

When It Changed Short Guide

When It Changed by Joanna Russ

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Contents

When It Changed Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Key Questions.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

Janet, the first-person narrator of "When It Changed," is adept with languages ("I can talk the old tongues in my sleep"), which is one reason she is called to meet the arriving men. She is thoughtful, perceptive, and inclined to worry about her wife and children, even though she has fought "three duels" and has the scars to prove it.

Janet's wife, Katy, drives wildly, but refuses (until the crisis of the story) to handle guns. Their daughter, Yuriko (Yuki), is an ebullient twelve-year-old whose future is the focus of Janet's anxiety. Several other women are named, and their descriptions help fill in other characteristics of the society of Whileaway.

Of the four unnamed men who arrive from the space ship, only two actually speak. The first reveals his obtuseness by asking twice "Where are all the people?" even though Janet has explained the history of the plague to him. After his second question, she tells us, "I realized then that he did not mean people, he meant men, and he was giving the word the meaning it had on Whileaway for six centuries."

The second man acknowledges the stupidity of his colleague and reveals the purpose of his visit: "There's been too much genetic damage in the last few centuries. Radiation. Drugs. We can use Whileaway's genes, Janet." His revelation drives the normally gun-shy Katy to threaten him with Janet's rifle.

Given the attitudes of the men, Katy and Janet both fear their children will be "cheated of their full humanity and turned into strangers."

In an important sense, it is the sixhundred-year history of the women's planet, Whileaway, that is the true central character of "When It Changed." Each of the individual women described, and especially the sharp contrasts between their personalities and those of the men, help the reader to construct a composite picture of a world as it would be if no one felt the need to "play the role of the man."



Social Concerns/Themes

The central event of "When It Changed" is the arrival on the planet Whileaway of a space vehicle full of men. Whileaway had been colonized by men and women from Earth, but all the men had died of a mysterious plague some 600 years before the story begins.

The women have devised technologies of survival — both for reproduction by the merging of ova and for conducting the heavy labor needed to sustain civilization — and have evolved a society that is not presented as perfect, but that is richly satisfying to most of the women so long as they are willing to accept both its limitations and its communal character.

The narrator, Janet, is caught between her wife Katy's violent reaction to the men's arrival (Katy feels they "should have burned them down where they stood") and their daughter Yuki's derisive dismissal of the men as "ten-foot toads." Janet senses that neither violence nor humor will suffice to head off the inevitable changes in their world when the men return. She explores a number of consolatory rationalizations but realizes the most devastating change the men will bring to Whileaway will be their ability to drain away the meaning, so painfully created over hundreds of years, of the women's lives. Her final protest, "Take my life but don't take away the meaning of my life," is both defiant and despairing.

The implication that men are incapable of respecting women's accomplishments, and that they will always cast women in subordinate roles, seems to spell the doom of Whileaway. It would be mistaken, however, to take this as a defeatist story; Janet certainly has not given up hope, in spite of her evocation of the original name for the planet — "For-A-While." She has simply reached a stage of awareness from which she can begin to mobilize the necessary moral and imaginative forces needed to protect the planet from reabsorption into the male-dominated universe.



Techniques

By their very nature, short stories require the reader either to infer a great deal of unwritten contextual material, or to take a great deal on faith. "When It Changed" requires both; it also provides an excellent example of the economy and efficiency of an accomplished storyteller. The exposition is both revelatory and tricky. An unsuspecting reader may fail to notice that the narrator is female until halfway through the story.

The narrator refers to "my wife" and alludes to "three children between us, one of hers and two of mine." When she first describes the plague to the visiting man, she states, "We lost half our population," but only after further description of post-plague history does she explain that the lost half was all the men. The reader, at this point, must accept the premise that "the merging of ova" is biologically possible, but that is one of the few science fictional elements of the story other than that it is set on another planet sometime in the future.

Janet's explanations to the men of the history of her society, as well as her brooding about the implications of the arrival of the men, serve to inform the reader of the special character of the planet and to convey the complex interactions that make up the society.

Russ employs some familiar types (the miles gloriosus who is the first man to speak, the "benevolent colonizer" who is the second), but in the very use of these conventions she discredits them by showing the degree to which they can function only in mutually agreed interactions with other stereotypes. If the women of Whileaway refuse to acknowledge the roles the men cast them in, then the men's roles must also be deconstructed. This is the hope for the future.



Key Questions

"When It Changed" is set on Whileaway, a planet devoid of males. This ideal of a world where women can be free from patriarchal and societal constraints permeates the writings of Russ.

But Whileaway is not another Eden, there is violence and there are difficulties which must be overcome by the inhabitants and the sudden arrival of several males is just one of them.

1. What does the title of this short story mean? Exactly when did it change? When the men arrived or when the men died on the planet?

Exactly what do you think changed and was it for the better?

2. The name of the planet is "Whileaway." Why do you think that the author gave that name to her planet?

3. Russ plays with her readers at the beginning of this story when she describes the narrator's "wife" and later we learn that both partners are female.

Why did the author purposely do this?

What was she attempting to say about our modern culture?

4. The women on Whileaway have created a different kind of society.

Describe this society.

5. Would you describe the Whileaway society as Utopian? Why or why not?

6. Why do you think that Russ created a society devoid of all males and then reintroduced them to that society?

7. When the men arrive, one of them asks, "Where are all your people?"

When told that there was a plague on Whileaway, he asks the question again.

The narrator then realizes that the man means where are all the men. What is Russ saying about society, particularly a patriarchal society?

8. How does Russ describe the males? Why does she include all the information about the different types of transportation that they have brought with them?

9. When the four men come to Whileaway they ask "Which of you plays the role of the man?" and the narrator says "I doubt very much that sexual equality has been reestablished on Earth." What do you think she means? Why does she say that?



10. When told that men must be reintroduced to Whileaway the narrator is afraid that her accomplishments will dwindle from what they were. Why does she think that? And why does she end by saying, "Take my life but don't take away the meaning of my life. For-a-While." What does she mean?

Literary Precedents

In her afterword to "When It Changed," published in Halan Ellison's *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972), Russ states that the story is, at least in part, a response to some questions and problems suggested by Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) in which an androgynous civilization is depicted.

The story is thus associated with a considerable body of Utopian and dystopian fiction that depicts the impact of encounters between representatives of disparate or mutually exclusive cultures. An early example might be the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), but in more contemporary terms one of the earliest and best examples is Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937). A number of women have written works that transpose familiar male-oriented story types into feminist forms, Suzy McKee Charnas's revision of the post-nuclear holocaust type — *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) — and Marion Zimmer Bradley's revision of the Arthurian corpus — *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) — come to mind. Russ has adapted the persona of the hard-boiled enforcer/detective in "When It Changed," as elsewhere: tough but thoughtful, sensitive but guarded, ruthless when necessary.

Related Titles

Although Joanna Russ has stated, "My feminist novel, *The Female Man* (1975), was a later and very different project" (*Zanzibar Cat*, p. 9), the connection between the two works is difficult to ignore, since the first narrator in the novel is Janet Evason, who announces, "I was born on a farm on Whileaway." Certainly the novel — which traces the lives of three other women from parallel universes, and which gives a great deal more background about Janet — is a more complex and demanding work, but it is hard to see how it can be a very different project. The adventurous, even swashbuckling characters of Russ's other fictions (e.g., Alyx, of *Picnic on Paradise* and other stories) also constitute links among her various works.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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