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Motherhood in The Feast of St. Nicholas

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At first glance, *The Feast of St. Nicholas* by Jan Havickszoon Steen seems like a straightforward genre scene depicting a well-known message—good children are rewarded, while bad children are punished. On the eve of the feast of St. Nicholas, Dutch children leave their shoes out, hoping to wake up and find them filled with candy and other treats (“The Feast...”). In the painting, a young girl has clearly been good, as she carries a bucket of treats and clutches a doll. A crying boy in the background has received the equivalent of a lump of coal in his stocking—a bundle of twigs in his shoe. Though Steen’s overt moralistic message and skill were designed to appeal to the wealthy consumers of his work, in *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, he also returns to a theme that appears in several of his paintings—the definition of the mother’s role in the household.

The painting presents a family, gathered in what is probably one of the main rooms of the house. Celebrations appear to be in full swing. A basket of various kinds of breads and pastries sits on the floor in the foreground, along with another basket of glassware. One abandoned shoe lies front and center and the floor is littered with a few nut shells and a couple of balls. A chair to the right of the painting has more treats piled on it, its leather cushion propped up against it on the floor. At the center of the painting, four figures are illuminated by light coming in from windows at the left—the mother opens her arms to the good girl, who is in the process of turning away, and a younger boy looks out at the viewer, laughing as he points towards the crying boy. An older sister mocks the crying boy, prominently displaying his shoe with the twigs in it. The father sits quietly in the center of the painting, with a small smile on his face. Behind the chair on the right, a boy carrying a young girl in one arm points upwards with the other as a younger boy marvels at something invisible to the viewer. In the background, an old woman beckons to the crying boy as she opens a curtain, presumably leading out of the room.

Though this is a more sedate painting than some of Steen's other genre scenes—which tend to depict rollicking groups, often under the influence of alcohol—it still displays Steen's vibrancy and skill. Almost every figure is leaning one way or another, creating slight diagonals in the composition, adding a sense of energy to what could be a relatively static scene. The lone exception is the father, sitting upright in the middle of the painting, projecting an aura of calm as the head of the family. The strong diagonal of the boy pointing at the right of the painting draws the viewer's eye to a group that could otherwise have easily faded into the background. Steen also shows his skill at rendering the varied textures in the painting. The leather cushion shows scuff marks around the edges, each type of bread or pastry has its own texture, and a careful viewer can distinguish every kind of fabric in the painting. However, the perspective is a little strange. The windows are not quite straight, giving the strange impression that the wall at the back of the painting bulges inward. Still, the painting contains human figures and still lifes, demonstrating Steen's talent for painting different kinds of subjects.

Both the obvious moral and the skillful brushwork would have appealed to wealthy patrons, meaning that the painting likely hung in a relatively wealthy household. According to History professor Jeroen J. H. Dekker, morality paintings were a way for wealthy Dutch burghers to reconcile their strict Calvinist values with the consumption of sumptuous art, since the paintings' messages outweighed the pleasure of enjoying the beauty of the art (Dekker 167). *The Feast of St. Nicholas* presents its message simply. Unlike some of Steen's other work, there are no pieces of paper containing proverbs or owls hanging on walls. Instead, the good girl is the most brightly lit figure and the crying boy is highlighted as well, his shoe with the bundle of twigs framed by two pale hands which draw further attention to both the shoe and the contrast between the should and shouldn't. The painting has been dated between 1665 and 1668, during

Steen's mature period, which, according to curators Peter C. Sutton and Marigene H. Butler, was when he painted a series of large-scale works for which he became quite famous (5). As he continued to execute smaller paintings like *The Feast of St. Nicholas* during the same period, the piece probably commanded a decent price, partly because of his status alone.

However, a careful examination of the interpersonal interactions in the painting reveals a more subtle message about domestic order. The father's smile and his position in the center of the painting seem to suggest that all is well. He is in his rightful place as the most important member of the household and he is clearly satisfied with what is going on around him. However, his attention is solely focused on the good girl with her bucket of treats. According to Dekker, seventeenth-century Dutch fathers were never too involved with their children's moral education, as their most important role was to provide for their family and find suitable partners for their children (179). This father is likely satisfied with his good daughter and her rewards, not paying attention to the other children in the room. He is fulfilling his role, as the overflowing bread basket suggests, and does not have to worry about the children's behavior.

The interactions between the mother and children, however, hint at some problems. Dekker asserts that a mother's role, in addition to begetting children and keeping household order, was to morally educate her children, keeping all of them on the right path even when they attempted to stray off it (178). In *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, the mother does not succeed with this responsibility. None of the children pay any attention to her, except for the crying boy. The group on the right is completely absorbed by whatever has caught their attention. The little boy towards the center of the painting laughs at the crying boy as he engages with the viewer. The older sister is also caught up in making fun of her brother. He alone looks at his mother, perhaps appealing St. Nicholas' decision to punish him this year. Yet the mother's attention is focused on

coaxing the good girl towards her. The good girl, however, turns away, clutching her doll and treats close. The only “ideal” interaction in the painting is between the crying boy and the old woman. She smiles and beckons with a finger, perhaps trying to distract him from his tears. Perhaps she is a grandmother, more well-versed in the roles of motherhood than her daughter or daughter-in-law.

There are numerous other examples of mothers not fulfilling their role in Steen’s work. The most famous, perhaps, is in *The Merry Family*, where the mother is busy singing, her dress showing a scandalous amount of cleavage, while her children play instruments, drink wine and smoke pipes. A piece of paper hanging from the mantelpiece reads, “As the old sing, so shall the young twitter,” suggesting that the children are following their elders’ example. Though this message also implicates the father and grandmother depicted in the painting, the mother, as the keeper of the family’s moral compass, has a special responsibility that she is neglecting. Similarly, in *The World Upside Down*, which art historian Margareta M. Salinger describes as a painting of “indulgence and disorder” (123), the mother sits front and center, holding a jug and a flask, while in the background, a son smokes a pipe and a daughter reaches for something in the cupboard, receiving the amorous glances of a youth playing a violin. In both these works, the distraction of the mother and the adults leads to dangerous consequences for their children.

While the mother in *The Feast of St. Nicholas* is better than these examples—dressed soberly, she is at least taking some responsibility for her children—she focuses attention on the child who has already been good rather than the child who has erred. The painting even makes some subtle suggestions that the good girl is the family favorite; perhaps she is even spoiled. She is by far the best-dressed member of the family. Her dress alone is made of satin or some other shiny fabric. While the family isn’t poor—their overflowing bread basket, the father’s ruff and

the embroidery along the hem of the mother's skirt hint at their at least moderate wealth—no family member's clothes are as ornate as the good girl's. Is she perhaps the favored child in the family, unjustly rewarded with a bucket of treats? Even if Steen did not intend to suggest that the girl is being rewarded unfairly, the mother is still paying her an unnecessary amount of attention and ignoring the six other children in the picture.

Though it's tempting to see moralizing messages in every object in Steen's paintings, it is important to remember that Steen was known for his realism. Salinger argues that Steen's moralizing is lighthearted rather than aimed at reform. According to her, Steen seems to say, "This is what other people call misbehaving and dissolute, but for my part it is cheerful and all right" (Salinger 123-124). While I wouldn't go that far, I do agree with Salinger that certain aspects of Steen's paintings simply shows a household as it was. The messy floor in Steen's *The Merry Family*, added to the rest of the symbolism in the painting, strengthens the impression of the dissolute household and the irresponsible mother. While the shells, shoe and balls scattered on the floor in *The Feast of St. Nicholas* could be characterized this way, they are probably just results of the children's excitement. Like on Christmas morning, when wrapping paper is strewn everywhere as children rip open their presents, the debris on the floor probably just spilled off the chair or from the good girl's bucket. Curator Dr. Adriaan E. Waiboer argues that, like Vermeer, Steen's placement of food still lifes between the viewer and the family is meant to create a physical and psychological distance between them and the viewer (52). I don't believe that this is true in *The Feast of St. Nicholas*. The still lifes of the cushion and chair with treats on it, and the basket of bread are at either corner of the painting and don't really distract the viewer as the good girl is so brightly lit and almost at the same depth as the two still lifes. The still lifes could just have been foregrounded to showcase Steen's skill in multiple genres.

Sutton and Butler characterize Jan Steen's art as "satire with a moral" (3). Steen presented moral lessons to his viewers by showing them what they shouldn't do, instead of painting scenes of strict moral rectitude. This, combined with his skill, made his work more appealing. In *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, his energetic style and the number of figures make for a pleasurable viewing experience. It's important to remember that not everything in Steen's work may have a message; he had to combine marketing his skills and working for his audience with the messages he wanted to convey. *The Feast of St. Nicholas* is a perfect example of balance between these three necessities. Steen showcases his skills in painting different kinds of subjects with a simple message about children's good behavior, while subtly returning to a theme present in many of his paintings—the meaning of motherhood.

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