

The Dress

Family are the friends we do not pick by ourselves but are born into. Throughout our entire lives we will hopefully have the same family, which means we have a safe base to return to when times are good as well as bad. But a good family atmosphere requires that we appreciate each other and respect each other's differences. This means that we have to be there for each other, because it is tough work to create a good family life and it is each family member's responsibility to care for each other's well-being. The short story "The Dress", written by Julia Darling in 2006, deals with the relationship between siblings and what happens to a family when it is missing love and communication.

The short story starts in medias res where Rachel assumes that Flora has left with her newly bought dress, which Rachel had expected to wear in the evening for their mother's fortieth birthday. We are confronted with a lot of chaotic impressions by Rachel and we learn that she is very furious with Flora. In the description of this situation we are introduced to the three main characters of the short story; the mother and the two sisters, Flora and Rachel, and we get a clear impression of their personalities. Flora is a flighty and untidy person who apparently does not think of the consequences of her actions. In contrast, Rachel is well-structured and she guards all her things very carefully. These contrasts are expressed in the descriptions of the two sisters' rooms, which are messy and tidy respectively, and by the way the dress makes Flora feel: "It made her feel taller, braver, cleverer, and Rachel was all those things already", (ll. 1-2). This quotation also tells us something about the relationship between the two sisters and in particular, shows us that Flora feels inferior to her sister. Rachel is close to being flawless, while Flora cannot be a match for that, and this is the reason why she tries to win some of Rachel's perfection by stealing the dress. The relationship between the two sisters is characterized by jealousy and anger, and the strained relationship between the sisters affects the family, which except for the Flora and Rachel, only includes the mother.

The mother is divorced from the father, so she ought to be the head of the family in the little family, who should take care of problems and have a clear understanding of the conflicts between her daughters. But she is not in control or engaged in solving her daughters' conflict. At her job as a bereavement counselor she is able to cope with her clients problems, but she is completely powerless against the problems in her own family, and she just tries to ignore and cover them: "She suddenly wished they had gone to the cinema and sat together in silent darkness", (ll. 88-89). The description of the kitchen supports that she tries to cover the uproar in their family by creating a neat controlled surface: "Rachel walked back to the kitchen, with its neat bowl of shining apples on the long table, and the purring silver fridge, (ll. 13-14)" In these lines we see how the mother likes to radiate that she is in control and keeps up a first-class appearance. Yet despite this, she is none of these things. The mother also expresses that she only wants emotions to be explored at her job, which means that she wishes she and her daughters could be tender and loving towards each other instead of always arguing.

One of the reasons why the mother remains passive and does not take action is that her job has made her tired of listening to suffering people with problems. She is missing love in her daily life, and therefore she is not able to show or communicate her love to her daughters. Furthermore, that bit of communication there is between them always has a hard tone and it always ends up with an argument.

The short story is mainly structured chronologically with some flashbacks where the third-person narrator changes to see things from Flora's point of view instead of Rachel's. The narrator mostly describes the characters indirectly through their actions and what they say. The story is spread over one day, and the one flashback is a description of the wonderful time when Flora is wearing the dress, and the other flashback is a part of the discussion where Flora admits that she spoiled the dress and buried it in the garden.

The title 'The Dress' is also the main symbol in the story. One might assume that the dress is a symbol of love, because what the girls really fight over is the love and attention from the mother. In the end we find that the dress lies buried in the garden where no one can see it. Therefore "the dress" could be a synonym of love, as seen in the lines: "And the dress lay in the tired earth, smelling of dead birds in a porch in an empty house, and was forgotten", (ll. 198-199). Another interpretation is that the dress symbolizes the problems in the family. It is the dress which causes

the argument that in the end gives Rachel the grounds for leaving home. Moreover, it is the dress which they cannot stop thinking and talking about while they are in the restaurant, even though they try hard to seem like a happy family. None of them, especially the mother, is interested in solving the problem with the dress, or problems in general, and therefore they put it away in three different ways: Rachel gets angry and leaves home, Flora hides and buries the spoiled dress in hope of that she will avoid the confrontation with Rachel, and the mother orders Flora to leave home like Rachel did. Just like the dress, the serious problems are buried and forgotten, but hardly solved.

In conclusion, 'The Dress' deals with the conflicts that can spin out of control when family members do not communicate with each other. The characters of Rose and Fleur have very different personalities, and instead of respecting these differences and making sure of each other's well-being, they argue and compete with each other. They do so to gain their mother's attention and love, but because of her lack of involvement, the family is torn apart and the differences between the two sisters become irreconcilable.