

Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle

Short Guide

Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle by Ellen Gilchrist

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Characters

Many of the characters from Gilchrist's earlier short stories reappear in this collection: Nora Jane Whittington, Amanda McCamey, Traceleen, and especially Rhoda Manning. Although they have aged, all are remarkably consistent with their previous appearances. Several of the stories in *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* virtually recast previous stories in a more optimistic light. In "The Song of Songs," Barrett Clare, the child who was born to Amanda McCamey and put up for adoption in *The Annunciation* (1983), discovers her true mother's identity and reunites with Amanda on Christmas Day. This reunion clearly affects the tone of *The Annunciation* because the separation of mother and child loses its finality. In Gilchrist's world coincidences abound, not the least of which is that Barrett realizes she was earlier introduced to Amanda without recognizing her as her mother. Nora Jane Whittington, who in "The Famous Poll in Jody's Bar" was last seen arriving in San Francisco in search of the father of her unborn child, reappears in "The Starlight Express." Now seven months pregnant with twin girls and abandoned by her boyfriend Sandy, Nora Jane takes a train north to visit Freddy Harwood, another previous Gilchrist character. Soon after Nora Jane reaches Freddy's isolated house "deep in the woods" of Northern California she gives birth to her daughters just before a helicopter rescue team arrives to transport her to the hospital.

Freddy and Nora Jane may be on the verge of an enduring relationship, and the bond between Nora Jane and her twins, Tammili and Lydia, is already strong.

Perhaps the most promising addition to Gilchrist's gallery of characters is Lin Tan Sing, a Chinese medical student and research biologist studying at the University of California. Lin Tan, who appears in "The Starlight Express" as well as the title story, is an intelligent young scientist whose kindness and serenity seem boundless. His Chinese background as well as his quirky, delightful speech patterns constantly remind us that he comes from a very different culture, but what he shares with Gilchrist's American characters is more important than what sets him apart. Lin Tan's professional interest and personal fascination focuses on the origins of human life, in the emergence of "the miraculous brain of man."



Social Concerns

As in Gilchrist's earlier fiction, the emphasis in the stories collected in *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* falls squarely on individuals rather than social or political concerns. There is virtually no political context for these stories, and class consciousness figures even less importantly than in *Victory over Japan* (1984) or *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (1981). As the title suggests, however, several stories refer directly or obliquely to scientific endeavor. In "First Harmonics," Randal Yung, a nuclear physicist, verifies the Bose-Einstein condensation theory, a classic problem in quantum mechanics.

Unlike many contemporary authors, Gilchrist displays more enthusiasm than anxiety about modern science. For the most part, technical innovations, especially medical procedures such as amniocentesis, are presented in a neutral if not markedly favorable light.

Moreover, the natural world often mirrors the human relations among these characters. Gilchrist's scientists often uncover a truth that has been lost, forgotten, or corrupted over time.

Those scientific revelations are metaphorically linked to the emotional epiphanies of characters who cut through uncertainty, doubt, and preconceptions to arrive at some telling realization.

Typically Gilchrist's stories celebrate the beginning or continuation of a familial relationship: an adopted daughter discovers her biological mother's identity for the first time; a young Chinese man falls in love and proposes to an Arkansas woman; adult siblings and their cousin set off on a grand adventure that recalls their childhood exploits. As in earlier works, the affinities among blood relatives seem to be stronger than ever in Gilchrist's most recent stories. As Rhoda Manning, the protagonist of "Mexico," remarks of her brother and cousin: "How alike we are, how our bodies are shaped the same . . . Apples from the same tree, how strange that one little grandmother put such a mark on us."

The subject of death figures no less importantly than in Gilchrist's previous works. In "Mexico," for example, Rhoda Manning occasionally alludes to the suicide of her friend Anna, whose death is the central episode in *The Anna Papers* (1988). Rhoda and other middle-aged characters harbor an awareness that time is creeping up on them, but, rather than inducing melancholy, that awareness only reaffirms their commitment to life.

One important recurrent theme, especially in the stories concerning Rhoda, is her recognition of the differences between men and women. Rhoda, for instance, remarks that she could never do what her cousin Saint John, an obstetrician, does when he performs surgery. As a child and a mature woman, Rhoda fears danger and violence more than the males around her.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle is framed by stories about Rhoda Manning. The first, actually a group of three brief stories about Rhoda's youth in Seymour, Indiana, during World War II, is balanced by a more sustained story at the end of the collection describing Rhoda's adventures in Mexico with her brother, Dudley, and her cousin, Saint John. These three characters have reached their mid-fifties, but there is a youthful exuberance and recklessness at the beginning of their foray into Mexico. That they have lost little of their zest for life is probably indicative of their vitality and spontaneity as well as the enduring importance of childhood experiences for all three of them. Playing hookey from the responsibilities of adulthood, they indulge in what begins as a carefree escape. At a bullfight Rhoda meets and makes a date with the hero of the day, a young, sensuous matador. But Saint John and Dudley, struck by the violence of the bullfight, persuade Rhoda not to meet him. The primitive power associated with animals reappears when the three visit a ranch — part breeding ground and part hunting preserve — for exotic cats: jaguars, leopards, lions, and tigers. Terrified by the animals, Rhoda tries to flee but falls and breaks her ankle. She returns to the University of Arkansas to begin the fall term and writes her brother in the hope they can overcome the impulses that fueled the trip to Mexico: "Daddy's aggression . . . his terrible desire for money and power."

Many of Gilchrist's stories interlock.

Lin Tan, the medical student who falls in love with Margaret McElvoy, happens to meet Nora Jane on the train and remembers that he performed the clinical work for her amniocentesis. His phenomenal memory has no trouble in recalling the details of her case. In his distinct handling of his second language he says: "Oh, this is very strange. You are Miss Whittington of 1512 Arch Street, is it not so?" Gilchrist's fiction increasingly sees the world as intricately interrelated. That her stories interlock and overlap imparts a sense of what Lin Tan refers to as "the shape of the universe and the breathtaking order of the species."

Appropriate to an ordered world, these stories are finely crafted and beautifully structured. They, in fact, reflect the order of a universe in which birth, death, and love remain the most potent realities.



Related Titles

Throughout her writing career, Gilchrist has chronicled the exploits of her alter ego, Rhoda Manning, jumping from her imagined life as a child to adulthood. *Rhoda: A Life in Stories* (1995) collects all the Rhoda stories in chronological order and adds two new ones "Blue Satin" and "Drunk Every Day." The stories provide scrutiny of Rhoda's personality that peel back the admittedly autobiographical nature of these stories. Rhoda and her creator are complex and vexing, full of life that energizes the reader while becoming egocentric as she looks for that "wide band of luminous and precarious order."



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