

PEACE: 3 Misses

The Urth list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 17 Aug 2002

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Roy C. Lackey — 17 Aug 2002, 05:56

Before this latest PEACE discussion dries up altogether, I still have a few things lying around from the last discussion. This is one of them.

Some elderly people, as their physical and mental abilities decline with age and they loose the ability, even willingness, to cope with the present, often become preoccupied with the past, with their youth, particularly their childhood. One of the ways this manifests itself is the tendency to call things by their old names; say when a store or company changes its name, they often continue to call it by its old name. In the same way, the place where you buy gas for the car is a "service station", even though it's decidedly not anymore, and you store food in the "ice box", not the refrigerator, because that's what those things were called when they were growing up. I think A.D. Weer is like that. The little that we learn of his life is mostly from his childhood; not much about his adulthood and almost nothing about the prime years of his manhood. As Weer himself says in his "what went wrong" soliloquy: "When I recall my childhood, and forget (as I sometimes do) everything else . . .".

This is the only good reason I can come up with for his persistence in calling certain married women by their maiden names. He does this with three females. He does it in the presence of other people in the story, and directly to the reader. Two of these females the reader knows he knew when he was a child, Eleanor Bold (Porter) and Margaret Lorn (Price), so calling them by the names he first knew them by might be understandable for a befuddled old dead man in his second childhood. But then we have Miss Birkhead. We don't learn that she was married with children until Miss Hadow interrupts the concluding Sidhe story. That bit of information, coming where it does in the book and otherwise contributing nothing to Weer's story, must be significant. We don't know what she looked like, or how old she was when she died. The only clue along those lines is that she had been Smart's secretary before Weer's, but we don't know for how long. Weer was grown before he went to work for Smart, and it seems doubtful that he would have had much, if any, contact with Smart's secretary, even if she had been working there that long ago. When he was a middle-aged employee he saw Smart only once every two years. So when did he pick up the habit of calling her Miss? If she was unmarried when she became Weer's secretary, then she must have been relatively young, because she went on to have two children. Weer was in his mid-to-late forties when he took over the company, much too old to excuse his lack of respect for her married state, if she got married only after he became president, and too old for him to be referring to her as Miss in the frametale, if he was reverting to childhood associations as he apparently did with Eleanor and Margaret.

The mystery is deepened by the fact that Miss Hadow, someone Weer claims never to have seen before, doesn't bat an eye when he asks the whereabouts of Miss Birkhead, even though she clearly knows that that is not her name. She apparently even calls her Miss Birkhead too, when she asks about sending flowers. Miss Hadow should have no reason to do that.

Could Miss Birkhead be some unnamed, or differently named, female from his childhood? Someone who appears in the book, or is at least hinted at?

-Roy

Robert Borski — 18 Aug 2002, 05:26 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy done writ:

Some elderly people, as their physical and mental abilities decline with age and they loose the ability, even willingness, to cope with the present, often become preoccupied with the past, with their youth, particularly their childhood.

[Best to skip here my own personal travails in the decline of my brain, with sidejaunts down Nostalgia Avenue saved for unappreciative grandchildren.]

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Don't agree with this last point at all. People who work for different divisions of the same company enter and leave the building every day, so one might easily encounter them coming or departing from work; ditto for the company parking lot and cafeteria, to say nothing of the social get-togethers almost every company has (picnics in the summer, Christmas parties in the winter, etc., etc.). You may not see these people in any sort of professional capacity during the day, but outside these moments, at off-the-clock interstices, such encounters are relatively common. Plus Cassionsville itself, being small, may provide for further mixing of seldom-encountered-on-site co-workers.

This objection being noted I have yet another thought.

Roy, do you think it's possible that Miss Birkhead is meant to be the third member of some sort of linked trio of women? We know that Den has been romantically involved with Miss Lorn, and when he describes Miss Bold at the party commemorating his fifth birthday, it is far from the perspective of a toddler. Writes Den: "[Barbara Black's sister] is radiantly blonde, slender and flexible as a willow--too much so for the other women, for to them a physical pliancy implies moral accomodation, and they suspect Eleanor Bold of the most improbable of lovers: farmhands and railroad firemen, the rumored sons of departed ministers, the sheriff's silent

deputy." Later, in comparison to the other women present, he will call her a girl--otherwise, he makes clear, she would be the most beautiful woman at the party--an honor he instead confers on his aunt Olivia. But again it's difficult to attribute these thoughts to a five year old, so somewhere along the line, Den, perhaps smitten as a child by the lovely Miss Bold, has sought to flesh out the fantasy with bits of gossip he's heard later about Eleanor, perhaps even likening himself to be one of her most improbable lovers. Indeed, she may represent the first female outside his mother and Olivia to interest him as a male, even though these feelings are puerile and immature. Margaret Lorn, on the other hand, may represent the second step in Den's sexual development, with Den moving on from the pretend world of his childhood to the very real world of adolescence, with its social and dating complexities, and maybe even a bit of sexual exploration. Margaret seems a little too chaste to give herself to anyone outside of the institution of marriage, which perhaps may be another reason their relationship never works out. Miss Birkhead, however, is a working woman. Could she represent the next stage in Den's sexual development--perhaps being the very woman he loses his virginity to? There's nothing in the text that rules out they're being similar ages, and as I've said, they could have met in any number of ways outside of Julius's office--plus knowing that Den might someday inherit his uncle's factory would seem to make eligible bachelor Weer a most enticing catch for anyone. Onomastically, the name "Birkhead" has eluded me, but according to the OED, "birk" is a variant of "berk" and derives from an "Abbrev. of Berkeley (or Berkshire) Hunt, rhyming slang for c*nt." Which to me, by connotative extension, comes very close to "maidenhead."

Might the three eternal misses therefore represent progressive stages in the sexual development of Den Weer--the first timers he can never forget?

Robert Borski

Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Aug 2002, 20:12 · follows Robert Borski

Roy Lackey started this thing and my first reaction is that the "Miss" thing is simply mid-century corporate sexism, where secretaries hired on as nubile sex-objects retain their maiden names as quasi "professional" names. Not to denigrate exploration, just to say that's how I've seen it.

Robert Borski's musings on Weer's early amorous fixations has led me to similar noodlings. Just the other day I was saying to myself that attempts to solve the coldhouse prank with a motive for Weer might miss the mark in that the motive for Bobby Black's fall (which links to the coldhouse prank) seems to rest entirely on the passions of the moment . . . Weer at 25 is not necessarily any more calculating than Weer at 5 (well thats seems hard to take).

But Robert's notes remind us that lovely blonde Eleanor is Bobby Black's maiden aunt: just as Bobby is a twin to Weer, so is his beautiful aunt a twin to Olivia (taking note, as Robert says, of how Weer shifts from Eleanor to Olivia.

Later, in
comparison to the other women present, he will call her a girl--otherwise,
he makes clear, she would be the most beautiful woman at the party--an honor
he instead confers on his aunt Olivia.)

And since we later see that Weer has a quasi-Oedipal thing for Olivia, we can see a powerful sexual charge in the motive for Bobby's fall: Bobby is the rival of Weer for Eleanor, who is a substitute for Olivia.

Pretty interesting!

Adding to Eleanor's alleged wanton ways, we used to toy with John Weer's possible extra-marital womanizing.

But wait!

The "Olivia" section is really AUNTIE MAME rewritten to a tragic ending (the Mame is killed by an old lover).

The "Gold" section is really LOLITA rewritten to a happy ending (in that the Lolita does not die young, like, oooh, like Doris the carny Cinderella dies young).

=mantis=

Roy C. Lackey — 20 Aug 2002, 05:08 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Robert Borski writes:

Onomastically, the name "Birkhead" has eluded me, but according to the OED, "birk" is a variant of "berk" and derives from an "Abbrev. of Berkeley (or Berkshire) Hunt, rhyming slang for c*nt." Which to me, by connotative extension, comes very close to "maidenhead."

My old _Webster's_ gives "birk" as [Scot. & Dial. Eng.] "birch". It gives "birch" as akin to the German "birke", deriving from an Indo-European word meaning "shine, white". I presume that the "white" is due to the whitish color of the tree bark. So, "Birkhead" can be taken to mean something like "whitehead" or "brighthead" or "shininghead". The same dictionary lists "Helen" as from the Greek "Helene", which means, literally, "torch". So, the two names "Helen" and "Birkhead" would seem to be reinforcements of each other's meaning, for whatever that's worth. I can make nothing of "Tyler".

-Roy

matthew.malthouse — 23 Aug 2002, 13:42 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On 20/08/2002 06:08:34 Roy C. Lackey wrote:
I can make nothing of "Tyler".

Not having read Peace I have no idea if there's any relevance but the word can mean door or gate keeper. Archaic and obsolete except in Masonic Lodges where the additional meaning of keeping out the uninitiated applies and Tyler is a formal position. To tyle the lodge; bar the doors assured that only the authorised are within.

The more prosaic meaning being a tiler, one who makes, provides or lays (roof) tiles. The "i" spelling is prfered to the "y" after about 1670 although the "y" remains more common as a name.

From that a cat that frequents roofs. A sneak-thief or burglar.

Obscurly; also a c17 shoplifter.

Is that of any help?

Matthew

Roy C. Lackey — 26 Aug 2002, 04:19 · follows matthew.malthouse

Matthew responding to me:

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So, Helen Birkhead Tyler yields . . .

torch + shininghead (?) + gate keeper(?)

flame-topped gate keeper?

Like the cherubim with flaming swords at the gates of Eden, guarding the way to the tree of life?

-Roy