

Short Story 85: Redbeard

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Marc Aramini — 08 Aug 2014, 05:58

“Redbeard” was first published in **Masques** in 1984 and is recollected in **Storeys from the Old Hotel.**

SUMMARY:

A man moves with his wife Mara and son John to a small Texas community where he feels a definite social separation between the “old stratum” and the new, since he has only been there “since the end of the sixties or the Truman Administration or the Second World War. Since Something.” He becomes friends with a man named Howie, and one day they go for a drive together, coming across an old house the narrator remarks looks haunted.

Howie says he can’t bring himself to enter it and proceeds to tell the story of a man named Jackson from nearby Clinton, Texas who moved into the area. Jackson was twenty years older than his wife, Sara Sutter. After a bus crash resulted in several injured children, a deputy asked Jackson’s help in transporting some of the children to the doctor’s in his truck, and Jackson suspiciously refused and tried to drive away. The Sheriff reached under the tarp in the back of Jackson’s truck and found a dead Italian girl who might have been named Rosa, whose family owned a shoe store.

When the cops came to Jackson’s house, in the basement they found a huge locked door that the wife said was his “personal place” — the bodies of three women were found within. During the trial the wife testified for her husband’s character, and the prosecutor tore into her by saying him telling her not to enter the room was a cry for help. The narrator is bored at several places, thinking the story commonplace and lacking in sensationalism with only three victims. When Sarah went to visit Jackson in jail, he had borrowed a razor to shave. He cut his own throat as she arrived, killing himself as she looked on. She sold the house and married again, having a child within the year. Howie speaks of the final victim, found by children in her private sewing room. Sarah had killed herself. Howie asks who was morally responsible — her husband, the prosecutor, the family of the victims, or “baby blues?” The narrator says it scarcely matters now, probably postpartum depression, and Howie reveals that she was his mother.

COMMENTARY:

The subtlety we are used to in Wolfe does not seem to extend to plot details in this story, but rather to the assignation of blame and the artistic distance the narrator’s voice has from Wolfe’s narrative theme. The narrator is bored and uninterested in the story with his “new” perspective, but he is wrong in believing it is irrelevant — it is the origin story of his friend, a deeply personal tale for him.

Obviously, as the text itself says, the story resonates with Bluebeard, which we will recap - the aristocrat Bluebeard has a vile reputation as well as an ominous blue beard, and no one knew what happened to his wives. He marries the younger of two sisters and gives her a key to his

chambers, but instructs her never to enter his private room. When he is away and her sister is present, she enters, finding his dead wives on hooks and the floor drenched in blood, in which she drops the key. When he returns, he sees the blood on the key which his wife dropped and threatens to behead her, but she implores him for time to say her prayers and flees with her sister to a locked room in the tower, and in the time she gains her brothers come and kill Bluebeard, leaving her with all his wealth.

In Wolfe's "Redbeard", the wife winds up on a hook of her own design, and her unwillingness to press into her husband's affairs leads her down a path of self-destruction. However, the difference between old and new is established constantly throughout the text and is worth examining. We will return to an older story behind the Bluebeard myth soon.

POSSIBLE AMBIGUITIES:

This seems to be a pretty straightforward Wolfe story, but there are a few things that might be subtle and suspicious, though I don't think they point to plot trickery in this case. The narrator calls his friendship unusual, but this could only be because of the thematic separation between the "old stratum" and the "new" people; there is usually no connection between new and old in the town.

The attitudes of the narrator are clearly displayed when he pigeonholes the murder as commonplace and pathetic with only three victims, which seems pedestrian in comparison to the murders of Gacy or Jack the Ripper. This displays the attitudes of the "new" people — the story isn't significant enough to be engrossing and doesn't matter anymore, even though it resulted in at least six deaths. Interestingly, the narrators claim that the murders don't matter echo his opening statement: "It doesn't matter how Howie and I became friends, except that our friendship was unusual."

Rather than indicate that our narrator is murderous or that some spirit of evil lurks throughout this story as it did in "Kevin Malone", we should see the callous nature of the narrator as the difference between old and new. Right from the beginning, the "new" people in town cut the grass on Sunday morning rather than go to church as the "old" people do. This is not the only juxtaposition.

Some examples of "new" philosophy in the text: the idea that Jackson was crying for help and his wife was an accomplice, the concept that the deputy could never have searched the vehicle without a warrant and made an arrest now, the feeling that three murders make a boring, commonplace story, all these ideas culminate in the ideology that "It doesn't matter now."

These are directly juxtaposed with "old" philosophy: Jackson would have confessed if he wanted to stop, the deputy did a good job in pulling off that tarp and seeing the evidence, the murders have the power of a horror story — those human lives mattered.

The beginning of the story says of the old ones: "Those people are still here, practically all of them, like the old trees that stand among the new houses."

The final line says, "To our right was another ruined gate, another outdated house collapsing slowly among young trees."

This is about as clear a statement as we can get — the new people, or the young trees, exist among houses that are falling apart and ancient, living in untenable circumstances with a destructive philosophy that casts blame everywhere at once. The old are among livable houses — their philosophy did not perpetuate an unending cycle of decay and shifting blame.

The moral question asked by Howie begging for responsibility for his mother's suicide is perhaps the place where the new ideas are interesting:

"I thought you said she'd killed herself."

"That's what they would have said, back when she married Jackson. But who killed her now" Jackson — Redbeard — when he killed those other girls and cut his throat like that? Or was it when he loved her? Or that district attorney? Or the sheriff? Or the mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters of the girls Jackson got? Or her other husband, maybe some things he said to her? Or maybe it was just having her baby that killed her — baby blues, they call it. ...

"Postnatal depression .. I don't suppose it makes much difference now."

The blame here for his mother's suicide winds up being placed on Howie's shoulders, the teller of the tale. It clearly isn't his fault, and the assignation of blame becomes impossible in a system which must consider all of these external forces — it almost precludes the idea of free will.

The Wolfe-Wiki posits that the second house mentioned with its ruined gate is that of Sarah's second family.

While plot-wise it doesn't seem as if there are many unresolved questions, there are still a few details that are perhaps not fully fleshed out:

"There had been a certain amount of trouble around Clinton going on for years, and people were concerned about it. I don't believe I said this Jackson was from Clinton, but he was. His dad had run a store there and had a farm."

Is the trouble in Clinton just a continuing part of the cycle that carries blame forward from the past to the new generation?

A POTENTIAL WOLF:

The internet makes research significantly easier in some ways for general purposes than Wolfe might have enjoyed during the composition of this story, and there is a possible source for the Bluebeard story that deals with the Breton King Conomor the Accursed, who was also reputed to be a werewolf. In this story, Conomor murders his wives when they become pregnant, and the ghosts of his dead wives warn his new one when she becomes pregnant. She is beheaded anyway, but miraculously returned to life by a Saint, and the castle crumbles around Conomor and destroys him.

It isn't clear that Wolfe would be aware of this source story, but there are several hints that he might have been. When ascribing guilt for the death of the mother, our narrator asserts that it is post-natal depression, effectively blaming Howie. The wife in the story above will be killed for becoming pregnant. In the story of Conomir, she is somehow killed and survives, while in Wolfe's story she survives but kills herself.

Whether or not Wolfe knew of the evolution of the Bluebeard story is open to speculation. However, the werewolf angle certainly might have impelled him to structure a tale around it.

SETTING: Highway 27 runs from Lubbock to Amarillo.

NAMES:

Rosa, the name of the Italian girl found under the tarp, is the latin form of Rose

The narrator's wife's name, Mara, implies "bitter" or "strong".

Howard means "defender" but the family name Howie means "hollow".

Sarah Sutter has the most interesting name as her first name implies "lady", but the family name implies "shoemaker." The dead Italian girl's family owned a shoestore.

Jackson means God has been gracious. It is based on the name John — and, not coincidentally ...

John is the name of the narrator's son. This creates a cyclical impression — shifting blame from one generation and family to the next.

Wolfe has made two different comments on the story in his afterword and introduction:

"Redbeard" is a horror story based upon a house I used to drive past every so often. It has since burned to the ground, which may be a good thing. Maybe I should write a story about John Gacy, the killer clown; he lived a few miles from here, and my friend Jerry Bauer used to take pictures for him."

From *The Best of Gene Wolfe*:

Long, long ago, when Rosemary and I were still a young couple with small children, we moved to a tiny town out in the country. If I remember right, the population was under three hundred. Everyone in town — except for us — knew everyone else. Half the time, they were at least distantly related. Rosemary and I were outsiders, and very much so. It was much lonelier than an isolated house would have been, and lonelier too than any city apartment.

Often I drove past a big white house in which no one lived. Most of its windows were broken; one shutter hung from a single hinge. The yard was full of weeds. I never found out why the house had been abandoned or who had abandoned it, but it has come to haunt my fiction.

It is fascinating that Wolfe casts his own portion of the experience of being "new" in the character of the narrator, whose entire mental attitude is clearly being criticized by the story.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why are both the wife and the first victim related to shoes? Sarah's last name means shoe-maker, and the first victim's family owned a shoe store. What symbolic association should we assume, save that they protect feet from the outside world and separate man from nature? Are they somehow the symbolic "sisters" from the Bluebeard story? One of the versions of the tale identifies one of the previous dead wives as Rosalinde, but there are many different versions and names.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

Except for the narrator's callous attitude, which I think is thematically related to the callous

nature of the modern world rather than a murderous curse or a scourge of werewolves, the sinister does not seem concealed in this tale. Wolfe's recasting of fairy stories will also occur in "The Death of Koschei the Deathless", "In the House of Gingerbread", "The Little Stranger", and in many other tales as he moved toward fairy tales and away from the science fictional and social elements many of his stories maintained throughout the 1970s.