

Short Story 69: Our Neighbor by David Copperfield

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 24 Jul 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6579>

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.

Marc Aramini — 24 Jul 2014, 14:09

"Our Neighbor by David Copperfield" was originally published in **Future Tense** in 1978, though according to the wolfe-wiki it was supposed to be included in a Philip Jose Farmer proposed anthology involving fictional writer stories which never materialized.

SUMMARY:

The Dickens character David Copperfield gives a few words about his situation in life as a newspaper reporter for the debates of Parliament and a writer, living with his wife Dora, dog Jip, and a single servant. He sees a rather shabby looking young man named Tom Tipsing who is watching the house across from the Copperfield residence. Tom observes several people enter, and reveals that he is trying to ascertain exactly what is going on next door, as an acquaintance of his, Mrs. Nedles, has a daughter who quit her addiction for two weeks after visiting the house and wants to know how this occurred, but was not admitted herself to talk to the owner, Dr. McApple. (While the addiction might be to alcohol, it might just as easily be to laudanum or anything else which can be drunk). During his next visit to the neighborhood, Dr. McApple actually accosts him in the street and reveals that his scheduled visit by a beggar has been interrupted, and that he needs another destitute pauper and would pay Tom for procuring one.

Tom comes across a man selling birds and convinces him to come speak to the Doctor for money and a meal, more than he could make selling several birds. The man has a wooden leg. Tom is dismissed by Dr. McApple but hides behind the coats and listens to their conversation, during which it is revealed that Dr. McApple is interested in phrenology (physiognomy of the skull) and mesmerism. Dr. McApple is seeking "the resolution of apparent conflicts, the cases in which we find that a man's behavior does not correspond in all respects to what his skull tells us it should be."

McApple places the birdman John under a trance in front of his wealthy visitors and cuts or injures him so that he bleeds, then instructs him to stop the bleeding. The doctor wants to get the entire story of John, claiming, "poor people's lives can be compressed into a simple narrative." John relates his memories with poverty of his mother, and going to work in the rope-walk at six or seven. He learned how to lime birds there, and the work soon drove him to run home to his mother, whom he never found. He enlists on the **Swiftsure** but later tried to desert in Spain and was flogged. He lost his leg when a gun fell on it, smashed. His marketable life skill has proven to be his ability to catch and lime birds to hold them until they are sold.

Dr. McApple asks him to be young again and recount the pain of looking for his Mother as a child. During his weeping and supplications for his mother, the crowd remarks how amazing it is. As the guests leave, Tom pretends that he belongs and gives them their coats, and they treat him more or less as a servant. Dr. McApple remarks that there is rain upon Tom's cheeks when he sees them, though they are tears.

Dr. McApple revealed that he made a suggestion to the girl Jenny Nedles during her trance to

abandon her addiction, though it only helped for two weeks. The doctor says his real business is pity, and he is trying to determine why the wealthy, no matter how well developed the area of their skull that seems related to pity, "the quality itself appears not to exist."

DISCUSSION:

Luckily, "Our Neighbor by David Copperfield" is an extremely straightforward story for this time period in Wolfe's writing career (unless, as is possible, I missed something). It is a moralistic story in the mode of Dickens about class distinctions that (almost) seriously explores several things like mesmerism and phrenology that were at one times on the cusp of science but have now gone the way of the dodo into fantasy. The question the story asks is why does affluence and money in the modern world lead to an absence of pity? It takes a fairly negative attitude towards the wealthy and the affects that wealth has on their humanity. The test subjects of Dr. McApple are actually the rich in their response to the impoverished and their tragic stories, though he also plants helpful suggestions in his destitute case studies when he feels it is appropriate.

The wealthy visitors treat the clerk Tom as a butler when he acts as one, and in a way appearances become everything to them.

Most of the fun of the story is a style exercise in emulating 19th century prose for Wolfe, something which I will leave to more discerning eyes for style, though the first sentence should serve as a fairly good example of the self-effacing, almost apophatic, tone the work seeks to recreate:

"Some earlier sketches of mine having been received with some slight approbation by the public, my good friend the Editor has asked me, for the benefit of the previously named influential group, to prefix this one with some explanation of the means by which the affecting circumstances here related reached my attention — a thing I would not otherwise undertake to do, the relation being of so commonplace a nature that only my esteemed friend's request could embolden me to inflict it on my readers."

The situation of this story during Copperfield's first marriage sets it before Dora's miscarriage and death and well before his second marriage to Agnes Wickfield, so the sketches David is talking about certainly can't include the totality of the novel *David Copperfield*, but will include the earlier writing that he undertook, and probably occurs near Chapters 48 and 49 of the original Dickens? novel. The pity that is McApple's obsession can be found echoed throughout the original novel, even in scenes such as the death of the dog Jip and the illness of Dora in Chapter 53.

The title of Our Neighbor certainly invokes not only the strange behavior of McApple as the neighbor of Copperfield but also raises the old biblical question — who is our neighbor? All of humankind - certainly we should empathize with them and treat them as such.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The work is fairly rife with Dickens references, which seem to be more like Easter Eggs than any real metonymic pattern.

David Copperfield: from the Dickens novel of the same name, he is working as a reporter for a newspaper and also writes in his spare time, fictions "no more false, and much more innocent, than those I must often report as fact." His fickleness does not allow him to be entirely content with Dora in the original, though he plays only a very small part in this story.

Dora: perennially childlike, she will die and David marry again. Some of her irresponsibility is captured in this story "Thus, as soon as my darling Dora was gone, leaving (as her custom is) what remained of the tea things behind her?"

Brass: one of the visitors to McApple's, who include "a poor woman with a child, a City merchant, and a gentleman of the legal profession" — the last of whom is probably Sampson Brass from **The Old Curiosity Shop**; in the novel, he is a sycophant who helps frame a servant for robbery.

Tom Tipping: a clerk at Lincoln's Inn, where many of Dickens's famous novels have scenes. He has aspirations to pass the bar and making money. As far as I can tell he and the Nedle family are Wolfe's creations.

McApple: Mr. Breedlove supposedly calls him the successor to the historical Franz Joseph Gall, whose phrenology is now considered much less than science but did lead to a naturalistic paradigm for considering humanity. He is also interested in the works of Franz Mesmer and animal magnetism or mesmerism. The apple has its obvious Judeo-Christian symbolic connotations — McApple seeks knowledge that will explain the attitudes of the rich.

Parsons — the jolly voice that is quieted by the others, he is probably Gabriel Parsons from "Sketches by Boz".

At one point a long legal battle is mentioned in the text: "Why, some of these cases drag on for fifty years. A hundred years!" and this almost certainly references the case of Jarndyce Vs. Jarndyce recounted in **Bleak House**.

It is conceivable that the last name Breedlove alludes to the characters in Toni Morrison's **The Bluest Eye** (1970), which involves poverty and cruelty to children, but certainly not necessarily.

HISTORICAL EVENTS:

The birdman John served aboard the **Swiftsure**, probably the vessel that was commissioned in 1787, involved in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: Are all of the unnamed visitors to Dr. McApple's house based on Dickens characters? Any meaning to the names Nedle or Tipping?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe's love of Dickens is well documented, and this is his easiest foray into that territory. Of course he will use Dickens characters again in "The Doctor of Death Island" and "The Vampire Kiss". I feel that Wolfe has occasionally sought to emulate writing styles, whether something that sounds like Runyan in "Beautyland" or Dickens here. The trend of giving characters a vulgar or class differentiated method of speaking became far more widespread in Wolfe during and after **The Book of the Long Sun**, though clearly dialog and the manner different characters communicate has always interested him.

The wooden leg of John seems to resemble the crushed leg of Johann in "Silhouette", also smashed during his service on the ship, and Wolfe's own grandfather had a wooden leg.