Roman Fever From a Feminist Point of View

Women are catty, selfish, and spiteful. At least this is the rather judgmental generalization made clear in Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever,” from a feminist point of view, or any point of view.

There’s always been a stereotype that women, in older age, are resigned of meaningful tasks to do and therefore are left with nothing to accomplish but knitting. It is not so prevalent a stereotype nowadays as it was in the past, but back then even young girls spoke with condemnation of their mother’s having nothing to do but knit, as they should, while they go off gallivanting, never dreaming it’s their own inevitable fate they are mocking. Such is the case in the beginning of “Roman Fever,” when Barbara makes a comment to her friend Jenny, “Well, come along then, and let’s leave the young things to their knitting.” One mother laughs at this comment and easily shrugs it off, but the other meekly pulls her knitting from her handbag, admitting, “It’s just the collective modern idea of Mothers.” This presents a commonly well-known idea of women as well as a clear distinction between the expectations of young women and older women. When their daughters are grown, the young leave to reckless, romantic adventures and their mothers sit restfully and knit endlessly.

All women want to marry rich, handsome men is another common stereotype presented in the story. Mrs. Slade’s thoughts pause for a moment on Mrs.
Ansley’s daughter, Barbara, who she considers to be practically engaged to one of the finest young men in Rome, while her daughter Jenny has no change of competing for the prized match. Both Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Slade are described as marrying wealthy men, and no mention of love is ever made. To women, the most attractive object in marriage is money.

Once married, depending on their social status, women have a specific part/obligation to play in the relationship. Mrs. Slade quite evidently plays the typical part of a wealthy man’s wife, as described when she clearly outlines her own role while pondering on her life. “As the wife of the famous corporation lawyer...everyday brought its exciting and unexpected obligation: the impromptu entertaining of eminent colleagues from abroad, the hurried dashes on legal business to London, Paris or Rome, where the entertaining was so handsomely reciprocated; the amusement of hearing her wake: ‘What, that handsome woman with the good clothes and the eyes is Mrs. Slade - the Slade’s wife? Really? Generally the wives of celebrities are such frumps.’ ” She entertained, dressed prettily, and stayed by her husband’s side faithfully. Nothing more was asked of her because she was simply a woman, and therefore capable of nothing more. And once their husband has departed, a woman’s role comes to a halt, also demonstrated by Mrs. Slade. “It was a big drop from being the wife of Delphin Slade to being his widow...Yes, being the Slade’s widow was a dullish business after that.” A woman’s place is by her husband; without him, she is nothing.

Sons have always had precedence over daughters. Mrs. Slade mourns over having a daughter who is too perfect to be worth much trouble, as well as the
passing of her supposedly brilliant son. “Now she had only her daughter to live up to, for the son who seemed to have inherited his father’s gifts had died suddenly in boyhood.” Her son could have brought her more joy because of his gender role, along with his inherited talents, naturally also being a part of his gender. Although Jenny Slade is the ideal of what every mother would want in a daughter, “Perfect. An extremely pretty girl who somehow made youth and prettiness seem as safe as their absence,” she will never pull the equal weight of what a perfect, brilliant son would have.

Juxtapose the famous Mrs. Slade is her lifelong friend, Mrs. Ansley. She, in direct contrast to her friend, more fully fills the traditional idea of what a woman should be in character. She had been “exquisitely lovely” in her youth and, parallel to her ideal husband, was “Good-looking, irreproachable, exemplary.” Her daughter, Barbara, however, fits the modern version of what a woman should be, “Babs, according to the new standards at any rate, was more effective - had more edge, as they say.” These four women, the Slades and Ansleys, make up the ideals of traditional and modern ideals of women portrayed by society.

“Would she never cure herself of envying her? Perhaps she had begun too long ago.” Women are known for envying and judging one another constantly. This is the overall theme of “Roman Fever.” It is first introduced prior to the descriptions of the two women “Each one, of course, had a label ready to attach to the other’s name.” Women very often have made up their minds about people before even becoming fully acquainted. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have considered themselves to be lifelong, intimate friends, yet they judge each more quickly than most and are
surprised by how much they really don’t know about each other. Mrs. Slade is so
driven by envy of her friend that she very cruelly plays what is supposed to be a
prank on Mrs. Ansley and thrives on her assumed success for over 25 years. She
defends her position by stating, “Well, girls are ferocious sometimes, you know.
Girls in love especially.” However, although Mrs. Ansley appears more prudent, in
her mind, she got her victory over Mrs. Slade and she thrived on the mere
knowledge of that. Upon discovering truths about each other, both women’s
perspectives are shattered and everything they’ve been living for is torn apart.
“Girls have such silly reasons for doing the most serious things.”

Women sit, knit, gossip, and silently judge everyone and everything around
them. Although a broad generalization, there is evidence enough in this one story of
the spite of women are capable of to prove the entire assumption viable. And
because of their gender, they will never change their spiteful, jealous nature and will
continue to sit, knit, gossip, and silently judge.
Works Cited
