

Short Story 89: The Nebraskan and the Nereid

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Marc Aramini — 12 Aug 2014, 18:06

The Nebraskan and the Nereid

"The Nebraskan and the Nereid" first appeared in **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** in 1985. It is collected in **Endangered Species**.

SUMMARY: The Nebraskan, Dr. Sam Cooper, is a university employed folklorist visiting the Saronikos Kolpos in Greece. On the coast, he catches a glimpse of a naked woman before she disappears into the Sea. He quotes Keat's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and imagines himself as "Stout Cortez" and describing his adventure in the faculty lounge when he returns. He sees a tall, angular woman approaching him who calls herself Dr. Thoe Papamarkos, an archeologist from the University of Athens, who greets him with a regal gesture.

She says she is looking for Saros (see the discussion of the concept of Saros and King Saron below), a city ancient in the time of even Pericles and Plato. She thinks they should know and possibly assist one another as well. He identifies her as "an old maid school teacher" and reveals that he is tracing the history of the Nereids. He denies their reality, and she says that she seeks out the temple of Poseidon, and adds that the mermaids or sea fairies were the ladies of his court.

She says, "You do not want a drink of my water, I hope. ? I have a nose disease. — I must take my medicine to breathe, and my medicine makes me thirsty. — Do you wish for some?"

Dr. Cooper reviews the types of mermaids in and expresses curiosity that only the Nereid lingers in Modern Greek stories (which is accurate). Dr. Papamarkos speculates that they might be the only kind left.

He returns to his inn, and "stopped its dumpy little maid of all work and mustered his uncertain Greek to ask her about Dr. Papamarkos". He wonders if the naked woman he saw earlier was Dr. Papamarkos, but determines the woman had been "younger, smaller, and — um — rounder."

He returns to the spot that he saw both Dr. Papamarkos and the naked girl, and sees a laughing face circled by dark floating hair. After about ten minutes the doctor reappears, and she has an ancient Mycenaean cup encrusted with marine growths. It represents a bearded man and a fish, and on the back, beside a trident (no doubt psi) appears the letter pi, which Dr. Papamarkos claims is for Poseidon. After the Nebraskan recognizes its "deft energy" despite its crudeness, Dr. Papamarkos says, "Sailors prayed to him, and captains. Also to Nereus, the old sea-man who knew the future. Now it is to Saint Peter and Saint Mark. But it is not so different, perhaps . The fish, the beard, they are still there."

Thoe says that talking with him led her to think that perhaps the coast has changed over time, and that the temple of Poseidon and the city of Saros which she sought had been submerged.

She had “no diving equipment” but still found it. She does not let him accompany her back to his camp, and he says, “I’ve seen a Nereid, Thoe- or somebody’s trying to make me think I have.”

She says it is a Greek girl fooling him, and encourages him, since he knows how to swim well, to explore the caves with underwater entrances along the coast. She does tell him that “If you are truly a good swimmer, you know a swimmer must be wary.”

On his third attempt he enters the caves and finds a cave with air, and “as he climbed from the water, two small arms encircled him.” They make love, and she sings a lullaby about a child safe in a rocking boat to him.

When he goes to the inn, he thinks of a song about a mermaid losing her morals down among the corals and is upset that his bed hasn’t been made and complains to the innkeeper. The next morning he finds a body in the sand and recognizes her as his mermaid from the cave.

Dr. Papamarkos arrives and says, “She was the maid at your inn — She loved you. Perhaps you do not think it possible. — I promised to help her if I could. This is all the help I can give her now, to make you understand that once you were loved. When you record love stories from the lips of old people, remember it.” She instructs him to go tell the innkeepers that he has found the body, but knowing that his Greek is insufficient he returns to see Thoe undress and unbind her hair and dive into the sea, leaving a symbol beside the dead girl’s body traced in the wet sand: ?it might have been a cross with upswept arms, or the Greek letter ?. He sniffs the canteen Dr. Papamarkos left behind, and as he expected it is filled with sea water.

COMMENTARY:

This story of the Nebraskan is dripping with irony — he is looking for a Nereid, and finds one almost instantly, but thinks of her “an old-maid school teacher”. The naked woman whom he sees at the start and to whom he makes love remains unidentifiable to him, as he notices only a “dumpy” maid even as he is thinking of her naked body as being rounder than that of Dr. Papamarkos. (We here have a maid pretending to be a mer-maid).

His interaction with the maid when she is not unclothed is to ask about the other woman and to complain to the management about his sheets being unmade (because she was too busy making love to him in the cave to make his bed). He has travelled all this way seeking stories of Nereids and cannot recognize anything as it truly is until he finally surmises that Thoe Papamarkos was his real target all along. He doesn’t even speculate as to the origin of Thoe’s first name until the final scene, when he finally calls her by it, though he is a folklorist.

Thoe seeks the city of Saros and the temple of Poseidon, as even to her, it is ancient history, and, if we take her at face value, talking about her own folklore caused her to truly think about what happened to the city. A saros usually implies an 18 year cycle of lunar and solar eclipses in astronomy, but at one point it could also mean 3,600 years; a “sar” is an ancient Mesopotamian measurement. The early Mycenaean cup that Thoe finds would probably be between 3,600 and 3,900 years old. The Saronic Gulf (Saronikos kolpos) is found along the eastern side of Corinth. The origin of the name comes from King Saron, who drowned at the Psifaei lake. This gulf was also reputed to be an entrance to the Underworld, and note the somber warning that Thoe gives to Dr. Coöper when she suggests he explores the cave — swimmers must be wary there.

There is some confusion over two symbols given for Poseidon, as Thoe scratches a psi into the ground beside the maid’s body. Insofar as pi is a symbol of Poseidon as she first said when

displaying the cup, it is only one which indicates the first letter of his name: ????????. The later Psi that Thoe actually leaves beside the body is the real symbol of Poseidon and later Neptune, and the trident mentioned as appearing next to the pi on the cup is of course a stylized psi.

Poseidon's symbol is probably the best explanation for that psi, though the story of King Saron involves his drowning at Psifaei Lake, and the Wolfe-wiki speculates that psi is a symbol of Psamathe, the goddess of sand beaches, but clearly the real association of the psi symbol is Poseidon, with pi merely indicating the first letter of his name and not being a "true" symbol.

(I rather fancy the reason for this is simple letter symbolism: the pi symbol is an approximation of Poseidon but does not contain his essence, as the maid at the inn only parades as a mermaid, while the real Nereid knows the true symbol of power, the psi, and is genuine). In other words, there are many ways to represent concepts such as Poseidon and his Nereids, some more accurate than others. The maid attempted to capture the imagination of the American visitor by putting on the symbolic allure of the mermaids and swimming in the sea naked, while Thoe hid her true form behind the image of an aging university professor.

The syncretism between Poseidon and St Peter and St Mark is typical of Wolfe's work with mythology — a blending of myths over time, as if these powers represented something that was an intermediary between God and man or at the very least ultimately served a higher power as well, though they are "different" than humanity.

The name Thoe is of one of the Nereids from Greek myth, the daughters of Nereus and Doris who accompany Poseidon, and they are especially associated with the Aegean Sea.

LITERARY AND OTHER HISTORICAL ALLUSIONS:

Since Sam Cooper fancies himself as a discoverer of new things, he thinks of Schliemann, who discovered Troy and married a young Greek girl, and thinks of Keats' poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" — which is Keats' response to Chapman's translation, much different and earthier than the previous polished translations available.:

MUCH have I travell'd in the realms of gold,

And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;

Round many western islands have I been

Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes

He stared at the Pacific and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise?

Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

In the poem, the “new” translation of old familiar material strikes Keats with all the sublimity and power of which art is capable. Though he was familiar with Homer, he had never experienced it in such a fashion, and this echoes the experience our Nebraskan is about to have — familiar with all the stories of mermaids, he cannot tell imitation from real until he actually lives through his entire experience, an explorer mute before what he has seen — as Cortez at the coast of a new world.

After the Nebraskan makes love to the maid, he remembers the song “Minnie the Mermaid”, and here is one version:

O, what a time I had with Minnie the Mermaid,

Down at the bottom of the sea.

Down amongst the corals where she lost her morals,

My, but she was good to me.

Oh, what a time I had with Minnie the Mermaid

Down in her seaweed bungalow.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust;

Two twin beds and only one of them mussed.

Oh, what a gal was my Minnie the Mermaid,

Down at the bottom of the sea.

The ashes to ashes line is fascinating in light of the maid’s fate, but there are many, many versions of this song, and one that even ends with her being “a personal friend” who “does my laundry”.

He thinks of Thoe at first as Miss Minerva from Frances Boyd Calhoun’s *Miss Minerva and William Green Hill*, a stuffy and proper aunt who insists upon correct usage in the midst of Southern dialect, or as the self important tutor from the comic strip “The Katzenjammer Kids”, a first impression completely at odds with her final mythical transformation.

NAMES:

The name of Thoe is obvious in its reference to a mythical Nereid, and the maid is unfortunately never named, for the Nebraskan never paid much attention to her. The small city in which the inn is called Nemos (Nemo in Latin can mean “no one” — but we are in Greece).

Sam Cooper's first name implies "God has heard" or "Name of God", while Cooper is an occupational name for those who repair barrels. There seems to be little relationship between his name and his function in this story except that a barrel can contain water, and in this text he is most often referred to as "the Nebraskan". Nebraska means "flat water", so perhaps this relates to his interest in water faeries in this story.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Since Sam sees the maid as "dumpy" and complains about her not fixing his bed even though he is the only guest, has he cost the maid her livelihood and prompted her suicide? Has enough time passed between the morning he discovers her body and the time he complains to the innkeepers for her to learn of his displeasure, or was she merely incautious in the strong current, as Thoe warned against? The coast is reputed to be a mythological entrance to the Underworld. Suicide might be the more likely answer, in light of how she might feel over his complaints about her service, failing to realize that he never recognized her.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe would write several other Nebraskan tales, and there is a very close relationship with the more science fictional stories of Anderson in "The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus" and its sequel, though Anderson seems a bit more perceptive and erudite than Dr. Cooper, especially in this opening tale. The syncretism between paganism and Christianity mentioned by Thoe is quite prominent in Wolfe's fantasy explorations and his novel series, and there is even talk of "little green men" in connection with mythology which links this story directly to the ubiquitous nature of the fey folk in "A Cabin on the Coast."