

Suzanne Delage

The Urth list — 9 messages, 6 voices, 10 May 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/585>

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adam louis stephanides — 10 May 1998, 13:17

On Fri, 8 May 1998 Craig Christensen wrote:

I read Suzanne Delange again last night and when nothing unmistakable jumped out at me I reread it with the story's opening statement in mind. That is, the narrator was struck by the passage he had read which stated that every person has probably had at least one event so momentous and so inassimilable (somebody's making good use of his thesaurus, huh?) that he has wiped it from his memory. I took that to mean that the narrator had not only met Suzanne in his past, but that she was very important to him.

I was lying in bed this morning and came to the conclusion that this was correct. Based on it, I developed a reading of the story. It explains the text; it is consistent with Wolfe's method in other works such as

Peace and The Fifth Head of Cerberus_; and on this reading the story is worthy of Wolfe. My explanation will be a bit lengthy, but bear with me.

As in other works by Wolfe, the narrative seems ordinary on the surface, but when you study it carefully anomalies appear. First of all, why is the narrator so obsessed with the "certain remark" he reads, to the point of lying awake trying to remember something extraordinary that happened to him that he has forgotten(!)? And what he comes up with--never having met Suzanne--is not, despite his claim, all that "strange--I might almost say...incredible." (362; page references to the Tor hardcover, in which the story runs from 361 to 367). By implication, the town's population is close to 100,000 (362), and the high school is a large one (364). Later in the story he states that if he had ever danced with Suzanne "the years have so effectively sponged the event from my memory that no slightest trace remains." (366) Together, these suggest that something has indeed happened to the narrator which he has not merely forgotten but repressed, and that his non-meeting of Suzanne is what psychoanalysts call a "screen memory": a false memory covering up a repressed event.

What might the narrator have repressed, and why? There are two clues in the narrator's retelling of "the idea that so forcibly struck" him. The first is that the "extraordinary experience he refers to is not necessarily supernatural, merely a "dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability." The second is that the person undergoing such an experience forgets it because "he has ... been so conditioned to consider himself the most mundane of creatures." (361) This is significant because the narrator does indeed "consider himself the most mundane of creatures." He calls his life "dull" and is "afraid [he] bored" both his wives (362). The latter is no surprise, for he is a boring narrator; compare him with Weer in _Peace_. The information that the narrator's life is "perhaps a lonely" one, that he was briefly married twice (362), and that he now lives alone (366) is also significant.

If the narrator is indeed repressing something, there should be traces of it in the narration. And there are. He tells us that if he had met Suzanne as a child, "I would no doubt have soon come to both love and hate" her. (366) This is certainly possible, but why does he say there is "no doubt"? Then, it's odd that he thinks he might have danced with a girl as beautiful as Suzanne apparently was and casually forgotten about it. But it is the description of Suzanne's daughter

that is the real giveaway. I won't quote it all, but read it over. Firstly, we have this sudden outburst of poesy in a narrative that has up till now been completely prosaic. Secondly, he claims to have observed in her "an air, at once insouciant and shy, of vivacity coupled with an innocence and intelligence that were hers alone." But he only saw her for a few seconds as she "walked quickly past" him! How could he have possibly perceived all that? This passage is in reality not a description of the daughter, but a repressed memory of Suzanne herself bubbling up, triggered by seeing her daughter.

Confirmation comes with his friend's wife's reply: "'But of course you know who she is, don't you?'" (367) If he really did not know Suzanne, why should his friend's wife assume he will recognize her daughter? He did know Suzanne well enough for the friend's wife, an acquaintance but not a friend herself, to remember it, although he--consciously--does not.

To sum up: the narrator did know Suzanne, who may well have been as extraordinary as he describes her daughter as being, and did "love and hate" her. He later "sponged the event from his memory": either because he "considered himself so mundane," or because the end of the affair was too traumatic, and he made himself "mundane" as a reaction. Since then he has led the "dull" life he describes.

I read the "Unable to be photographed" to mean that Suzanne was pregnant then and that the young lady he saw was his own daughter.

The girl he sees isn't his own daughter--I can't see the narrator as being in his early thirties--but it's possible that Suzanne was unable to be photographed because she was pregnant. Also, the narrator may have torn the pages out of the sophomore yearbooks himself, either to get the individual pictures of himself and Suzanne as he says or in the wake of the break-up.

Well, that's my theory. Do you agree? (Even if you don't, I've learned a lot about the story from this discussion, and I'd like to thank everyone who's participated.)

The vampire angle never occurred to me. Neither have many other aspects of Mr. Wolfe's writings revealed to me in the urth.list archives.

I have to admit, when I first read Mr. Westlake's post I thought he was saying Suzanne was not a vampire but a fairy or something of the sort. In that case, I have some other objections. "Her complexion [was] as pure as milk" (367) does not, to my mind, describe a vampire's pallor; and the entire description does not feel vampiric to me. And the vampire theory doesn't explain why the narrator never met Suzanne, or forgot meeting her, since his wife's friend did not forget.

--Adam

Peter Westlake — 10 May 1998, 23:58 · follows adam louis stephanides

At 13:17 1998/05/10 -0500, Adam wrote:

..

Well, that's my theory. Do you agree? (Even if you don't, I've learned a lot about the story from this discussion, and I'd like to thank everyone who's participated.)

Seconded. I do like your theory, even though I don't believe it's the one the author intended. It does fit the text pretty well, but I think it isn't quite strongly enough implied. At least, I *think* I think that.

The vampire angle never occurred to me. Neither have many other aspects of Mr. Wolfe's writings revealed to me in the urth.list archives.

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that case, I have some other objections. "Her complexion [was] as pure as milk" (367) does not, to my mind, describe a vampire's pallor; and the entire description does not feel vampiric to me.

True enough, and I would prefer her not to be a vampire. It just seemed to fit, and to be reasonably Wolfeish.

And the vampire theory doesn't explain why the narrator never met Suzanne, or forgot meeting her, since his wife's friend did not forget.

Not meeting her would just be a coincidence, as it is in Proust; it starts the narrator looking through his yearbooks, and reveals the subtext to the (possibly over-imaginative :-) reader, though not to the narrator.

Of the theories I've heard so far, I like Alice's the best. It makes most sense of the structure of the story - with Suzanne's daughter appearing at the end, a very conspicuous part of the story. I do wonder how many other readings there are, though - we haven't had the one yet in which the Pie Club is really the Pudding Club and they're all off ill having babies at exactly the same time, like the women of Midwich. I'll spare you that one, I think.

Peter.

Peter Stephenson — 11 May 1998, 08:02 · follows Peter Westlake

adam louis stephanides wrote:

But it is the description of Suzanne's daughter that is the real giveaway.

...

This passage is in reality not a description of the daughter, but a repressed memory of Suzanne herself bubbling up, triggered by seeing her daughter.

You're right that this is a key moment, and seems to be asking for a psychological rather than a fantasy explanation. Actually, it recalls another part of Proust, towards the end, when he meets Gilberte Swann's daughter and recognises in her all the things he once saw in Gilberte. Sorry I don't have it around, but maybe there's a really telling quotation in 'Le Temps Retrouvé' (Time Regained) somewhere.

pws

adam louis stephanides — 11 May 1998, 13:02 · follows Peter Stephenson

On Mon, 11 May 1998 Peter Westlake wrote:

Seconded. I do like your theory, even though I don't believe it's the one the author intended. It does fit the text pretty well, but I think it isn't quite strongly enough implied. At least, I *think* I think that.

This might be true for another author, but not for Wolfe. I think my theory is at least as strongly implied by the text as is Weir's ghostly state in Peace, which we know Wolfe intended.

Of the theories I've heard so far, I like Alice's the best.

The main problem I now have with Alice's theory is that it doesn't account for the strong indications that the narrator has indeed forgotten something. (I don't think you can say he has "forgotten" not having met Suzanne.)

--Adam

Craig Christensen — 12 May 1998, 08:40 · follows adam louis stephanides

William,

Anyway, my point is that the narrator mentions Hamlet **after** he talks about the "extraordinary experience" but **before** he says anything about forgetting it. So "Hamlet's hackneyed precept" is about the unusual, not about memory, making the Horatio quote most probably the one intended by far.

Good points, but how about this well-known quote from Hamlet?

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be"

Maybe the narrator owed her money and has conveniently forgotten it. <g>

I was originally going to post a message saying "enough with the Suzanne Delage already".

OK, here's my last Suzanne Delage post. I'm obviously out of ideas, anyway.

Craig

Damien Broderick — 13 May 1998, 22:23 · follows Craig Christensen

As I was reading this morning - reading the URTH list's digest on my computer screen, I should explain - I was struck by the deluge of posts, deliberately left unread until now, concerning the story 'Suzanne Delage'. It occurred to me to wonder about this thread. Living all my life, as I have, in a genre comprising less than a hundred thousand stories, I had not even been dimly aware of this particular tale. And yet it had plainly excited the witty and astute vulpine readers here. I went as soon as it was convenient to my local library and found the copy of ENDANGERED SPECIES that, hardly opened except to read 'The Cat', I had returned only a month before, and there belatedly met for the first time the enigmatic absence of Suzanne Delage. Or so it seemed, until, with a strange frisson, my first for the day, I noticed that this story had originally appeared in a collection entitled EDGES (Pocket Books, 1980), edited by Mr Wolfe's agent, Virginia Kidd, and her other most notable client, Ursula Le Guin. This was striking enough as a coincidence, for at that time I too was a client of Ms Kidd. Stranger yet was the fact that this volume, in which I had never previously encountered Mr Wolfe's story, opens with a novella that I believe Mr Wolfe might enjoy, entitled 'The Ballad of Bowspit Bear's Stead'. As it chanced, I had written that story.

I turned for clues to Ms Kidd's introduction to the story. It proved immediately unreliable in a small way, not perhaps a startling discovery in a paperback original which had printed the closing sentences of my own story not on its last page but at the head of the italicized introduction to the next, Carol Emshwiller's 'Omens'. We are misinformed that Mr Wolfe had been 'working extensively on his tetralogy (*The Rock of the New Sun*)'. Nevertheless, it is worth attending to Ms Kidd's insiderly comment:

'His short story hereunder is a den of iniquities; no one else could have written it.'

I think this is likely. It is less a madeleine than a reverse veronica, a kind of Turin test. Here are some incidental, glancing reflections:

Suzanne is not a vampire, I think, nor is she her own daughter and mother, not quite. I do think she might have no use for men. Is it implausible that those exhausting trips taken by Madame Delage and Mother, so eagerly repeated, were spent as often under the quilt as on it? Was it Mother who later scissored out the photos of the young woman who (perhaps) - like daughter, like mother, like grandmother, faithful mirror of the flesh - so resembled her lost lover? Why did

the bitter old neighbor widow so detest Mrs Delage? Had she been displaced in the beautiful friend's affections (or those of someone looking quite similar - wait, wait for it) by other, younger women, Mother being merely the latest?

Why should this be the occasion of retrograde amnesia? The conjecture above might be the root of a complex Oedipal agony of (as it were) biblical proportions. As Adam noted of this confessedly (or avowedly) dull small-town dog:

< "extraordinary experience he refers to is not necessarily supernatural, merely a "dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability." The second is that the person undergoing such an experience forgets it because "he has ... been so conditioned to consider himself the most mundane of creatures." (361) This is significant because the narrator does indeed "consider himself the most mundane of creatures." He calls his life "dull" and is "afraid [he] bored" both his wives (362). >

The provenance of the luscious 15 year old daughter of the absent Suzanne? Mantis provided the key allusion to Proust, a writer for whom sexual evasions and masks were not unknown. But here's another possible layering (if we are prepared to accept that Gene Wolfe is vatic as well as gnostic, the necessary premise for many of this list's entertainingly over-interpretative hi-jinks). You all know, of course, that Ives Delage (1854-1920) was the French zoologist who (as the EB tells us) 'developed a method for culturing sea urchins following artificial fertilization of the eggs with chemicals'. This might be irrelevant in the work of anyone with less interest in cloning and reduplication than Mr Wolfe.

Having mused on this matter for a time, I let it slip my mind and opened my mail from the Taxation Department of the Australian Commonwealth. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good IQ, is quite often as thick as a brick when faced by normal tasks routinely handled with dispatch by the village halfwit. Horrified by what I found there, I pedalled at once to gladiolus-rich Moonee Ponds [sic], Melbourne seat of the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation, suburb apostrophised so lovingly by our laureate Dame Edna Everage for its lower-middle class

niceness, in order to set right, if I could, a lamentable lapse of memory. In a fit of near-Alzheimerish muddle I had written not long ago to the Deputy Commissioner or his lackey a brief message deploring his request for a certain penalty that I believed wrongly had been forgiven following an earlier round of correspondence. Or rather, that amount having indeed been remitted, demurring at the more substantial amount now requested with menaces, which proved to relate to another year entirely. How time flies and so on.

Since I could find no method of electronic payment, and no other that did not involve a hefty excess for the service, I bicycled, as I say, to cloudy autumn Moonee Ponds and there withdrew from the local bank branch - after first admitting my inability to drive a car and producing what I regarded as an excessive number of documents showing my face and my signature - an amount of folding cash equal to 68 times the sum paid me by Deakin University Press for my book about deconstructive theory.

Soon I entered the vast building in nearby Gladstone Street and was directed to a bullet-proof glass-fronted cashiers' counter where a small frisson greeted me, my second or third for the day. Waiting to take and count my bank notes were two burly chaps, apparently there from central casting in the role of smash-and-grab men or perhaps undercover drug cops working a dangerous biker detail, in louche wrinkled garments revealing rather an expanse of beefy forearm. The thug who took my money and spent a surprisingly long time counting it, putting it into small piles and moving these back and forth, was shaven-skulled in a stubbled 5 o'clock shadow way, with a long plaited queue rising from the back of his head in the place where my

male pattern tonsure, sadly, meets the equally bald portions at the front. I found this entire scene extremely gratifying, at once a metonymy of the process and evidence of a new and refreshing relaxation of out-moded shibboleths. If the rules had been as sensible when I was a young lout, who knows but that I might now be approaching the close of a well-remunerated working life in the Public Service.

Damien Broderick

Jack Lyons — 13 May 1998, 10:45 · follows Damien Broderick

On Wed, 13 May 1998, Damien Broderick wrote:

:As I was reading this morning - reading the URTH list's :digest on my computer screen, I should explain - I was :struck by the deluge of posts,

[snip]

Finally, somebody is starting to make sense.

Patera Jack

adam louis stephanides — 13 May 1998, 11:08 · follows Jack Lyons

On Mon, 11 May 1998 Craig Christensen wrote:

After reading Suzanne Delange I looked for Spanish Influenza information, to date when the characters were in high school. Of course I was surprised to learn that the Spanish Influenza occurred in 1918 during the first World War. This certainly doesn't seem to be the correct period for the characters' high school years.

I think it could be. According to Krug's *The Shaping of the American High School, 1880-1920*, extracurricular activities of the type the narrator describes were found in that period; and I don't see any other details which are inconsistent with it. (The reference to a "fundamentalist church" might be a problem, since the term may not have been in use then, though I haven't looked it up; but this could be the narrator himself using anachronistic terminology.) This would mean, of course, that the "present" of the story was itself in the past when it was published, but I see no problem with that. In fact, the initial reference to "those somewhat political, somewhat philosophical, somewhat historical books which can now be bought by the pound each month" doesn't seem to really apply to the late-1970s publishing scene.

Hamlet? And second, why the long rambling description of quilt collecting? In such a compact story it must have significance.

Good question. I took it as furthering the characterization of the narrator as boring, as well as indicating a possible source for this trait in his mother's conventionality; but it may well have some more specific significance which escapes me at present.

In response to some posts of William H. Ansley's which I had deleted: the "many decades ago" bit (363 in ES) is indeed hard to explain. To me "many" is certainly more than three, and even more than five--I wouldn't say that Wolfe had written many novels with Severian as protagonist--and as William points out, for Suzanne to be 65 now is already pushing the outer limits of probability (although Damien's theory would account for that). Of course, I use this to support my own theory: not only has the narrator repressed the events to the extent of suppressing that it was he that tore out the pages, but he pushes the tearing-out back in time to an impossible extent.

As for the italics in the recounting of the "idea," they're that way in the hardcover. I don't think it's a typo. The narrator immediately forgets about the forgetting, so to speak: his explanation of why the idea is correct ignores that part of it, and he also ignores it when trying to recall an extraordinary event in his own life. I can tie this in with my theory too, but I won't belabor the point.

Damien Broderick's post, which is in the archives but not yet in my mailbox was fascinating. Assuming that the comment about the "den of iniquity" reflected inside information and not just the editor having nothing else to say, it confirms that there is **something** under the surface. While the Ivan Delage cross-reference is indeed suggestive, though, I don't think I can buy the theory as yet; now if you could tie it in with those quilts...

--Adam

Peter Westlake — 14 May 1998, 11:27 · follows adam louis stephanides

At 22:23 1998-05-13 +0000, Damien Broderick wrote:

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Masterful! :-)

Nevertheless, it is worth attending to Ms Kidd's insiderly comment:

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I think this is likely. It is less a madeleine than a reverse veronica, a kind of Turin test. Here are some incidental, glancing reflections:

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Astounding!

I don't know which boggles the mind more - that this is a coincidence, or that it isn't. A bit like life on other worlds.

I see that Ives Delage died soon after the height of the Spanish Flu epidemic; but that way madness lies, I fear.

Peter.