Isaac Newton’s Dirty Secret

The short story “Fairy Tale”, written by Robert Olen Butler for his collection of short stories *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, details the journey of a prostitute from Saigon and her immigration to the United States after the Vietnam War. Written from a first person perspective of the protagonist, Miss Noi, the story explores the theme of cultural dissonance and how sex and love can lose meaning if given in overabundance. The story accomplishes this by uses of unique symbolism and a distinct tone that entices the reader onward.

The largest aspect of how this story presents itself is in its tone and the way the main character speaks. Miss Noi uses broken English throughout, the effect of which is a deeper exploration of the English language and its meanings from the point of view of someone who understands very little of it. A major use of this is Miss Noi’s interpretation of an American diplomat mispronouncing a Vietnamese phrase, “Now if I think this man says that Vietnam should live for ten thousand years, I think he is a certain kind of man. But when he says that a sunburnt duck is lying down boom, my heart melts.” We as the reader are left to make our own inferences as to what he meant, but, in lieu of understanding, our protagonist analyzes a completely random collection of words to mean something entirely different. This occurs multiple times throughout the story where we are witness to the main character piecing together how the world works via their own unique outlook.

Part of the narrator’s character and worldview is her love of apples, the red fruit becoming a major and repeated symbol. Being a foreign fruit, apples were only obtainable to her via the American GIs who interacted with her and courted her services as a prostitute. Throughout the story she finds herself living in Louisiana, a place where she can purchase apples readily. The character herself begins to note of the diminished flavor and appeal of apples, “It’s like eating too many apples. You take a bite now and you can make yourself remember that apples are sweet but it is like the apple in your mouth is not even there.” By removing the exclusivity and rarity of this treat, it becomes an almost mechanical interaction. As a metaphor for sex and love, we see the effects of prostitution on her love life and how her interactions with men become routine. This is until a particular man breaks this pattern

Much like the tale of the sunburnt duck, the apple is referenced multiple times during the story. While the duck is presented at first as a representation of the Vietnamese people, and Miss Noi herself, it is reintroduced toward the end of the story instead as a representation for Mr. Fontenot, Miss Noi’s fiancé, and his personal struggles. Much like Mr. Fontenot is reinvigorated through the fairy tale that Miss Noi creates, the apple, too, is given meaning and a special purpose when it is used by Mr. Fontenot to propose to Miss Noi. The end of the story, “and she never eats an apple unless he thinks to give it to her. Though this may not be very often, they taste very good to her,” details exactly how love has finally come to be viewed by her. Sex may no longer be abundant to her, but when she does indulge it is once again special.