

Short Story 208*: Unrequited Love

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 22 Apr 2015

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6729>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 16:08

UNREQUITED LOVE

"Unrequited Love" first appeared in **Subterranean Press Magazine** in their Summer 2007 edition. It has not been collected.

SUMMARY:

The story begins with an epigraph from Shakespeare's "Sonnet 144": "Two loves I have of comfort and despair". Our narrator claims that in the hopes of doing good, he has in fact quite innocently done wrong. "There are millions like me in that, and most acknowledge no smallest trace of guilt — Soon, one hopes, a great, blood-colored hand whose fingers are tipped with claws will close about them and drag them down to Hell."

He claims that it is results that matter, and he has brought pain to innocent hearts.

The narrator describes how he met the robotic girl Roberta, adopted by the Robinsons because they "could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a real child." One morning as the artificial Roberta walks to school, he asks her if she likes school and what they are studying. In addition to school topics, she mentions, "Stranger danger." As her next door neighbor, he assures her he is no stranger.

He asks what she would get if black and white were mixed, and she responds, "Grey if you mean paint. Brown if you mean people." Proceeding to ask the square root of 256, she answers and replies, "Only that's not fair. It's not first-grade work." Roberta indicates that there are more boys than girls in school, and that she enjoys tutoring the most because it truly helps the teacher, Mrs. Morse, though she enjoys tutoring girls more.

Later, the narrator meets Julianne, a fellow student of Roberta's. In her mumbling, sad way, she admits that she plays with Roberta and that her father is a cook. Upon mentioning to her parents that Roberta is going to be getting a puppy, they agree to get her one as well. The narrator quotes Byron's epitaph to his dog Boatswain which begins "Beauty without vanity ..." and asks which breed she will be getting. "A robot. Roberta's going to get a border terrier, though," she says, hoping that the dogs will play together as the children do. The narrator is "filled with a tragic anger" as he walks on, and the gently curving streets and the partially artificial grass offend him. "I hated every house I saw; their fresh pain and absurd mixture of styles more than sufficient to account for any amount of hatred." He reveals that his true anger is because almost none of the houses hold two children, and most housed none, like his own.

He remarks, "My kind had built a paradise, of which I was a part. A paradise for machines, in which the human race, though welcome, could not and did not thrive. In and around the filthy huts of the medieval peasants, children ran and shouted, laughed and wept, and no doubt received sturdy buffets when they made too much noise. There the family sang around a table

we would scorn. Their grandmothers recounted wild tales before the fire, tales full of bold boys who made good and honest country maidens who tricked evil dwarves like me. Tales that were full of life because the children were, and full of death, too, because each child had to learn that death is life's shadow.

He watches the girls as a week passes, remarking upon Roberta's perfection and the unnatural sound of Julianne's laugh, which he hears once. He sees Roberta get her dog, and a week or two later Julianne gets hers, a larger "caricature of a Dalmatian". He notes that Roberta's puppy plays with it as he might a ball or another object. He thinks of a plan and, when Roberta's puppy penetrates the hedge that separates his house from hers, tempts it with scraps of meat. When he returns the dog to the girls, he asks, "Have you two ever thought of trading puppies for a few days?" He makes up a story about doing something similar as a child, and Roberta asks if Julianne could give up Robber for a week if she relinquishes the real dog, Rover.

The next day, he sees that Julianne has the robotic Robber once again, saying that she likes him better, offering only that he doesn't mess the carpet. Later, he confronts the artificial girl Roberta directly, and she reveals that both girls were crying over recess and she reveals that "Robber thinks he's a real dog." Her words "held a world of agony."

Roberta says, "He's — he's a *thing,* but he thinks he's a real dog," before she runs into her house.

He soon sees Dan and Tamara Robinson out looking for their dog, and on a hunch he finds out Julianne's address to find Rover, "lying quietly by the side of the house, half hidden by shrubbery, under a window that I would guess was that of Julianne's bedroom."

"God forgive me! I picked him up and carried him home," reveals the narrator. The next day he sees that Robber has come to wait for Roberta on her way to school. "During the weeks that followed, I saw him there twice — I have never seen him again. Julianne says they keep him chained up."

COMMENTARY:

As in so many of Wolfe's stories, the thing that most frightens and hurts the human characters is symbolically akin to looking into a mirror: Julianne doesn't like Rover because he makes a mess and has biological flaws — she knows that her knowledge, capabilities, and even perhaps her appearance are inferior to Roberta's. When she has Rover, it makes her aware of her own natural shortcomings. The narrator notes that the only time he hears her laugh, it is unnatural, and that she mumbles everything, clearly signifying a lack of self-confidence. The same reflection pains Roberta, in what is surely one of Wolfe's most pathos-filled scenes, as the artificial girl condemns Robber for being a "thing" who thinks he is a real dog, something which she herself obviously does as well. For all her talents and charm, she will not confront the fact that she is not a "real" girl.

The narrator himself cannot stand the artificiality of the modern world, knowing that it is contrived and that the idyllic memories he has of real children playing together highlights his sterile loneliness, as he describes himself as something akin to an evil dwarf without children of his own. While his plans are not entirely altruistic for the children, as he was hoping to teach them a lesson about the joining of the artificial and the real, there is no reason to believe that he actually wishes the girls harm or has any kind of sexualized intention for them. It is the story of a lonely old man who resents his society, but in his attempt to make it better, he has opened up the emptiness of modern life to everyone involved, from the live girl to the robotic dog. The dogs recognize their potential masters quite readily on the basis of some instinct, but the girls both shun the dogs because it reveals something about themselves they cannot face.

The idea that humanity has favored increasingly automated systems must concern Wolfe, yet quite clearly the anguish and pity both the girls and both the dogs inspire do not create an impression of true authorial bias against machines. One further irony is that the human girl imitates the mechanical one in getting a dog, but when given the opportunity to own the original inspiration for her desire, she shuns it. The unreturned love that the dogs feel for those that are most like themselves shows that it is for the most part the sentient creatures with full self-awareness who fear to see themselves as they truly are.

Despite the quite common claims that Wolfe's fiction at times can be sexist, the young girls come off quite sympathetically here. In addition, the preponderance of boys in the very small class (5 to 2) might show a cultural preference for male children as the only child in a family, and there does seem to be an implied criticism of this bias for masculine children (this cultural bias can easily be seen in overpopulated countries such as China, for example, which has actually created a real gender imbalance). There is no true textual indication of selective breeding and engineering, however. Certainly and obviously, for natural breeding to work, a gender balance is preferable. The small class size further emphasizes the relative sterility of this future.

CULTURAL AND LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

In addition to mentioning the famous dog Lassie, the text also mentions Grayfriars Bobby, the 19th century Skye Terrier who supposedly sat on his master's grave for over a decade.

The text begins with the first lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 144:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And, whether that my angel be turn'd fiend,
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,
But being both from me both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell.
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,

Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

Even though the line “the better angel is a man right fair” might be transmuted to a jingoistic attitude favoring natural humanity, the ending scene of the robot dog longing for Roberta shows us that it, too, loves fully and loyally, and that its love has resulted in the loss of its freedom. The dichotomy between the artificial and natural world is also mirrored by our narrator's claims of innocent intentions leading to damnation and hell. His own life, a not-so-subtly disguised disappointment full of despair, seeks to achieve contentment, but in so doing creates even more widespread despair — it is impossible for the narrator, the characters, and even society to recognize the reality of their situations: “whether that my angel be turn'd fiend — but being both from me both to each friend, I guess one angel in another's hell.” The mirror which the narrator holds up to the dogs and the girls reveals the emptiness they all feel in the glancing at the truth.

One final possible reference to Shakespeare's **Titus Andronicus** is in the form of Tamara Robinson's first name. Tamara is a wrathful woman in the play, and she allows Titus' daughter to be raped by her sons. In retaliation, Titus kills the men, bakes them into a pie, and feeds them to their mother Tamara. This violent, sad end to both family lines is obviously much tempered, as this Wolfe story is devoid of violence, but for a mother to consume her children shows an awful, unnatural end to a natural lineage. This may bear some thematic relationship to the idea that these family lines are being disrupted in a potentially harmful way.

NAMES:

Clearly robots are named as Robber and Roberta are. Dan and Tamara Robinson have first names, and while the similarity in sound for their last name is suggestive, they are clearly humans, as this joining of artificial and organic is the catalyst that offends the narrator and leads him to concoct his experiment.

Roberta means “famed, bright, or shining.” The last name Robinson means “son of Robin/Robert” (which also means “famed, bright, or shining”). Having human characters with a last name implying the child of a robotic name shows the partial subordination of humanity to the mechanized, sterile ideal. Dan means “God is my judge.” Tamara means a “date palm tree”. Perhaps the reference to Shakespeare's **Titus Andronicus** is implied, discussed above.

Julianne can mean “downy grace” and may also be a feminine form of Julian, which means “youthful”. (Rover means “wanderer”, though it is a generic enough name for a dog).

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe's sympathetic treatment of dogs is well documented, extending back through **The Book of the New Sun** to more recent stories such as “Dog of the Drops” or “Rattler”. The relationship between man and machines is much less problematic in **The Book of the Long Sun**, but there is a strain of potential tension chronicled in “Counting Cats in Zanzibar”, “All the Hues of Hell”, and other earlier stories. This particular story is filled with pathos for almost everyone involved, and the sympathetic young female characters is similar to the treatment of Vivianne in “The Magic Animal”, also published in 2007.

RESOURCES:

Shakespeare, William. “Sonnet 144”. Shakespeare Online. 2014. Web. 19 March 2015. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/144.html> Wolfe, Gene. ?

Unrequited Love?. Subterranean Press Magazine (Summer 2007).

http://subterraneanpress.com/magazine/summer_2007/fiction_unrequited_love_by_gene_wolfe