

Short Story 83: The Last Thrilling Wonder Story

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Marc Aramini — 06 Aug 2014, 18:27

"The Last Thrilling Wonder Story? was published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1982 and is republished in *Endangered Species*.

SUMMARY: The author Gene Wolfe tells his character a plot breakdown of what will happen, first shaping and describing him, but Brick Bronson, the hero of the story, takes umbrage at a few of the descriptions such as calling his hands hams instead of "pavement breakers", and he even insists on going to pray before the action begins. According to the author, he must save Dr. Crane, whose beautiful daughter Brick loves, though he has never met her, and protect Dr. Crane from a pharmaceutical company's hit man who would prevent him from releasing his life saving serum. Aliens from Rigel will, according to the author, eventually abduct them, and the problems on Rigel and on Earth are ultimately resolved in an apocalyptic battle.

The action begins, and on his way to St. Michael's Church Brick is stopped by an earthquake and the church flattened. Someone claims no one was injured because "Father always locks up after the last morning mass" - here, meant to be an authorial interference and realistically erroneous. He pulls a damaged statue of the Virgin Mary and her child from the wreckage.

When he arrives at Dr. Crane's, "Lucifer Satanus" greets him with "a stink like an open sewer — the reek of the corpses in a certain field of upland rice" (culled from Brick's military service). When Brick tries to shake his hand, Lucifer says "That will not break my pavements — despite so many wild rumors, they are not laid of good intentions — which are, in my experience, quite easily broken." Wolfe has unleashed Satan on Brick because he appealed to a higher power than the author, transforming it into a religious story, and now he is there in place of the aliens from Rigel.

Satan disappears and he meets Dr. Crane, who is being blackmailed and threatened by someone but merely admits he feels watched. Crane reveals that in a few months he will release his serum for free, and Brick offers to protect him. Carol Crane enters, and the scene shifts, at which point Brick speaks with his author again, saying that the others can't hear him because they are on a different part of the page. He asks about his rights and claims he will turn into nothing but a puppet and caricature facing the devil.

Carol enters and tells Brick her father is scared and in danger. She admits, "Brick I want him to die. But -? when they are interrupted by a shot. Below, Crane has injured the hitman, John Slade. Brick identifies the weapon and projectiles involved and displays some expertise in delineating their traits, and they call for an ambulance. Here there is a conversation on how he arrived without being heard, which we can only attribute to sloppy authorial construction — Slade got there because the author needed him there. Crane says that the threatening letters he has received are from a very familiar person. Brick notes his daughter's tempered animosity towards her father and asks her about it, but she says it isn't the time or the place. Brick replies, "It may be the only time and place we'll ever have — the story may be over soon." He tells her the story of mating birds he witnessed on a Pacific Island, trapped into the same mating ritual

no matter what they desired — their instincts would not let them mate without the ritual, but he asserts that they are different and can do what they please.

When Crane returns he is “high” on some drug. When asked about what he uses, Crane says, “I won’t say — and you can’t force me to. At this very moment there is a curtain — a wonderful curtain, invisible, beautiful, the strongest and most beautiful invisible object ever seen — between myself and yourself. Between myself and the world.” The sound of ambulance is heard, and when Crane still won’t reveal the name on the letters he has received, Brick strikes him. The letters are from himself, Dr. Crane. Crane denies they are forgeries, saying, “Not forged — He — Xerox ...” and then Brick speculates, “Lucifer Satanus, Prince of Sin, you did all this to us. Dope. Attempted murder. Lies. But if you’re real, He has to be real too.” The author intervenes and almost says that he is the only God for Brick, but stops just short.

As Brick is trying to get Slade to drink water, Slade slips the gun from his belt and shoots Dr. Crane, claiming it was because Crane would have killed the world. Slade also says, “Dr. Crane told me — Burn lab. The paramedics arrive, a bit drunk from the stress of dealing with all the earthquake victims from earlier. The paramedics are sure the gunshot victims are DOA, but Brick tries to convince them they need plasma. Carol reveals her father ?did it to [her] — when [she] was a little girl. About once a week for a year. — I’ve never been able to forgive him for that.”

Then she reveals her dreams: “Brick, we’ll be rich. — People will pay anything for it. Think of all the rich old men.” Brick says Dr. Crane was going to give it away, but she believes it was only for prestige and recognition. Realizing the ambulance drivers are too drunk, he knocks out one and gets Carol to drive while he goes to make the lab appear to be on fire so that he can get the main villain to appear.

Unfortunately, the bad guy surprises him by showing up right away, and it is Dr. Crane. Brick positions them in line with his truck, which the evil Dr. Crane drove directly over the gas canister to eventually produce a large explosion. Dr. Crane reveals he is a copy, probably created by the Rigelians, and that the original had about an hour of his memory erased, the hour in which he solved the last problem of his serum. This Dr. Crane plans to kill him and take his place when the original Dr. Crane returns from the hospital.

Alas, a shot hits Dr. Crane, from Brick’s rifle on his burning truck. Knowing the effects of heat on the bullet, Brick positioned the evil doctor so that eventually he would be in line with the increasingly hot rifle mounted on his truck. Brick says, “You don’t believe that crap you fed Slade, do you” We’ll be saving the best people — engineers, physicists, craftsmen. If somebody’d found that serum in time, we’d still have Einstein, and by now we’d be selling fried chicken on Mars.

Dr. Crane drops, and Brick frees himself to enter the burning lab and seek the serum notebook, where he drops to the floor, and he has one last conversation with his author, who asks him, “Where is the God you prayed to now?” Brick asserts that he is everywhere, and that the author will be seeing him soon. Brick stops answering his author, and Wolfe begins to show fear. “On TV tonight they showed a man who got pulled out of a fire in California. But his name was Rick, Rick Benson. — That wasn’t you, was it, Brick” — Answer me! Brick ???

COMMENTARY: Wolfe’s most overt metafiction, “The Last Thrilling Wonder Story” starts with an introduction that sets up the dialog between Wolfe and his protagonist, Brick Bronson. Even in this opening scene, the character does not quite behave exactly as Wolfe desires. He resents the description of his hands as “hams” and questions the logic of falling in love with a woman he never met. His religious sentiment, contrary to Wolfe’s desires to get the plot moving in true

pulp fashion, “changes” the story to one in which the demonic has sway, making it look much more like a morality play.

The story, for all its asinine trappings and the ridiculous plot set out by Wolfe in the first section, explores free will. Even with an earthquake and disasters, our extra-textual Gene Wolfe shows that the fictional Wolfe can control what happens in the story, but not how his character truly responds, as Brick assumes something of a life of his own. The idea that fiction mirrors life is inverted a bit for science fiction — sometimes speculative fiction shows what may become true in life, and the title of the story is based off of **The Thrilling Wonder Stories** begun by Hugo Gernsback. This magazine would occasionally show the negative side of science and inventions, and here we have the ultimate biological invention: a cure for pretty much any degenerative disease, but one which must be administered immediately after it is produced. “Good” Crane wants to give it away, but his “evil” copy strives to work against him by sending an altruistic but naive hitman, feeding him stories of overpopulation and the long ranging consequences of the invention.

Oddly, Dr. Crane is both humanitarian and perverse villain, serving the role of both hero and heavy after his ridiculous copying at the hands of aliens, despite the fact that both versions of himself have, according to his daughter, committed an atrocity, and one of the most vilified in modern society. I believe that this doubling is a literary re-enactment of free will. The same man can make a choice, even after he has acted as a villain. While his daughter has ascribed his character’s willingness to make his treatment free to humanity to greed for recognition, she wants to make money off of it, and the copy of her father can choose to steal, discredit, or destroy his work. It is interesting that there seems to be a third, never seen copy of Dr. Crane, which the aliens have taken away. Perhaps he represents in some ways the unseen immortal soul — how is he affected by the decisions of his epigones?

There is some confusion as to whether the daughter is sincere in her accusations of being molested by her father, for she does have one very powerful motivation: she wants to sell her father’s formula and enlist the aid of a man who is clearly more powerful than him in the form of Brick. However, there does not seem to be enough evidence one way or the other to disbelieve her, as I think the theme plays out more perfectly if indeed Dr. Crane is guilty of a past sin, one thought to be by society almost unforgivable — he can still choose to give his work away and help humanity. Or he can choose to try to seek profit — the same man with the same background can react differently.

This is slightly undercut by the copies claims that he must be an imperfect copy, but I do think that it still shows free will in action, something that is of ultimate importance to the Catholic dualist Wolfe. Often villain and hero are but a single choice away from switching roles.

Brick’s discourse on the mating birds he saw during his flight overseas with the military is also of ultimate thematic importance:

There were a lot of birds on that island, and it was the mating season. — They would pair off and kind of bob up and down at each other, and keep it up for hours. Sometimes one would go get an oyster shell and lay it at the other’s feet. I guess the one that carried the shell was the male, or maybe they both did it. Anyway, there was an ornithologist — a bird scientist — who’d come to study them. — I asked why they did it, why they bobbed up and down like that. And he told me they had to. It didn’t matter how much they wanted to get together. To mate. If they didn’t bob up and down like that, they couldn’t do it.

“That’s sad, isn’t it” Sad, and a little funny. But I don’t understand why you’re telling me about it now.

"I just meant that we're people, not birds. If I could bring you candy and flowers and take you someplace to dance — or for a walk in the desert in the moonlight that would be nice. But we don't have to do it."

The animals must serve their instincts no matter what — they are born knowing all that they need to survive, but even in Wolfe's fictional world, the characters show free will.

Circumstances may conspire to force them, but, at least in this story, the idea that they have a choice is always there, even if it means they might die. The birds serve as a symbol of the creatures bereft of free will — Brick wants to assert his choice in the fiction no matter how determined his surroundings seem, and his plea to Wolfe to avoid becoming a predictable puppet is serious:

"Sir, I'll die."

"I won't let you."

"Not that way, sir. I'll die inside. I'll turn into a store window dummy and a tape recorder. Pull the string and I say my lines, push me over and I'll never get up."

Without real character and choice, Brick sees himself as dead.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

In addition to the meditation on free will and the problem of evil in the world, the text definitely references the pulp science fiction of the early part of the 20th century, especially the magazines run by Hugo Gernsback such as **Amazing Stories**, then **Wonder Stories**, which became **Thrilling Wonder Stories** when it was purchased by Thrilling Publications in 1936. For a time, *Wonder Stories* competed with Campbell's **Astounding Science Fiction**, but dissolved by the 1950s. Of special note is that some of the pulp stories were liberated from constraints by the end of the magazine's run, such that controversial stories involving interspecies sex and even one with incest between a father and daughter, Springer's "No Land of Nod", were being published in the magazine, which might resonate with the incest implied by Crane's daughter.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

Some of the discussion between Wolfe and Brick involves the reforms to the Catholic Church under John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. Of course, the cornerstone to the orthodox solution to the problem of evil (how could an all good God sit powerless and let evil work in the world?) is free will — if evil can be possible, it will of necessity occur, but man cannot judge what works will result in good, and which in evil, only try to choose the good in accordance with what he understands and love God and his neighbor. This is distinct from predestination and some other Protestant ideology (though of course, there are many different Protestant positions). Brick is particularly Catholic in his love of ritual, and seems to resent variation:

He was not a regular churchgoer — the ritual of the mass soothed him, but the improvements and variations irritated and distracted him, and since there were now more improvements and variations than ritual, he had scarcely attended since his discharge. Yet he had never truly doubted the existence and the goodness of God; and as he drove he imagined himself on his knees before the Holy Virgin while the bright flame of a newly lit candle proclaimed his devotion, the purity of his intentions toward Carol Crane.

There is the wonderful moment of hubris in this story where the character Gene Wolfe declares, "There is no God for you, Brick, and your Devil wasn't cast out by anybody. He was cast by me, and cast into your life by me. If you've a God at all — never mind." About to proclaim himself as God, Wolfe stops short. (Of course, there is still the rather humorous statement by Brick that the serum would be used to save the best people first — and the first type he lists are engineers).

Brick's moment of realization that there is more to the world than the plot and the pages he is trapped inside involves a recognition of evil: if the vile forces of darkness are real, then the divine must be real as well. This resembles a few of the observations Ivan Karamazov makes in Dostoevsky's **Brothers Karamazov** (though the film version with Yul Brynner and Shatner emphasizes this point far more emphatically than the book.)

The final dialog shows the inversion of the power dynamic between author and character — at first, Wolfe said he would not let Brick die, and at the end this discussion ensues:

"You see what it got you, Brick. You might have been rich and famous, married to a lovely woman. Where is the God you prayed to now?"

"Everywhere sire. Nowhere. I still haven't seen him.

"You never will."

"But you'll see me."

"What are you talking about" You're burning to death right now, dying of smoke inhalation.

"But He made me real. ..."

"Brick, you can never be real, Not real the way I am. When this is over, you'll be left behind on the page. ..."

And then Brick enters our author's reality, showing that he is not the highest authority, and that his own reality is subject to the power of something even higher. Wolfe's attempt at playing God fail, and his creations are often dependent upon the reality around him.

GUNS: Not since "The Largest Luger" have we seen this obsession with the workings of guns, and just as in that story, the physical properties of weapons serve to allow Brick to defeat Dr. Crane. Knowing something of the physics of his rifle and the effects of a hot fire on it, he defeats a man clearly imbued with a greater intellectual ability because he has situational and practical knowledge of scientific and physical properties.

NAMES:

The name of Charles implies "free man, strong" - which resonates with our idea that free will is possible — one can be a villain or a hero based on a single choice or perspective. Crane is a nickname for a tall thin man resembling the bird. Carol also means "free, strong". No coincidence.

John implies the grace of God, Slade small valley

Brick means "quick moving, alert". Bronson means "son of the dark man". It is Anglo-Saxon in

origin. When Brick insists he is Irish, Wolfe instead says it is merely a pulp name, not an Irish one. (Implying that a careful author would know that the name would indicate origin and possibly traditions rather than simply a meaningless cipher of “cool” sound). His real name, Roscoe, implies “from the deer forest”.

Rick implies “hard ruler” and Benson, which could mean “son of the right hand” or “son of the mountain peak”, though the right hand one makes a better contrast to his fictional name, “son of the dark man”, showing Brick's liberation from a gnostic and fallen reality, that of Wolfe, into a higher one.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Did Crane really molest Carol? I think that the best reading implies that he did.

What is Crane using to create a screen that separates him from the world and others? Probably this is simply one of the ways that the devil can act in the world, like the alcohol that helps the ambulance drivers cope with the devastation of the earthquake, and the details are unimportant.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

For all the egregious action and the appearance of Satan, there is still the sense that there is an absurd tone to the story, no doubt mocking the pulp based plot, but undercutting it with serious themes — does life imitate art, or is the opposite true? Are creations free and alive separate from their creator? The influence of Borges on Wolfe's metafictional accounts are clear, and “Creation”, “Parkroads: A Review”, and “Bibliomen” all play with the artificiality of the fictional reality. Borges would also influence the large Sun series, but by and large “reality” is more solid in those books. The relationship between myths, reality, and the pages of a book are also explored in the “Thag” series. The thematic implication of “The Last Thrilling Wonder Story” and Wolfe's Catholic belief in free will constitute part of my problem with Wright's book length study of New Sun ? *Attending Daedalus*. Even though I am greatly oversimplifying, Wright asserts that when we approach the final level of meaning in New Sun, Severian's situation is subject to extreme external manipulation — and while this is true, from Wolfe's basic ideology, this should not invalidate the decisions Severian makes, for good or evil.