Enchanted Night Short Guide

Enchanted Night by Steven Millhauser

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Contents

Characters

While most of Millhauser's characters do tend to represent various small town stereotypes, his loners and losers, lovers and dreamers are able to join in these rites of mythic consequence, despite being extraordinarily ordinary, precisely because they already move across their suburban landscape like figures at a masquerade ball. Just as Linda Harris dons her black eye-mask and calls herself Summer Storm when she and the other Daughters break into houses, the novella's other characters assume sketchy, but possibly provisional identities that are determined, primarily, by the titles of the interlaced vignettes that make up the Millhauser narrative. Haverstraw becomes "The Man in the Attic." Mrs. Kasco becomes "A Woman Waiting." Others are described as: "Laura Invisible," "The Woman Who Lives Alone," "The Man with Shiny Black Hair," "Coop along the Railroad Tracks," and "Danny Alone."

While some of the novella's personalities do manage to transcend the limitations of stereotype, Columbine and Pierrot remain the most obviously stock members of the cast. As Millhauser describes their relationship, the perpetually heartbroken Pierrot flings himself into a multitude of melancholy poses, which will permit him to express the full poetry of his spurned and hopeless devotion. His Columbine, confined though she is to one unvarying expression of disdain, is so lovely that he wishes to fall continually at her feet in attitudes of adoration and ruin.

But now, under the melting power of the moon, she has been set free to explore a rich repertoire of dismissive looks—the mocking, the bitter, the cruel, the reproachful, the laughing, the petulant, the defiant, the bored—accompanied by gestures eloquent with lofty indifference and delicate ennui.

When Pierrot stabs himself with melodramatic fervor, Columbine momentarily regrets the possibility of his permanent removal from her sphere of attraction, if only because she has become accustomed to these opportunities for stylized rejection.

Other lovers are only slightly less theatrical in their interactions. When Janet wakes to the cliched pebble against her window, she alternates (as fickle as Columbine) between trepidation and euphoria. Although she longs to pull the covers over her head, to "live alone, die alone," rather than keep her date with the handsome youth she had impulsively agreed to meet, she will give in eventually to the spirit of the evening.

"You're wild tonight," her unnamed lover will tell her before she leads him into her childhood hideout that becomes a proverbial bower of bliss.

Although Janet's passion may only retain its eternal resonance in memory, she, unlike Columbine, has achieved complex status, because she has managed to overcome her characteristic coyness in order to seize the pleasures of night. We can believe that this evening has significantly altered her existence. Other couples have also par ticipated in Millhauser's variation on the carpe diem mode. When Coop, the human equivalent of Pierrot, is approached by the suddenly mobile mannequin as he rests, forlornly, against

a garbage can, he no longer cares if the eight or more alcoholic beverages he has consumed are contributing to delirium tremens. Earlier he had fled the scene of the mannequin's transformation, assuming that her movement was only a projection of his own emotional and chemical instability. Now, he allows the "glasshard" beauty to touch his face, then to take his hand.

Coop eventually realizes that his longstanding attraction to the formerly inaccessible female figure has been based largely on "her untouchable, out-of-this-world thereness, her unshakable unreality." As a blue-collar worker, Coop has been exhausted by the pressures of reality. That is why he drinks. Because Coop is not capable of coping with the complications of a relationship with another human being, he is not at all likely to be put off by the adamantine coolness of fiberglass flesh. Indeed, Coop has never been turned on by the girl next door or the cheerleader type—and he even sneers at a drugstore's cardboard cutout, because he fails to appreciate the bikini-clad model's over-exposed breasts. He does, however, view a mannequin in a window as an object of sexual desire. He finds himself wondering, for example, if her breasts have nipples; but he really does not want to know.

Coop does not want consummation. He needs to retain his grip on the unreal, to assuage his tiredness with fantasy. Although his mannequin will return to her aloof pose with morning and Coop will be left to puzzle over the details of his midsummer night's dream, he seems somehow less pathetic, less down-and-out than he has previously been.

Perhaps because Coop is deliberately contrasted with other males who objectify the female body in ruder terms and with less sympathetic motives, he manages to come across as more of a "pale romantic," than a fetishistic drunk. Even as Coop idolizes his feminine ideal, however, he upholds the familiar view of woman as either madonna or demon, virgin or whore. Amusingly, Coop's fiberglass angel appears in a department store window, rather than on the traditional pedestal; still, the archetypal pattern obviously holds. It is surely no coincidence, then, that the vignette in which Coop indulges in "The Pleasures of Window Gazing" is immediately preceded by two scenes in which other males dehumanize, as they sexualize, the feminine form.

In the first, the trio of white, teenage boys, who have purloined the key to the library, engage in a sexually- and raciallycharged ritual of masculine bonding. With Blake's enthusiastic encouragement, Smitty uses raunchy slang to recount his grope-bygrope encounter with a non-Caucasian girl.

Smitty is outraged because the female (who may be Native American or Hispanic) has allowed him to fondle her "Cherry Lane" and her "Jug Alley," but rejects him when he tries to french kiss her. In the following segment, a solitary, but sinister man stalks the streets in search of pictures for what he calls his private gallery. We will later learn that this unsavory character with his shiny black hair is a singularly unpleasant pervert, who steals glimpses up girls' skirts in the library and manages to convince himself that even the most unsuspecting of his visual objects is deliberately provoking his prurience.

Haverstraw will eventually catch him creeping up on the thicket, where a fourteen-year-old girl named Laura has removed her clothing after being seduced into a false impression of privacy by a sensuous combination of moonlight and Pan song. Laura is probably the character that Millhauser has in mind when he includes those affected by "red-fever visions" in his earlier call to bacchanal. Indeed, in the novella's opening paragraph, Laura is overcome by restlessness so intense that even the "inside of her skin itches." She cannot bear to stay indoors where she feels edgy and suffocated.

Once she escapes to the open night air, however, she still feels oppressed. The town itself seems to have become a larger version of her stifling bedroom.

That Laura feels spied upon even before the pervert notices and pursues her is significant. Her urge to break out of the confines of room, town, and self is at least partially motivated by her awareness of her status as a potential object of an undifferentiated gaze. Laura wants to evade adult supervision as much as sexual recognition.

"She doesn't want anyone to look at her," we are told. "No one is allowed to think about her body." However, Laura's desire to escape is not driven entirely by adolescent discomfort with the body's hormonal changes. Indeed, Laura seems to revel in her transformative potential. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, Laura is figured as a powerfully mutable figure. She is "a taffy girl" and "a telescope girl." Like Janet, the Daughters, and the woman who lives alone, Laura will also be cast as an Artemesian favorite, as a vestal virgin, and as "a daughter of the moon."

Indeed, after she disrobes in the supposedly secluded, arboreal alcove, Laura slips into a trancelike state, mesmerized by the lunar gleam. As she reclines on the grass, she is penetrated by rays that irradiate and purify her as a "sword plunging deep, burning away her restlessness, cleansing her, killing her." Although the moon does appear as an intense, if incestuous, masculine force in this passage, it also comes across as rather ambivalent in its sexual agency in other erotic moments in the text. Only a few chapters later, Danny, the only participant of the library break-in to distance himself from the misogynistic sex talk, will also find himself the object of the moon's attentions.

Although Danny has never had a sexual relationship, he instinctively respects females more than his companions do. In fact, Blake is offended by Danny's disinterest in Smitty's smutty complaints. Blake accuses Danny of disliking "pussy," but Danny realizes that he actually has a greater appreciation of female anatomy than the others do. If a girl ever allowed him to touch her body, Danny believes that he would feel "gratitude so deep that it would be deeper than love." As if to reward such a chivalrous attitude, Danny will be singled out later that evening by a surprisingly amorous moon goddess after he falls asleep beneath the clothesline where his family's underwear has been left out overnight.

Diana, too, has apparently been inspired by Pan's libidinous influence.

Despite the humorously contradictory nature of its mythical pretensions, this scene manages to establish Danny's function as a younger version of Haver straw. Danny has potential and so might Haverstraw, who has up until this point seemed something of a "could-have-been" or a "never-will-be."

Both Danny and Haverstraw are loners and dreamers; although Danny is more of a "pale romantic," Haverstraw is a "flop" and an "Ishmael," less fighter than "palooka," more soft than rugged, more blurry than distinct. While this night has inspired Haverstraw to consider himself as a potential traveler and trailblazer, inventor and entrepreneur, Danny has imagined putting off college in order to drive a truck across country, to learn something practical about highways and diners, to acquire some knowledge that transcends the limitations of his provincial and conventional world. Like so many Millhauser characters, Danny and Haverstraw are in search of "options," of "chances," of "whimsical possibilities" (Kinzie).

Both Danny and Haverstraw also attain semimythical status in the text. While Danny seems so "mortal and beautiful" as he lies on the grass that even the most dedicated of virgin goddesses cannot resist playing the part of succubus, Haverstraw regards himself as blessed by the same deity after he abrogates the pervert's bad intentions toward Laura. Haverstraw identifies himself as an "emissary" of "Diana the huntress: chaste and fair. Protectress: guardian of virgins." He sees himself, finally, as a hero, as a "punisher of spies," as a servant of the moon.

Social Concerns

Unlike the plot of Theodore Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt—a novel lent to the scholarly character at the center of Enchanted Night in order to "increase his social consciousness"—the typical Steven Millhauser story line tends to eschew obvious sociopolitical commentary. Indeed, as Douglas Fowler has noted in an article published in Critique, much of Millhauser's work could accurately be described as "exquisite," but decidedly "apolitical" and "socially indifferent". Millhauser's Pulitzer Prize-winning Martin Dressier (1996), which concerned itself with the commercial as well as the fanciful aspects of architectural design, seems something of an anomaly when compared to the more fantastic interludes of In the Penny Arcade (1986), The Barnum Museum (1990), or The Knife Thrower and Other Stories (1998).

While Millhauser's fiction has been categorized as magical realism, as solipsistic minimalism, and as a postmodern expression of "art for art's sake," some critics say that Millhauser's compressed narratives seem slightly less marvelous than those of his Latin-American counterparts. The difference, they suggest, may be attributed to the persistent presence of the commonplace in his works. In choosing to localize his suburban fantasias in southern Connecticut, Millhauser constantly reminds the reader of the really banal reality that circumscribes his manifestations of the unreal and/or the magical. When the mythological Diana gazes down from her lunar abode in Enchanted Night, for example, she glimpses "telephone poles studded with glass insulators," "trucks rolling along the thruway," "gas tanks and water towers," "railroad tracks and white picket fences," "lifeguard chairs and . . .

limestone quarries," "high-voltage lines strung between steel pylons," "winding country lanes with a double yellow line down the center" as well as a boy "lying asleep in his back yard between the clothesline and the garage."

Again and again, Millhauser presents the reader of Enchanted Night with overviews of an average neighborhood where his characters are defined to some extent by their proximity to clotheslines, basketball nets, lawn sprinklers, and other man-made objects. For the most part, the residents of Millhauser's microcosm are a civilized lot: a thirty-nine-year-old writer who lives with his mother; a somewhat repressed young woman who met a beautiful young man earlier that day on the beach; a sad drunk in love with a department store mannequin; a lonely lady who leaves her empty house to cavort on the grass, because "[s]urely there is no law against it."

Here, even the outlaws are relatively benign. A gang of high school girls, calling themselves the Daughters, breaks into houses only to "steal small, unimportant objects like refrigerator magnets, toothbrushes, and eyeglass cases." At the same time, three adolescent males sneak into the public library only to engage in the kind of crude, but frustrated, sexual banter that is usually reserved for the locker room. Although a potential rapist does creep through the dark behind the athletic field of the junior high

school, he is ultimately thwarted by an unlikely hero, wielding a book (the aforementioned Jennie Gerhardt) as a weapon.

Indeed, as Boston Globe reviewer, Robert Taylor has suggested, Enchanted Night seems, at times, to be constructed as a contemporary American version of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Like Shakespeare's comedy, Millhauser's text allows for the temporary suspension of social norms as characters flee civilization in defiance of the usual order of things. Although the conclusion suggests that the status quo may be reaffirmed in the morning, various characters do manage to break old routines, to shed inhibitions, and to engage in spontaneous and exuberant acts. They heed the mysterious cricket-and-flute call that leads them out of confined rooms and selves, and into the relative wildness of woods, or shadows, or merely the thicket behind Denner's Body Shop. Like Shakespeare's Bottom, the blearyeyed William Cooper (aka Coop) finds himself in the arms of an otherworldly mistress, who can only appreciate his fleshy humanity because she is enchanted herself. In Millhauser's work, the agent of misrule is not Puck, however, but "a strange man with naked chest and sharp ears, hairy flanks and prancing goat-legs." He is both pied piper and the fertility god, Pan.

It would appear that, despite the Victorians' insistence, the great god Pan is not dead after all. He has merely left Arcadia for the American Dream. His music appeals to the various "dreamers and drowners," "loafers and losers," "shadow-seekers and orphans of the sun" that populate Millhauser's novella. He sings, "Come out, come out, you flops and fizzlers, you good-for-nothings and down-and-outers, day's outcasts, dark's little darlin's," directing his song at all you who are misbegotten and woebegone, all you with black thoughts and red fever-visions, come on, you small-town Ishmaels with your sad blue eyes, you plain Janes and hard-luck guys, come, you gripers and groaners, you goners and loners, you sadsacks and shlemiels, come on, come on, you pale romantics and pie-eyed Palookas, you has-beens and never-willbes, you sun-mocked and day-doomed denizens of the dark: come out into the night In featuring characters who would generally be assigned the roles of extras in somebody else's adventure story, Millhauser continues to explore ideas that were central to Martin Dressier. While Dressier exhibited a genius for taking chances, for pursuing the American dream, and staking everything on his faith in his own internal muse, the characters in Enchanted Night are dreamers riddled with self-doubt.

Haverstraw, the scholar-figure, for example, has been writing his masterpiece ("an experiment in memory") for the last nine years. Like George Eliot's Casaubon in her novel Middlemarch, Haverstraw seems unlikely to finish his Key to All Mythologies, because he is ultimately unable to commit himself to the present. Although he longs for justification, for redemption, he is unable to act decisively. He very likely remains a virgin, despite a long-term relationship with a much older woman. He hoards cereal box prizes and bubblegum cards, because he cannot bear to discard his childhood. On this evening of enchantment, however, Haverstraw is finally able to recognize that his failure stems from his inability to veer from "the beaten track," to wander along "wilder" byways.

As he roams in the moonlight, however, Haverstraw finds himself imagining other roles for himself. He would like to be: King of the New World: trapper, hunter, fisher, farmer, sower of appleseed, stargazer, trailblazer, pathfinder, deerslayer, barefoot boy with cheek of tan, Huck Finn on the Housatonic, crackerbarrel philosopher, wily old coot in a coonskin cap, shrewdeyed Yankee, inventor of the cotton gin, the printing press, the typewriter, founder of libraries, distributor of American jeans to the Indians, self-made tycoon in a thirty-room mansion, a hometown boy, worked his way up, one in a million, a lone ranger, a wayfaring stranger, a born loser, a man down on his luck.

In this fantasy, the man who has never explored nature, who has yet to achieve any practical accomplishments that might be listed on a resume, can actually imagine himself playing every part that James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Horatio Alger could invent.

Until now, Haverstraw has never been able to embrace individualism, has never played the hero even in his dreams. On this enchanted night, however, he rescues a teenage girl from her would-be violator. That he does so, by threatening to throw Jennie Gerhardt at the man, is surely as significant as it is funny. Haverstraw can now testify to the "social value of art."

Techniques

Literary scholars who attempt to categorize and analyze the formal concerns of earlier work, including In the Penny Arcade and The Barnum Museum, have also tended to accentuate fantastic and phantasmagoric elements, even as they call attention to Millhauser's realist or naturalist bent. The names of Kafka, Borges, Poe, Calvino, Andersen, Hawthorne, Garcia Marquez, and.

Nabokov are often cited as analogues by those who cast Millhauser as a metafictionist or a magical-realist. Angela Carter and John Barth might also be assigned to this list.

Like Carter and Barth, Millhauser seems to be appropriating and revamping overly familiar myths. As Mary Kinzie has noted in reference to "The Invention of Robert Herendeen," Millhauser has made a career of rehabilitating and parodying archetypal patterns, such as the figure of the doppelganger or alter ego that is prevalent in literature from Ovid's Metamorphoses to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, from Poe's "William Wilson" to Borges's "The Circular Ruins."

In Enchanted Night, Millhauser multiplies his doubles, pairing Haverstraw with Danny, Coop with Pierrot, Janet with the mannequin, and so on. He is also, most obviously, reintroducing the rather hoary, as well as horny, Pan to the American reader, who has probably relegated the fertility spirit to ancient Greece or Victorian Britain. Although the goat-god scampered through The Wind in the Willows, by the Scotsman Kenneth Grahame, and turned up in various other works by British writers at the turn of the century, he has not had much impact on contemporary American fiction.

Although Millhauser's Pan only appears in one of the seventy-four vignettes or prose poems that constitute the novella, the reader familiar with the restive effects of the goat god's flute will have suspected the identity of the music's source all along. Another reasonable suspect would have been the Pied Piper of Hamelin who, like Millhauser's Pan, led children on a somnambulistic trek out of town. Either legendary character would make for an equally efficient agent provocateur. Indeed, Millhauser more than likely expects the reader to speculate on both possibilities.

As is the case in his earlier fictions, Millhauser courts multiple associations by self-consciously peppering his text with allusions to other works. It is not surprising that one reviewer compared Enchanted Night to Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Comparisons can be made to Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, Hoffman's The Nutcracker, Eliot's Middlemarch, and Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. Millhauser invites intertextual interpretation.

It is this habit of teasing the reader with literary resemblances that lends a playfully perverse quality to Millhauser's prose. The reader is never allowed to forget that he or she has fallen into Wonderland. As Kinzie remarks, Millhauser does not encourage suspension of disbelief. In fact, he constantly insists on reminding the reader of the

artificiality of the fictional universe. In Enchanted Night, he has a character complaining about the inauthenticity of the written or spoken "I." He constructs entire "chapters," in which insects sing "Chk-achk mmmm," a teddy bear muses, "I wuv woo. Does woo wuv me?," and an unidentified speaker says, "Hello there, moon!"

The purpose of this particular exchange is incomprehensible unless it is intended to prompt an association with the popular children's book Goodnight, Moon.

In addition to invoking numerous literary associations, Millhauser's prose also tends to signal its author's desire to promote awareness of textual artificiality by repeatedly producing overmodified lists that are replete with alliteration and internal rhyme. As Kinzie notes in her discussion of "Alice, Falling" from The Barnum Museum, Millhauser frequently overwhelms his reader with a catalogue of decorative detail. Kinzie suggests that he strains the believability factor with these "assemblages of items," by choosing to include seemingly idiosyncratic details in list after list. When quoting Millhauser, one sometimes feels compelled to insert ellipses or to paraphrase passages in order to limit the length of a particular paragraph. Despite these editorial liberties, the breathless, even prolix quality of Millhauser's syntax is still evident.

Millhauser's Enchanted Night is not, then, a linear, mimetic text. Although he does ground the reader amid the backyards and telephone poles, railroad tracks and white picket fences of suburban Connecticut, he offers only superficial verisimilitude in this lyrical rendering of Pierrot's and Columbine's, Haverstraw's and Laura's, Smitry's and Danny's one-night enchantment.

Millhauser offers in his fiction what Coop needs from his mannequin. He suggests that what "moves" us all is not the fictional replication of real-world experiences, but the temporary diversion of "unshakable unreality" and "out-of-this-world thereness."

Themes

Although Millhauser appears to be winking at critics who argue that he, like Haverstraw, ought to contend with larger social issues in his work, he also appears to be returning to the subject that preoccupies much of his fiction. In short stories like "The Invention of Robert Herendeen" and "Eisenheim the Illusionist," and in novels— including Edwin Mullhouse (1972), Portrait of a Romantic (1977), and Martin Dressier— Millhauser has repeatedly concerned himself with artistic conflict. His creative characters struggle with ambition and alienation, with intuition (joie de vivre) and its absence (ennui). They are generally lonely people, who create imaginary playfellows and universes that can never fulfill their need to reconstruct reality for long. Each illusion must eventually be supplanted by a grander illusion. Why do writers like Millhauser write? As one of his fictional counterparts explains, "Stories, like conjuring tricks, are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams" ("Eisenheim the Illusionist," 1990). Or, as the same narrator remarks, writers create out of a spiritual urge to transgress boundaries, to subvert what is by summoning what could be.

Haverstraw's memory project continues to elude completion, however, because he cannot believe in the validity of his work.

As he tells Mrs. Kasco, the widow he visits on Fridays and Saturdays at one in the morning, Haverstraw is frustrated by his inability to convey actuality in words. Even the pronoun "I" fails to represent the self of the writer, who commits that letter to the page. "What bothers me I guess is the lie of it all, I mean the inevitable lie of the form itself," says Haverstraw, since the second you say 'I' you're immediately separating yourself from the person you're claiming to be, am I making myself clear, so that the T which is supposed to be the sign of authenticity is really the most devious pronoun of all, nothing but a 'he' in disguise, a 'he' with false beard and mustache. Because when you say 'I' you're no longer the 'I' you claim to be, but someone else, a stranger spied on by your present self, separate, severed, estranged.

Haverstraw, unfortunately, cannot capture memory's psychological and philosophical features, because he is unable to accept the oversimplifications that pass for remembrances of the past. He cannot appreciate the little details that stick with him ("the chip near the handle" of a teacup, "the tea stains along the run"), because he cannot recall all of the circumstances that encapsulated that one vivid image in his mind. He is forced to fill in the gaps. For Haverstraw, the interplay between memory and imagination is grounds for rejecting all testimony. Clearly, he would make a poor Proust.

Haverstraw is not the only character in Millhauser's novella, however, to suffer from artistic anxieties. Twenty-year-old Janet Manning, gazing out her window, suddenly feels like a girl in a painting, trapped by its frame. Paradoxically, her yearning for release is paralyzed by her growing conviction that she cannot move. Janet is, at this moment, the opposite of another female figure who occupies a position behind glass.

Just as Janet's conflicting desires for freedom and stasis seem to have turned her, temporarily, into art, the mannequin in the window of a Main Street department store welcomes the moonlight that loosens "the rigorous bonds of her nature" and enlivens her fiberglass flesh. She is Pygmalion's statue come to life.

Like the walking eidolons that Millhauser's protagonists Eisenheim and Robert Herendeen concentrate into being, the mannequin represents the successful animation of imaginative life. As Mary Kinzie has noted in her essay on Millhauser's earlier work, the figure of the "double," "the golem, familiar, Frankenstein, or Pygmalion-creature" is a frequent fixture in Millhauser's fictions. Indeed, the transmogrified mannequin is only the largest of this novella's living dolls. Others—including a one-eyed teddy bear, Raggedy Ann, a toy soldier, and Pierrot and Columbine (the stock figures from the commedia dell'arte)—pirouette about attics all over town. Although no nutcrackers appear, the reader cannot help but be reminded of the fantasy suite of E. T. A. Hoffman and Tchaikovsky.

The key difference between the processes of animation in Enchanted Night and Millhauser's earlier texts, however, is the external nature of the transformative impetus. Whereas Eisenheim and Herendeen actively will their figments into being, neither Haverstraw nor any other human character in the novella can be credited with godlike powers of inspiration. Instead, Pan the goat-god makes a benevolent, but unannounced appearance in this Connecticut venue in order to stir up some imaginative nightlife. No explanation is offered for his sudden advent in this place or this time.

Unlike the Pans of Arthur Machen, Algernon Swinburne, or E. M. Forster, this Pan is terrifying to no one. Millhauser's Pan is more of an energizing and consoling life force. He is the sexual agent of a D. H. Lawrence novel and the natural spirit of a Wordsworth poem. After an evening of communing with the dim music of pipes and an unusually sensual moon, various characters return to their beds feeling gratitude, satisfaction, and hope as the sun rises.

Janet has felt flowers blossoming behind her eyelids. The woman who lives alone has adopted the pseudonym, "Sister of the Summer Moon," following her encounter with the teenage renegades, the Daughters.

Haverstraw, who has previously disdained romantic reactions to nature, is feeling like the blessed son of night, and even the mannequin returns to her window without regret. Each character has come to appreciate his or her opportunity to straddle, temporarily, two worlds: the real and the magical.

Haverstraw, especially, has gained renewed faith in imagination as a source of authenticity. Under Pan's guidance, he has felt less real and more real than he has ever felt before. More significantly, however, he has come to appreciate this paradox. The reader can believe that Haverstraw may now be capable of achieving a heightened plane of creative being akin to Keats' Negative Capability, because he has, on this evening, allowed himself to give into "uncertainties, Mysteries, [and] doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" ("To George and Tom Keats," 1817).

Key Questions

Many readers find metafictional prose to be frustrating, because of its tendency to defy the suspension of disbelief. Readers may be afraid to take the subject matter seriously even when the author seems to be incorporating realistic or naturalistic elements. If the author seems to be making light of the value of art to society, for example, the reader may wish to avoid interrogation of the work's sociopolitical issues for fear of seeming to have missed the joke.

Those who believe that fiction is designed to entertain, rather than to educate or to propagate ideology may also be tempted to refuse to discuss books like Enchanted Night.

It would be very difficult, however, to dismiss the cerebral nature of Steven Millhauser's aesthetic project. For this reason, I would argue that all readers should be prepared to approach his texts with a mixture of intellectual curiosity and levity. Enchanted Night is artsy and funny; it is also impressively brainy.

1. In "The Sisterhood of Night," nervous parents claim that delinquent young women may be indulging in pagan rituals, because they have been "made restless by the boredom and emptiness of middle-class life." In frequently featuring average citizens as the subjects of supernatural enchantment, Millhauser seems to be suggesting that ordinary people from Suburbia, USA are continuing to experience an urgent need to reconnect with deep-rooted mystical and/or spiritual beliefs. Why does the legend of Pan continue to appeal to American readers of today?

2. When Haverstraw complains about his distrust of the pronoun "I," Mrs. Kasco suggests that he should read "a little Marx." She tells him that "it wouldn't hurt [him] one little bit to think about class, about class values." When Haverstraw defends his right to "paddle [his] own canoe," or follow his own creative urges, Mrs. Kasco asks him who is renting him the canoe, allowing him to use the stream, and paying for his paddling pursuits. Do you believe that the creative writer is obligated to consider sociopolitical issues in his work? Does he owe society that much?

3. Analyzing texts that preceded Martin Dressier, Mary Kinzie says that Millhauser's characters frequently suffer from "a want of psychological relatedness," from "a want of psychological being, that might otherwise make them attractive to us as mimetic objects of human fate." Do any of the personalities featured in Enchanted Night manage to overcome the typical flatness of the Millhauser character? Is Haverstraw as complex as Martin Dressier, for example?

4. Comment on the eroticization of the female body in Enchanted Night. Does Millhauser challenge or contribute to the tendency to polarize females into virgins or whores? Which females are sexualized? Which ones evade sexual speculation? And why does Millhauser's Diana/Artemis commit statutory rape?

5. What happens the morning after the Enchanted Night? Does the gratitude, satisfaction, and hope dissipate?

6. In "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town," also from The Knife Thrower and Other Stories, townsfolk enjoy the freedom of wandering about an underground maze.

The story's speaker claims that they "descend in order to have before [them] the perpetual possibility of losing [their] way." In Enchanted Night, Haverstraw must allow himself to wander along wilder byways, to take roads less taken, if he is to break out of his nonproductive routine. In other words, his work cannot go anywhere if he is unwilling to stray into unknown territory. How does this creative strategy compare to similar arguments made by other writers, such as Robert Frost?

7. In Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," two of the best-known examples of the carpe diem motif in literature, the listener or reader is advised to "seize the day," to enjoy life's pleasures without worrying about the future. How does Millhauser's novella compare/contrast with the rhetorical appeals of these texts?

8. Although Millhauser informed Kinzie that he had been deeply immersed in Franz Kafka's letters when he was composing the stories in The Bamum Museum, Kinzie identifies more common ground between Millhauser's prose and that of Jorge Luis Borges. Does Enchanted Night remind you of work by other authors?

Does the intensely allusive nature of Millhauser's prose make it seem more or less original than that of other writers?

9. Comment on the nonlinear organization of Enchanted Night. Could any of the segments be omitted? Is the "Song of the One-Eyed Cuddly Bear" a little too precious?

10. The woman who lives alone claims that "you are free" when "you are hidden." What does she mean? How empowered are the Daughters by their anonymity?

Literary Precedents

In order to appreciate Millhauser's contribution to the mythography that concerns itself with the legendary, goat-footed piper, the reader may wish to sample other fictional incarnations from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under the auspices of imaginative literature, metaphysical Nature, represented by the hoofed and horned god, has frequently been examined as either corruptive and sinister or protective and benevolent. Arthur Machen's The Great God Pan is, perhaps, the bestknown example of the former perspective.

Kenneth Grahame's The Wind and the Willows takes the latter approach. Usually, however, Pan—whose name (in Greek) means "all"—is cast as a constitutionally ambivalent spirit.

In E. M. Forster's "The Story of a Panic," for example, British tourists gather for a picnic in the Italian countryside only to find themselves scrambling downhill, precipitated by undifferentiated fear. Neither the narrator nor any of the other characters can articulate the cause of the panic that comes upon them like the sudden madness that leads sheep to suddenly break from a peaceful fold, only to plunge over a cliff to certain death. Forster's tourists are, for the most part, conventional individuals, concerned with proper comportment, satisfied with orthodox beliefs. They are diligently and complaisantly repressed.

Only one character, a fourteen-year-old boy named Eustace, manages to remain behind after the others abandon dignity and bolt. Although he has formerly distinguished himself as a particularly shiftless, unmotivated personality, Eustace is transformed and revitalized by his encounter with an unseen agent that leaves cloven footprints in the dirt. Upon returning to lodgings, the other tourists find themselves unable to control the boy's manic behavior.

He pretends to be a dog, catches a hare, kisses old ladies, and embraces an Italian employee of the hotel. Despite a conspiracy to confine him to his room, Eustace leaps through a window and escapes. The wild boy will eventually grow up to become a celebrity, whose antics will be followed in the news.

In E. F. Benson's "The Man Who Went Too Far," another narrative that features the energizing effects of Pan's grace, an artist named Frank Halton devotes himself to a regimen of unadulterated joy. "Zealously avoid [ing] the sight of anything unhappy," he strives to rid himself of the suffering that he associates with Puritanism, that "awful and terrible disease" that advocates "useless renunciation, asceticism for its own sake" and "mortification of the flesh." As he deliberately endeavors to enhance his receptivity to Pan's "gospel of joy," Halton gives up smoking and becomes a vegetarian. Like a D. H. Lawrence character, he also indulges in erotic fits, in which he wallows amid daisies and cowslips, caressing the earth.

Although Halton's nature-loving lifestyle does bequeath him with a newfound youth and a certain luminosity of visage, the artist is eventually forced to recognize and accept suffering as an inherent attribute of predatory Nature. Once Halton is finally able to rid himself of the inhibition that led him to avoid ugliness, unhappiness, and death, he succeeds in invoking the goat-god. He dies in the process. However, as Halton tells the narrator earlier in the text, he is prepared for such an outcome. He expects his "final revelation" to throw open to me, once and for all, the full knowledge, the full realisation and comprehension that I am one, just as you are, with life. In reality there is no 'me,' no 'you,' no 'it.' Everything is part of the one and only thing which is life. . . . I shall see Pan. It may mean death, the death of my body, that is, but I don't care. It may mean immortal, eternal life lived here and now and for ever.

Much like Haverstraw, Halton has considered the implications of an illusory "I."

Unlike Haverstraw, Halton is not troubled by the flimsy nature of the self. In fact, he is eager to transcend the realm of separate identities, in which the individual perceives himself as discrete and disconnected. While Haverstraw identifies language as the source of estrangement, Halton is untroubled by the ineffability factor, because as a visual artist, he does not expect to locate authenticity in words. Unlike Haverstraw, who still hopes to complete his masterpiece, Halton, at age thirty-five, has relinquished a professional career; he does not desire public success. In fact, Halton has not exhibited any of his paintings in years. Instead, Halton expresses his artistic agenda in the manner in which he lives.

A similar message is promoted in the Pan-related fictions of the occultist Dion Fortune. In "A Daughter of Pan," which appeared in the 1926 edition of The Secrets of Dr. Taverner, and in "A Son of the Night," included for the first time in the 1978 reprint of that volume, Fortune identified the puckish deity as the patron of "the abnormal, the subhuman, and the pariah," as well as "the lunatic and the genius." In other words, Fortune suggested that the mentally ill may actually be mentally gifted.

Because nonconventional personalities are often compelled to conform to restrictions set by a more conventional society, they often tend to break down, to resort to selfdestructive behaviors. This can only be avoided if they are allowed the freedom to run with packs of spectral were-creatures, to make music that defies and disturbs accepted rules of composition, and to loosen inhibitions in order to heighten their awareness of past lives and atavistic passions that are usually confined to the collective unconscious.

Fortune explores the latter subject, the relationship between repression and reincarnation, in greater detail in her 1936 novel, The Goat-Foot God. In this text, a spiritually anemic man in his early thirties undergoes a psychological crisis following the death of his unfaithful wife. Hugh Paston has always been "a nondescript individual," who lacks vitality and personality. Like Haverstraw, he appears to be a woebegone "flop," a habitual self-doubter until he decides to invoke Pan in order to get in touch with elemental forces that he identifies with the old pagan gods. Paston has never been

religious and does not believe that Christianity with its repressive attitude, its "oldmaid's insanity," can offer the primal passion that he lacks.

For Paston, Pan is no "cosmic billy-goat," who can be induced "to materialize on your hearth-rug." For Paston, the "real invocation of Pan" involves "surrender to bedrock natural fact, the return to Nature, the sinking back into the cosmic life after all the struggle to rise above it into an unnatural humanity." For Paston, Pan is "the keeper of all wild and hunted souls for which no place could be found in a man-made world."

Although Paston's crisis is presented as a schrzotypal complex, as a psychopathological imbalance provoked by past life trauma, Fortune does not limit such crises to one man alone. Indeed, she suggests that Paston's predicament is endemic to modern civilization. As an occultist, Fortune believed that her contemporaries could benefit from a revival of pagan rituals, which she associated with holistic organicism, with earthcentered consciousness. Fortune denied that progressivist science had led to mental evolution that had eliminated psychical needs, which had formerly been met by the natural religions of the past. She would likely have praised the urge that led the residents of Millhauser's suburbia to venture into the night, to gambol on the grass. Fortune would likely have praised Millhauser's novella for reminding us all of the vital, primal energies that we relinquish when we fail to keep in touch with our own inner goats.

Related Titles

Perhaps the closest analogues to Enchanted Night may be found in two tales by Millhauser from his collection The Knife Thrower and Other Stones. In "Clair de Lune," a fifteenyear-old insomniac feels compelled to escape the oppressive atmosphere of his bedroom. Like Laura, he intuitively follows a course set by a seemingly sentient moon.

Although he imagines himself on a rope swing in the backyard of a schoolmate he barely knows (much like Janet with her unnamed lover in the novella), the speaker of "Clair de Lune" eventually finds himself engaged in a game of Wiffle ball that seems subversive as a secret ritual, primitive as a fertility rite. He recognizes his playmates as girls he has glimpsed at school but, somehow, they are transfigured; even their gender seems uncertain under the strangely radiant moon. Cast as "a night of revelations," this effervescent evening is imbued with a lightness of being that affects all the characters who break out of their houses (or into other people's houses) in the later work.

The story that seems, in many ways, to serve as a preliminary sketch for ideas more fully developed in Millhauser's Enchanted Night, however, is constructed as a segmented report of rumors that surround a group of teenage girls who call themselves "The Sisterhood of Night." Like the Daughters, this band of twelve- to fifteen-year-olds is supposed to have formed a secret society motivated by a desire "to withdraw," "to become invisible" and "inaccessible," to claim for themselves the privilege of remaining unknown. In Enchanted Night, the woman who lives alone articulates the Daughters' similar motives when she adopts a pseudonym of her own. "They cannot stay in their rooms alone," she thinks, "they cannot, cannot, they must go out into the night and never be known. Because when you are known, then you lose yourself, but when you are hidden, then you are free." In "The Sisterhood of Night," the town's concerned parents and citizens cannot believe in their daughters' innocence preferring, instead, to circulate rumors that cast the girls as wild-eyed maenads convening in covens, where they drink the blood of animals, experiment with their sexuality, and serve the dual deities of Pan ("a goat-haired figure") and the witch-goddess Hecate beneath the corruptive light of the moon.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994