

Short Story 81: Suzanne Delage

The Urth list — 8 messages, 4 voices, 05 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 05 Aug 2014, 17:02

“Suzanne Delage” was first published in *Edges* in 1980 and is reprinted in **Endangered Species**.

SUMMARY: As the narrator is reading a book, he is struck by the idea that every man has had in the course of his life some extraordinary experience, some dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability, of such magnitude that he might in his own person serve as a living proof of Hamlet’s hackneyed precept — but that he has, nearly always, been so conditioned to consider himself the most mundane of creatures, that, finding no relationship to the remainder of his life in this extraordinary experience, he has forgotten it.

He then ponders how boring his life is and comes to the conclusion that his extraordinary event is simply that living all his life in a small town he has been dimly aware of a woman his age’s existence but claims to have never met her. After reviewing his basic history, that he was married twice and bored both his ex-wives as they bored him, that he was a second string football player in highschool, and that he then searches his yearbooks to find that either she was not pictured or the pictures were cut out for collages or to attain the individual pictures. In others she is not pictured because of an epidemic of some kind which the narrator thinks is Spanish Influenza took place.

He reveals that their parents were great friends and searched for quilts together, which were then displayed at the discoverers house for everyone to come look at. Despite these parties, he believes Mrs. Delage was never welcome because of a bitter old woman across the street who would despise them if Mrs. Delage came over. There are several other creepy ruminations about coming to love and hate Suzanne if he had met her, and the story culminates with him recollecting that a few days ago he ran into someone who had known him all his life, the wife of a friend, in the town. They see a beautiful 15 year old girl, and his reaction to her is very strong, noting her pale skin and dark hair and imagining his hands encircling her thin waist. The friend says the girl is the very image of her mother, Suzanne Delage.

COMMENTARY:

If someone were to attempt to create an infinite speculation device, they might very well begin with the premise of “Suzanne Delage”: extraordinary and special events, removed from everyday existence, are forgotten. Given the vast breadth of ideas which have been put forth around Suzanne Delage, I think there are a few guidelines which are provided through thematic analysis and through blatant metatextual instruction to the reader. For this reason, I will not present every possible analysis of Suzanne Delage in its entirety, which, given the elided nature of the central event, could be almost anything if we do not adhere to certain rigid patterns created throughout the story.

I believe that “Suzanne Delage” is perhaps the most protean of Wolfe’s realistic stories — it is not an almost inscrutable literary myth in the manner of, say, “The God and his Man”, “To the

Dark Tower Came”, or ?Cues? ? we have low mimesis characters in a fairly believable American setting here with fairly straightforward action (or inaction, as the case may be). Here, a sound conclusion must be based on *theme *analysis, and the theme of the details mentioned in the story seems to indicate that extraordinary repression of unwanted or painful memories is not only possible but has happened over and over throughout history. Occasionally these repressed memories will come back involuntarily, sometimes to cause great upheaval, but occasionally just to make us re-evaluate who we are, or even show that we are incapable of that re-evaluation.

I accept several principals at face value from the narrator as general guidelines:

1) That an extraordinary event actually could be forgotten, so that he can't be trusted to reliably remember it. If he could remember it, then the premise of the story is invalid. If we do not accept this premise, the analysis can stop right here — the extraordinary event in his life is that he never met Suzanne Delage.

2) When he says, “there has, in fact, been one thread of the strange — I might almost say the incredible, though not the supernatural — in my own history,” I take him at face value. To be honest, never meeting a girl is not that incredible. I see this as the metafictional statement that must control our interpretation — incredible things are possible candidates for elision because they have suffered oblivion, but supernatural things are not. In other words, elves, demigods, and aliens probably don't play a part in the best analysis of the story.

3) The narrator will only lie or be inaccurate in the suppression of a very particular memory, and this must be a repetitive or discernible pattern or related to the suppressed event — so that he is only unreliable regarding the remembrance of that event.

It is conceivable that “Hamlet's hackneyed precept” might be “To be, or not to be”, but I think it is more likely that the narrator speaks of the observation, “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” This quote would tie in slightly better with the theme of many historical forces at work subjectively ignored by the observer. In particular, forgotten or unknown things might exist in the world and have consequences, but been rather remarkably relegated to oblivion.

INACCURATE OR CONTRADICTORY DETAILS:

If the story were completely unreliable and our narrator a thorough liar, then nothing could be ascertained. However, if he is conclusively unreliable on one or two related topics and it is possible to establish that, then we can assume he is only, but still utterly, unreliable on that topic. In this case, every claim he makes about Suzane Delage falls under suspicion for the following reasons.

The story begins “last night”, when the narrator starts to think about extraordinary events, and after pondering for what seems like forever, he says, “I have been dimly aware of the existence of a certain woman without ever meeting her or gaining any sure idea of her appearance.” At the end of the story, we get a graphic, strange, and obsessive depiction of the young girl on the street, which took place “a few days ago”:

Her hair was of lustrous black, and her complexion as pure as milk; but it was not these that for a moment enchanted me, nor the virginal breasts .. nor the little waist I might have circled with two hands — to the woman beside me I said, “What a charming child. Who is she?”

?Her name? ? I can't think of it. But of course you know whose she is, don't you? She's the very

image of her mother at that age — Suzanne Delage.

The meeting had this eerie impact, and even after this almost ephebophilic description, he *still* forgets about the oddity of it until he ponders and ponders for hours over his book. He knew exactly what she looked like before the text even started, according to his own description, but did not think his reaction to the 15 year old girl was at all extraordinary, and did not even mention it until the long, discursive review of his life, then claims he has no idea at all what she looks like.

There are further inconsistencies, claiming that ?(though I fear most of us here have always pronounced it 'Susan')? (note the parentheses there) and that he has no idea which groups she associated with, though he states of the year book pictures, "I seem to recall that these were torn out and cut up to obtain the individual photographs many decades ago. My own face is among those missing, as well as Suzanne Delage's; but in another section, one devoted to social activities, a girl's club (it was called, I think, the Pie Club) is shown, and one of the names given in the caption is Suzanne's." Notice the vague verbiage here: he *seems* to think they were obtained for individual photos (why would he or his mother cut out the picture of a girl they never met?) and that he *thinks* it was the Pie Club, again in parentheses, though he has the yearbook right in front of him. He later claims "whether Suzanne Delage had entry to one of more of [these little coteries] I do not know," despite the fact he knows of her involvement with the Pie Club. This haze concerning Suzanne seems like an extreme inability to retain memories concerned with her.

He even says only a few of the girls, the "really promiscuous ones and the dazzlingly beautiful ones whom we, in those naive times, called 'queens' ? were known to everyone," but he seems to think that the young girl is dazzlingly beautiful, and the lifelong friend also just assumes that of course he knows exactly who the girl is, for he must have known Suzanne Delage. Why would she make that assumption?

This particular narrator seems especially faulty when saying "I think" and ?seem? - and when he thinks about why she was unable to be photographed, he says, "there was an epidemic of some kind (I think Spanish influenza)? just at the time the pictures for the annual were to be taken. Suzanne is listed as one of those ?unable to be photographed." Like everything else that he associates with Suzanne Delage, the memory is hazy. However, anyone who actually lived through the Spanish Influenza would not be likely to identify it as "an epidemic of some kind" which is incredibly only recalled to our narrator when "on one of the closing pages a woebegone roll of names reminded me of something I had forgotten for many years" - (see the theme section below for more details on its destructive and terrible effects, but since World War I was about to escalate, it was somehow historically less known that other destructive pandemics in history like the Bubonic Plague or the Black Death). How could he have forgotten this, if it devastated the school and community during his adolescence? He isn't even certain that it is Spanish Influenza.

The mothers even seem to be close friends who leave town together all the time. The primary impediment to the mother's sharing the sheets is the old woman across the street, a widow who would have become enemies for life if Mrs. Delage was invited over, and the narrator states, "I believe my mother's friend died while I was at college." However, it is unclear if the friend referenced is the widow, who was never referred to as a friend, or Mrs. Delage, who was so identified earlier: "Mrs. Delage, who became my mother's friend." This seems like a rather nebulous excuse as well.

Almost every claim he makes about Suzanne consciously is subject to question, but a few of the speculative ones are almost suggestive: "It would therefore have been entirely logical for Mrs.

Delage to have been our frequent guest, at least for tea; and for her to have brought, occasionally, her little daughter Suzanne, whom I would no doubt have soon come to both love and hate." This is a strong statement about someone whom one has never met — assuming that love and hate would simply occur naturally based on the concept of simply knowing her. Here there seems to be some subconscious truth — the narrator loved, and hated, Suzanne Delage, but repressed it, as the excised yearbook pictures (do we cut out pictures of people we never met?) and the vague memory of everything associated with her indicates. The fantasy meeting even involves a dance: "It is even possible I danced with her — but I do not really believe that, and if, indeed, it happened the years have so effectively sponged the events from my mind that no slightest trace remains," which is probably exactly what happened.

There is one more odd disjunction that occurs at the start of the story, where our narrator claims, "I have never made an effort to meet [Suzanne Delage], and I doubt that she has ever attempted to meet me, if, indeed, she is aware that I exist. On the other hand we are neither of us invalids, nor are we blind. This woman — lives, or at least so I have always vaguely supposed, on the eastern edge of our little city I live on the western." The mention of being blind is very odd indeed. Why mention this at all? We do know that an epidemic which prevented people from being photographed hit the city, though the narrator is not certain which it was. One disease that does leave people blind is Small Pox, and there is an interesting connection with the disease and quilts of just such types as the mothers collect that is discussed below — specifically, in an attempt to eradicate Native American populations, quilts infected with small pox were distributed. Assuming that our narrator has suppressed the memory of a terrible event, one in which he comes to love and hate Suzanne Delage and then represses everything about their relationship, it is not unreasonable to assume that they were lovers and that something disastrous happened.

We have details in the text of a denial of blindness, of her living on the western edge of town, of his complete lack of knowledge of her appearance, and his claim that his life is completely boring, but underneath these details, especially parenthetically, there at least seems to be some strong emotional certainty involving Suzanne Delage and her image, through the daughter, has a profound affect on him at the end. If they indeed made love on the quilts collected by their parents and spread the disease through the town as a result, destroying families and perhaps one of them even going blind, then a reason for the repression materializes.

While this involves a huge speculative scene (Suzanne and the narrator possibly consummating their juvenile relationship on an infected quilt and then devastating the town before completely suppressing the memory), the details of epidemic, the denial of blindness, and the strange conviction that he would come to love and hate Suzanne otherwise make very little sense — why are they present, especially the denial of their mutual blindness? Our narrator is metaphorically blind, but perhaps the smallpox has made Suzanne literally so.

THEME AND LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

In this case, the primary literary allusion at work is also the one which must control the theme: Proust's **Remembrance of Things Past** or **In Search of Lost Time**. We must decide if it is a simply situational reference or if the entire idea behind Proust's giant work is being invoked. The start of the novel involves the narrator awakening involuntary memories of his childhood which were forgotten through the same taste he experienced as a child, changing his perception of his current life through all those memories coming back. This would fit with the theme of repression of the incredible or painful — things we cannot deal with or understand are simply shoved to the bottom of our minds forever and we go about our lives, but sometimes they can pop up again. The alternative, single scene reference is as follows.

The title character is named after a scene from Proust's **Remembrance of Things Past**, probably first noted by Michael Andre-Driussi.

She spoke to me of myself, my family, my social background. She said: "Oh, I know your parents know some very nice people. You're a friend of Robert Forestier and Suzanne Delage." For a moment these names conveyed absolutely nothing to me. But suddenly I remembered that I had indeed played as a child in the Champs-Élysées with Robert Forestier, whom I had never seen since. As for Suzanne Delage, she was the great-niece of Mme Blandais, and I had once been due to go to a dancing lesson, and even to take a small part in a play at her parents' house. But the fear of getting a fit of giggles and a nose-bleed had at the last moment prevented me, so that I had never set eyes on her. I had at the most a vague idea that I had once heard that the Swanns' feather-hatted governess had at one time been with the Delages, but perhaps it was only a sister of this governess, or a friend. I protested to Albertine that Robert Forestier and Suzanne Delage occupied a very small place in my life.

"That may be; but your mothers are friends, I can place you by that. I often pass Suzanne Delage in the Avenue de Messine. I admire her style." Our mothers were acquainted only in the imagination of Mme Bontemps, who having heard that I had at one time played with Robert Forestier, to whom, it appeared, I used to recite poetry, had concluded from that that we were bound by family ties. She could never, I gathered, hear my mother's name mentioned without observing: "Oh yes, she belongs to the Delage-Forestier set," giving my parents a good mark which they had done nothing to deserve. (from Proust's *The Guermantes Way*, Chapter 2).

That relationship is straightforward enough, but there are other "forgotten things" at least hinted at in the text. In our narrator's world, the mothers actually are acquainted, and nonsensically seek for quilts together and then proudly display them at parties (why would they display them in our narrator's house if Suzanne's mother were not permitted to come over?) If the text only refers to this portion of Proust's work rather than the entirety, then the analysis in the section above loses some of its thematic validity.

Spanish Flu: considering the manner in which the Spanish influenza, the 1918 flu pandemic, is treated by the narrator, as an epidemic of some kind which he thinks was Spanish influenza, it seems like something one would remember: it infected 500 million across the world and killed perhaps almost 100 million of them "three to five percent of the world's population — making it one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history" (?1918 Flu Pandemic?). It was unusual in that it killed previously healthy young adults because of their strong immune response:

In the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries, despite the relatively high morbidity and mortality rates that resulted from the epidemic in 1918-1919, the Spanish flu began to fade from public awareness over the decades until the arrival of news about bird flu and other pandemics in the 1990s and 2000s. This has led some historians to label the Spanish flu a "forgotten pandemic".

The infestation of small pox in quilts seems another fact that for many years would be forgotten by the general populace — it is shameful and probably evil, and the disregard for human life from the civilized portion of American society paints a fairly vile picture that is uncomfortable to look at and might be repressed. Perhaps forgetting this past sin comes back to haunt the community, and the ghostly presence of Suzanne at the end serves as a symbol of this theme for our narrator's life.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SMALL POX THEORY:

The quilts take up a fair amount of time, but the women desire 18th century quilts, though usually find ones of the earlier part of the 19th century. The quilt which belonged to “the wife of a major in a fencible Zouave regiment” is mentioned in particular, and is spread over the sofa. While the name Zouave is usually associated with French forces in Africa, but there are non-French Zouave regiments, even American units during the Civil War and until the 1880s when they transformed into something like the National Guard. The dating of the quilts they attained seems off, but note the use of parentheses and “I think” this quote: “(it was their enduring hope, I think never well satisfied, to find a piece from what they called 'American revolution times' - by which they meant the eighteenth, even such dates as 1790 or 1799)? Our narrator is notoriously bad at thinking, especially in parentheses, which always seem to contain some pertinent detail. If they did attain their desire, then it might have led to something disastrous, as we can see from the history of 18th century American quilts:

On June 29, 1763, ... Bouquet was preparing to lead an expedition to relieve Fort Pitt when he received a letter from Amherst making the following proposal: "Could it not be contrived to Send the Small Pox among those Disaffected Tribes of Indians? We must, on this occasion, Use Every Stratagem in our power to Reduce them."

Bouquet agreed, writing back to Amherst on July 13, 1763: "I will try to inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets that may fall in their hands, taking care however not to get the disease myself." Amherst responded favorably on July 16, 1763: "You will Do well to try to Inoculate the Indians by means of Blanketts, as well as to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execreble Race."

As it turned out, however, officers at the besieged Fort Pitt had already exposed the Indians in just the manner Amherst and Bouquet were discussing. During a parley at Fort Pitt on June 24, 1763, Captain Simeon Ecuyer gave representatives of the besieging Delawares two blankets and a handkerchief from the smallpox ward "out of regard to them" after the Delawares pledged to renew their friendship. While the exact meaning of his phrase was unclear, a later invoice appears to clearly establish the purpose was transmittal of smallpox.

Indians in the area did indeed contract smallpox. Some historians have noted that it is impossible to verify how many people (if any) contracted the disease as a result of the Fort Pitt incident; the disease was already in the area and had reached the Indians through other vectors. ... The smallpox epidemic that had occurred during Pontiac's War ... killing as many as 400,000-500,000 Native Americans during and years after Pontiac's Rebellion. ("Seige of Fort Pitt")

His claim that the sheets were never used is also in parentheses — they could have been used by a teenage couple quite easily.

The strange old widow across the street is another oddity in the text, but I think that the narrator's claim that the Delages lived across town is another one of his mis-remembrances — maybe she lives right across the street.

The age of the narrator is a problem if we assume the girl is his daughter, even though he retired “much sooner than most men” - for him to be the father, he would have to probably be in his early or mid 30s, unless the relationship with Suzanne lingered longer than in high school, and if it did, that would certainly have prompted his lifelong friend to say something more damning than that. Retiring “much sooner” is an understatement there. Perhaps the girl is not his child, but the relationship of her mother and the narrator probably goes much deeper than

he can remember.

It seems that his claim of Spanish Influenza hitting the town is wrong, but it is difficult to determine if his childhood is set in 1918 or even the 1950s, as its depiction of small town groups seems fairly generically rural or suburban America.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS:

In light of the eerie description of the young girl and the difficulty in getting a handle on the time line of the work if the girl at the end of the story is his daughter from a high school relationship (is our narrator really only in his early 30s?) there are several other explanations which fit a few details but not all. One is vampirism: the lack of pictures of Suzanne and her milky complexion as well as agelessness creates a kind of immortal mind fog lurking over the town. Yet she is in some of the pictures which were cut out and excised, and this does not explain many of the other strange details of the text.

Borski asserts in **The Long and Short of It ** that Suzanne is another name for “Lily” and draws the parallel with the mention of queens with the bitter old woman across the street as the villain of **Snow White ** and the apple of the story with Suzanne's presence in the Pie Club. Thus the girl at the end is in some way still the original Suzanne, but our narrator proved to fail as the prince to awake her from her slumber.

Gwern.net has several other reactions to the story, referenced below.

Both of these seem to fail in holistic explanations of why all these inconsistencies occur in the narrator's memory and why he has cut out the yearbook pictures, if not in a kind of deliberate but forgotten suppression. They don't serve the theme of forgotten things returning quite suddenly and unexpectedly, occasionally with disastrous consequences. The suppressed relationship, making love on the quilts, and the spread of smallpox through the town makes use of the majority of the details in the text if we accept the premise: extraordinary things sufficiently removed from every day life can be repressed and forgotten, even if they were a huge important part of history (such as the disastrous but forgotten Spanish Influenza, which devastated the world but was relatively forgotten, or the spread of disease infested quilts in an attempt at genocide).

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Since I favor a “realistic” interpretation of this story (part of the details show that extraordinary suppression of unwanted memories happens, even if, for example, 1 in 20 people in the world die or are affected by it), the strain of realism in Wolfe is actually relatively select. There are **possibilities ** of realism under science fiction or fantasy (**The Sorcerer's House** or “The Ziggurat”, for example). “Beech Hill”, “The Recording”, perhaps “The Flag”, “Pauls Treehouse”, and “The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories” are all perhaps realistic fiction, but just as in those stories and others close to our reality, the strangeness lurks beneath the surface — if not in the supernatural or spiritual, then in the extreme unlikeliness of the situation.

This story is important for its almost sublime ordering as a palimpsest — almost any interpretation can fit the premise, but in cases such as this in Wolfe's fiction, his modernist, engineering mindset should lead us to look for patterns of theme and in the unreliability, or we will be lost amid infinite speculation. The published criticism on Wolfe has shown that this is a very real possibility.

The most important feature of this story is the use of the parenthetical asides, ostensibly extra

information, revealing everything that our narrator treats as extra irrelevant information to his story of himself. Ultimately, he will never understand his life until he reincorporates the relevant but separated and isolated information into his life.

For the purposes of this write up, only a general assessment of the historical references was necessary, and thus the following sources:

"1918 Flu Pandemic." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 5 Aug. 2004. Web. 5 Aug. 2014. Borski, Robert. *The Long and the Short of It: More Essays on the Fiction of Gene Wolfe*. Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc. 2006.

"Siege of Fort Pitt." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 11 May 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

"Suzanne Delage." *Gwern.net*. 22 June 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.
<http://www.gwern.net/Suzanne%20Delage>

Greg Bates — 06 Aug 2014, 00:45 · in reply to Marc Aramini

I have never been able to make head or hair of this story! Someone needs to hold Wolfe down and force him to explain what he was going for with it, beyond an extended riff on Proust.

On Tue, Aug 5, 2014 at 1:02 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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"Her name" — I can't think of it. But of course you know whose she is, don't you? She's the very image of her mother at that age — Suzanne Delage.

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course he knows exactly who the girl is, for he must have known Suzanne Delage. Why would she make that assumption?

This particular narrator seems especially faulty when saying “I think” and “seem” - and when he thinks about why she was unable to be photographed, he says, “there was an epidemic of some kind (I think Spanish influenza)? just at the time the pictures for the annual were to be taken. Suzanne is listed as one of those ?unable to be photographed.” Like everything else that he associates with Suzanne Delage, the memory is hazy. However, anyone who actually lived through the Spanish Influenza would not be likely to identify it as “an epidemic of some kind” which is incredibly only recalled to our narrator when “on one of the closing pages a woebegone roll of names reminded me of something I had forgotten for many years” - (see the theme section below for more details on its destructive and terrible effects, but since World War I was about to escalate, it was somehow historically less known that other destructive pandemics in history like the Bubonic Plague or the Black Death). How could he have forgotten this, if it devastated the school and community during his adolescence? He isn't even certain that it is Spanish Influenza.

The mothers even seem to be close friends who leave town together all the time. The primary impediment to the mother's sharing the sheets is the old woman across the street, a widow who would have become enemies for life if Mrs. Delage was invited over, and the narrator states, “I believe my mother's friend died while I was at college.” However, it is unclear if the friend referenced is the widow, who was never referred to as a friend, or Mrs. Delage, who was so identified earlier: “Mrs. Delage, who became my mother's friend.” This seems like a rather nebulous excuse as well.

Almost every claim he makes about Suzanne consciously is subject to question, but a few of the speculative ones are almost suggestive: “It would therefore have been entirely logical for Mrs. Delage to have been our frequent guest, at least for tea; and for her to have brought, occasionally, her little daughter Suzanne, whom I would no doubt have soon come to both love and hate.” This is a strong statement about someone whom one has never met — assuming that love and hate would simply occur naturally based on the concept of simply knowing her. Here there seems to be some subconscious truth — the narrator loved, and hated, Suzanne Delage, but repressed it, as the excised yearbook pictures (do we cut out pictures of people we never met?) and the vague memory of everything associated with her indicates. The fantasy meeting even involves a dance: “It is even possible I danced with her — but I do not really believe that, and if, indeed, it happened the years have so effectively sponged the events from my mind that no slightest trace remains,” which is probably exactly what happened.

There is one more odd disjunction that occurs at the start of the story, where our narrator claims, “I have never made an effort to meet [Suzanne Delage], and I doubt that she has ever attempted to meet me, if, indeed, she is aware that I exist. On the other hand we are neither of us invalids, nor are we blind. This woman — lives, or at least so I have always vaguely supposed, on the eastern edge of our little city I live on the western.” The mention of being blind is very odd indeed. Why mention this at all? We do know that an epidemic which prevented people from being photographed hit the city, though the narrator is not certain which it was. One disease that does leave people blind is Small Pox, and there is an interesting connection with the disease and quilts of just such types as the mothers

collect that is discussed below — specifically, in an attempt to eradicate Native American populations, quilts infected with small pox were distributed. Assuming that our narrator has suppressed the memory of a terrible event, one in which he comes to love and hate Suzanne Delage and then represses everything about their relationship, it is not unreasonable to assume that they were lovers and that something disastrous happened.

We have details in the text of a denial of blindness, of her living on the western edge of town, of his complete lack of knowledge of her appearance, and his claim that his life is completely boring, but underneath these details, especially parenthetically, there at least seems to be some strong emotional certainty involving Suzanne Delage and her image, through the daughter, has a profound affect on him at the end. If they indeed made love on the quilts collected by their parents and spread the disease through the town as a result, destroying families and perhaps one of them even going blind, then a reason for the repression materializes.

While this involves a huge speculative scene (Suzanne and the narrator possibly consummating their juvenile relationship on an infected quilt and then devastating the town before completely suppressing the memory), the details of epidemic, the denial of blindness, and the strange conviction that he would come to love and hate Suzanne otherwise make very little sense — why are they present, especially the denial of their mutual blindness? Our narrator is metaphorically blind, but perhaps the smallpox has made Suzanne literally so.

THEME AND LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

In this case, the primary literary allusion at work is also the one which must control the theme: Proust's **Remembrance of Things Past** or **In Search of Lost Time**. We must decide if it is a simply situational reference or if the entire idea behind Proust's giant work is being invoked. The start of the novel involves the narrator awakening involuntary memories of his childhood which were forgotten through the same taste he experienced as a child, changing his perception of his current life through all those memories coming back. This would fit with the theme of repression of the incredible or painful — things we cannot deal with or understand are simply shoved to the bottom of our minds forever and we go about our lives, but sometimes they can pop up again. The alternative, single scene reference is as follows.

The title character is named after a scene from Proust's **Remembrance of Things Past**, probably first noted by Michael Andre-Driussi.

She spoke to me of myself, my family, my social background. She said: "Oh, I know your parents know some very nice people. You're a friend of Robert Forestier and Suzanne Delage." For a moment these names conveyed absolutely nothing to me. But suddenly I remembered that I had indeed played as a child in the Champs-Élysées with Robert Forestier, whom I had never seen since. As for Suzanne Delage, she was the great-niece of Mme Blandais, and I had once been due to go to a dancing lesson, and even to take a small part in a play at her parents' house. But the fear of getting a fit of giggles and a nose-bleed had at the last moment prevented me, so that I had never set eyes on her. I had at the most a vague idea that I had once heard

that the Swanns' feather-hatted governess had at one time been with the Delages, but perhaps it was only a sister of this governess, or a friend. I protested to Albertine that Robert Forestier and Suzanne Delage occupied a very small place in my life.

"That may be; but your mothers are friends, I can place you by that. I often pass Suzanne Delage in the Avenue de Messine. I admire her style." Our mothers were acquainted only in the imagination of Mme Bontemps, who having heard that I had at one time played with Robert Forestier, to whom, it appeared, I used to recite poetry, had concluded from that that we were bound by family ties. She could never, I gathered, hear my mother's name mentioned without observing: "Oh yes, she belongs to the Delage-Forestier set," giving my parents a good mark which they had done nothing to deserve. (from Proust's *The Guermantes Way*, Chapter 2).

That relationship is straightforward enough, but there are other "forgotten things" at least hinted at in the text. In our narrator's world, the mothers actually are acquainted, and nonsensically seek for quilts together and then proudly display them at parties (why would they display them in our narrator's house if Suzanne's mother were not permitted to come over?) If the text only refers to this portion of Proust's work rather than the entirety, then the analysis in the section above loses some of its thematic validity.

Spanish Flu: considering the manner in which the Spanish influenza, the 1918 flu pandemic, is treated by the narrator, as an epidemic of some kind which he thinks was Spanish influenza, it seems like something one would remember: it infected 500 million across the world and killed perhaps almost 100 million of them "three to five percent of the world's population ? making it one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history" (?1918 Flu Pandemic?). It was unusual in that it killed previously healthy young adults because of their strong immune response:

In the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries, despite the relatively high morbidity and mortality rates that resulted from the epidemic in 1918?1919, the Spanish flu began to fade from public awareness over the decades until the arrival of news about bird flue and other pandemics in the 1990s and 2000s. This has led some historians to label the Spanish flu a "forgotten pandemic".

The infestation of small pox in quilts seems another fact that for many years would be forgotten by the general populace — it is shameful and probably evil, and the disregard for human life from the civilized portion of American society paints a fairly vile picture that is uncomfortable to look at and might be repressed. Perhaps forgetting this past sin comes back to haunt the community, and the ghostly presence of Suzanne at the end serves as a symbol of this theme for our narrator's life.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SMALL POX THEORY:

The quilts take up a fair amount of time, but the women desire 18th century quilts, though usually find ones of the earlier part of the 19th century. The quilt which belonged to "the wife of a major in a fencible Zouave regiment" is mentioned in particular, and is spread over the sofa. While the name Zouave is usually associated with French forces in Africa, but there are non-French Zouave regiments, even American units during the Civil War and until the 1880s when they transformed into something like the

National Guard. The dating of the quilts they attained seems off, but note the use of parentheses and "I think" this quote: "(it was their enduring hope, I think never well satisfied, to find a piece from what they called 'American revolution times' - by which they meant the eighteenth, even such dates as 1790 or 1799)" Our narrator is notoriously bad at thinking, especially in parentheses, which always seem to contain some pertinent detail. If they did attain their desire, then it might have led to something disastrous, as we can see from the history of 18th century American quilts:

On June 29, 1763, ... Bouquet was preparing to lead an expedition to relieve Fort Pitt when he received a letter from Amherst making the following proposal: "Could it not be contrived to Send the Small Pox among those Disaffected Tribes of Indians? We must, on this occasion, Use Every Stratagem in our power to Reduce them."

Bouquet agreed, writing back to Amherst on July 13, 1763: "I will try to inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets that may fall in their hands, taking care however not to get the disease myself." Amherst responded favorably on July 16, 1763: "You will Do well to try to Innoculate the Indians by means of Blanketts, as well as to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execreble Race."

As it turned out, however, officers at the besieged Fort Pitt had already exposed the Indians in just the manner Amherst and Bouquet were discussing. During a parley at Fort Pitt on June 24, 1763, Captain Simeon Ecuyer gave representatives of the besieging Delawares two blankets and a handkerchief from the smallpox ward "out of regard to them" after the Delawares pledged to renew their friendship. While the exact meaning of his phrase was unclear, a later invoice appears to clearly establish the purpose was transmittal of smallpox.

Indians in the area did indeed contract smallpox. Some historians have noted that it is impossible to verify how many people (if any) contracted the disease as a result of the Fort Pitt incident; the disease was already in the area and had reached the Indians through other vectors. ... The smallpox epidemic that had occurred during Pontiac's War ... killing as many as 400,000-500,000 Native Americans during and years after Pontiac's Rebellion. ("Siege of Fort Pitt")

His claim that the sheets were never used is also in parentheses — they could have been used by a teenage couple quite easily.

The strange old widow across the street is another oddity in the text, but I think that the narrator's claim that the Delages lived across town is another one of his mis-remembrances — maybe she lives right across the street.

The age of the narrator is a problem if we assume the girl is his daughter, even though he retired "much sooner than most men" - for him to be the father, he would have to probably be in his early or mid 30s, unless the relationship with Suzanne lingered longer than in high school, and if it did, that would certainly have prompted his lifelong friend to say something more damning than that. Retiring "much sooner" is an understatement there. Perhaps the girl is not his child, but the relationship of her mother and the narrator probably goes much deeper than he can remember.

It seems that his claim of Spanish Influenza hitting the town is wrong, but it is difficult to determine if his childhood is set in 1918 or even the 1950s, as its depiction of small town groups seems fairly generically rural or suburban America.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS:

In light of the eerie description of the young girl and the difficulty in getting a handle on the time line of the work if the girl at the end of the story is his daughter from a high school relationship (is our narrator really only in his early 30s?) there are several other explanations which fit a few details but not all. One is vampirism: the lack of pictures of Suzanne and her milky complexion as well as agelessness creates a kind of immortal mind fog lurking over the town. Yet she is in some of the pictures which were cut out and excised, and this does not explain many of the other strange details of the text.

Borski asserts in **The Long and Short of It ** that Suzanne is another name for "Lily" and draws the parallel with the mention of queens with the bitter old woman across the street as the villain of **Snow White ** and the apple of the story with Suzanne's presence in the Pie Club. Thus the girl at the end is in some way still the original Suzanne, but our narrator proved to fail as the prince to awake her from her slumber.

Gwern.net has several other reactions to the story, referenced below.

Both of these seem to fail in holistic explanations of why all these inconsistencies occur in the narrator's memory and why he has cut out the yearbook pictures, if not in a kind of deliberate but forgotten suppression. They don't serve the theme of forgotten things returning quite suddenly and unexpectedly, occasionally with disastrous consequences. The suppressed relationship, making love on the quilts, and the spread of smallpox through the town makes use of the majority of the details in the text if we accept the premise: extraordinary things sufficiently removed from every day life can be repressed and forgotten, even if they were a huge important part of history (such as the disastrous but forgotten Spanish Influenza, which devastated the world but was relatively forgotten, or the spread of disease infested quilts in an attempt at genocide).

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Since I favor a "realistic" interpretation of this story (part of the details show that extraordinary suppression of unwanted memories happens, even if, for example, 1 in 20 people in the world die or are affected by it), the strain of realism in Wolfe is actually relatively select. There are **possibilities ** of realism under science fiction or fantasy (**The Sorcerer's House** or *"The Ziggurat"*, for example). *"Beech Hill"*, *"The Recording"*, perhaps *"The Flag"*, *"Pauls Treehouse"*, and *"The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories"* are all perhaps realistic fiction, but just as in those stories and others close to our reality, the strangeness lurks beneath the surface — if not in the supernatural or spiritual, then in the extreme unlikeliness of the situation.

This story is important for its almost sublime ordering as a palimpsest ? almost any interpretation can fit the premise, but in cases such as this in Wolfe's fiction, his modernist, engineering mindset should lead us to look

for patterns of theme and in the unreliability, or we will be lost amid infinite speculation. The published criticism on Wolfe has shown that this is a very real possibility.

The most important feature of this story is the use of the parenthetical asides, ostensibly extra information, revealing everything that our narrator treats as extra irrelevant information to his story of himself. Ultimately, he will never understand his life until he reincorporates the relevant but separated and isolated information into his life.

For the purposes of this write up, only a general assessment of the historical references was necessary, and thus the following sources:
"1918 Flu Pandemic." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 5 Aug. 2004. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

Borski, Robert. *The Long and the Short of It: More Essays on the Fiction of Gene Wolfe*. Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc. 2006.

"Siege of Fort Pitt." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 11 May 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

"Suzanne Delage." *Gwern.net*. 22 June 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.
<http://www.gwern.net/Suzanne%20Delage>

Marc Aramini — 06 Aug 2014, 00:48 · in reply to Greg Bates

As I said, I think the theme is that the sins of the past come back to bite you, but that the ability of humanity to repress things is infinite and extraordinary.

On Tue, Aug 5, 2014 at 5:45 PM, Greg Bates <gregory.a.bates at gmail.com> wrote:

I have never been able to make head or hair of this story! Someone needs to hold Wolfe down and force him to explain what he was going for with it, beyond an extended riff on Proust.

On Tue, Aug 5, 2014 at 1:02 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

"Suzanne Delage" was first published in *Edges* in 1980 and is reprinted in *Endangered Species*.

SUMMARY: As the narrator is reading a book, he is struck by the idea that every man has had in the course of his life some extraordinary experience, some dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability, of such magnitude that he might in his own person serve as a living proof of Hamlet's hackneyed precept — but that he has, nearly always, been so conditioned to consider himself the most mundane of creatures, that, finding no relationship to the remainder of his life in this extraordinary experience, he has forgotten it.

He then ponders how boring his life is and comes to the conclusion that

his extraordinary event is simply that living all his life in a small town he has been dimly aware of a woman his age's existence but claims to have never met her. After reviewing his basic history, that he was married twice and bored both his ex-wives as they bored him, that he was a second string football player in high school, and that he then searches his yearbooks to find that either she was not pictured or the pictures were cut out for collages or to attain the individual pictures. In others she is not pictured because of an epidemic of some kind which the narrator thinks is Spanish Influenza took place.

He reveals that their parents were great friends and searched for quilts together, which were then displayed at the discoverers house for everyone to come look at. Despite these parties, he believes Mrs. Delage was never welcome because of a bitter old woman across the street who would despise them if Mrs. Delage came over. There are several other creepy ruminations about coming to love and hate Suzanne if he had met her, and the story culminates with him recollecting that a few days ago he ran into someone who had known him all his life, the wife of a friend, in the town. They see a beautiful 15 year old girl, and his reaction to her is very strong, noting her pale skin and dark hair and imagining his hands encircling her thin waist. The friend says the girl is the very image of her mother, Suzanne Delage.

COMMENTARY:

If someone were to attempt to create an infinite speculation device, they might very well begin with the premise of "Suzanne Delage": extraordinary and special events, removed from everyday existence, are forgotten. Given the vast breadth of ideas which have been put forth around Suzanne Delage, I think there are a few guidelines which are provided through thematic analysis and through blatant metatextual instruction to the reader. For this reason, I will not present every possible analysis of Suzanne Delage in its entirety, which, given the elided nature of the central event, could be almost anything if we do not adhere to certain rigid patterns created throughout the story.

I believe that "Suzanne Delage" is perhaps the most protean of Wolfe's realistic stories — it is not an almost inscrutable literary myth in the manner of, say, "The God and his Man", "To the Dark Tower Came", or "Cues"? we have low mimesis characters in a fairly believable American setting here with fairly straightforward action (or inaction, as the case may be). Here, a sound conclusion must be based on *theme *analysis, and the theme of the details mentioned in the story seems to indicate that extraordinary repression of unwanted or painful memories is not only possible but has happened over and over throughout history. Occasionally these repressed memories will come back involuntarily, sometimes to cause great upheaval, but occasionally just to make us re-evaluate who we are, or even show that we are incapable of that re-evaluation.

I accept several principals at face value from the narrator as general guidelines:

- 1) That an extraordinary event actually could be forgotten, so that he can't be trusted to reliably remember it. If he could remember it, then the premise of the story is invalid. If we do not accept this premise, the analysis can stop right here — the extraordinary event in his life is that he never met Suzanne Delage.

2) When he says, “there has, in fact, been one thread of the strange — I might almost say the incredible, though not the supernatural — in my own history,” I take him at face value. To be honest, never meeting a girl is not that incredible. I see this as the metafictional statement that must control our interpretation — incredible things are possible candidates for elision because they have suffered oblivion, but supernatural things are not. In other words, elves, demigods, and aliens probably don't play a part in the best analysis of the story.

3) The narrator will only lie or be inaccurate in the suppression of a very particular memory, and this must be a repetitive or discernible pattern or related to the suppressed event — so that he is only unreliable regarding the remembrance of that event.

It is conceivable that “Hamlet's hackneyed precept” might be “To be, or not to be”, but I think it is more likely that the narrator speaks of the observation, “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” This quote would tie in slightly better with the theme of many historical forces at work subjectively ignored by the observer. In particular, forgotten or unknown things might exist in the world and have consequences, but been rather remarkably relegated to oblivion.

INACCURATE OR CONTRADICTORY DETAILS:

If the story were completely unreliable and our narrator a thorough liar, then nothing could be ascertained. However, if he is conclusively unreliable on one or two related topics and it is possible to establish that, then we can assume he is only, but still utterly, unreliable on that topic. In this case, every claim he makes about Suzane Delage falls under suspicion for the following reasons.

The story begins “last night”, when the narrator starts to think about extraordinary events, and after pondering for what seems like forever, he says, “I have been dimly aware of the existence of a certain woman without ever meeting her or gaining any sure idea of her appearance.” At the end of the story, we get a graphic, strange, and obsessive depiction of the young girl on the street, which took place “a few days ago”:

Her hair was of lustrous black, and her complexion as pure as milk; but it was not these that for a moment enchanted me, nor the virginal breasts .. nor the little waist I might have circled with two hands — to the woman beside me I said, “What a charming child. Who is she?”

“Her name” — I can't think of it. But of course you know whose she is, don't you? She's the very image of her mother at that age — Suzanne Delage.

The meeting had this eerie impact, and even after this almost ephebophilic description, he **still** forgets about the oddity of it until he ponders and ponders for hours over his book. He knew exactly what she looked like before the text even started, according to his own description, but did not think his reaction to the 15 year old girl was at all extraordinary, and did not even mention it until the long, discursive review of his life, then claims he has no idea at all what she looks like.

There are further inconsistencies, claiming that "(though I fear most of us here have always pronounced it 'Susan')?" (note the parentheses there) and that he has no idea which groups she associated with, though he states of the year book pictures, "I seem to recall that these were torn out and cut up to obtain the individual photographs many decades ago. My own face is among those missing, as well as Suzanne Delage's; but in another section, one devoted to social activities, a girl's club (it was called, I think, the Pie Club) is shown, and one of the names given in the caption is Suzanne's." Notice the vague verbiage here: he *seems* to think they were obtained for individual photos (why would he or his mother cut out the picture of a girl they never met?) and that he *thinks* it was the Pie Club, again in parentheses, though he has the yearbook right in front of him. He later claims "whether Suzanne Delage had entry to one of more of [these little coteries] I do not know," despite the fact he knows of her involvement with the Pie Club. This haze concerning Suzanne seems like an extreme inability to retain memories concerned with her.

He even says only a few of the girls, the "really promiscuous ones and the dazzlingly beautiful ones whom we, in those naive times, called 'queens' ? were known to everyone," but he seems to think that the young girl is dazzlingly beautiful, and the lifelong friend also just assumes that of course he knows exactly who the girl is, for he must have known Suzanne Delage. Why would she make that assumption?

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Spanish Flu: considering the manner in which the Spanish influenza, the 1918 flu pandemic, is treated by the narrator, as an epidemic of some kind which he thinks was Spanish influenza, it seems like something one would remember: it infected 500 million across the world and killed perhaps almost 100 million of them "three to five percent of the world's population ? making it one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history" (?1918 Flu Pandemic?). It was unusual in that it killed previously healthy young adults because of their strong immune response:

In the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries, despite the relatively high morbidity and mortality rates that resulted from the epidemic in 1918?1919, the Spanish flu began to fade from public awareness

over the decades until the arrival of news about bird flu and other pandemics in the 1990s and 2000s. This has led some historians to label the Spanish flu a "forgotten pandemic".

The infestation of small pox in quilts seems another fact that for many years would be forgotten by the general populace — it is shameful and probably evil, and the disregard for human life from the civilized portion of American society paints a fairly vile picture that is uncomfortable to look at and might be repressed. Perhaps forgetting this past sin comes back to haunt the community, and the ghostly presence of Suzanne at the end serves as a symbol of this theme for our narrator's life.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SMALL POX THEORY:

The quilts take up a fair amount of time, but the women desire 18th century quilts, though usually find ones of the earlier part of the 19th century. The quilt which belonged to "the wife of a major in a fencible Zouave regiment" is mentioned in particular, and is spread over the sofa. While the name Zouave is usually associated with French forces in Africa, but there are non-French Zouave regiments, even American units during the Civil War and until the 1880s when they transformed into something like the National Guard. The dating of the quilts they attained seems off, but note the use of parentheses and "I think" this quote: "(it was their enduring hope, I think never well satisfied, to find a piece from what they called 'American revolution times' - by which they meant the eighteenth, even such dates as 1790 or 1799)" Our narrator is notoriously bad at thinking, especially in parentheses, which always seem to contain some pertinent detail. If they did attain their desire, then it might have led to something disastrous, as we can see from the history of 18th century American quilts:

On June 29, 1763, ... Bouquet was preparing to lead an expedition to relieve Fort Pitt when he received a letter from Amherst making the following proposal: "Could it not be contrived to Send the Small Pox among those Disaffected Tribes of Indians? We must, on this occasion, Use Every Stratagem in our power to Reduce them."

Bouquet agreed, writing back to Amherst on July 13, 1763: "I will try to inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets that may fall in their hands, taking care however not to get the disease myself." Amherst responded favorably on July 16, 1763: "You will Do well to try to Inoculate the Indians by means of Blanketts, as well as to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execreble Race."

As it turned out, however, officers at the besieged Fort Pitt had already exposed the Indians in just the manner Amherst and Bouquet were discussing. During a parley at Fort Pitt on June 24, 1763, Captain Simeon Ecuyer gave representatives of the besieging Delawares two blankets and a handkerchief from the smallpox ward "out of regard to them" after the Delawares pledged to renew their friendship. While the exact meaning of his phrase was unclear, a later invoice appears to clearly establish the purpose was transmittal of smallpox.

Indians in the area did indeed contract smallpox. Some historians have noted that it is impossible to verify how many people (if any) contracted the disease as a result of the Fort Pitt incident; the disease was already in the area and had reached the Indians through other vectors. ... The

smallpox epidemic that had occurred during Pontiac's War ... killing as many as 400,000-500,000 Native Americans during and years after Pontiac's Rebellion. ("Siege of Fort Pitt")

His claim that the sheets were never used is also in parentheses — they could have been used by a teenage couple quite easily.

The strange old widow across the street is another oddity in the text, but I think that the narrator's claim that the Delages lived across town is another one of his mis-remembrances — maybe she lives right across the street.

The age of the narrator is a problem if we assume the girl is his daughter, even though he retired "much sooner than most men" - for him to be the father, he would have to probably be in his early or mid 30s, unless the relationship with Suzanne lingered longer than in high school, and if it did, that would certainly have prompted his lifelong friend to say something more damning than that. Retiring "much sooner" is an understatement there. Perhaps the girl is not his child, but the relationship of her mother and the narrator probably goes much deeper than he can remember.

It seems that his claim of Spanish Influenza hitting the town is wrong, but it is difficult to determine if his childhood is set in 1918 or even the 1950s, as its depiction of small town groups seems fairly generically rural or suburban America.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS:

In light of the eerie description of the young girl and the difficulty in getting a handle on the time line of the work if the girl at the end of the story is his daughter from a high school relationship (is our narrator really only in his early 30s?) there are several other explanations which fit a few details but not all. One is vampirism: the lack of pictures of Suzanne and her milky complexion as well as agelessness creates a kind of immortal mind fog lurking over the town. Yet she is in some of the pictures which were cut out and excised, and this does not explain many of the other strange details of the text.

Borski asserts in **The Long and Short of It ** that Suzanne is another name for "Lily" and draws the parallel with the mention of queens with the bitter old woman across the street as the villain of **Snow White ** and the apple of the story with Suzanne's presence in the Pie Club. Thus the girl at the end is in some way still the original Suzanne, but our narrator proved to fail as the prince to awake her from her slumber.

Gwern.net has several other reactions to the story, referenced below.

Both of these seem to fail in holistic explanations of why all these inconsistencies occur in the narrator's memory and why he has cut out the yearbook pictures, if not in a kind of deliberate but forgotten suppression. They don't serve the theme of forgotten things returning quite suddenly and unexpectedly, occasionally with disastrous consequences. The suppressed relationship, making love on the quilts, and the spread of smallpox through the town makes use of the majority of the details in the text if we accept the premise: extraordinary things sufficiently removed from every day life can be repressed and forgotten, even if they were a

huge important part of history (such as the disastrous but forgotten Spanish Influenza, which devastated the world but was relatively forgotten, or the spread of disease infested quilts in an attempt at genocide).

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Since I favor a “realistic” interpretation of this story (part of the details show that extraordinary suppression of unwanted memories happens, even if, for example, 1 in 20 people in the world die or are affected by it), the strain of realism in Wolfe is actually relatively select. There are *possibilities *of realism under science fiction or fantasy (*The Sorcerer's House* or “The Ziggurat”, for example). “Beech Hill”, “The Recording”, perhaps “The Flag”, “Pauls Treehouse”, and “The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories” are all perhaps realistic fiction, but just as in those stories and others close to our reality, the strangeness lurks beneath the surface — if not in the supernatural or spiritual, then in the extreme unlikeliness of the situation.

This story is important for its almost sublime ordering as a palimpsest ? almost any interpretation can fit the premise, but in cases such as this in Wolfe's fiction, his modernist, engineering mindset should lead us to look for patterns of theme and in the unreliability, or we will be lost amid infinite speculation. The published criticism on Wolfe has shown that this is a very real possibility.

The most important feature of this story is the use of the parenthetical asides, ostensibly extra information, revealing everything that our narrator treats as extra irrelevant information to his story of himself. Ultimately, he will never understand his life until he reincorporates the relevant but separated and isolated information into his life.

For the purposes of this write up, only a general assessment of the historical references was necessary, and thus the following sources:
“1918 Flu Pandemic.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 5 Aug. 2004. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.
Borski, Robert. *The Long and the Short of It: More Essays on the Fiction of Gene Wolfe*. Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc. 2006.

“Siege of Fort Pitt.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 11 May 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

“Suzanne Delage.” *Gwern.net*. 22 June 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.
<http://www.gwern.net/Suzanne%20Delage>

Gerry Quinn — 06 Aug 2014, 12:57 · in reply to Greg Bates

On 06/08/2014 01:45, Greg Bates wrote:
I have never been able to make head or hair of this story! Someone needs to hold Wolfe down and force him to explain what he was going for with it, beyond an extended riff on Proust.

I think it is a twist on the theme of romantic love. The narrator *doesn't* ever meet the woman who should have been the love of his life. We are told early that he had two brief and insipid marriages that ended in divorce; he and his partners bored each other. His life was lonely and dull. There's a reason we are told these things, and it doesn't seem likely to have much to do with potential 'vampire' themes, or whatever.

At the end he sees the daughter of Suzanne Delage, who - we are informed - looks just like her, and in his only display of emotional animation, he is instantly enchanted by her.

Some malign conspiracy of chance or fate prevented him from meeting the woman who should have been his love. He recognises the oddness of not ever meeting a particular small-town contemporary, but doesn't fully realise the implications - that is left to the reader.

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 06 Aug 2014, 13:07 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

I wrote this step in the exegesis just for you, Gerry ;)

1) That an extraordinary event actually could be forgotten, so that he can't be trusted to reliably remember it. If he could remember it, then the premise of the story is invalid. If we do not accept this premise, the analysis can stop right here — the extraordinary event in his life is that he never met Suzanne Delage.

On Wednesday, August 6, 2014, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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- Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn — 06 Aug 2014, 13:22 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 06/08/2014 14:07, Marc Aramini wrote:

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Indeed, that is the extraordinary event. The point of the story is its implications. There's also the question of *why*, to which it seems we are given no answer.

- Gerry Quinn

antonio at gmail.com — 07 Aug 2014, 13:49 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

No dia 06/08/2014, às 14:22, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> escreveu:

On 06/08/2014 14:07, Marc Aramini wrote:

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Indeed, that is the extraordinary event. The point of the story is its implications. There's also the question of *why*, to which it seems we are given no answer.

You mean to say Wilfe wrote a story with a foregone unremarkable conclusion? Why write it at all? In which act is the gun fired?

(I like guns that don't end firing, but they'd better be surrounded by others that do.)

That the narrator hasn't forgotten the fact that he never met SD automatically prevents it from being an extraordinary event that has been forgotten. Not to mention that it isn't an event at all.

Gerry Quinn — 07 Aug 2014, 13:58 · in reply to antonio at gmail.com

On 07/08/2014 14:49, antonio at gmail.com wrote:

No dia 06/08/2014, às 14:22, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com>
<mailto:gerry at bindweed.com>> escreveu:

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He did forget it, or at least it never percolated to the forefront of his consciousness, until he started trying to think of a remarkable event in his life, and could not. Then it came to him that there was a remarkable non-event he had thus far forgotten.

The gun is fired - as is often the case - at the very end, in which he sees and responds to the girl who is her image. [And when we are short of tangible pieces of a story to grasp, is it not reasonable to reach for the beginning and end as standing out at least because of their unique locations in the sequence? Note, then, that the parts of 'Suzanne Delage' crucial to my interpretation are right at the beginning, and right at the end.]

In the introduction to 'Endangered Species', Wolfe notes that every short story must have "at least one event to narrate, though in a few of these stories you may have to search carefully to find it". There are many events of a sort in Suzanne Delage, though for the most part they appear rather quotidian, and mostly happen to other people. Only one event seems to stir any emotion in the narrator.

- Gerry Quinn