Might" was published. First-wave feminism was primarily concerned with women's right to vote, but largely advocated for the rights of white women, ignoring and excluding women of color. Gilman often simultaneously explored both of these Progressive Era issues in her writing, focusing on how the economy impacted women specifically, and especially critiquing the way that the traditional family and gender roles limited women's economic independence. At odds with its name, the Progressive Era coincided with the height of the eugenics movement in the United States, and Gilman was an outspoken member of this problematic movement.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Widow's Might" reveals how traditional family and domestic life can prevent women from living out their own goals and desires and suggests that economic independence frees women to live life on their own terms. Gilman explored these same ideas in her books *Women and Economics* and *The Home: Its Work and Influence*. "The Widow's Might" puts forth an unorthodox critique of marriage, another major theme throughout her work and one that she extensively explores in her most famous short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." Gilman's work is also similar that of Kate Chopin, who was writing feminist literature in the same era. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" likewise features a protagonist who finds her husband's death liberating, an extremely controversial idea at the time. Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, explores controversial ideas about motherhood, another theme present throughout Gilman's work. In addition, Gilman was publishing at the same time as some of the first-wave feminist movement's most prolific leaders. This includes Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose novel *The Women's Bible* advocated for women's self-development. Gilman's later works explore utopian feminism, an ideology that wasn't common within feminist circles until the 1970s. Her best-known utopian feminist work is *Herland*. The novel paints a picture of a society of women who live and reproduce without men, and Gilman suggests that this kind of society is the antidote to all social ills and conflicts.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Widow's Might
- **When Published:** 1892
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism, First-Wave Feminism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Feminist Fiction, Horror
- **Setting:** Denver, Colorado
- **Climax:** Mrs. McPherson reveals that her husband's will is null-and-void because he transferred all his assets to her, which is why she doesn't intend to move in with any of her

children.

- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Traveling Salesperson. Before finding success as a writer, Gilman was a traveling salesperson who sold soaps.

PLOT SUMMARY

Siblings James, Ellen, and Adelaide are reluctantly gathered in Denver, Colorado for their father, Mr. McPherson's, funeral. Their spouses have stayed behind on the East Coast, where they now have homes and families of their own. The story begins after the funeral has ended. The siblings discuss the fate of their now widowed mother, Mrs. McPherson, while they wait for the lawyer, Mr. Frankland, to arrive and help settle their father's will. They assume their mother is too old, weak, and devastated by her husband's death to continue living on her own, so the three debate back and forth about who should take their mother in, and, importantly, how much it will cost them.

Each of the siblings make repeated offers to welcome her into their homes, although it's clear to all three that these offers are empty. They speculate about how much they'll inherit from their father, and how much his ranch and properties will be worth, comparing what they expect to earn from what they expect to spend on their mother's upkeep. Eventually, Ellen and Adelaide say what none of them wants to admit: all three siblings have offered to take their mother not because they love her, but because they feel trapped by a sense of familial obligation. In reality, they view their widowed mother as a burden, just as they view their father's funeral as an inconvenience. They also reflect that they all hated growing up on the ranch in Denver and that their family was never very affectionate or loving. Meanwhile, Mrs. McPherson is upstairs where she has asked to be left alone.

The siblings become impatient. All have train tickets to get out of town that evening and want to settle the will as quickly as possible. Finally, Mr. Frankland arrives, and Mrs. McPherson emerges to announce that the will is null and void because Mr. McPherson signed his property over to her—and she has no intentions of selling it. The siblings and Mr. Frankland are all shocked. She explains that for the past three years she has run the ranch as her husband grew sicker, even establishing a miniature hospital on the property. She has been very successful and has made enough money to pay her children the money they would have received from the will and still have enough remaining for herself to live on and, eventually, pay for her own funeral. The siblings question her sanity, but Mr. Frankland defends her.

Until this point, the siblings haven't seen their mother's face, which has been covered by a **black veil**. With a sense of drama and urgency, Mrs. McPherson opens the windows, filling the dark room with bright sunlight, and removes the veil as well as her black mourning cloak. Underneath, she wears a traveling suit. She explains that now that her husband is dead and her children are grown, she is done with familial duty and obligation. Instead, she intends to do what she has never done before: live her life in pursuit of her own passions and desires. The siblings, who now seem genuinely concerned for her, all make one final offer each to take her in, all of which she respectfully and firmly declines. She wants them to understand that she is a "Real Person" with her own interests and half a lifetime left to live out her new freedom and independence. She tells them she is going to travel the world and explore places as far as New Zealand and Madagascar. They all depart that night, the siblings traveling east while their mother heads west.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. McPherson – Mrs. McPherson is the widow of the recently deceased Mr. McPherson and the mother of James, Ellen, and Adelaide. Mrs. McPherson spent most of her adult life—from her early 20s to her 50s—tied down by a sense of duty to sacrifice her own dreams and desires in service of her husband and children. Throughout her husband's funeral, she stays hidden behind a **black mourning veil**, and her children assume that behind it they'll find a sad old woman. When she uncovers her face, however, she reveals that she isn't saddened by her husband's death but instead excited to finally live a fully independent life on her own terms. Unbeknownst to anyone, she has already begun to live a more free and independent life in the last three years. Mr. McPherson signed all his property over to her, and she has been running their ranch ever since. She made sure he was cared for as his illness progressed, ultimately establishing and running a small, profitable hospital on the ranch. This business earned her an economic independence she never had before. This economic freedom, as well as her freedom from familial obligation, marks the true beginning of her own life. Rather than move in with her children, as they assume she will, Mrs. McPherson plans to use her hard-earned money to travel the world.

James – James is Mrs. and Mr. McPherson's son and Adelaide and Ellen's brother. He lives in New York with his wife, Maude, who everyone knows doesn't like Mrs. McPherson. Like his sisters, James always hated family life on their ranch in Colorado and wants to wrap up his father's affairs as quickly as possible so that he can return to his life back east. After the funeral, James makes empty offers that he and Maude would be happy to let Mrs. McPherson live in their home, though he would clearly prefer to provide financial support and nothing more. He is willing to pay for his mother's clothes, food, and other essentials, but he isn't willing to commit to the emotional

labor of caring for her daily. This task, he thinks, is better suited for one of his sisters. James is seemingly more concerned with his inheritance and the value of his father's property than he is with his mother's well-being, as he calculates and re-calculates how much he expects everything will be worth. Rather than mourning his father's death, he regards the funeral as a business transaction. James is shocked and concerned when his mother announces her intentions to keep the ranch, which now belongs to her, and live independently. He condescendingly tries to convince her to instead sign the property over to him so that he can distribute it as was written in his father's will, and he's baffled when she refuses.

Ellen – Ellen is Mrs. and Mr. McPherson's daughter and James and Adelaide's sister. Ellen lives in Cambridge with her husband, Mr. Jennings, and her sickly children who demand a lot of her time and attention. Like her siblings, Ellen hated growing up in Colorado and wants to leave as soon as the funeral and her father's affairs are settled. She offers to take her mother in out of a sense of duty rather than out of true concern, but she does her best to look like a caring and concerned daughter. Ellen admits that their family wasn't a very loving or affectionate one and that they still aren't. Ellen is shocked by her mother's fierce determination to live independently, and it's only after she reveals these intentions that Ellen seems genuinely concerned for her well-being.

Adelaide – Adelaide is Mrs. and Mr. McPherson's daughter and James and Ellen's sister. Adelaide lives in Pittsburg with her husband, Mr. Oswald, who is well-off but unwilling to financially support Mrs. McPherson. She can't stand to be in Colorado and plans to depart with her siblings as soon as they've settled the inheritance. Adelaide admits what none of the three siblings want to say: that they aren't concerned about what happens to their mother because they love her, but because they feel duty-bound to her as her children. When she finds out that her mother owns all of the family's property, Adelaide suggests that she sign it over to James simply because she wants to get out of Colorado as fast as possible.

Mr. McPherson – Mr. McPherson is Mrs. McPherson's late husband and James, Ellen, and Adelaide's father. Before he passed, he signed his properties over to his wife for safekeeping. This means that his will—which originally split his assets into equal parts between his children—is null and void. Mr. McPherson meant well and did his best to care for his wife and children, but he didn't express love or affection for them.

Mr. Frankland – Mr. Frankland is the lawyer tasked with carrying out Mr. McPherson's will. He finds himself caught between the McPherson siblings and their mother. On the one hand, he defends Mrs. McPherson and her desire to remain independent, acknowledging that it's within her rights to do so and that she has always been an intelligent and capable woman. On the other hand, he's just as shocked as her children by her fierce and determined independence, which defies society's norms for women.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Maude – Maud is James's wife, who everyone knows doesn't like his mother, Mrs. McPherson. She isn't willing to leave their home in New York to accompany James to the funeral.

Mr. Jennings – Mr. Jennings is Ellen's husband.

Mr. Oswald – Mr. Oswald is Adelaide's husband.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS AND FEMALE INDEPENDENCE

"The Widow's Might" is a story about how 20th-century societal expectations surrounding caretaking and domesticity unfortunately tended to curb female independence and freedom. Siblings James, Ellen, and Adelaide expect that their recently widowed mother, Mrs. McPherson, will be weak and devastated in the wake of her husband, Mr. McPherson's, death. Although none of them want to take her in, they assume that she's incapable of living on her own and needs someone to look after her. James in particular pressures his sisters to let their mother live in their homes. While he's willing to provide for his mother financially, he assumes that his sisters should be the ones to take on the burdensome domestic role of caretaker—an indication that he clings to the patriarchal expectation that women should take on difficult domestic roles instead of men.

However, the sibling's assumptions about their mother are soon proved wrong. Mrs. McPherson is stronger and more independent than ever. With her husband dead and her children grown, she is finally free of the domestic caretaker role that society assigns women. Additionally, and importantly, she has achieved the financial autonomy necessary to live as a fully independent person. When her husband signed his property over to her, he transferred to her a power typically reserved for men in the early 20th century (which is when the story was published). For the past three and a half years, Mrs. McPherson has managed a successful business on their ranch and amassed a small fortune that will allow her to spend the rest of her life independently pursuing her own dreams and interests. For Mrs. McPherson, this means traveling the world, literally leaving the confines and limitations of her old life behind. In this way, "The Widow's Might" illustrates that breaking free from

the domestic caretaker role society forces on women—and managing to achieve financial autonomy—allows women to live fully independent lives in pursuit of their own dreams and desires.

LOVE VS. DUTY

"A Widow's Might" complicates the assumption that families are bound together by love. In the wake of their patriarch's death, the loveless McPherson family begins to crumble. The three McPherson siblings, James, Ellen, and Adelaide, openly acknowledge that they didn't really love their late father, Mr. McPherson, nor did he ever truly love them. They remember their family as affectionless, and they all hated living on the family's ranch. They are so happy to have escaped their childhood home that they were even reluctant to return for their father's funeral and can't tolerate spending even one night there, even though they made the long journey to be there. It's clear, then, that this family has always been bound together by nothing more than a sense of obligation and duty.

Now that their father is dead, the siblings assume that the duty of caring for their mother will become theirs, and though none of them is excited by or even willing to take on this obligation, they see no other option, for to reject it would go against the idea that family members are expected to stand by one another—something they only seem willing to do in a cursory, compulsory sort of way, as if to keep up the mere *appearance* of familial love. When Mrs. McPherson rejects their empty offers to take her in, then, she dissolves the ties that have kept the family artificially bound together. In other words, she frees them all from the familial duty that none of them, including herself, want to uphold any longer. In turn, "A Widow's Might" suggests that families are not always held together by love; sometimes, the story implies, families stay united only out of a superficial sense of duty and obligation that, when it comes down to it, can have very little to do with affection or a sense of personal connection.

DEATH, LOSS, AND NEW BEGINNINGS

Rather than death amounting to no more than a tragic sense of loss, "The Widow's Might" suggests that the death of a loved one can actually give people new kind of freedom. Mrs. McPherson best illustrates this idea. In stark contrast to the sadness and devastation that her children expect will have consumed her in the wake of her husband's death, Mrs. McPherson is joyful and excited to live an independent life now that she is free from her role as a wife and mother. When she throws off her borrowed **black veil** and the black mourning clothes she wore to her husband's funeral, Mrs. McPherson reveals that her grief was a performance, a costume she wore to act out the emotional devastation that society expects of a woman when her husband dies.

Underneath her mourning clothes, she wears a traveling suit, which represents the exciting new beginning of her independent life—a life she'll spend in pursuit of her own dreams and aspirations. In this way, her husband's death allows for her life to begin again. Similarly, the McPherson siblings, James, Ellen, and Adelaide aren't saddened by their father's passing, instead feeling relieved that it frees them from the childhood home and loveless family they always quietly despised. By focusing on how death gives way to new possibilities and renewed perspectives, then, the story challenges the conventional idea that this kind of loss has to be tragic and overwhelming. Instead, the story implies, losing a loved one can actually become a new beginning that frees rather than destroys.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BLACK VEIL AND MOURNING CLOAK

Mrs. McPherson's black veil and mourning cloak represent the inauthenticity of her grief, as well as the freedom and empowerment her husband's death has afforded her. Throughout her husband's funeral, Mrs. McPherson's face is obscured by the veil, and her children comment that it's impossible to tell how she's truly feeling because they have yet to see her face. They regard it as a typical symbol of mourning and expect that she'll look old, tired, and devastated underneath. After she stuns her children with the revelation that she is in possession of all her husband's assets and has no intention of surrendering her newfound independence, she dramatically removes her veil. First, she opens the window shades so that the blinding Colorado sunshine fills the room, fundamentally altering the dark and funereal atmosphere. Then she throws off the veil, which she explains is borrowed. That the veil is borrowed symbolizes the inauthenticity of her grief. Rather than a symbol of genuine sadness over her husband's death, Mrs. McPherson's grief is a costume she has borrowed to live up to what society expects of a widow. After shedding the veil, though, she removes her black mourning cloak and reveals a traveling suit underneath. The suit represents the exciting and empowered future that awaits her now that she is free of her family and her limiting, domestic role as a woman.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories* published in 2009.

The Widow's Might Quotes

"Perhaps if she stayed with me, you could—help some," suggested Ellen.

"Of course, of course, I could do that," he agreed with evident relief. "She might visit between you –take turns—and I could pay her board. About how much ought it to amount to? We might as well arrange everything now."

"Things cost awfully these days," Ellen said with a crisscross of fine wrinkles on her pale forehead. "But, of course it would be only just *what* it costs. I shouldn't want to *make* anything."

"It's work and care, Ellen, and you may as well admit it."

Related Characters: Ellen, Adelaide, James (speaker), Mrs. McPherson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

The McPherson siblings are discussing which of them should take in their mother, Mrs. McPherson, following their father's death. James is the sibling best equipped to support their mother. He can easily give her a place to live in his large house and can afford to pay her expenses. Ellen and Adelaide, however, are first to offer to care for their mother because they understand that their brother will expect them to take on the caretaking role that society traditionally assigns to women. When Ellen offers that their mother can live with her, James is relieved to have dodged the responsibility. Ellen pauses before asking her brother if he can help financially, even though they all know that the sisters don't have their own money to spend. As was common for the time, the sisters depend entirely on their husband's money, whereas James, with the economic freedom of a man, has his own funds with which to provide for his mother.

He seems okay with this arrangement, which mirrors the gender dynamics of the nuclear family; the women stay home to tend to home and family while the men are the financial providers. When Ellen clarifies that she doesn't want to profit off James, Adelaide jumps in to remind her that allowing their mother to live in their home requires hard work and care, which ultimately should be compensated. Ellen's offer mirrors the reality of the world they live in. Women labor all day at home but go unpaid for this work, and without their own way of making money, they are financially dependent on their husbands

"She had help toward the last—a man nurse," said Adelaide.

"Yes, but a long illness is an awful strain—and Mother never was good at nursing. She has surely done her duty," pursued Ellen.

"And now she's entitled to rest," said James, rising and walking about the room.

Related Characters: Adelaide, Ellen (speaker), Mrs. McPherson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

As the siblings continue to debate Mrs. McPherson's future, Ellen reveals that their mother was never a great caretaker, and so expects that the three long years spent caring for their ailing father have exhausted her. More broadly, this reflects the exhausting reality of being a woman in this era. While caretaking is largely devalued, and for wives and mothers uncompensated, it's an exhausting and often thankless endeavor.

What traps women in this unfair and tiring arrangement is duty and obligation. Society expects women to care for their families, and a woman who fails to do so, or even worse abandons her family and her duty to them, is almost unfathomable. For a woman, her husband's needs will always come before her own.

In a gender reversal, Mrs. McPherson ended up hiring a male nurse to do the caretaking that was expected of her as a woman, while she took on the role as his boss, a position typically reserved for men.

James, symbolic of the patriarchal society they live in, announces that their mother is entitled to rest now, only after seeing through her duties to their natural end. His comments suggest that she wasn't entitled to rest while her husband still needed her care. This is the first indication that her husband's death is what has freed Mrs. McPherson from the oppressive and restrictive limits imposed on women.

Ellen looked out across the dusty stretches of land.

"How I did hate to live here!" she said.

"So did I," said Adelaide.

"So did I," said James.

And they all three smiled rather grimly.

"We don't any of us seem to be very—affectionate, about mother," Adelaide presently admitted, "I don't know why it is—we never were an affectionate family, I guess"

"Nobody could be affectionate with Father," Ellen suggested timidly.

"And Mother—poor Mother! She's had an awful life."

"Mother has always done her duty," said James in a determined voice, "and so did Father, as he saw it. Now we'll do ours."

Related Characters: James, Ellen, Adelaide (speaker), Mrs. McPherson , Mr. McPherson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Ellen and Adelaide acknowledge what has yet gone unsaid among the siblings but is clear from their behavior. None of the three siblings want to take in their mother because none of them truly love or care about her. Instead, they feel obligated to take care of her because that is what families do. Refusing to take care of her would look bad in a society that expects the nuclear family to be bonded by love and devoted to each other.

Ellen's comment about their father points to the way in which the gendered expectations that men be unemotional and tough play a large part in creating affectionless families. The three siblings hated growing up on the ranch because they weren't given the love, affection, and care that children need to feel safe in a family. The sisters understand that their mother has had an awful life spent caring for children and a man who showed her no affection. They understand this more deeply than James because it mirrors their own lives as women with families.

James, representative of a patriarchal and capitalist society that, Gilman suggests, profits off of the nuclear family arrangement, avoids the truth his sisters speak and reverts to duty, the affectionless glue that bonds a family together and traps the individual members in a life they hate.

"I dare say it was safer—to have the property in your name—technically," James admitted, "but now I think it would be the simplest way for you to make it over to me in a lump, and I will see that Father's wishes are carried out to the letter."

"Your father is dead," remarked the voice.

"Yes, Mother, we know—we know how you feel," Ellen ventured.

"I am alive," said Mrs. McPherson.

Related Characters: James, Mrs. McPherson , Ellen (speaker), Mr. McPherson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Having learned that Mr. McPherson had signed his property over to his mother, James reluctantly concedes that it made sense for the property to be in Mrs. McPherson's name for safekeeping during the economic downturn, but only temporarily. Financial opportunity belongs to men in this society, and his father transferred that power to their mother with the deeds. James, then, is eager to take that power back for himself, but that property would mean robbing his mother of her newfound freedom and independence.

Mrs. McPherson's declaration that their father is dead and she is alive highlights the way that her children have been talking about her as if she's died with her husband; by making plans for her life without consulting her, they rob her of her agency and fail to consider that she might have her own desires and goals. On the contrary, Mrs. McPherson's life hasn't ended with her husband's; her husband's death is the *beginning* of her life. Without him and the obligations and limitations of being his wife, she is more alive than ever before. His death grants her personhood. She's no longer a mother and wife, mere accessory to the family she is expected to serve, but an independent person with the time and ability to focus on herself.

"I have no children, Mr. Frankland. I have two daughters and a son. Those two grown persons here, grown up, married, having children of their own—or ought to have—were my children. I did my duty by them, and they did their duty by me—and would yet, no doubt." The tone changed suddenly. "But they don't have to. I'm tired of duty." The little group of listeners looked up, startled.

Related Characters: Mrs. McPherson (speaker), Adelaide, Mr. Frankland, James, Ellen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. McPherson's declaration that she has no children is at once shocking and, in a sense, true. For a mother to say she no longer has children is controversial because a woman is meant to devote her entire life to those children, even when they are adults. In Gilman's day, society expected that a woman forfeited her right to exist as anything but a mother from the moment her first child was born. Mrs. McPherson's shocking comments reveal a truth that women are afraid to admit because the repercussions for such an admission could be harsh in a society that treats them this way. She asserts that women shouldn't be obligated to devote their entire lives to their children, especially when they're grown, at the expense of their own identity. She's reclaiming what societal expectations stole from her.

Mrs. McPherson is tired of the duty and obligation to care for others. At the same time, she has no interest in her children carrying out what they perceive as their duty to care for her now that she's older. She wants to interrupt the cycle of duty that has bonded this unaffectionate family together. She doesn't want her children to be trapped by duty the way she has been for the past 30 years of her life, especially her daughters, who already carry the burden of duty for their own husbands and children now.

"I'm going to do what I never did before. I'm going to live!" With a firm swift step, the tall figure moved to the window and pulled up the lowered shades. The brilliant Colorado sunshine poured into the room. She threw off the long black veil.

"That's borrowed," she said. "I didn't want to hurt your feelings at the funeral."

She unbuttoned the long black cloak and dropped it at her feet, standing there in the full sunlight, a little flushed and smiling, dressed in a well-made traveling suit of dull mixed colors.

Related Characters: Mrs. McPherson (speaker), Adelaide, James, Ellen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. McPherson's life is finally beginning now that her husband has passed and her children are grown. While death is typically associated with grief, Mrs. McPherson reveals a way in which death can often be a joyous new beginning. Mr. McPherson's death has freed her from the duty and obligation that prevented her from living a fully realized and autonomous life. Of course, this admission is highly controversial in a society that expects total devotion to one's husband. It also flies in the face of how society regards death.

Death is meant to be dark and gloomy like the room they've gathered in. But Mrs. McPherson triumphantly opens the curtains to let in the light, just as her husband's death has brought the new and bright light of opportunity into her life. She throws off the black veil, a symbol of a grief that she doesn't feel. The admission that she borrowed the veil reveals that her grief was only a costume she put on to embody the role of devastated widow that her children, and more broadly society, expected of her. Now that the funeral is over, she lets the façade crumble.

When she removes the black cloak, another symbol of mourning, she reveals a new self underneath. Her traveling suit represents her newfound freedom. It represents the joy that her new life is going to bring her as she travels far away from the ranch that trapped and oppressed her.

"If you want to know my plans, I'll tell you. I've got $6,000 of my own. I earned it in three years—off my little ranch sanitarium. One thousand I have put in the savings bank—to bring me back from anywhere on earth, and to put me in an old lady's home if necessary. Here is an agreement with a cremation company. They'll import me, if necessary, and have me duly—expurgated—or they don't get the money. But I've got $5,000 to play with, and I'm going to play."

Related Characters: Mrs. McPherson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Owning the ranch allowed Mrs. McPherson to become a business owner, which afforded her a financial independence that women are typically denied in a

patriarchal society. Having money of her own grants her the freedom to play and explore, another privilege typically reserved for men while women stay behind to tend to home and family. As a mother she didn't have time to play and have fun, and now she gets to experience that crucial part of a life well-lived.

While her children agonized over who would care for her in her old age, they didn't expect that she would have already planned for that herself. Mrs. McPherson isn't worried about living out her later years in the comfort that her children expected she needed. Instead, she regards her death rather cavalierly, having made her own simple arrangements that make sense given the way she plans to spend the rest of her life. This also frees her children from the obligation to deal with her once she's gone. She likely has a sense that they felt their father's funeral was merely an inconvenient obligation. This is clear from their spouses' absences and their constant reminders that they must return home quickly that night. At the same time that Mrs. McPherson is finally freed of her duties, then, she frees her children from the same rather than force them to bear these unwanted obligations the way she had to for 30 years.

"Are you—are you sure you're—well, Mother?" Ellen urged with real anxiety.

Her mother laughed outright.

"Well, really well, never was better, have been doing business up to to-day—good medical testimony that. No question of my sanity, my dears! I want you to grasp the fact that your mother is a Real Person with some interests of her own and half a lifetime yet. The first twenty didn't count for much—I was growing up and couldn't help myself. The last thirty have been—hard. James perhaps realizes that more than you girls, but you all know it. Now, I'm free."

Related Characters: Mrs. McPherson , Ellen (speaker), James, Adelaide, Mr. McPherson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146-147

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. McPherson's independence is so strong, so at odds with what society expects of a woman, that Ellen doubts her sanity. She's truly worried for her mother. However, she's simply internalized the way that society views women who dare to break convention. When a woman asserts herself, society deems her hysterical or insane, and will go so far as to medicate or institutionalize those women who threaten to upend the status quo. Mrs. McPherson laughs in her daughter's face because, rather than being ill, she's never been freer.

Mrs. McPherson has left the limiting role of mother behind, but her children, like society, can't conceive of a woman who isn't bound by familial duty. When she implores them to understand that she's a "Real Person," she wants to confront them with her humanity. She's a person with desires and interests and dreams of her own, not a mother robbed of identity in service of others. She suspects that James, who represents the male oppressor who benefits from women's oppression, understands that she's been robbed of herself in the 30 years she spent as a wife and mother. Her remark suggests that oppression isn't an accident, but a calculated move that men make in order to hoard power. But she knows that her daughters, too, understand this reality, as it's one they live every day.

"Where *do* you mean to go, Mother?" James asked.

She looked around the little circle with a serene air of decision and replied.

"To New Zealand. I've always wanted to go there," she pursued. "Now I'm going. And to Australia—and Tasmania—and Madagascar—and Terra del Fuego. I shall be gone some time."

They separated that night—three going East, one West.

Related Characters: Mrs. McPherson , James (speaker), Adelaide, Ellen

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. McPherson regards her children with a serene look because she feels more at peace than ever as she's about to leave her limited life behind. By travelling halfway around the world to New Zealand and Australia, she's getting as far away as she possibly can from her old life. Additionally, the destinations she's selected are all wild, full of rugged terrain and adventure, completely at odds with the domesticated life she lived on the ranch in her role as wife and mother.

She's always dreamed of travelling to these places, a dream that was made impossible for so long by her financial and gendered oppression. Her desires reveal that women have dreams that society doesn't expect of them. Gilman

critiques the mindset that marriage and motherhood are all that girls should grow up to desire, while boys are taught that this is all that women are made for. Mrs. McPherson's adventure upends this societal expectation, and she represents new possibilities for women.

She and her children depart in opposite directions, and this departure represents the dissolution of a family that was suppressed by duty and obligation. Not only is Mrs. McPherson free, but so, she hopes, are her children—free from duty to her, and perhaps free from a future dictated by duty to their own households.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE WIDOW'S MIGHT

James is at a funeral that his wife, Maude, cannot attend because she has to watch their children and she doesn't leave New York unless to go to Europe or on summer vacation. She certainly won't leave for a funeral in Denver in the middle of winter. Ellen and Adelaide attend as well (out of a sense of duty), but their husbands, Mr. Jennings and Mr. Oswald, have stayed behind. After the funeral ends, James, Ellen, and Adelaide all wait for the lawyer to come read the will, at which point they'll be able to go home on the night train.

The narrator begins the story in the middle of the action. It's unclear whose funeral James, Ellen, and Adelaide have just attended. What's clear is that the funeral doesn't seem very important to any of them. Ellen and Adelaide are there only out of a sense of obligation. James's wife, Maude, scoffs at the idea of inconveniencing herself to attend, and Ellen and Adelaide's spouses have likewise chosen to stay home. This general unwillingness suggests that the funeral might be for someone relatively insignificant in their lives, certainly not someone worth traveling all the way to Denver for. It's implied that James, Ellen, and Adelaide are related because they are involved in the will that the lawyer is coming to read, and rather than grieving, the three seem most concerned with attending to this business transaction so they can return home as quickly as possible, again revealing how much they don't want to be there.

The siblings regard meeting with the lawyer, Mr. Frankland, as a formality, believing that their father, Mr. McPherson, can't have left much behind for them to inherit after his lengthy and presumably costly illness. They quickly transition into a discussion about what to do with their now widowed mother, Mrs. McPherson. First, Ellen offers to take her, admitting that her husband's salary is more than enough to cover expenses, though she also says that her offer depends on how much her inheritance will amount to. Next, Adelaide offers to take her in, immediately undermining her offer by saying she doubts her mother would want to live with her in Pittsburgh because she never liked the city.

The dialogue reveals that James, Ellen, and Adelaide are siblings and that it's their father who has died, leaving them worried about their now widowed mother. Their expectation that there won't be much to inherit is tinged with disappointment and, along with their general unwillingness to be there, reveals a sense that their father is useless to them. Both sisters make blatantly empty offers to take their mother in, as each immediately provides excuses as to why it wouldn't work out. It's obvious that neither wants to care for their mother, but what they do care about is maintaining appearances. They want to appear to be the concerned adult children who care for their widowed mother that society expects them to be.

James looks at both his sisters and asks how old their mother is. Ellen replies that she's 50 and presumes she is worn out after caring for her husband through his illness. Then she suggests that their mother would be most comfortable with James because he has such a large house. Adelaide agrees, adding that she believes a woman is always better off with a son than living with a daughter's husband. James admits that this idea has merit, but he says, "it depends," and the sisters exchange knowing looks.

That James doesn't even know his own mother's age is another indication that he doesn't care very much about her. The siblings continue to operate under the assumption that their mother is too old to care for herself. The sisters try to pawn her off on James, citing the resources he has, in this case his large house, that leave him better equipped to take her in. When James considers that their mother may in fact be better off with him, Ellen and Adelaide exchange knowing looks that suggest they suspected James assumed that the duty of caring for their mother would fall on the sisters. Additionally, they know that his wife Maude doesn't want Mrs. McPherson in her home. Based on Maude's failure to show up to the funeral, she doesn't seem to care for Mrs. McPherson, though the story doesn't reveal why.

Ellen suggests that if their mother stays with her, James could help out. James agrees and suggests that their mother could stay with either Ellen or Adelaide while he would pay her entire board. He asks how much that might cost, insisting that they arrange everything now. Ellen, with a furrowed brow, replies that everything is really expensive these days. She clarifies that she'd want James to cover only what their mother needs, and that she's not looking to make a profit off him. Adelaide jumps in to remind her taking care of their mother is work, and that Ellen has a lot on her hands already, caring for her sickly children and her husband, Edward.

While James has the most resources to take care of their mother, both the house and the money to cover all her expenses, it's clear that he is resistant to take on the traditionally female role of caretaker. He expects that this more labor- and emotionally-intensive duty will befall his sisters. James worries aloud about how much this will cost him, and Ellen assures him she's not looking to make a profit. This assurance aligns with the fact that society undermines traditionally female work, especially the work involved in caring for a family, and fails to compensate them for this labor. Ellen already has a lot on her plate caring for her husband and her children, but as a woman she's expected, and even feels obligated, to take on more. Additionally, the siblings continue to discuss the matter as if it's primarily a business transaction, more worried about costs than they are about their mother, which reinforces that they view their mother as a burden, not a beloved and respected matriarch.

Now Adelaide again offers to take her mother in, saying that her house is big enough and that her husband would barely notice an increase in the household bills. The only noticeable expense would be the cost of providing clothes. Immediately, she backtracks, explaining that her husband would mind that expense. James insists that their mother must be well cared for and then asks how much the clothes would cost each year. Adelaide, faintly smiling, suggests that it would cost the same as his wife's clothes do, but Ellen quickly interjects that this estimate is inaccurate because Maude is a high-society woman with more clothes than their mother would ever dream of having.

Adelaide's offer and James's insistence that their mother be well cared for are again facades, with the intention of making them appear generous and dutiful as society expects them to be. The sisters' dig at Maude's pricy vanity suggests that they disapprove of their brother's wife. Adelaide's faint smile and Ellen's interjection reveal that the two are allies against their brother in this conflict.

James regards Ellen gratefully and asks her to make an estimate of how much board and clothes should amount to. Ellen rummages in her purse for a pen and paper, finding none, and James hands her an envelope and a pen. She scribbles calculations, estimating that food will be four dollars weekly, heat and light will add six each week, while clothes, carfare, and other small expenses will amount to $300 a year. James calculates that this adds up to around $600 a year and then asks Adelaide if her husband would contribute. Adelaide flushes before saying he probably wouldn't unless absolutely necessary. James says he has enough money, but Adelaide says he doesn't have much outside of his business and he has to look after his own parents. She can only give their mother a home.

The siblings continue to treat their mother's well-being like a business transaction. James and Ellen make stingy calculations and it's clear James doesn't want to support his mother financially despite his repeated offers to do so. Realistically, however, he is the only sibling with the resources to support her. Like many women of the time, Ellen and Adelaide are financially dependent on their husbands, so their ability to provide for their mother is dependent on their husbands' willingness to do so. Adelaide's husband can't provide financial support because he already supports his own parents, again suggesting that it's a man's responsibility to financially support his family. James's resistance continues to reveal his lack of care for his mother.

Ellen insists that either she or Adelaide can take their mother in, and if James is willing to pay, he'll be spared the effort of caring for her. She suggests that his wife, Maude, won't agree to let her live with them. Adelaide wonders if their father might be passing down some money after all and if maybe the house and land could sell for a reasonable amount, leaving funds to care for their mother. The house is on a large piece of land that isn't too far outside of Denver, with rural views of the Rocky Mountains and vast Colorado plain. James supposes that it should be worth at least $6,000 or $8,000.

Once again Ellen gives into both James's and society's expectation that women should take on the burden of caregiving while men provide financially. She brings up Maude's unwillingness again, too, confirming a truth that the siblings all understand but leave unspoken: Maude has absolutely no interest or intention of letting her mother-in-law live in her home, perhaps because it would interrupt her high society lifestyle. The conversation becomes business-like again as the siblings hope that the land will free them from the financial burden that no one is willing to take on.

Adelaide interjects that she noticed her mother's black funeral clothes were old—the same ones she has worn for as long as she can remember. Ellen notices that their mother has been upstairs for a while now, so she wants to go see if she needs anything. Adelaide convinces her not to, saying that she asked to be left alone to rest before the lawyer came. Silence fills the space between them until Ellen remarks that their mother is dealing with the death well. Adelaide says that, while their father meant well, their mother's heart isn't broken by his passing. Ellen says that their father always upheld his duties, but that neither their mother nor the three siblings really loved him very much.

When their business-like talk subsides, an awkward silence overtakes the siblings, revealing that they don't have much to talk about with each other beyond these logistics. It's increasingly clear that these siblings are not bonded by love but by obligation both to each other and their mother. Adelaide's admission that their mother isn't heartbroken over her husband's death confirms that love didn't play a large role in their family. Ellen agrees, noting that their father upheld his duty to provide for his children, but didn't provide them with the foundation of love that children need and that family is expected to be built upon. Given this information, it's less surprising that the siblings have regarded their father's death so cavalierly, more concerned with business than emotions.

James insists that they shouldn't disrespect his memory with this kind of talk. Ellen changes the topic, noting that their mother didn't remove her **veil** at the funeral. She suspects that, when they see her, their mother will have aged significantly after caring for their father for so long. Adelaide reminds her that a male nurse helped out towards the end, but Ellen insists that the long illness was likely a great burden on their mother, who was never very good at nursing and caring for others. Ellen gives her credit for upholding her duty through it all.

James doesn't want to talk about the truth of their family, and instead wants to maintain the appearance that they are bonded by love, rather than admit that duty alone is what kept them together. However, his own continued reluctance to take any responsibility for his mother contradicts his efforts to keep up appearances. Because their mother hasn't yet removed her mourning veil, they don't truly know if she's as bad off as they're assuming. In part, Ellen assumes she will be run-down because she was never good at upholding her motherly, feminine duties of caring for others. The role of caretaker is one that never seemed to fit her, but that she took on out of duty because it's what society expects of a woman. Ellen intuitively understands that the burden of assuming this role is likely exhausting for their mother. It's the exact same role she and her siblings wish to avoid themselves.

James says that their mother has earned her rest, and he wonders how quickly they'll be able to settle the affairs and get rid of the land and house in Denver. He supposes that there could be enough to cover their mother's expenses once everything has been sold. Ellen looks out at the land, then exclaims that she always hated living there. Adelaide and James both agree, and the three siblings smile at each other grimly.

James is in a hurry to get rid of his childhood home and to profit off it as much as he can. He hopes that it can earn him enough money to pay for his mother's expenses that he is so reluctant to take on. He sees both his family home and his own mother in terms of money, how much he'll either make or lose, rather than regarding them with any sense of love or care. The siblings may be in such a hurry to get rid of the property because they all agree they hated growing up there. They didn't receive much love and affection from their father, so growing up without a strong sense of emotional security and connection likely contributed to their desire to get away from home. Perhaps just like when they were children, the siblings are desperate to escape the ranch and head back east as soon as possible. The longer they stay, the more trapped they feel in this place that didn't give them the love they needed.

Adelaide admits that none of them are very affectionate towards their mother and reflects that the entire family never showed much affection. Timidly, Ellen says that no one could be affectionate with their father. Adelaide exclaims that their mother lived a terrible life, but James defends both their mother and father, insisting that they admirably upheld their duties as parents. He tells his sisters that now it's their turn to uphold their duties as children.

Once again, Ellen and Adelaide bring up the unspoken truths of their family. They know that their family was bonded by duty rather than love, and they know that commitment to duty trapped their mother and made her life terrible. James is still unwilling to confront this truth and falls back on the importance of upholding duty. James stands in as a symbol of their patriarchal society, wherein men make and enforce the rules of duty that ultimately limit and restrict women more than they do men. Ellen and Adelaide are more willing to confront the truth because it impacts them more than it does James, who has an interest in upholding the rules of duty so that his sisters are obligated to care for their mother, rather than him.

Mr. Frankland arrives, and Ellen stands up to retrieve their mother, Mrs. McPherson. She runs upstairs and knocks on her door. She lets her know that Mr. Frankland is downstairs. Mrs. McPherson replies that she knows he has arrived and tells Ellen to let him get started without her, since she already knows what's in the will. Ellen, again with a furrowed brow, goes back downstairs to let the others know. Adelaide and James exchange glances as Mr. Frankland jumps right in to reading the will.

The siblings are eager to get started when the lawyer arrives, but in contrast, Mrs. McPherson appears totally unconcerned about the will . There's a sense that Mrs. McPherson is not just hiding from her children, but that she's asked to be left alone because she's hiding something else from them. All three siblings are seemingly frustrated and concerned by this behavior.

Mr. Frankland apologizes for having missed the funeral. The will is brief—their father, Mr. Frankland explains, left what remained of the estate (after deducting their mother's portion) to the three siblings in four equal parts. Two of those parts are left to James, while Ellen and Adelaide are to receive one each. The will states that the three children are responsible for caring for their mother, too. The estate includes the ranch, the house and all furniture, and $5000 in mining stocks. James notes that this is less than he'd expected, but Mr. Frankland clarifies that the will was made ten years ago and that the total value has likely gone up in that time. He also reminds them that their mother made money by taking in boarders, and James laments that this business will be over now.

The will explains that the siblings' inheritance will be disbursed in "equal" parts, but James receives two portions compared to his sisters' one each. The financial inequities between men and women in society are reflected here in their father's will, which privileges a son over daughters. Additionally, the unequal distribution of the inheritance further reinforces the reality that James has more resources with which to care for his mother, which it turns out is a duty the will passes down to them. James is immediately disappointed with the total value of the inheritance, which increasingly appears to be his only concern here. When reminded of his mother's small boarding enterprise, he doesn't hesitate to assume that she'll be going out of business now, as if he, a man, is making that decision for her.


Just then, Mrs. McPherson joins the group. She's tall and draped in her **black veil** and funeral clothes. She tells Mr. Frankland she's happy to hear him say that Mr. McPherson was of sound mind until the end because it's true. She tells the group that she hasn't come to hear the will because the will isn't good anymore. The siblings and the lawyer all turn around in their chairs when they hear this. Mr. Frankland asks if there's a new, updated will. Mother doesn't know of any other will but explains that Mr. McPherson died without any property to his name.

Mrs. McPherson finally enters the story as an imposing and dark presence. She easily commands the entire room and her matter-of-fact announcement about the will shocks everyone. The woman that enters the room is clearly far from the weak and helpless woman her children described and expected.


Mr. Frankland is shocked and exclaims that Mr. McPherson had property four years ago. Mrs. McPherson agrees, but then she explains that he gave it to her three and a half years earlier as a way of keeping it safe from creditors in the wake of a financial panic. She shows them the deeds that verify Mr. McPherson handed his entire estate over to her. Mr. Frankland remembers that Mr. McPherson reached out to him for his opinion during the panic, and Mr. Frankland had thought the transfer was unnecessary.

Mr. Frankland had advised Mr. McPherson against transferring his property to his wife, a stand-in for the patriarchal society that keeps wealth away from women. Mr. McPherson's decision, and now his death, leave Mrs. McPherson with a financial opportunity and autonomy that would otherwise be off limits to her.


James clears his throat. He tells his mother that this revelation complicates the siblings' original plan to settle all the financial business that afternoon and then take her away with them on the night train. Ellen tells her mother that they can't be away from home any longer than they already have been. Adelaide suggests that she give the property back to James or to all three of the siblings so that they can leave Denver. Mrs. McPherson asks, "Why should I?" In a persuasive tone, Ellen tells her mother she must be feeling bad and tired but reminds her that they originally expected to take her with them that night and that she had even packed up her things.

The siblings are immediately concerned only with their own needs and plans. They don't' care what their mother wants, or even care to learn more about the situation. They simply want their money as quickly as possible so they can get out of Colorado that night. Notably, Adelaide asks her mother to pass her property back into the hands of another man. She has again so deeply internalized the idea that wealth belongs to men that she doesn't question robbing her mother of this wealth, nor does she even think to consider that it could be signed over to her or her sister. When Mrs. McPherson confidently rejects this suggestion, asking "Why should I?" the siblings deflect away from this question they can't answer and instead focus on carrying out their self-interested plans.

Mrs. McPherson agrees that she has been packing. James concedes that it was safer for the property to be in her name but that now it's easiest if she signs it over to him in a lump sum so that he can carry out the terms of the will. Mrs. McPherson tells them that their father is dead. Ellen tentatively responds that they know, and they know how she feels. Their mother declares that she is alive. Adelaide, impatient and a little annoyed, tells her that they understand it's hard for her to talk business in the wake of her husband's death, but that they told her as soon as they arrived that they wouldn't be staying overnight.

It's unclear why Mrs. McPherson is packing now that she's made it known that she won't be leaving with her children as planned. The siblings, however, ignore her clear rejection and continue to try and force their plans on her. When she states the obvious—that her husband is dead and she is alive—she draws attention to the way in which the siblings' discussions up until this point have completely disregarded their mother's humanity and autonomy. They've been talking as if, like their now dead father, she has no say in what happens next nor any needs or wants of her own. They can't conceive of a widowed woman who is independent and self-sufficient. When Adelaide reminds her mother that they are in a rush to leave that night, in other words to get away from her as soon as possible, she reveals a crack in the façade of care and love they've been attempting to hide behind this entire time.

James adds that the affairs must be settled right away. Mrs. McPherson replies that everything is already settled. James, now impatient himself, suggests that Mr. Frankland might be able to explain the situation more clearly to her. Mr. Frankland replies that he's sure Mrs. McPherson understands, as she has always been an incredibly intelligent woman. Mrs. McPherson thanks him and then asks if he could help her children understand that the property belongs to her now. Mr. Frankland says that they all understand the basic facts, but that they all likewise expect her to consider the wishes outlined in Mr. McPherson's will.

James condescends to his mother when he asks Mr. Frankland to explain the will, as if she's incapable of understanding a simple business transaction. The idea that she wants to remain independent and in possession of her newfound wealth is so at odds with what her children, and society at large, expect of a woman that he thinks it reveals her stupidity rather than her intelligence. Mrs. McPherson shows them that she knows exactly what she's doing when she responds to James with the same condescension. Although Mr. Frankland defends Mrs. McPherson's intelligence, he too asks her to defer to her husband's wishes left behind in his will, as if the now null-and-void wishes of a dead man hold more weight than the woman standing right in front of them.

Mrs. McPherson says she'd spent the last thirty years considering her husband's wishes and it's time for her to consider her own. She states that she upheld her duties as a wife from the very day they married. Mr. Frankland asks her to consider her children, but Mrs. McPherson tells him she has no children. Her son and daughters, though once her children, are now grown, married, and having children of their own. She says that she has already done her duty by them, and they've upheld their duty to her and will surely continue to do so. However, with a dramatic shift in tone, she tells them that they don't have to uphold their duty to her anymore because she is tired of duty.

Her husband's death frees Mrs. McPherson from the bonds of duty and obligation that tie women down to home and family. In other words, his death is the beginning of a new life for Mrs. McPherson, one in which she is free to fulfill her own wishes and develop her own sense of self. When Mrs. McPherson declares that she has no children, a shocking statement for a woman and mother to make, she pushes back against the way in which society reduces women to their motherhood alone. Even though her children are grown and don't need her to care for them anymore, Mr. Frankland, and society at large, still see her as a mother who should be concerned with her children's well-being first and foremost, rather than her own. She defiantly separates herself from this role in order to reclaim herself, to become her own independent person with an identity separate from motherhood. Her declaration that she is done with duty is simultaneously a declaration that she is done with her family. Her comments reveal an uncomfortable truth at odds with society's portrayal of what ties a family together. Rather than love each other, the McPhersons simply felt obligated to each other, and each felt repressed by the weight of that obligation and the responsibilities that came with it. Just as her children yearned to escape the ranch and were reluctant to invite her into their homes, Mrs. McPherson is likewise desperate to finally escape duty. The difference is that she is unafraid to say this out loud now, as opposed to her children, who still try to keep up the façade of a loving and caring family.

The siblings and Mr. Frankland are shocked by her words. Mrs. McPherson continues, telling them that they have no idea how life on the ranch has been since they've left. She tells them she has spared them the trouble of dealing with her affairs, but she'll tell them everything now. She explains that Mr. McPherson knew he didn't have many years left to live when he signed the property over to her for safekeeping. She took over from that point on, hiring a nurse and doctor for Mr. McPherson and eventually turning the house into a miniature hospital where dozens of patients lived and worked, which turned a profit for Mrs. McPherson.

Mrs. McPherson highlights how clueless her children are about how her life has been in the past three years. It's clear they've ignored her, busy back East with their own lives and happy to be away from the home they hated and the parents they felt little affection for. Mrs. McPherson knows this so well that she didn't even bother to let them know what her life has been like. This only further reveals the inauthenticity of their claims that they care about, and want to provide for, their mother. When her husband gave her his property, she not only inherited his wealth, but used it to accumulate more. Wealth begets more wealth, and Mrs. McPherson was able to become an entrepreneur due to the financial opportunities her husband's property afforded her. This is an opportunity most women of the time were denied, and one that begins to set Mrs. McPherson free. Cleverly, Mrs. McPherson takes the traditionally feminine role of caretaking—one that her children remember she was never good at—and outsources it, first to a male nurse, until later turning it into her own business. Rather than go unpaid for the labor of caretaking, as women are expected and forced to do, Mrs. McPherson turns this into an enterprise that earns her money. She's the boss, not the caretaker.

Mrs. McPherson tells her children that she has tended a garden, cows, and chickens and that she has worked and slept outdoors. She declares that she is a stronger woman than ever before. She stands up straight and takes a deep, confident breath. She continues, explaining that Mr. McPherson's property was worth $8,000 when he died, which would leave $4,000 for James and $2,000 each for Ellen and Adelaide. She tells them she'll give them their money now, although suggests that the daughters take it in a yearly cash income because she thinks it's important for a woman to have money of her own to spend as she likes. Both Adelaide and Ellen agree with her on this.

In stark contrast to the weak woman broken by grief that her children, and society, expect her to be, Mrs. McPherson is stronger than she has ever been. Freed from her role as wife and mother, and given the opportunity to work, she has proven herself capable of doing what any man can, and perhaps doing it even better, considering her business turned more profit than the ranch did alone when her husband was in charge. Her independence lends her a new air of confidence and strength. Mrs. McPherson knows that her children are more concerned with their inheritance—the business matters they've been so impatient to settle—than they are with mourning their father or caring for her. The wealth she's been able to accrue as a property and business owner is enough to give them what they're owed, the very last of her familial obligations. Mrs. McPherson understands the profound power of her financial independence, and that's why she suggests that her daughters ensure their inheritance will be theirs alone to spend, rather than end up in the hands of their husbands as would be customary. Ellen and Adelaide agree despite the fact that they are unable to see the other ways in which they've tried to curtail their mother's freedom due to their own internalized sexism.

James asks if she doesn't need all this money for herself. She explains she doesn't because she is going to keep the ranch, which has been making her $2,000 a year. She's recently rented it to a friend, a female doctor, for the same amount. Mr. Frankland tells her that she has done remarkably well. Adelaide is stunned that she'll have an income of $2,000 a year. Ellen shyly inquires if she'll still come to live with her, and Mrs. McPherson thanks her before declining. Adelaide likewise offers her home, and Mrs. McPherson declines again. Finally, James makes the same offer, assuring her that his wife, Maude, would be happy to have her. Mrs. McPherson says she doubts that and declines.

Rather than sign the ranch over to James, Mrs. McPherson has rented it out to a female doctor. This way she'll continue to profit while also empowering another businesswoman like her. This choice is significant because it represents a redistribution of wealth from men to women who are typically denied these opportunities. The siblings make their empty offers one final time, and Mrs. McPherson confidently declines, not just because she knows her children don't truly want her, but more importantly because she wants them even less. She's the one who is most excited to be rid of this unhappy family that was tied together by a repressive sense of duty and obligation for thirty years.

With real concern, Ellen asks what she is going to do in that case. Mrs. McPherson declares: "I'm going to do what I never did before! I'm going to *live!*" She takes strong and fast steps towards the window, draws the shades, and lets the bright Colorado sunshine fill the room before pulling off her **black veil**. Then she tells the siblings that she borrowed the veil because she didn't want to hurt their feelings at the funeral. She unbuttons her black cloak and lets it fall to the floor. She stands in the sunlight, flushed and smiling, wearing a traveling suit.

Her husband's death is what finally gives Mrs. McPherson a chance to live. It hasn't devastated her the way her children, and society at large, expect, but instead opens a door to a new and invigorating freedom that her role and duty as a woman had kept tightly shut until now. When she opens the window, she fills the dark and funereal room with light, changing the tone of the room from one of mourning to one of celebration that matches the joy and excitement that this loss has counterintuitively afforded her. Pulling off the veil has the same effect. The fact that it was borrowed reveals that it was merely a costume, and she an actor, at her own husband's funeral. It was a façade that allowed her to appear like the mourning and devastated widow society expects her to be. She didn't want to tell her children it was borrowed because she wanted to uphold her duty to them to appear sad at their father's funeral. When she sheds the black cloak, the final piece of her mourning costume, she reveals the traveling suit underneath. The suit represents a new self and new possibilities born of her husband's death.

Mrs. McPherson tells the siblings she'll explain her plan. She has $6,000 saved up, money she earned herself in three years of running the miniature hospital at the ranch. She has put $1,000 of it in savings to be used to deal with her body after her death, or for the cost of a nursing home if needed. She explains that this leaves "$5,000 to play with, and [she's] going to play." Adelaide and Ellen look stunned and try to interject, suggesting that she's too old for such a plan. James frowns in a way that makes him look like his father.

Mrs. McPherson's freedom is made possible by her newfound financial independence. Like most women of her time, she lived the majority of her life financially dependent upon her husband, a reality that kept her trapped on his ranch. When he signed his property over to her, he transferred to her a power typically reserved for men. Without anyone left to take care of, she's able to spend her money on herself in pursuit of her own dreams and interests, which underscores that denying women financial independence is paramount to keeping them oppressed. Ellen and Adelaide have so internalized the financial limits placed upon women that they try to talk their mother out of her plan, even though they themselves must contend with the same oppression. James's frown reminiscent of his father's represents men at large, and their disapproval for a financially independent woman. A financially autonomous woman like Mrs. McPherson is dangerous because she can abandon her role as caretaker, a role upon which men and the nuclear family, the cornerstone of patriarchal and capitalist society, depend.

Mrs. McPherson says she knew her children wouldn't understand, but she doesn't care anymore. She declares that she gave them and their father 30 years of her life and that the next 30 will be for herself. Ellen anxiously asks if she's sure she's feeling well, and Mrs. McPherson laughs in her face. She says she has never been better and that her business is proof enough that she's in good health. She enthusiastically reassures them that she is perfectly sane. She asks them to try and understand that she is a "Real Person" with her own interests and desires and with a whole half a lifetime left to live.

Ellen worrying about her mother's sanity plays into the societal tendency to regard independent and assertive women as crazy, a tactic that intends to keep them oppressed within their expected role. Independent women are dangerous to a patriarchal society, and writing them off as crazy is a path to medicating the independence out of them or locking them away for good. That Ellen suggests this reveals the ways in which she's internalized society's expectations for women, even though these expectations are detrimental to her, too. Mrs. McPherson knows that her children, and society at large, view mothers one-dimensionally. She wants her children, and society, to understand that women are people, not machines who exist only to serve others. Instead, women should have the chance to live life in service of themselves and their passions.

Mrs. McPherson says that the first 20 years of her life didn't count for much because she was still growing up, and the last 30 have been hard. She figures that James probably understands this best, but that they all know what she means. "Now," she declares, "I'm free." James asks where she intends to travel. She regards the group with a decided and peaceful attitude before she says she'll be going to New Zealand, a place she has always wanted to see. From there, she says she'll go to Australia, Tasmania, Madagascar, and Terra del Fuego. She says she'll be gone for a significant amount of time. The siblings and their mother separate that night, the siblings heading east while their mother goes west.

Mrs. McPherson's comments about her life show how women are robbed of any free and independent life of their own, immediately transitioning from the restrictions of childhood to the restrictive domestic expectations of marriage and family. She is confident in her plan, and her long-awaited autonomy fills her with a deep inner peace as she embarks on her journey towards self-actualization that women are otherwise denied. She tells her children that she is leaving them for a long period of time, to make up for the 30 years she lost being a mother to them. They abandoned her when they moved out, and now it's her turn to be rid of them. Their opposing departures that night represent the final dissolution of this family that was bonded by the unbearable restrictions of duty rather than a fulfilling and meaningful love.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Parks, Rebecca. "*The Widow's Might*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Sep 2022. Web. 6 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Parks, Rebecca. "*The Widow's Might*." LitCharts LLC, September 6, 2022. Retrieved September 6, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-widow-s-might.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Widow's Might* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. The Widow's Might. Oxford University Press. 2009.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. The Widow's Might. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. 2009.