

"The Changeling" solution? [spoilers]

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Aug 2002, 19:35

An early Wolfe story (collected in CASTLE OF DAYS), "The Changeling," is set in the same town that the later novel PEACE is set in.

While I've always been a big fan of the story, it has also been one of the most baffling to me. Damon Knight somewhere made a comment that "The Changeling" was about a guy who is dead (the story appeared in one of Knight's ORBIT anthologies), and while that may be true for the story, it is certainly true for the novel, so maybe Knight was mixing them up.

My own thinking on the story had to do with figuring out the hidden name of the strange fairy boy, which I think is "Peter Pan." Beyond that I became lost in the maze of how an American man was made an unperson: birth certificate lost in fire, school photographs forged, personal history obscured to the point of erasure, etc.

I knew quite well what a changeling is: an infant is snatched by fairies who put a fey substitute, the changeling, in the cradle, and use the human infant for whatever weirdness the fairies have. So the fairy boy I call Peter Pan is clearly the changeling of the title, but traditionally: the switch is done in infancy; the changeling is usually deformed or weird, sometimes it dies young (otoh it can be hundreds of years old); etc. There is no question that the protagonist of the story is the human victim, but there is enough weirdness in his story that he is himself something of a changeling, too; which caused me some confusion.

Anyway, today it finally occurred to me this morning in an idle moment. Peter Pan of the story is a =serial= changeling, and our unpersoned protagonist is only =one= of the fellows he has erased. I had never made that connection, focusing only on the one-to-one ratio of changeling:infant.

Such serial behavior makes perfect sense with creatures that live hundreds of years without visibly aging. The fairy boy has displaced many human boys, and each time they are joined to fey families that wander America like displaced persons or carnies, and the fey parents die-off rather early (like the changelings of tradition often do), leaving their young man "offspring" in scattered towns. Our protag is likely the only one to find his way back to the town of his birth, and notice how he fits in: as a "crazy" hermit on the island.

That is: the protagonist was born as Peter Palmieri, second child of Mama and Papa Palmieri (first child Maria is three years older than Peter; third child Paul is six years younger). He grew up in town and went to school up to grade 4. Then on that fateful summer day in 1945 with the frog (or shortly thereafter), Peter Pan took Peter Palmieri's place =retroactively=, becoming first Maria Palmieri's big brother (when Maria is age 1-7; circa 1932-39), then twin brother (when Maria is 8-10; 1940-42), then Maria's little brother (when Maria is 11-19; 1943-51), then Paul's little brother (when Paul is 11+ and Mama Palmieri is 60+). "Pete Palmer" left town with his fey father after his fey mother died, and they went to Buffalo; presumably at the same time the Palmieris (with Peter Pan as Peter Palmieri) moved from the house on Front Street to the

place they live now, where they run the motel. Then Pete joined the Army, went to fight in Korea, was a P.O.W., refused to repatriate at first, then came back later, served time in military prison, and finally returned to the town.

Anyway, either Peter Pan was already in town, living with another family whose time had run out (i.e., the mother was in her 60s and it was time to switch) and is the serial changeling I thought of this morning, or Peter Pan was summoned to town somehow and took up residence by taking Peter Palmieri's identity from a few years before Peter Palmieri was even born.

Or, if Peter Pan is not really time traveling (which causes all sorts of problems), he might be just generating false memories for his pre-1945 Palmieri presence.

=mantis=