Dream Children Short Guide

Dream Children by Gail Godwin

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Characters

The young couple in the ancient Dutch farming village (in New England) who are the major living characters in "Dream Children" are the McNairs. The outward placidity that the pleasant and personable Mrs. McNair displays in her daily goings about among the villagers gives the impression that nothing bad or disturbing has taken place in her life. Yet the reckless manner in which she rides her stallion through the fields causes wonderment among some of the locals, such as Mrs. DePuy and her husband, who own the old Patroon farm near the McNairs' land. They sense that something is amiss somewhere in her life; is she making up for an unfulfilled need such as children, is she so free of fear that she doesn't care anymore what happens to her?

At the end of the story Mr. DePuy, watching her heedless horsewomanship, is filled with aggression and hostility; despite his being a good, practical husband, father, and householder, he almost wishes her ill fortune. The villagers know nothing of her fairly recent tragedy, the traumatic stillbirth of their infant son, which took place before she and her husband moved to New England from New York. Mr. McNair is a weekender in the village, however, having kept one foot back in New York; he definitely likes this arrangement, as he continues working as a TV producer and remains a steady partner to the mistress he loves, just as he continues caring for his wife, who can no longer offer sex.

Just as the satisfactory, commonplace existence of the well-to-do DePuys contrasts with the inner turbulence of the McNairs, so do the outrageous manners of the TV news commentator Victoria Darrow and her lover-boy fourteen or more years her junior contrast with the far more staid lifestyle of the McNairs. Mr. McNair invited them out to the house in the village for the weekend, and he and his wife have to endure not only their nocturnal lovemaking noises but Victoria's "yammering" about wanting to get pregnant, a woman's biological clock, and a horrible stillbirth experience that is reminiscent of the McNairs' own case. As for the McNairs' tragedy, Mrs. McNair's terrible experience is in fact made worse the morning after, when an exhausted nurse mistakenly brings in someone else's baby, cheerfully telling Mrs. McNair that it is hers, and lays it in her arms. When the error is explained to her, the poor woman will not let go of the baby, and her agonizing ordeal takes on a new form of suffering.

On the other hand, the nurse that caused all this added trouble claims to have had a revelation about mothers and children: there are only mothers and children, they are all interchangeable, no one can own anything or anybody. But the nurse's revelation loses its force.

Social Concerns

Gail Godwin's "Dream Children," because of its particular emphasis and breadth of suggestive associations, is sharply distinguished from much of her other short fiction and from many of the stories in the genre of "lost child" fantasy literature. One commentator on Godwin's writing, Mary Ann Wilson, remarks that Godwin from the start has continued to concentrate on females: their self-definition problems in marriage, their families, the "regions and cultures" with which they identify, and their chosen work. (All of these clearly bespeak social concerns in the larger sense.) On the other hand, many "lost child" or "what if there had been a child" stories have emphasized only one feature or at most very few features of the broad range of possible experiences and events that such a situation might engender. Here, the literary/musical connections, to be discussed below, give "Dream Children" its special importance.

The story focuses on a woman whose baby boy, after a normal pregnancy and the beginning of a delivery that the doctor assured her would "be a breeze," was born dead. (Judith C. Kohl, another commentator on Godwin's work, points out that a married couple in Godwin's 1994 novel The Good Husband "lose their full-term infant to umbilical strangulation" in the course of a home delivery.) Essentially, "Dream Children" is about grief management: replacement therapy in effect, mainly through the compensatory power of the imagination, and in the form of unearthly visitations by the lost child, and sustained hope of periodic encounters with him ever afterward.

Perhaps this is not a "real" solution to her problem of having to live with such a loss, but it is certainly better than her doing nothing about it. As the narrator puts it in discussing the woman's plight, so freakish a last-minute accident in birthing has onein-a-million odds, "and it's a wonder the poor woman kept her sanity." But the forlorn creature, driven by love longing, clinging to an esoteric hope of heaven, lies about in her private alcove, escaping into books on science fiction and the occult, exemplifying something greater than the personal psychology of her own case study. She points up the specific social concern of the childless woman, particularly one who has lost her child, who harbors a terrible need for a live child of her own to have and to hold: that is, the incomplete, unfulfilled would-be mother who is compelled to contrive some means, however far-fetched, of dealing with her deprivation.

Godwin, pointing (by means of hints, reminders, and outward show) to her basic messages, here gives us "sound bite" evaluations of the woman from her neighbors. Here the scene is a "Dutch farming village, founded in 1690," and "nestled in the foothills of the mountains" within commuting distance of Manhattan (quite possibly in the Hudson River Valley), where she and her husband had moved after the loss of their baby. The neighboring couple, farmers, own adjacent property, "the old Patroon farm," and the man, who often sees her racing her stallion in a devil-maycare manner in the early morning, thinks she is courting disaster. The farmer's wife, a rider herself since she was three, recognizes "something beyond recklessness" in such behavior, and thinks the woman no longer has anything to fear. The farmer, though, is more direct. Children are what she needs, he remarks.

Another major social concern in "Dream Children" is the tendency, born probably out of deep personal need, for people to lead double lives. A staple of imaginative literature in various genres, the comedy repertoire, the lore of confidence trickery, and popular jokes and anecdotes since time out of mind, this double-life pattern applies primarily to the young couple who lost their newborn infant. She now manages to appear cheerful and normal as she goes about her daily errands in the village, in such a convincing manner that no one would have a clue as to what she went through not long ago, before moving here from the city.

Though she tries to hide from her husband the full power of her secret life of the mind, he is aware of her apparent obsession with fantasy writing, and knows that she has been seeking refuge, since their tragedy, in alternative modes of day-to-day living.

Regarding her husband, a TV producer in Manhattan, she assumes that he has a weekday mistress while staying in town but managing to play the caring husband with her, when he returns home on weekends. As to why she does not resent his (likely) spousal betrayal, the answer involves the two social concerns discussed above. Following the unfortunate stillbirth, she was unwell and soon developed gynecological complications, which put an end to their sex life. But he has seemed all along to take that situation quite in stride. There was a lesson for her in this: "Nobody is just one person." Having watched her husband on TV, being interviewed by the station's female news commentator, she later thinks of what he once was to her in their earlier relationship, and understands that both he and the woman interviewer have double lives that to them seem quite normal. The complicated matter of her dream child's having a double life also (to her way of thinking) will be dealt with below.

A third social concern is the difficulty for the layperson of (1) keeping up with high tech state of the art, and (2) accepting the modern "miracles" that scientific and technological research and development are making possible. This issue, discussed in a domestic scene of faulty communication, reveals why the couple, while fully intending to remain together in their fashion (i.e., without sex), are so mutually out of synch that even a renewed sexual relationship (were it possible) might not restore true harmony. They are watching the last in a series of TV programs whereby that medium supposedly undergoes self-examination. She, being steeped in mystic lore and books such as The Timeless Moment and Between Two Worlds, begins to think of the tiny dots on the TV screen, and of how those dots reconstitute a human face from far away, by means of time and space travel. Did he ever, she asks her husband, think all that is a miracle? Does he not wonder about all the miracles, unlike TV, not yet officially approved? Perhaps a century hence it will be taken for granted that an individual will be able to transmit a personal image through space, by some natural means already available? What are space and time?

Where are their boundaries? But he is not "into" any of this, being preoccupied instead with such practical matters as not renewing the contract of the female news commentator, and more importantly, what to do about his wife's dependence on fantasy literature, her escape into a world of miracles. Ironically, just at this point in the narrative, the unseen narrator alludes to what is in effect the husband's double bond.

Reference is made to his telling his beloved mistress his "whole story" and affirming that he will always remain married: he could never leave his wife, which the sympathetically supportive "other woman" understands and accepts.

Techniques

Godwin's third-person omniscient narrator is a multifarious village voice; or, looked at another way, a roving reporter with unlimited access, thanks to a good mike and a supply of truth serum, so that enough of the McNairs' sad—or to some readers, hopeful—domestic chronicle can be presented meaningfully. Admittedly, there is here a disjointed sequence of narrative fragments, private thoughts, impressions, folk wisdom, sound bites, rhetorical questions—transcribed in an inconsistent mix of italics and plain text. But to offset any modest awkwardness in format, there is the overall effect of a very moving story which also gives us a "feel" of the human mind in the act of remembering these happenings selectively, yet including something of everything, in an arresting series of scenes and "dissolves."

Godwin's treatment of her material clearly involves magical realism: an oxymoron at first glance, but a literary method hard to avoid when one is writing a serious story with personal meaning, about dream children or ghost children returned (in some form) to earth. Magical realism is described in A Handbook to Literature, 7th edition (1996), by William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, as a worldwide tendency in graphic and literary arts (prose fiction especially) during the twentieth century. On the surface the work may be realistic in the conventional way; however, such contrasting features as "the supernatural, myth, dream, fantasy make their way in and alter the" entire basis of the art process. A direct statement, quoted above, is made in the text of the story and clarifies Godwin's intent as far as method, beyond dispute. The child psychiatrist had told Mrs. McNair, when she was nine and subject to night journeys from her bed, that children are surrounded by a magical reality that keeps them safe.

Themes

Expressed as a directive, a major theme of this story is "Measure a person by his or her sense of loss." The young wife whose infant was stillborn is utterly transformed by the tragedy, going off on a new life course which is largely regulated by her ongoing need to penetrate by whatever means the unbreachable time-space wall of human existence and, in defiance of all logic, reason, and conventional wisdom, to be reunited with her lost baby son. Her husband, clearly not needing replacement therapy comparable with hers, reconstructs his life in the most convenient and thoughtful fashion he can manage. That is, by expressing concern for his wife's health and mental state, acting as her caregiver—so to speak—when he is home on weekends from his TV work in the city, and acting as another kind of husband during the week: a shadow husband with full rights and privileges, to the mistress he loves. While his real wife will "have it" her way or none in dealing with her problem, however impossible her way may seem, he himself is in reality Mister Have It Both Ways, and definitely likes that arrangement. But in neither of his two lives does his lost child seem to have a very important place. Admittedly, he fainted when the dead infant had to be forcefully extracted from his wife, and there is a reference, in connection with their sexless conjugal sleep, to "their mutual sorrow" resembling "a sword between them."

Another major theme of the story is that real life and dream life, considered as two separate lines or roads, are for some people not always separate and distinct, but rather mutually accessible, at least during certain periods. In Western literature from at least the fourteenth century with its dream-vision sagas and epics such as the English Piers Plowman and the Italian Divine Comedy of Dante, on down to the Spanish drama of Calderon: La Vida Es Sueno (1635)—with its more direct equating of life and dream, and on into the last two centuries, dream life and real life have preserved their friendly acquaintance, which sometimes verges on imprudent familiarity. The English essayist Charles Lamb wrote a reverie entitled "Dream-Children" (1822), which seems to underlie Godwin's "Dream Children"; however, she gives an entirely different genesis for that story, in her 1976 article in The Writer, "Discovering the Form for Your Fiction"). Ernest Bernbaum in his Guide to the Romantic Movement (1949) says of Lamb, "He loved to fall into reveries about the mysterious margins of ordinary human life—for instance, about dreams."

There are several kinds of dreams referred to in Godwin's story, some of them genuinely thought-provoking, and one of them seemingly frivolous or facetious: the suggestion that the young woman's sleeping dog might be dreaming of a rabbit in its jaws; to this a corollary is appended—the question of whether that (dream) rabbit knew that "it was a dream." (This is somewhat reminiscent of the last chapter in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass [1871], titled "Which Dreamed It?" Here little Alice playfully demands that her Kitty tell her who [which] really dreamt that dream; was it Alice herself, or the Red King? But Kitty is silent, so Carroll asks the reader.)

At one point in Godwin's story her narrator cites a passage about dreams and the human mind, in a book the young woman read. It was written by a respectable English

scientist who described his power of thought control, which enabled him to become detached from his regular physical personality, keep the intelligent part of himself wide awake, then enter the world where thoughts, memories, and dreams exist. He found, once having made a number of such mind journeys, that there is no competition between dream and reality. Rather than being rivals, dream and reality are complementary sources of consciousness—reciprocals. Earlier in Godwin's story (characterized by jumbled-time narrative segments and explanations), there is a clear-cut, eloquent description of how the young woman herself embarked upon a particular dream journey. Alone in the house, as she awoke in the middle of the night, after a storm, it was as if she were falling into one of her charming, deep reveries, wherein she could cast her thoughts wherever she wished, her mind holding within it the entire world.

Floating around in this silent realm, going through the house as she had done before, in a state "of weightless reverie" and practicing "the trick of sending herself abroad," she or her spirit eventually found the source of those strange noises, and she thereby came upon her lost little boy, playing with small objects in a jar. He was now two, keeping his own time sequence as if he had remained alive, in his real mother's world.

(On a later night-journey to seek him out, she found the little objects were coquina shells.) They looked at each other, silently.

But she knew enough not to come too close to him, and then when the lights came on, and she found herself so emotionally worked up, she was not certain that she had earlier left the bedroom.

As a brief commentary on her soul (mind, or spirit) journey, Edward Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, stanza 66 is worth noting. Though no lost love object is referred to in this section of the poetic cycle, the frame of reference has its relevance. "I sent my Soul through the Invisible,/ Some letter of that After-life to spell;/ And by and by my Soul returned to me,/ And answered, 'I Myself am Heav'n and Hell'—" There is a kind of nocturnal soul-journey dream even more powerful and affecting than the one in which she moves about the house in search once more of the lost child.

That is, the dream in which the boy himself initiates the difficult process of bringing about the reunion with her. Supreme fulfillment of her dearest wish! But this new phase of the mother-son relationship, such as it is, calls up an earlier experience the woman herself had, which is of great importance to the storyline. At age nine, she suddenly began walking in her sleep. One night during the summer, under the influence of this somnambulistic tendency, she left her bed, exited the house, and made her way to the fishpond, where she ended her nocturnal ramble curled in a heap at the edge of the fishpond. Her frightened and worried parents sought help from a child psychiatrist, who assuaged their fears for the child's safety, and gave them a bit of strong philosophy to take home with them.

Quite a number of children, she told them, leave their beds for "little night journeys...

but they wake up, and then they can't understand why there is so much commotion." Most of the time no harm comes from those night journeys: "a magical reality . . . surrounds the children, ensuring their safety." The "race of children. .. have magically sagacious powers," which the grownups, worried and afraid of so much, forget that they themselves once had. After this visit to the child psychiatrist with her clear message, there were no more night journeys for the girl.

In this greater dream experience, then, her dream child, who she believes loves her, is seemingly induced or conditioned (by her dedicated efforts) to come out and seek her on his own. Such "truly magic times"—six in six months—for the anxious would-be mother, daring to anticipate more times like those: the growing boy, by means of "his own childish powers," finding a will sufficiently strong or innocent "to project himself upon her still-floating consciousness" with the clarity and believability of her husband's image on the TV screen. In another dream experience the would-be mother imagines another, somewhat detailed life in another realm for the little boy of her dreams, in what amounts to a parallel world or universe. (In the existing commentary on Godwin's story, this has been seen as one more example of her "double life" symbolic pattern, but a mystical dreamcounterpart to a human, even a stillborn one, changes that format considerably.) In this other life he is part of a large but poor family including a harassed mother—living probably on Florida's west coast. And the young woman continues to develop her little scenario about her dream child and his night journeys, wondering if he can remember anything of his dream life with her—though she couldn't remember her own dream life during her sleepwalking phase. She once actually has a conventional dream—so qualitatively different from her magic dreams of him—in which she sees his whole (imagined) family, living a trailer existence where the palm trees grow.

That however was but a dream, and she knew it then.

The story concludes with yet another take on dreams and their relation to ordinary life. As the young woman rides so wildly and happily through the fields on her stallion, she wonders about her existence and its dream-like quality. What is she? Is she a woman riding on a horse, dreaming that she is a mother anxiously waiting for her child to wake up from its sleep? Or is she a mother who is dreaming about herself in the form of a free spirit capable of riding her horse "like the wind" because there is nothing for her to be afraid of?

A remaining theme that helps to undergird the story has been mentioned already, in connection with the young woman and her dream son, that is, the mystique that the story (i.e., its author) attributes to children.

To reiterate the words of the child psychiatrist, "a magical reality ... surrounds the children, ensuring their safety." To illuminate the possible implications of this philosophy as it might be applied to the young woman's dream child, it seems worthwhile to cull a certain number of lines from William Wordsworth's majestic "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807). Though Godwin does not

refer to this poem, and though she—despite her literary studies—may not even have had it in mind when she wrote "Dream Children," there is a peculiar appropriateness in considering the following passage as somewhat descriptive of the lost little boy: Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The soul that rises with us, our life's star, Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar: Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, But trailing clouds of glory do we come From God, who is our home: Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Adaptations

"Dream Children" was adapted as an audiocasserte by the American Audio Prose Library in 1987.

Key Questions

Godwin's "Dream Children" examines themes of marriage, self-definition, and loss.

1. Taking into account its subject matter and Godwin's handling of the narrative structure, were you particularly affected emotionally by "Dream Children"? If so, explain.

2. Was the ending of the story, with its rhetorical question about Mrs. McNair's happiness, effective in "wrapping up" the story of her life? Comment either way, or both ways.

3. What in your opinion is the purpose of all the italicized passages throughout the story? Who is saying or thinking those things? How do they fit into the major part of the story, which is not in italics but in plain text?

4. In your view, was Mrs. McNair really trying to kill herself and make it look like an accident, by racing her stallion so recklessly?

5. Even taking into account the emotional needs of a bereft, would-be mother like Mrs. McNair, how convincing is Godwin's account of Mrs. McNair's nocturnal soul journeys to be with her lost son?

6. What in your opinion was Godwin's purpose in making Mrs. McNair a sleepwalker when she was a small child?

7. Why in your opinion did Godwin include a scene in which Mr. McNair, a TV producer, was watching with his wife the TV program "in which TV purportedly examined itself"?

8. In your view, considering the importance of the "double life" in the story, do many people presently lead "double lives" in one way or another?

9. One of the italicized passages reads, "yes, the race of children possesses magically sagacious powers!" Comment on this statement. Do you think it is accurate, realistic, far-fetched, or something else? Offer evidence to support your view.

Literary Precedents

It seems reasonable to begin with the assumption, since positive proof is lacking, that Godwin's story has its literary origin in the English essayist Charles Lamb's "DreamChildren: A Reverie" (1822). Here Lamb, a bachelor, creates an imaginary scene in which he, now a widower, is with his two children, who nestle close to him as he tells them about dead relatives, including their (supposed) Great-grandmother Field and his long courtship of their mother ("the fair Alice"). Great-grandmother Field, so runs his story, was once mistress—that is, housekeeper—of a great house in Norfolk, where she lived alone, the owner dwelling elsewhere. That very house had been associated with certain tragic events popularized in a ballad, "Children in the Wood." It was her belief, accustomed as she was to sleeping in utter solitude, "that an apparition of two infants was to be seen at midnight gliding up and down the great staircase near where she slept." The two dream children are described realistically and charmingly. At one point he senses "the soul of the first Alice" looking out from the eyes of the little Alice beside him listening to his tales. Soon the images of his two dream children begin to fade and then only "two mournful features" can be discerned in the farthest distance, seeming to give him a message. That is, in effect, we are not Alice's children, nor yours, nor are we even children. Alice's children call another man father (he whom she married). We are less than nothing, dreams: merely "what might have been," and will have to wait untold ages before having an existence and gaining a name. Then the narrator awakens, having fallen asleep in his bachelor armchair.

The British composer Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934), best known for his Enigma Variations and Pomp and Circumstance Marches, also composed two short orchestral works, "Dream Children," Andante and Allegro, op. 43. This musical piece, recorded by the Bournemouth Sinfonietta, is available in a Chandos Digital CD #241-4. According to the program note on this selection, by Noel Goodwin (1999), "The two Dream Children manifested themselves in idyllic contrast to the celebratory music of King Edward VII's Coronation in 1902. The title is from Charles Lamb, and a long quotation from him at the end of the score ends with the poignant words, 'We are only what might have been.' It finds an echo in the yearning sadness that suffuses No. 1 [the Andante], with its musing oboe and clarinet, and which also intervenes in the lighter No. 2 [the Allegro]." Again, while there is no available evidence that Godwin knew of this music, it is an interesting link between Lamb's reverie-essay and Godwin's "Dream Children."

Stories of dream children, ghost children, wished-for or otherwise hypothetical children, reveal a wide range of authorial seriousness and sensitivity. Though readers' reactions to works of fiction in this genre depend on their personal taste and prior experiences relating to children, the literary quality of those stories or longer fiction works is very uneven, in fact not susceptible to being averaged. The following selections will provide an indication of a few individual instances. Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "Miss Mehetabel's Son" (1873) is based on a circular anecdote told by a colorful but addlepated old codger in a New Hampshire country hotel in 1872. He details, in a series of installments, the life of a son that he might have had, if only he had married a longtime sweetheart,

Mehetabel Elkins, to whom, it turns out, he never had gotten around to proposing matrimony.

This is perhaps the most amusing and whimsical of all the works in the above category, particularly since the talkative ancient has a number of other fascinating quirks, besides carrying the phantom biography only through the boy's twelfth year, after which he is ever willing to begin all over again, even to a repeat audience.

Though there is only a touch of the gruesome in the Aldrich story (the imaginary boy dies in an accident at age eleven), W. W. Jacobs's once famous tale "The Monkey's Paw" (1902) is essentially gruesome.

Belonging not only to the "ghost child" category of fiction but also to the "three magic wishes" category, it concerns a monkey's paw upon which an Indian fakir has placed a spell, to prove a point about the fatal danger of meddling with fate. The paw will grant its possessor three wishes.

One man who comes into the possession of the monkey's paw wishes first for money—which he soon receives as compensation for his son's death in an industrial accident.

Not long after, urged on by his wife but feeling it is the wrong thing to do, he wishes his son were alive again. A mysterious knock on his door persuades him that he is about to confront his horribly mangled son, returned from the grave, and gripped by that terrible fear, he wishes his son were no longer alive.

Oddly enough the next two stories— masterful works on several counts, but quite underappreciated over the decades, most likely because of their philosophical complexity—also deal with men who for private reasons do not want to encounter their lost children, or pass up the uncertain opportunity to do so. Rudyard Kipling's "They" (1904) features a bereaved father who comes upon a great house in the southern English countryside, presided over by a blind lady.

The house and grounds, it turns out, are frequented by a number of ghosts of children whose parents live in the vicinity and have the chance (and apparently the privilege) to be reunited with them every now and then. William Faulkner's "Beyond" (1933) is about a dying Judge who appears to be entering Heaven, laden with doubts and mixed feelings about life, death, the afterlife, God, and seeing his little boy again.

As he both seeks, and tries to avoid finding, his lost little boy, he encounters a number of people in this strange Heaven, including Mary and Baby Jesus, and engages in a heated discussion with an atheistic philosopher about traditional Biblical Christianity versus rationalism. In the Judge's convoluted reasoning, which is reflected in other Faulkner writings, he seems to touch on and even go beyond the Tennysonian idea that "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." This means in effect—following Faulkner's line, which bears directly on the Judge's dead boy, somewhere in Heaven—it "is better to have loved and lost than to have loved and not lost."

Another literary precedent may be found in the fiction of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (1896-1953), best known for her novel The Yearling (1938) and her memoir of life in Florida, Cross Creek (1942). As the present writer has pointed out in a literary biography of Rawlings (1974), almost her entire body of work, from her juvenilia to her last novel, The Sojourner (1953), may be described as "some pictures of the boy she never had." While there are not exactly ghost children in her stories, her terrible yearning for a little boy all her own is traceable all the way back to her childish attempts at fiction, and to incidental occurrences over the years of her life. Two works in particular, the short story "A Mother in Mannville" (1936) and the novelette Mountain Prelude (1947), feature a little orphan boy like the one she met once, in the North Carolina mountains.

As was pointed out in the abovementioned literary study of Rawlings, her pictures of the nonexistent boy "constitute a remarkable study of a woman's tormented mind fantasizing dream children and redemptive second chances."

A few literary successors with respect to Godwin's "Dream Children" may be mentioned. Toni Morrison's novel Beloved (1987) concerns a dead baby who is killed by her slave mother, to save her from the horrors of slavery, and who supposedly returns to life under unusual circumstances. John Sayles's script for his movie The Secret of Roan Inish (1994), based on Rosalie K. Fry's novel, The Secret of the Ron Mor Skerry (1957), is set on a small island off the Irish coast and portrays the mysterious sighting of a little Irish boy who was lost at sea when very young, but returns to play in the sand as he had been used to doing. Joyce Carol Oates's "Ghost Girls" (1995), a horror tale of violence and decadence among drug dealers, concerns an angry man who murders his two small daughters. As the title of this Oatesian shocker indicates, they return in ghostly form periodically and resume their playing activities.

Related Titles

"Dream Children" is the title story in Godwin's story collection Dream Children (1976). The other stories in that collection are: "False Lights," "Some Side Effects of Time Travel," "Nobody's Home," "My Lover, His Summer Vacation," "Interstices," "The Legacy of the Motes," "Why Does a Great Man Love?" "Death in Puerto Vallarta," "An Intermediate Stop," "A Sorrowful Woman," "Layover," "The Woman Who Kept Her Poet," "Indulgences," and "Notes for a Story." In different ways, commentators on Godwin have remarked on her female protagonists' attempts to cope with (stringent) demands on them by family, contemporary society, and other outside sources, while at the same time utilizing all the powers available to them to define and assert their selfhood in the face of discouraging opposition. In short, these women insist on making a life for themselves. Perhaps the best comparisons with "Dream Children" to be found among the other titles in the above story collection are "A Sorrowful Woman" and "Nobody's Home."

Neither is a ghost story but their female protagonists either simply arrange to stop playing the role of wife (and in one case, mother as well) or do so in actuality. But they come back at last, and resume their wifely burdens under constraint, somewhat reminiscent of Mrs. McNair in "Dream Children." "Nobody's Home," however, appears to be something of a spoof, a whimsical feminine-revenge tale, that is a response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's sketch "Wakefield" (1835). There the narrator speculates on what it would be like to have a man walk out on his wife, live close by to spy on her, then whenever in the distant future it suits him, simply walk back into their lodging and resume where he had left off. Though it is missing in "Dream Children," Godwin's sense of humor shows through once in a while.

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