

Short Fiction: Mistaken Identity

I hesitate in the doorway, blinking: barely noon and every seat's taken, not even spare chairs left leaning against those dark veneer walls. I walk up to the podium.

"Hello," I say, as their chatter subsides. "My name's John and I'm an alcoholic. I want to tell you how I come to be here."

I grip the sides of the podium and spread my feet: my balancing act.

"I come from a long line of alcoholics," I say. "Mind you, some of my ancestors took a generation off, tried a different line of work. My parents, for instance. But we never got it out of our blood. I didn't touch a drop myself until I was legal."

I rub my face, smoothing out the lines.

"I'm 40, but you probably guessed 60."

I check out the front row: one woman nodding, another smiling weakly.

"I could tell you how I was an insurance adjuster, successful, well-regarded, always on the road, reviewing claims. I was an ambulance-chaser really, first on the scene after the '89 quake, Oakland Hills fire, Hurricane Katrina, working 24-hour days until I'd written checks for all the policy holders in town. I could blame the sight of all those disasters for my drinking. But the truth is, I drink because I'm an alcoholic."

A woman in black, sitting back there in the corner: she reaches into her purse, feeling around, pulls her hand out empty and wipes her eyes on her sleeve.

"At first I didn't drink all the time," I say, watching the woman. "I thought if I stayed off the stuff till after I'd finished a job, or just kept sober in front of my family, I'd never break my kids' bones or scare my wife away." I drop to a whisper. "But I was wrong."

The audience inhales, crowds in, just like an orchestra readying their instruments as the conductor raises his baton.

"I started to hurry through jobs, so's I could get to the bottle at the end. And I stayed awake nights, until my wife dropped off and I could sneak out of bed. To put me to sleep, I told myself, to keep the nightmares away."

I'm scanning the crowd, waiting, willing that woman in black to look up. She does.

"For 20 years," I say, "all those years I drank to keep the nightmares away. You know the ones. Not Godzilla. Not Satanic possession. Not alien invaders and body snatchers. Not even mass murderers, nuclear war or bioterrorism. No. I'm talking about the nightmares where you wake up with blood on your hands. The kind where your son gives you lip and you grab onto him and shake him and when you let him go his shoulder's out of

its socket, he's screaming. Or where your wife brings you breakfast and you're so dizzy you spill it on the floor and she starts in crying again and you throw the plate in her face."

The woman in black is staring now, her eyes luminous, round in that thin, pale face, tracking my every move.

"You know the nightmares I'm talking about."

"Yes," she's saying.

"For years they stayed away. And I worshipped the bottle that kept them away. I don't remember when exactly they came back. Only once I dislocated my son's shoulder and his face was a mirror of mine, that time so long ago when my dad broke my arm."

Folks exchange glances, frown. I smile.

"My parents didn't drink, no. But my dad threw his dinner in my mom's face whenever he didn't like the taste or the texture or the temperature of what she'd cooked for him. I caught a glimpse of her face one day in my wife's."

I inhale, watch my hands grasping the rim of the podium, shake my head.

"I had so many accidents I lost my license. I made accounting mistakes, trashed jobs, found myself blacklisted. And still I couldn't stop. Oh, I came to meetings. I'd sober up for a week, a month, even a couple years at a time. But I always went back."

The woman is crying openly back there. I wipe the sweat from off my cheek.

"I come home to find my wife and kids gone. Moved out. No trace of them; not even a photo left. So I take a car parked outside and go looking. And that's how I come to be here."

My knuckles whiten and the veins in my hands pop out, blue and purple.

"I drive down the street where my father-in-law lives. A little girl is playing ball in his front yard. I slow down to get a closer look, see if she's my baby Anna. Her ball rolls into the street. And then I remember. I'm in the wrong place. My father-in-law's been dead for years. Anna just turned 13. I step on the gas and catch my breath."

I scan the audience, close my eyes.

"I see a flash of color. *Could she have fallen in front of my car?* My worst nightmare: me driving along and suddenly a kid cuts out chasing a ball. I hit the brakes, but not fast enough. The kid flies up over my car and lays still on the grass. And after the squeal of rubber and the thud of the body, then comes the silence. Too late. I know that kid is dead. Maybe not yet, but soon now, very soon. No time for paramedics or police. I'm staring at a circle of kids trying to rouse a little girl. I step on the gas and catch my breath and drive on."

Review: The Power Dead Even Rule

Boys play win-lose games, girls play win-win games. Boys play goal-focused games, girls play process-oriented games. Boys learn to take risks, girls learn to avoid conflict. These are three of the examples that Dr. Patricia Heim, a writer and consultant specializing in gender/culture distinctions, uses to illustrate the effects of gender conditioning on relations between men and women in the work place

Dr. Heim theorizes that because ethnic and racial differences are physically obvious they are more often recognized and valued. Since we are less aware of cultural differences between genders, they create frequent problems in the work place. Classic cultural clashes occur between men and women who respond quite differently to the same situation, even though each person is acting according to his or her own gender conditioning.

Studies by Dr. Deborah Tannen, an author and sociolinguistics professor at Georgetown University, demonstrate that females of all ages interact with each other face-to-face, while men of all ages interact side-by-side. The popularity of golf and fishing among men provides one example. Other linguistic differences between the sexes include the disclaimers, hedges and tag questions used by women. Men, on the other hand, bond through verbal bantering, insults and sarcasm. Gender differences appear in the spatial realm as well as the verbal. In navigating, women rely more on landmarks and objects, while men use distances and street names.

Even work place metaphors often contain gender biases. When asked to describe a team player, men's definitions typically include following orders, supporting the team unquestioningly and doing the job no matter the cost. On the other hand, women's understanding of team behavior involves sharing ideas, listening to disagreements and working collaboratively.

Good girls don't brag. But when questioned about their successes and failures in the work place, women tend to chalk up personal success to external factors (such as good luck or task ease), while attributing their failures to lack of competence. Men respond in reverse. They ascribe their success to competence and failure to external factors (such as bad luck or task difficulty). As a result, women tend to give up too quickly in the face of difficulties, whereas men are inclined to resist change, repeating the same mistakes over and over.

Researchers believe these differences are learned in childhood, and point to the stories we read about boys and girls, men and women, growing up. A study of recent Caldecott Medal winning children's books reveals three times as many male characters as females overall, with a ten to one ratio of males to females in leadership roles. Although the various authors associated 140 different occupations with male characters, they described female characters in only 40 roles, the top five being housewife (at 50%), witch (at 25%), dancer, musician and queen.

So what is the Power Dead Even Rule? It describes the flat organizational model that women enforce, where power is shared equally among the participants. By contrast, male-dominated organizations operate on a hierarchical model. Make no mistake this theory is no

tribute to feminism. According to the Power Dead Even Rule, members pay a price for every achievement. Those with superior skills risk sabotage or betrayal by their friends. To maintain a dead even state requires a delicate balance.

Additional information and resources on the topic of gender differences in the work place can be found at www.heimgroup.com.

Essay: *Violence and Agency in The Book of Esther*

Critics disagree on the genre of The Book of Esther, some considering it a comedy, while others view it as an extended metaphor for Israel's difficulty maintaining a faith identity during and after the Babylonian Exile. Still others consider it primarily an explication and Scriptural justification for the celebration of Purim. With no external evidence that a Jewish Queen of Persia saved her Diaspora community from destruction, the book cannot be read as history. Yet it addresses universal issues of violence against women and against the Other, by presenting Esther as a woman who transforms herself from object to agent. Finally, in addition to the Greek variant, *midrash* on The Book of Esther provides multiple perspectives of the characters of Esther, Mordecai, Ahasuerus and Haman. This kaleidoscope of narrative point-of-view alone creates a fascinating study of meaning in a written text. In effect it warns the reader against assigning a generalized and historical message to the story, instead focusing us on the unique individuality of its main characters. The theme of violence (actual physical violence, threatened physical violence, emotional violence and implied sexual violence) pervades the plot. Establishing a particular message for this text risks violating its characters' humanity, particularly that of Esther.

Psalm 137 certainly evidences the crucial need of the Jews in Diaspora to find ways to practice their religion, in the absence of Temple, pilgrimages, priesthood and kingship structures. Clearly the Book of Esther explicates the carnival aspects of Purim and legitimates its existence. The story contains many comic twists and detailed descriptions of excess, incompetence and narcissism. However, the level of violence and the serious nature of threatened genocide point more to the genre of tragicomedy, exemplified in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The ending of the story affirms the patriarchal society and its foundation in violence. Because unhistorical, the text is of necessity realistic in this sense, regardless of our modern desires to subvert or overthrow patriarchal structures. Reading Esther's story in generalized ways denigrates the centrality of her character. A close look at the text reveals that only Esther and Ahasuerus transcend the text's violence, in their relationships as beloved and lover. Haman, given opportunities for enlightenment, rejects them and dies violently, a victim of his own machinations. Mordecai remains stable throughout: a wise courtier who collaborates with the enemy to preserve the lives and fortunes of his family and, through luck, his tribe.

A writerly approach seeks the text's main theme in the developing relationship between Esther and Ahasuerus. In a short space, Ahasuerus grows from puerile partier, playing at king, to mature adult monarch. Esther expands her self-image from one based on attractiveness to men, by definition external and mutable, to an integrated persona founded on honesty and competence, internalized and stable. She begins by following orders perfectly and ends up giving orders. Initially, others – Mordecai, eunuchs and emissaries – mediate her speech, in parallel with the eunuchs' and sages' mediations of the king's speech and decisions. By the end of the story both Esther and Ahasuerus speak and act on their own. The Hebrew text contains minimal dialogue, with the only true conversation occurring in three exchanges between Ahasuerus and Esther, as she establishes a mystery, challenging him to discover what it is she desires. The Greek version extends their conversations even further, thus accentuating their mutual transformations.

Both Ruth and Esther appear as startling agents in the Hebrew Scriptures. Ruth, doubly marginalized as a woman and a Moabite, living in Bethlehem of Judah, becomes the ancestor of King David. Esther, doubly marginalized as a woman and a Jew, living in postexilic Persia, delivers her Diaspora community from a pogrom. Just as The Book of Ruth presents a woman who abandons her role as Other and assumes agency in Israel, restoring her kinship circle to Covenant with God, The Book of Esther presents a woman who abandons her role as object and becomes the agent of Israel's salvation in Persia. In the process, the Book of Esther recounts the very real dangers of agency for a gender existing as Other in Diaspora. Esther's heritage complicates the gender issue. Although Jewish by birth and upbringing, the necessity to maintain a secret identity prevents her from openly practicing her faith. A secular Jew and a secular Queen, she is orphaned not only from her parents but also from the faith community that would normally support her. She communicates with her cousin Mordecai, her adoptive father, through emissaries who translate between their languages. Esther's condition reflects the classic objectification of women through beauty and submission.

Artists excel in portraying women as objects of men's gaze and therefore as inherently fragmented. Women cannot integrate their intellects and souls with their selves when viewers focus solely on their bodies, particularly on bodies partially uncovered or arranged in submissive postures with the intent to tantalize the male eye. Intellectual or spiritual objectification of women, while no less fragmenting, rarely occurs in Scripture and is much more difficult to portray visually. The lavish detailing of the palace, banquets and Persian life itself resembles a portrait of luxury, a sort of still life. The Greek version of the text accentuates the opulence, itself a subtle form of violence, which the Hebrew original carefully documents.

There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired. – Esther 1:6-8 (Hebrew version)

which was adorned with curtains of fine linen and cotton, held by cords of purple linen attached to gold and silver blocks on pillars of marble and other stones. Gold and silver couches were placed on a mosaic floor of emerald, mother-of-pearl and marble. There were coverings of gauze, embroidered in various colors, with roses arranged around them. The cups were of gold and silver, and a miniature cup was displayed, made of ruby, worth thirty thousand talents. There was abundant sweet wine, such as the king himself drank. The drinking was not according to a fixed rule; but the king wished to have it so, and he commanded his stewards to comply with his pleasure and with that of his guests. – Esther 1:6-8 (Greek version)

With its focus on the sensual and the exterior, the text fragments not only Esther, but Ahasuerus and his courtiers as well. Inherent in portrayals of fecund flesh – whether human, animal or vegetable – is the intimation of death and decay. As soon as the fruit is

cut, it begins to decompose. The Persian court described here reminds the reader of the sort of enervated lassitude that T.S. Eliot memorialized in *The Waste Land*. Generativity is notably absent from this story.

Having obtained her position as Queen due to a combination of her beauty and submission, Esther suddenly finds herself required – by her adoptive father and, by extension, God – to demand redemption for the Jews, only nominally her people. Worse, their redemption must come from the person who most fundamentally objectifies Esther: her husband, King Ahasuerus. Such a request necessarily involves disobedience, as well as the revelation of her secret identity. Finally, it comes at precisely the time in Esther's life when she questions her beauty's attraction. Married for five years, she has produced no heir; and the King has not required her presence for the past thirty days. In such a relationship, as the dependent object's beauty fades, survival requires that her submissive charms take precedence. Vashti provides a ready example for the dire consequences of disobedience. Without her dismissal from the court for refusing the King's command, Esther would not be Queen.

In some *midrashim*, Ahasuerus commands Vashti to appear naked before him and then has her executed for subversive disobedience. Although this interpretation adds color to the story, in a sense Vashti's mere disappearance sufficiently annihilates her. Further, any command to a woman to display her beauty to a group of carousing men carries an implicit violence to self, with the psychological impact of being stripped. Mordecai's demand quite literally puts Esther's life at stake and she immediately recognizes this.

“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law – all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” – Esther 4:11 (Hebrew version)

‘All nations of the empire know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is no escape for that person. Only the one to whom the king stretches out the golden scepter is safe – and it is now thirty days since I was called to go to the king.’ – Esther 4:11 (Greek version)

Esther describes the Persian law in passive voice, more succinctly in the Greek than in the Hebrew version. No agent interprets the law, alters it or takes responsibility for discharging it. It exists in itself as agent, as everyone knows. The king, however, holds active potential. He can choose to call or not to call, and he has not called Esther in a long time. Significantly, Mordecai also takes a passive role, telling Esther what to do in very general terms (save our people), but not how to do it. Thus both Mordecai's command and Esther's response cast backward glances at God's providence.

In the end Esther capitulates and agrees to intercede for the Jews, expecting the worst. She issues the first of her three commands in the story – that the Jews in Persia join with her and her maids in a three-day period of fasting and prayer. (Her second command sets Mordecai over Haman's house after his death and her final command establishes Purim. Mordecai issues the command allowing the Jews to destroy their enemies.) In the first

decision of her lifetime, Esther immediately assumes agency, speaking not only in active voice, but in imperatives.

“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” – Esther 4:16 (Hebrew version)

“Go and gather all the Jews who are in Susa and fast on my behalf; for three days and nights do not eat or drink, and my maids and I will also go without food. After that I will go to the king, contrary to the law, even if I must die.” Esther 4:16 (Greek version)

Esther mourns for the traditional amount of time required to confirm death (three days in the tomb), in effect mourning herself, a tradition Mary Magdalen later imitates when she anoints Christ for burial before His death. Then Esther restores her beauty and approaches her husband, expecting immediate execution. Ahasuerus, surprised at Esther’s initiative, sees her for the first time as a vulnerable human being. Both her apprehension and the narrator’s description imply that Ahasuerus formerly regarded her merely as a beautiful woman in his exclusive possession. As Esther becomes increasingly real and mysterious to him, he transforms into her husband, as opposed to her master. In parallel, she transforms into his wife, rather than his servant, eventually naming herself Queen Esther. At the center of the Greek text we find an explication of this dance between the two of them, not neglecting its potential for violence.

She was radiant with perfect beauty, and she looked happy, as if beloved, but her heart was frozen with fear. When she had gone through all the doors, she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clothed in the full array of his majesty, all covered with gold and precious stones. He was most terrifying.

Lifting his face, flushed with splendor, he looked at her in fierce anger. The queen faltered, and turned pale and faint, and collapsed on the head of the maid who went in front of her. Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself. He comforted her with soothing words, and said to her, “What is it, Esther? I am your husband. Take courage; You shall not die, for our law applies only to our subjects. Come near.”

Then he raised the golden scepter and touched her neck with it; he embraced her, and said, “Speak to me.” – Esther 15:5-12 (Greek version)

Esther enters the scene transfigured, yet in terror. Artaxerxes reveals himself as object, covered with stones, and reactive. When he realizes his violent effect on Esther, he translates her into subject. He could have said: “You are my wife,” continuing to define their relationship in terms of himself. Instead he tells her: “I am your husband.” When Esther understands that he belongs equally to her, the beloved comes to herself and finds her voice in the gentle arms of her husband. Both discover that the Other is capable of touching their heart, and they begin to truly love and respect each other.

By viewing the story as one of re-creation through mutual love, the violence of Haman and the slaughter of the enemies dissipate into background color of life in an alien culture. Living outside the Covenant, the Persians appear like the earlier Midianite enemies in Torah, or even the false priests and prophets that Elijah destroys on Mount Carmel in the Nevi'im: more a warning of the arbitrary nature of justice under other gods than the killing of real, named human beings. The Greek version of the story, which increases the excess of the Persian court, also diminishes the number of slain enemies. Violence and agency seem intertwined in this text. Mordecai and Haman both perpetuate either physical or emotional violence in their speech and actions. Ahasuerus/Artaxerxes vacillates. Only Esther refrains entirely from violence. She requests clemency for the Jews but resists demanding vengeance either on Haman or on the Persians.

God has no entirely privileged voice or character in the story. In the Hebrew text God neither speaks nor is spoken to, nor does He act directly. Rather, his people become His agents – Mordecai by refusing obeisance to Haman and Esther by following her intuition with Ahasuerus. The Greek text, punctuated by two occurrences of each of three sub-genres, invokes God more explicitly. The additions – dream/vision and interpretation; decrees of Artaxerxes, on behalf of Haman and Mordecai respectively; and prayers of Mordecai and Esther – act as mirror images framing the story. The outer mirrors, of dream and interpretation, begin and end the Greek text. Within come two letters proclaiming the destruction of the Other. Inside the frame of these mirrored letters, the author juxtaposes two prayers. Mordecai's intercession exonerates himself from the guilt of inciting Haman's anger towards the Jews, claiming that in refusing obeisance he has followed Torah. Esther's petition exonerates herself from the compromises to Torah required by her position in the Persian court. God reveals Himself through the triumph of good over evil, the relative restraint of the Jews in taking vengeance on their enemies, and in the reciprocal relationship that develops between Hadassah/Esther and Ahasuerus/Artaxerxes. Society makes no dramatic improvements, but individual human beings learn to love.

The themes of general cultural violence and the fragmentation have broad appeal. Many adults have experienced violence in their family lives, their neighborhoods or schools, or in their travels. Most women at some point find themselves in relationships where they become objectified. So the Book of Esther provides an opportunity for reflection on the development of those themes, as well as on narrative perspective. A narrator privileging a main character sees a different picture than a secondary character who is friendly to the main character or a merely casual observer. The Book of Esther, with its different versions and commentaries, provides a fuller and more human characterization of the King and Queen of Persia. Although these particular people never existed, their situations are universal: a distant husband who holds all of the power in the relationship; a wife with a dangerous secret who fears her husband perceives her merely as an object of his satisfaction; a culture of violence. Although the story is not literally true, it is absolutely real.