

"Kevin Malone" : A theory & spoilers

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Roy C. Lackey — 02 Mar 1999, 02:12

I have carefully gone over the text and have a theory that covers all of the major plot points in "Kevin Malone" -- I think. It doesn't require that I reveal any private, off-list confidences from Tony Ellis, so don't blame him. In fact, this theory is very different from his. There is no way to explain it without divulging parts of the plot, so be warned!

As with everything else Wolfe writes, the story is replete with authorial misdirection and narrator misapprehensions. For instance, the "master" is revealed on the third page of the story (p-39, TOR paperback), when the narrator asks "Will your master be able to see us?" Priest, who never lies (p-44), answers wryly, "The music room, perhaps, sir?" He then leads them to the room overlooking a rose garden, complete with gardener, who presumably isn't blind.

As the narrator hints, there is no necessary familial relationship between the elder Malone and Betty Malone. The common surname is coincidental. Further, I contend that Kevin Malone (KM) having the same surname is also coincidental, or at least not directly relevant. (His father may have been related to the elder Malone.) At any rate, KM states that his father was the "man-of-all-work", his mother the "parlor maid", and that he lived on the estate (p-45). Priest says that the elder Malone was the "stableman" and Betty Malone just "one of the maids" (p-48). This is not the same as KM's description of his parents.

But, you will say, if KM was not the child of either, much less both, of the dead Malones, how is it that he was an orphan? He wasn't. The text does not say that. The narrator asks, "I wondered why you had to leave and go into the orphanage. Did your parents die or lose their places?" (p-47). Priest and KM then give the sketchy account of the murder/suicide, in the course of which Priest says of the elder Malone "...it's possible he was accused falsely." (p-48) Precisely. The elder Malone didn't kill Betty Malone. KM's father or mother killed her (probably the father, as a hammer was used, a tool of a 'handyman'). Betty was a young "tramp" (p-48). She was sleeping with both KM's father and the elder Malone. One of KM's parents killed her, out of jealousy/rage. The elder Malone committed suicide, either out of grief or guilt. The suicide following closely the murder, "they" (the police) assumed that the elder Malone was the murderer. Case closed.

Others on the estate may have known or suspected otherwise. KM's parents were fired or had to quit their jobs. Thus did they "lose their places." KM was put into an orphanage because his parents couldn't afford to care for him. KM is "a man of middle age" (p-44) thus, counting back from the "now" of the story (late 1970s ?), the murder/suicide would have occurred during the Great Depression, so his going into an orphanage would not have been that unusual, given the circumstances. This also explains why there was no mention of a child in the newspaper accounts of the murder/suicide. Neither Betty nor the elder Malone had a child.

When KM says "...the house owns me." (p-45), he is referring to his obsession with it, that he had to amass a fortune to acquire it, that he had to return and live there. He is possessed by the "spirit", if you will, of the estate. This is in keeping with the time-honored tradition of "hauntings" associated with places where unresolved violent deaths have occurred. It is unresolved because the truth has never come out. Also, his obsession to acquire the estate may have been due, in part, to his desire to keep the true facts of the murder from coming out and bringing shame to himself and his parents. That's why he "had to have control" (p-47). The text hints that he may know where the body is buried. He was old enough to have known the truth

about the murder and what led to it.

This reading also accounts for his misogyny. It was "a tramp" who brought about his family's ruin and led to his expulsion from his idyllic home. Which brings us to Marcella, another tramp, also possessed by the house; "It owns me too." (p-45). All we are shown of her character indicates that she would never assume the role of a maid by choice.

Well, it all fits. Anyone buying it?

Roy