The Most Deadly Poison

Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers two separate definitions for the noun “chaser”. The first is “one that chases”, and the second is “a mild drink taken after hard liquor”. In John Collier’s short story “The Chaser”, the double meaning of this word is prevalent throughout the plot. It is the tale of a desperate young man who is chasing a young woman, and seeks for a potion to capture this young woman’s attentions. The old man selling the potion then implies that the young man will be coming back later for another potion to take the young woman’s life because he will discover that the first potion did not fulfill his naive desires. Through this allegorical use of dramatic irony, Collier is exposing the dangerous nature of a patriarchal society and emphasizing the importance of a women’s free will.

The character Alan Austen is a symbol for the general mindset of men in the time period (mid 1900’s), as he has no qualms about forcing a woman to love him and change everything individual about her in order to fit his needs. The old man describes the woman under the effects of the love potion, saying that “however gay and giddy she is, she will change altogether. She will want nothing but solitude and you.” This describes how men tend to view women’s individuality as nothing but “gay and giddy”, and that any removal of this individuality would be an improvement. Alan is “overwhelmed with joy” at the prospect of this change, and so it is clear that he is not interested in this woman for anything but her physical attraction. He is under the impression that he is in love, but in actuality he is in love with the ideal woman that the old man describes, one that “will care intensely”, a woman who will be mindlessly loyal and completely selfless. The fact that he is so eager and ready to strip away any of Diana’s free will to create this ideal woman is revealed to be a potentially fatal mistake.

Eventually, it is revealed to the reader that the old man expects the young man to return for a “chaser”; a poison to kill the girl he has turned into his supposedly perfect woman. This implies that this is a common situation, meaning that women’s lives are entirely expendable to the men in this society. This is a representation of the casual attitude of males regarding the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society, which in turn leads to the discrimination that is devastingly harmful to the female population. With the dire conclusion of a woman completely under a man’s control, and in turn dismissed by that man, it is clear that any woman without free will is not truly able to live. The dramatic irony used in the story creates an ominous mood, and highlights the horrifying nature of what men are willing to ignore in order to get their way with women.

The message of “The Chaser” is still highly relevant today, when rape culture is rampant in most of Western society. Due to the centuries of men influenced by this patriarchal mindset, there is still a lingering sense of ownership and entitlement that cause women’s free will to be belittled and dismissed. In the minds of many males (those who chase), the matter of a woman’s opinion and independence is dismissed with an attitude similar to “a mild drink taken after hard liquor”. This is a highly dangerous and toxic attitude, and if the majority of the female population is to be truly happy, it must be corrected.

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| **Scoring Criteria** | **Exemplary** | **Proficient** | **Emerging** | **Incomplete** |
| **Ideas** | The essay* demonstrates a thorough understanding of the short story
* perceptively applies the feminist critical perspective to the short story
* uses well-chosen details that support the thesis to analyze the work.
 | The essay* demonstrates an understanding of the short story
* appropriately applies the feminist critical perspective to the short story
* analyzes the work with appropriate details that support the thesis.
 | The essay* demonstrates a superficial understanding of the short story
* contains an underdeveloped application of feminist criticism
* contains too few examples or details, possibly replaced by excessive summary.
 | The essay* demonstrates little understanding of the short story
* does not apply the feminist criticism
* contains few examples or details and may repeat some details unnecessarily.
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| **Structure** | The essay* follows an exceptionally clear organization
* uses transitions effectively and creatively to move smoothly from one idea to the next.
 | The essay* organizes ideas clearly so that they are easy to follow
* uses transitions to move between ideas.
 | The essay* organizes ideas in ways that are difficult to follow
* uses few transitions or jumps too rapidly between ideas.
 | The essay* uses a confusing organization
* uses few or no transitions to move between limited ideas.
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| **Use of Language** | The essay* crafts language to enhance the analysis and consistently convey an academic voice
* successfully weaves in textual evidence from the story
* demonstrates strong control and mastery of standard writing conventions.
 | The essay* uses language clearly to communicate the analysis and demonstrate an appropriate academic voice
* accurately weaves in textual evidence from the story
* demonstrates control of standard writing conventions; may contain minor errors that do not interfere with meaning.
 | The essay* uses language that does not clearly communicate the analysis or demonstrate an academic voice
* awkwardly or inaccurately incorporates evidence from the story
* contains frequent errors in standard writing conventions that interfere with meaning.
 | The essay* does not clearly communicate the analysis or use an academic voice
* inaccurately uses a few details from the story
* contains numerous errors in standard writing conventions that seriously impede understanding.
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