

# In Looking Glass Castle

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 05 Sep 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1097>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

---

Robert Borski — 05 Sep 1998, 19:21

ObWolfe: Someone mentioned "In Looking Glass Castle" as a story featuring a backwards-living character, but I don't see that at all. That's the one featuring the world where there are no men and the scientist with a man hiding in her house, isn't it? What am I missing?

This is my assertion and it's one of two speculative claims I make about "In Looking Glass Castle"--the other being that the man Daisy McKane sees first in her house, then later on the Frances Alda, may be a figment of her overwrought imagination.

Here follows my reasoning for claim #1. The usual disclaimers obtain.

When we first hear of the previous owner of Daisy McKane's house, it's via the unnamed real estate agent who's driving Daisy to her new home. Says she about the woman, after initially revealing the deceased has never had herself cloned: "...she drowned and had to give this [the house] all up."

Daisy too refuses to have herself cloned. This is perhaps symbolized by her later finding some empty seed packets in the house, but also links her back to the previous occupant. (Perhaps they're even daisy seeds.)

Not much later we learn from Daisy that the drowned woman was an eccentric and that her name was "Jane Something." The "something" aspect of her name obviously implies Daisy doesn't remember her name, but may also be considered a variation on the convention used to label an unidentified dead female, i.e., Jane Doe. Daisy too might be considered somewhat of an eccentric for her time, refusing to have herself cloned and continuing to live alone.

Next follows a most curious exchange between Daisy and "the fat woman" who is her next door neighbor (the operatic connection here, I maintain, is germane, as I'll later attempt to detail). Pearl, the neighbor, makes two confusing remarks about drowned females, one being Jane, the other being Pearl IV, her third cloned daughter. But which remark pertains to which victim? Is it Pearl IV whose boat has flipped over and whose body has never been found? Or is it Jane--whose body, when it does wash ashore perhaps somewhere else, is identified as Jane Doe? In regards to the latter Daisy has already imagined "Jane rolling dead, naked in the surf"--and this may be a clue. Also, who is more likely to fall headfirst down a cistern--an adult woman or a child, i.e., Pearl IV? I maintain a child. But from this point on Daisy seems to believe that it's Jane Something who drowned in the cistern, and not Pearl IV.

Still later, after Daisy encounters the "PIG" in her house, she asks him, "You killed the other woman--the one before me." To which the man replies, "Indirectly and unintentionally, yes." But how does this relate to Jane Something's death in either version--the cistern or collapsed boat scenario? Did he indirectly and unintentionally leave the cover off the cistern? Or did he somehow frighten Jane on the boat, leading to her inadvertent death somehow?

Then there's the White Queen angle. "In Looking Glass Castle" obviously draws a good deal upon the works of Lewis Carroll. Consider the title, and this quote from Carroll's preface to *THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*: "The 'castling' of the three Queens is merely a way of saying that they entered the palace." I.e., in Wolfe's nightmarish treatment of feminism-gone-wrong, women/queens have taken over the castle/America. It's also worth noting that *TTLG* features a chess match, and that Gene Wolfe borrows on this in naming at least one of his characters (Char Cavallo = "black knight"). Also significantly, in chess, the queens are the most powerful pieces. Which brings us back to the White Queen. In Carroll's *TTLG*, she lives backwards, a way of life "which always makes one a little giddy at first, but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways." Asked by Alice what things she remembers best, the White Queen replies, "Oh, things that happened the week after next." In other words, though it's obviously confusing, she remembers the future better than the past.

In an exchange of dialogue with the male trespasser in her house (John Doe?), Daisy insists she is not the White Queen, but only in the aspect of not believing in impossible things. Also, in Wolfe's fiction, anytime a character stridently asserts something to be not true, the opposite often turns out to be the case.

In any event, when Daisy is offered a berth aboard the *Frances Alda* by Dr. Edith Berg (this, after a raid by the police on her house produces no intruder), she takes it. Given that *Frances Alda* (1885-1952) was a famous American diva [*Frances* was also the name of Lewis Carroll's mother], and that both *Alda* and *Edith* mean "rich," might there not be some sort of clue pertaining to opera here--say, some work by a composer with a name similar (remember, we're in looking glass territory) to "*Alda*" Berg? I'm arguing yes--that it's *Alban Berg's Wozzeck*, an opera where the title character suffers from hallucinations and winds up drowned. This is exactly what I believe to be Daisy McKane's fate. That when she sees (or more correctly \*believes\* she sees) the male intruder from her house below deck, something she does in a panicky mode leads to her demise and it is this watery forfeiture of life that she recalls when she earlier has the imagery of Jane Something rolling dead, naked in the surf. (I'm not going to argue in depth at this point about the hallucinatory nature of the male intruder; suffice it to say I think he originates out of Daisy's sexual frustration and thus parallels the situation of the governess in Henry James' *TURN OF THE SCREW*--a big chunk of which resonates throughout "*In Looking Glass Castle*").

As for the Pearl/Jane/cistern connection, notice how, just before the *Frances Alda* sails, Daisy is reading a book by Joan Somebody called *Cradle of the Sea*. Like the dead person in the cistern, Daisy is in an enclosure surrounded by water; subsequently she drifts off to sleep--which parallels an earlier dream where "She dreamed that she was Jane, head-down in the cistern". But where else are pearls formed, if not the cradle of the sea? And it is this confused memory of the future, conjoined with the present (the discussion of Pearl IV's death), which leads to the earlier supplanting of the Jane/surf notion with the Jane/cistern scenario.

Gene Wolfe received an unasked-for-grant from the Illinois Arts Council for "*In Looking Glass Castle*." It remains among my favorites of his shorter work.

Robert Borski

---

William H. Ansley — 06 Sep 1998, 00:51 · follows Robert Borski

This is my assertion and it's one of two speculative claims I make about "*In Looking Glass Castle*"--the other being that the man Daisy McKane sees

first in her house, then later on the Frances Alda, may be a figment of her overwrought imagination.

I find your second "speculative claim" about ILGC much easier to swallow than your first, in fact it even occurred to \*me\* that she might be imagining the man without too much speculation on my part. At times, it even seems likely, especially when she sees him on the ship.

I agree that there seem to be links between the mysterious former owner of the house (Jane something) and Daisy McKane. And I don't find it completely far fetched that Daisy might have reacted to seeing "the stowaways's bearded face" below decks by rushing back above decks (I apologize if I am using what I fondly imagine to be nautical terms incorrectly here--I am no sailor) and somehow falling overboard and drowning. But what you call "living backwards" seem like no more than old-fashioned foreshadowing to me.

I won't try to refute your all arguments point by point right now for lack of time (and desire) but let's look at your penultimate paragraph.

As for the Pearl/Jane/cistern connection, notice how, just before the Frances Alda sails, Daisy is reading a book by Joan Somebody called Cradle of the Sea. Like the dead person in the cistern, Daisy is in an enclosure surrounded by water; subsequently she drifts off to sleep--which parallels an earlier dream where "She dreamed that she was Jane, head-down in the cistern". But where else are pearls formed, if not the cradle of the sea? And it is this confused memory of the future, conjoined with the present (the discussion of Pearl IV's death), which leads to the earlier supplanting of the Jane/surf notion with the Jane/cistern scenario.

I don't really see much of a parallel. A cistern is a tank full of water and a boat is (in effect) a tank full of air, built to keep water out.

Pearls can be said to be formed in "the cradle of the sea" but a much more specific answer and one much more likely to elicit an association of "pearl" is "in an oyster."

Earlier, you claim that "Pearl, the neighbor [the fat woman], makes two confusing remarks about drowned females, one being Jane, the other being Pearl IV, her third cloned daughter." I really don't see how you can read her remarks as confusing, unless you believe Pearl is either being deliberately misleading or is demented. Pearl talks about death by cistern immediately and as an apparent response to being asked about the death of "the woman who owned my house" by Daisy. Except for one bit of evidence, which you don't mention at all. (I am in awe of your restraint here.)

What Daisy first thinks she hears as an answer to her question is the phrase "her sisters got her." When Pearl is asked to elucidate she replies, "I said the cistern got her. Fell down it head first." Of the two people Pearl and Daisy had just been speaking of (Jane Something and Pearl IV) we know Pearl IV had sisters. It seems very unlikely that Jane did, since no relatives had come to claim her belongings. Perhaps Pearl (the original) knows or thinks she knows that Pearl II and Pearl III ganged up on Pearl IV and pushed her in the cistern, drowning her. This might be enough to make Pearl unable to think clearly when talking about death by drowning and to reverse her replies to Daisy's questions.

I like this idea because it explains the "her sisters got her" remark. Since this is Wolfe we are talking about it seems impossible to think that this apparently misheard phrase can have no meaning. But, even if I accept this fully, I still don't see that it supports Daisy "remembering" her drowning in the future.

---

mary whalen — 11 Oct 1998, 13:23 · follows William H. Ansley

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

I recently read "In Looking Glass Castle" and wondered if the man living in the house might seem less like a hallucinatory problem if he actually dressed like a woman and had a life outside of the house. It would make it easier for him to survive. If he is mentioned in the book but is in disguise, it might be that he could have gotten on the boat at the end of the book. Does anyone have any ideas about who he could be?

prion