

The Knife Thrower Short Guide

The Knife Thrower by Steven Millhauser

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Characters

The story is told in the first person plural, and the effect is such that an entire community is speaking collectively and is a character unto itself. The narration seems to come from one perspective while maintaining the notion of a collection of voices. This allows judgment to be placed on the entire group and devotes attention to a group of people rather than singling out just one person who is responsible for fascination with Hensch—the fascination is the effect of a society, not of one single person's individual experiences. The group experiences the show together, and together the community must deal with the effects of the show: "as we left the theater we agreed that it had been a skillful performance, though we couldn't help feeling that the knife thrower had gone too far." The audience experiences a complexity of feeling, from understanding, to confusion, to sympathy, to a measure of betrayal. A link between the knife thrower and the community, they attempt to draw him in, "like the rest of us, he had to earn his living, which admittedly wasn't easy in times like these," but in the end, Hensch is still an outsider, and the community must deal with the feelings they are left with.

The knife thrower himself follows the stereotype of the dark magician, alluring, independent, and somewhat threatening.

Dressed in all black, he strides out on stage and holds himself confidently. Ignoring the audience until the very end and the only recognition in the form of a bow, his silence demonstrates his perceived superiority in demeanor and in his art. He is labeled a freak, by the narration, which is his reason for his act. He accepts his separation from "common" society, but he will do so only on his own terms. He has tempted the audience and draws them into his dark world in which all that they have come to expect about themselves and their children is brought into question. His assistant is his mouthpiece, a beautiful, leggy blonde with smooth skin and a gentle voice; she is the comforting side to the strict and uncompromising master. Soothing the new initiates and thus the audience, she masks Hensch's threat. The volunteers are each shy, somewhat withdrawn, and young. This creates a feeling that the audience is somehow responsible for them. In each case, some part of the audience attributes to them each a measure of joy or ecstasy at their experience of being marked. This is another way that the community attempts to justify its preoccupation with Hensch and his art. If the three people had received a measure of joy from their experience, then the community can rest at ease at their own encouragement of it.



Social Concerns

"The Knife Thrower" begins with a community puzzled and bewildered with the knowledge that the infamous Hensch, the knife thrower, is coming to town. Thus begins a tale that explores the deep recesses of desire, the formation of identity and the fascination with controlled (and sometimes not so controlled) danger.

Hensch is an outsider, a transgressor; he has crossed the boundary of his professional code. He has become a fascinating figure because he is on the outside of society, and he has turned his ostracization into a crowd drawing act: "in his early carnival days he had wounded an assistant badly; after a six-month retirement, he returned with his new act." His act draws crowds because it titillates the community's sense of guilty pleasures—tapping into their desire for the ability to watch what one is not supposed to watch and enjoy that which should only inspire disapproval. His popularity calls attention to where the community draws the line between entertainment and the infringement of decency, because Hensch is a transgressor; he does what he is not supposed to do: he wounds people.

The community goes into the performance willingly, with full knowledge of its dangerous potential. Again and again in the story the boredom of safety is contrasted with the excitement of danger as the community grapples with its own attraction to supposedly "unnatural" or "disapproved of" actions. For example, during the performance, the marking of the assistant has the mask of failure, at which the audience is disappointed: "The knife struck beside her neck. He had missed—had he missed?—and we felt a sharp tug of disappointment, which changed to shame, deep shame, for we hadn't come out for blood, only for—well, something else." It is the exploration of this "something else" that provides the basis for the story and the value of the performance for the community. As the audience chastises itself for its disappointment at the idea of the failure to harm and explores its inner feelings about the need to see the assistant be marked, it is revealed to the audience, and the reader, that the marking was successful.

The audience is grateful for "the touch of the master, who had crossed the line, who had carried us safely, it appeared, into the realm of forbidden things." The community is pleased that it was able to go through the experience of the marking with no harm to its view of itself, or to its ethical sensibilities. The community believes this until the final act of the performance, after the "ultimate sacrifice," has been made by a member of the community's own. Laura is stabbed, and after this occurs, the community is haunted by the images of the reality of the performance. The community attempts to rationalize the feelings away by guaranteeing to themselves Laura's safety: "Of course the final act had probably been a setup, the girl had probably leaped smiling to her feet as soon as the curtain closed," but the images remain, which cause them to "remember the traveling knife thrower with agitation and dismay." They are able to satisfy themselves throughout the performance, but instead of being able to leave their emotions in the theater, the indelible images caused by their own acquiescence to visceral attraction, and the possible effects it had on one young life in particular, remain.

Techniques

Millhauser uses color as a manifestation of the sides that the community is battling between and to demonstrate the rite of passage that the initiates must go through.

The story is built around the white of purity, the black of the master and the initiated, and the red of the blood that is the process and effect of transgression. Likewise darkness and light are used as examples of the differences between what the community knowingly becomes involved with, what they do not know or expect, and what they wish to ignore in the service of their own excitement.

Millhauser also focuses on one night and one performance by Hensch to tighten the focus of the story. This, in addition to his choice of narrative voice, emphasizes the community and the emotions and difficulties it experiences as a result of Hensch's performance.

Themes

The knife thrower can be seen as a cult figure for this community, a momentary visitor who incites strange and deeply felt emotions. Like many cult figures, part of his appeal is the offer of an identity of sorts from association with him. He gives out identifying marks that can be used by the receiver as a testament to their belonging somewhere, that they are brave and willing to risk injury for something worth doing.

His followers are "many, young women especially, who longed to be wounded by the master and to bear his scar proudly."

This is reiterated during the performance itself as many offer themselves to be marked: "then there were other hands, young bodies straining forward, eager." The people who are marked are new members going through initiation, which is demonstrated by the assistant who is transformed from purity, marked by gleaming white and silver gown, to the initiated, in a dark fullbodied gown; likewise, each of the members who are subsequently marked are dressed in dark colors.

Those who are initiated have demonstrated their bravery and their willingness to risk their own safety for the benefit of the master, for they do benefit him, as they become a part of his act. These people are looking for a place to belong, and they find it in the path of the Hensch's throw. The community, while encouraging the performance by their attendance, silently discourages this that is a slight step too far: "We wanted to cry out: sit down! you don't have to do this! but we remained silent, respectful." The community allows this to happen because they feel that it is their duty to be respectful and supportive of the young girls' decision. The people of the audience will return to this feeling after Laura is stabbed; part of their rationalization is that none of the three marked people were forced or coerced—they made their own decision and thus should be allowed freedom to do as they choose. The community's dilemma then arises as they consider what led them to the need for marking in the first place, and if anything could have been done differently.

At the same time, the community is fascinated with the ability of this man to transgress the boundaries set up for him. Codes and laws govern almost every section of our lives, whether it is our own personal moral code or the rules of the country in which we abide. The citizens who break these laws are considered transgressors and often a type of punishment will result, and those who are punished serve as a reinforcement of our own role as law-abiding citizens. Defying codes of conduct and assumed paths of life become stories and myths that we look to for renunciation of bad behavior, but also entertainment, titillation, and perhaps encouragement for our own minor transgressions. A result of this is a fascination that develops with those who transgress laws and codes and gain some kind of success because of it. Hensch is a person like this; he has broken the rules of his profession and as a result has a successful act. His bold indifference to codes of conduct and unspoken rules baffles and intrigues the audience in the theater. He begins the act when he pleases, defying the necessity of obliging the audience in their late arrival, and refuses to throw at a certain point, defying the



assumptions made by the audience about the course of his act. He does not acknowledge the audience until his final throw has been completed and he has committed his ultimate transgression.

He does not need the community, except for their attention, and this is an interesting facet of his performance for those who do need the community and draw their identity from it.

Key Questions

Millhauser explores the odd fascination that some societies seem to have about things with which they are not supposed to be fascinated. Guilty pleasures seem to be the best kind for many people. From these "unnatural" pleasures comes a sense of identity, for those participating and for those just watching. Whether priority is placed on independence or community vigilance also seems to be a primary concern for this story.

1. Is the community's fascination with Hensch similar to the popularity of "reality television"? In what ways is it alike or different?

2. Should the audience have stopped the three volunteers from being marked?

Why or why not? Would it have been different if the volunteers had been older? Why or why not?

3. Why would they each want to be marked? What is Hensch's appeal?

4. Do you think that the final act, "the ultimate sacrifice," was staged? Why or why not? If it was real and not a setup, how would that affect the community's opinion of the performance?

How does that affect your view of the performance?

5. Should Hensch be held responsible for those that he harms? For example, should his act be stopped? Does it matter that the members of the act are volunteers?

Literary Precedents

This story's closest literary relative is the work of Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote many short stories in addition to his numerous novels. The magical realism of this story finds a likeness with Nabokov's fiction, which often uses everyday events and lives to explore otherworldly dimensions and themes. A good example of a short story that explores similar themes is "The Aurelian," which takes as its subject a butterfly collector who is eerily watched by the specimens mounted in his shop. Another group of fiction that is somewhat similar to Millhauser's is Roald Dahl's fiction for young adults, as collected in *The Umbrella Man*.

Dahl's stories, like Nabokov's often take unexpected turns at the end, or end unexpectedly, often leaving the reader to complete the train of thought at the end of the story. This can be used to explore different assumptions that the reader has made throughout. These authors play with literary traditions, manipulating stock characters and prejudices to manifest their themes.

Related Titles

Millhauser's collection of three novellas, *Little Kingdoms*, also explores in similarly magically realistic ways the different desires that can consume and enchant. In each story a different art is considered, but in extremely different ways. The art begins to dictate reality to some extent, which is similar to "The Knife Thrower," and the community surrounding the art must deal with the effects of being consumed by a particular idea. The motif of the dagger, as well as the emphasis on a community's response to particular stimuli is present in the second novella, "The Princess, the Dwarf and the Dungeon."



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