

Short Story 100: In Looking-Glass Castle

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Marc Aramini — 21 Aug 2014, 14:48

"In Looking-Glass Castle" first appeared in 1980 in **TriQuarterly** and is reprinted in **Storeys from the Old Hotel**.

SUMMARY: In a female dominated United States, men, considered pigs, are hunted and scorned. Reproduction is undergone through cloning. A mathematician working for an important space project moves to West Cocoa Beach, Florida, (Cocoa Beach was a minuscule Florida village until the space program brought an influx of workers) and buys a house whose previous owner died under somewhat suspicious circumstances, drowning. She finds a few volumes of fiction written by men behind the accepted female authored texts in her library and also realizes that some of her food is disappearing. Eventually, she confronts the bearded man who seems to live in the shadows of her house, but does not turn him in. He begins to leave her small gifts, such as books by Lewis Carroll. Eventually, the police search her house, and she takes the first opportunity to escape by accepting a position on a boat. Even there, she sees the face of the man below deck.

COMMENTARY: Perhaps Wolfe's definitive exploration of the aggressive feminist philosophy which desires exactly the same method of power and influence as that stereotypically sought by men, "In Looking-Glass Castle" is complicated by the enormous number of allusions for such a short story. Many of them are probably irrelevant on a plot level (for example, the gifts of **Sylvie and Bruno** and **Pillow Problems**, two books by Lewis Carroll, are almost certainly present to highlight the real reference at work in the title, **Through the Looking Glass** (and **Alice in Wonderland**)). In addition to the overwhelming drowning imagery, as can be seen in the literary allusions discussed below, we can extrapolate fairly easily that Daisy will not long survive the end of her story. As a microcosmic reflection of her self-destructive society, several of the themes are quite clearly explored in Daisy's character.

Daisy is a female mathematician who must hide her status as a doctor from the public, but for all her book knowledge, she wonders if her car is made of aluminum or fiberglass. This lack of practical understanding is mirrored in her society, which treats everyone with suspicion. It understands the cold theory of how things work without understanding specifics of happiness and fulfillment (such as the idea that if one is lonely and unfulfilled, one can simply take a cell scraping and beget a clone). That car also serves as a simple metaphor — the old fashioned cars cannot long survive the corrosive atmosphere, and neither can old fashioned women. Daisy isn't certain which type of vehicle she has, nor is she certain which type of woman she is. When she mishears "the sisters got her" for "the cistern got her" when she inquires as to the fate of Jane, the previous owner, coupled with the necessity of hiding her degree, we see that there is very little solidarity or trust left. Instead of a supportive sisterhood, all relationships are suspicious. While the logic the man uses to keep her from turning him in may be spurious (blaming her for knowingly harboring him), there is enough truth in his claim that his denouncement of her would logically have disastrous consequences.

Mention of sympathizers in the North and the fact that the male-authored texts of Maupassant

and Kafka are found in the library read to pieces forces us to make an interpretive choice. Did the previous owner, Jane "Something", read those stories until the pages fell out on her own, or is the man who lurks in the shadows of the house real? When Daisy is confronted with the man at last after suspecting his presence, they have a fairly long discussion, and she asks if he killed the previous owner (who refused to clone herself and probably resisted other aspects of the society). By my reading, Jane was in love not with any real man, but with the idea of them, and was a true "sympathizer" mentioned in the text, who read those books. When her ideals became obvious, her sisters killed her. Thus, the idea and imago of man leads to her murder. When asked if he will kill Daisy in the same manner, he replies in the negative (see unanswered questions below). Jane was murdered by her sisters for embracing the idea of man. It seems more likely that Daisy, in trying to flee, is more prone to self-destruction, a different kind of death.

Daisy is actually not a true sympathizer — she fears loneliness and having too much responsibility. When Char Cavallo dies of a heart attack, we see some of the unnatural stress which has been created by this system. When a new woman comes to the apartment, Daisy offers to let her stay in the house rent free, "but the new woman was attractive and had, it seemed, better offers." Daisy can't even attain the companionship she craves by opening her house for no charge.

Of course, the possibly imaginary male serves as a mouthpiece criticizing the entire ideology of this brand of feminism, which seeks to take the power of the masculine and then eliminate males as unnecessary: "The sphere of logic has never been the world of women and men. If we can manage to forget it, we can both be free, or at least as nearly free as we are capable of being. ? [Logic] should serve us, and not master s. Don't you agree, for example, that if we both wanted the same thing, we could not both have it. Look, here's a slice of bread — we could divide it between us — evenly, or by some complicated formula you would work out. But if we both wanted the whole slice, could we both have it" Both eat it?

The critique of the all female society inherent in the text is strong: Daisy must balance her loneliness with the need to seek companionship, and she is forced unnaturally to think of other women as a man would: "She was quite good looking, Ms. McKane thought — though perhaps a little too old. — Her left hand was beside her leg, where the agent could touch it easily if she wished. She did not." The same games that men and women play with each other are found in this new society, and Daisy is exasperated by having to assume the more masculine role because of her relative lack of attractiveness. Her horrors are of solitude and loneliness: "of running down on a lonely road, and so many roads were lonely now." She wonders if she "can find someone to live here with [her]? and can't clone herself, for she knows that ?unless [she] can find someone to share the house, there'd be no one to look after the baby." She even finds herself forced to pay for a meal after being invited to lunch as a matter of course with no offer of splitting the bill, and thinks to herself, "How is this better?"

When Wolfe comments that the society is based on those of bees or ants in his introduction to **Storeys from the Old Hotel**, the large size of Pearl, the woman across the street, seems something like the increased size of the insect queen, and she has actually reproduced in the fashion accepted by this society. However, this process is repugnant to Daisy because of her personal revulsion for Pearl, and the "eccentric" Jane also refused it, though perhaps for different ideological reasons.

It is quite clear that the society's entire basis is suicidal, and that Daisy serves as a mirror to show its effects. In seeking to suppress and eliminate the male figure, the society still operates in almost the same exploitative way, except some of the females like Daisy must abandon their feminine roles and serve more masculine ones or be left alone. Has this forced Daisy to conjure

a fantasy? In many ways, while the work is realistic in nature, many of the allusions are to fantasies. Indeed, the final literary allusion, to **Cradle of the Sea** by Joan Lowell, was published as a memoir in which the main character fabricated an entire life raised on the sea, with the ship finally sinking as she swam to shore with kittens clinging to her back. **Through the Looking Glass** is a similar phantasmagorical fantasy, a dream reality where things in the real world have cognates through the mirror but are not necessarily physically real. When Daisy moves to the house in Florida, her size is emphasized, just as at the beginning of **Alice in Wonderland**, when Alice eats or drinks to shrink or grow to gigantic proportions:

[The house] was uncomfortable as a garment too large is uncomfortable by its very looseness. She had felt big and clumsy in her tiny Boston apartment. Now she herself was tiny, without force, without impact in this hulking structure. She made noise for the sake of noise and found herself wondering — if someone were not pounding her front door. — She seemed to be eating too much and felt sure it was in a subconscious effort to grow larger.

Something is missing in her life and her subconscious is working to make things “fit”. In this scene in **Alice in Wonderland**, the tears shed a giant cause a flood which almost drown her later, and this theme of drowning is repeated again and again in Wolfe's story. At first Daisy thinks the woman across the street is speaking of the previous tenant of the house who capsized in a boat, when in fact the woman's cloned daughter Pearl IV perished in that fashion. Daisy dwells on the idea of “Jane rolling dead, naked in the surf”, though in reality she has been thrust down the cistern out back. This fall also seems to resonate with Alice's fall down the rabbit hole into a world that has some nightmare qualities. Daisy resolves to get a cat (Alice's experiences in **Through the Looking Glass** began by playing with her white and black kittens).

Certainly the death of the Char Cavallo, with the name which means black night or black horse, summons the scene in **Through the Looking Glass** when Alice is threatened by the red knight. Is there really a white knight to save her in this reality?

Any attempt to brand the man as a phantom of Daisy's conscious must confront her claim, “You killed the other woman — the one before me”, to which he responds, “Indirectly and unintentionally, yes.” When she first hears him, she thinks, “the sound was so devoid of stealth that as soon as it had died away she felt sure it had been a waking dream, a phantom of hearing.” When the police cannot find any trace of her male guest, his reality really does seem to be that of Daisy's fantasy (like the fabricated memoir **Cradle of the Sea** — a fantasy masquerading as reality, or Alice's dream, with real objects inspiring a dream fantasy).

Ironically, the spaceship that Daisy is working on is called the **Aphrodite**, the goddess of love and procreation (though it is perhaps fitting that in at least one origin story she arose when Uranus' genitals were cut off and thrown into the sea). The nautical ship on which Daisy finally embarks is named after a famous Australian opera singer, Frances Alda, reputed to have a strong temper and bitter wit. Her attempt to escape is frustrated: “In the darkness below deck she glimpsed the stowaway's bearded face.”

The final effect of attempting to flee but seeing the man's dark face underneath lets us see that Daisy's attempts to truly escape him are impossible. We can expect that she, too, will drown, but by her own hand in an attempt to escape the that which cannot be fled. When she steps into looking-glass castle, she sees in a distorted mirror the things which have been missing from her life — it is not a true man she sees, but the absence lurking inside her, given form. For a looking-glass is nothing but a mirror to behold the self.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

Of course the female authors represent the canon with the male figures excised or cut out, so there is perhaps little thematic purpose for their presence (Jane Austen, the Brontes, Mary Shelley, Flannery O'Connor, and Dorothy Parker) . However, there are three male authors referenced: the short stories of Guy de Maupassant and Kafka, as well as the works of Lewis Carroll.

In addition, the poem "Harp Song of the Dane Women" by Kipling is misquoted by Daisy as "Go to the old gray window-maker." The poem is important because it seems to summon the allure of the killing sea (which is the old gray widow maker), for whom men would leave their women. Clearly the word widow no longer exists in Daisy's society.

What is a woman that you forsake her,
And the hearth-fire and the home-acre.
To go with the old grey Widow-maker?

She has no house to lay a guest in
But one chill bed for all to rest in,
That the pale suns and the stray bergs nest in.

She has no strong white arms to fold you,
But the ten-times-fingering weed to hold you
Out on the rocks where the tide has rolled you.

Yet, when the signs of summer thicken,
And the ice breaks, and the birch-buds quicken,
Yearly you turn from our side, and sicken?

Sicken again for the shouts and the slaughters.
You steal away to the lapping waters,
And look at your ship in her winter-quarters.

You forget our mirth, and talk at the tables,
The kine in the shed and the horse in the stables
To pitch her sides and go over her cables.

Then you drive out where the storm-clouds swallow,
And the sound of your oar-blades, falling hollow,
Is all we have left through the months to follow.

Ah, what is Woman that you forsake her,
And the hearth-fire and the home-acre,
To go with the old grey Widow-maker?

While it is impossible to pin down only one of probably 300 short stories of Guy de Maupassant as being of particular import, fortunately I am familiar with one that has an eerie kind of resonance — one of his fantasy tales, called "The Horla". The narrator lives by the water and waves at a three masted ship, and soon finds that someone is living in his house, drinking his water. Believing himself to have gone mad, he tries to travel and escape his situation before seeing a mesmerist. The mesmerist makes a woman believe a playing card is a looking glass. He even flirts with the idea of poisoning the unwelcome guest in his house: "How could I kill Him, since I could not get hold of Him" Poison? But He would see me mix it with the water; and then, would our poisons have any effect on His impalpable body? (Maupassant 25)

However, the nature of the Horla is vastly different from the man living in Daisy's house, unless he represents a physically stronger other: "One might say that man, ever since he has thought, has had a foreboding and a fear of a new being, stronger than himself, his successor in this world, and that, feeling him near, and not being able to foretell the nature of the unseen one, he has, in his terror, created the whole race of hidden beings, vague phantoms born of fear" (Maupassant 19).

He even comes to see the thing in a looking glass: "Behind me was a very high wardrobe with a looking-glass in it, which served me to dress by every day, and in which I was in the habit of inspecting myself from head to foot every time I passed it. So I pretended to be writing in order to deceive Him, for He also was watching me, and suddenly I felt, I was certain, that He was reading over my shoulder, that He was there, almost touching my ear" (24). The narrator beholds the phantom in the looking-glass, because it is very possible that the phantom is the narrator's own broken mind. After burning down his house, the narrator's final conviction is that, "I suppose I must kill myself." (27)

With all those similarities, there are still enough differences to remain uncertain as to its impact on Wolfe's story, and perhaps it is the attempted suicide of Maupassant after a descent into syphilitic madness that we should take away from reference to his stories.

The connection to Kafka is even more nebulous and speculative. The alienation and reaction to a man become a bug or vermin in a household might evoke the feeling of "Metamorphosis", or even the presence of the death boat in "The Hunter Gracchus" carrying the long dead titular character, wandering aimlessly and eternally over the seas after falling to his death. In his introduction, Wolfe says that he imagined the society based on that of bees or ants, with their strong eusocial groups dominated by a queen and female workers. Perhaps this is enough for the Kafka "Metamorphosis" reference — human society transformed into something insectile. The Wolfe-wiki takes this analysis in a different direction, and claims "In the Penal Colony" is the relevant Kafka story because of its totalitarian state with harsh punishments. It also posits "Mademoiselle Pearl" as the relevant Maupassant story, when an old maid is chosen as queen for twelfth night. This is also possible.

The attempt of a pawn to become a queen as is indicated in the movements of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* certainly resonates with the story, as Daisy even quotes the White Queen. If there is any specific chess move that is being used here, I think that it involves the threat of the Red Knight, which is thwarted by the White Knight. In Wolfe's story, the Queen has gotten rid of all her knights.

While the writings of James Tiptree Jr and Joanna Russ are never explicitly mentioned, there is certainly a sense that the zeitgeist following their feminist SF promoted an environment for the writing of "In Looking-Glass Castle."

Borski's claim that Edith Berg indirectly references Alban Berg's *Wozzack* goes a step too far for me. We have enough imagery of drowning and the sea to avoid having to resort to name magic.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

The kindle version of *Storeys from the Old Hotel* has an interesting change from my published print version. The answer he gives to her question, "Will you kill me the same way?" is ?Not. In the print version, he says, "No." The question is of course loaded anyway. If he says yes, he will

kill her. If he says no, it won't be in the same way. Which answer is more definitive, "not" or "no"? Is there truly any grammatical distinction between these two answers?

While the very title "In Looking-Glass Castle" evokes all the chess imagery and the obvious Alice references, it still describes a castle that is primarily a mirror. Alone in the house, has Daisy just begun to see herself and her own frustration and fears? If the Maupassant story "The Horla" is truly one of the sources, where a kind of progressive insanity leads to suicidal self-destruction, then we can assume, beyond the idea that she will kill herself, that the man haunting her is quite probably a manifestation of her own fears and desires.

If he isn't a part of her subconscious, how does he know to avoid the poisoned food and where does he hide? If he IS a part of her subconscious, how did he indirectly kill the previous tenant? Does sympathizing with the plight of suppressed men and what they represent constitute enough on our phantom's part to claim that he actually indirectly killed Jane?

There is one point when the man claims that if Daisy tries to hurt him, then that would be the only thing that would make him stop being afraid of her. Is this a complicated way of saying that she can only hurt him by hurting or killing herself?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The society depicted in **There Are Doors** is one that is dominated by females by a trick of biology rather than by choice and is far more sympathetic than the social order in this story, but the fascination Wolfe has with a matriarchy in the later part of the 1970s ("Many Mansions") and throughout the 1980s (the exploration of the war between the triple goddess and mother earth in the Soldier series, in addition to other short stories) fades as his career unfolds. Often criticized for putting females in secondary roles or depicting them as sexual manipulators or objects, here we have his most blatant depiction of women in power, but the theme, that attempting to change our nature to conform to society's expectations is destructive and perhaps suicidal for the soul, is not as vitriolic as many might first claim — the critique is of a very particular type of militant feminism which appropriates masculine power and eliminates rather than engenders and embraces.

Maupassant, Guy. "The Horla". **Hyperfiction**. 2010. Web. 21 August 2014.
<http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Horl.shtml>