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# THE WIVES OF THE LIVING?: ABSENCE OF DREAMS IN HAWTHORNE'S "THE WIVES OF THE DEAD"

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by MARK HARRIS

The few Hawthorne commentators who have given any attention to the undeservedly neglected "The Wives of the Dead" have either ignored the question of whether it deals with dreams or reality, or acknowledged the question and then dismissed it in one or two cryptic statements. Even those who have looked at the details of the story in any depth have evaded the mystery that asks for solution, or have arrived at erroneous conclusions that contradict the details the story presents.

H. J. Lang, who devotes over two pages to the story (which is, relatively, a lot), summarizes the first two types of criticism I have mentioned:

Arlin Turner summarizes the "slight" story as showing the response of each [sister] when she receives her own good news while believing her sister remains bereaved. Mark Van Doren finds it "one of Hawthorne's most attractive tales. Its atmosphere is the atmosphere of sadness and death, but its outcome—though the full effect of it upon the principals is withheld from us at the end—is in some rich, strange way happy and reassuring." For these and other critics the story is slight, plain, realistic and uncomplicated. (87)

Unfortunately, Lang then goes on to applaud Harry Levin for the passing, unexplained remark that "The Wives of the Dead" "dream vainly of their husbands' return" (58). Although Lang avers that "the story . . . must be read as a dream of the widows," he dismisses the primary question of the story—*do the wives really dream?*—with a simplistic "the title . . . alone should be sufficient" (87). Having revealed to us (without explanation) that the husbands' "happy return was only a dream; reality is as terrible as it is" (87), Lang leaves the dream/reality question of the story and tells us that the light and the dark in the story are the key elements, with "the center of the story's symbolism [being] the lamp"—again, without explaining why.

Michael Colacurcio treats the tale in some depth, but like other critics he makes erroneous statements about the plot (e.g., that both husbands die

"on a single day" [102] and that "Both women, we are told, do eventually fall asleep" [103]) and devotes most of his discussion to the sisters' individuality (100-07). Thomas Friedmann follows Lang in support of Levin's contention that the wives dream. However, Friedmann goes too far to the other extreme, presenting an overly imaginative thesis that alternately ignores and distorts the story's details. A close analysis of the story simply does not support the contention that "each [wife] dreams a scenario in which the other's husband survives" (141). Richard Poirier, though otherwise reticent about the story, identifies one of its integral aims: "Hawthorne . . . is trying to suspend us . . . between actuality and dream" (113).

"The Wives of the Dead" is written by a man about whose writing Poe says, "Every word tells, and there is not a word which does not tell" (526). We should look closely at the details of this tale that is obviously meant to raise (and evoke answers to) the question of whether the events it relates are dreams or reality.

From the start, the narrator tries to deceive us as to what is dream and what is reality by making us move too quickly over the story's details. Why, for example, does he say that the incidents of the story related in "The Wives of the Dead" "may be deemed scarcely worth relating" (49)? Because, as he immediately goes on to say, his relating of the incidents takes place "after such a lapse of time" (49). The *story*, he goes on to say—perhaps by way of explaining what he is going to tell us in spite of what he has just said—"awakened some degree of interest, a hundred years ago" (49). The narrator then launches us into the story, himself fading into the background, and we may fall too quickly and deeply into the story without paying adequate attention to the few preceding lines and the caution they imply. For example, the narrator does not tell us that the *incidents* of the story *happened* a hundred years ago; he says that the *story* awakened . . . interest" (49) at that time, which puts into question whether the story is or ever was supposed to be based on fact. Thus, a key element of the story is introduced: the difficulty of distinguishing between reality and unreality. At times the narrator will try to mislead us, burying reality beneath what may appear to be dreams, and we must distinguish dream from reality by the clues he provides.

Margaret is the first of the two sisters to receive a visitor who tells her that her husband is not dead as reported. To find out whether the visitor is right, we first need to determine whether Margaret dreams her visit or whether it actually occurs. This is rather easily determined, in spite of the narrator's misleading clues; Margaret does not dream her visit because she does not fall asleep before it happens. Her "mind" may have come "nearer to the situation of" the calmer Mary's (50), but nothing in the story

suggests that the same is true of her heart. Margaret does not fall asleep before her visit because she cannot; unlike Mary, she is still greatly disturbed by her grief. This is shown through the description of Margaret's state right up through the point when she hears "a knock at the street door":

Margaret became more disturbed and feverish, in proportion as the night advanced with its deepest and stillest hours. She lay listening to the drops of rain, that came down in monotonous succession, unswayed by a breath of wind; and a nervous impulse continually caused her to lift her head from the pillow, and gaze into Mary's chamber and the intermediate apartment. . . . While Margaret groaned in bitterness, she heard a knock at the street-door. (50-51)

The passage includes nothing that suggests Margaret has slept. Unlike Mary, who is clearly emerging from sleep when her visitor knocks the first time, Margaret hears and understands her summons the first time, even though it is "apparently given with the soft end of a doubled fist, . . . through several thicknesses of wall" (51). She expresses thoughts immediately, she "breath[es] hurriedly, . . . straining her ears to catch a repetition of the summons" (51), and she gets out of bed lucid and alert. Clearly, Margaret is awake when her visitation occurs.

As is true also of Mary's visit, however, establishing Margaret's wakefulness and the reality of her visit do not necessarily insure that the visitor's report is true. Examining Margaret's visit, however, we find nothing suggesting that the visitor and his information are unbelievable, notwithstanding the wonderful use the storyteller makes of light, dark, and color in his description of the outside of the house. The visitor, Goodman Parker, is known by Margaret "as a friendly innkeeper of the town" and is called "honest" by the narrator (52). Nothing seems disputable or ambiguous in his account of having received from "an express" the "tidings on the frontiers" that include news of Margaret's husband and 12 other soldiers' being alive (52). Parker's report to Margaret is straight-forward and simple. And although it is true that, unlike Mary's visitor, Goodman Parker brings secondhand information, the narrator says nothing to cast doubt on Parker's source, who has been traveling from the eastern jurisdiction" (52).

As Goodman Parker leaves, the narrator tells us that "his lantern gleamed along the street, bringing to view indistinct shapes of things, and the fragments of a world, like order glimmering through chaos, or memory roaming over the past" (52). Is the narrator telling us that there is

something unreal about what has just happened? No: unlike the "doubt of waking reality" (54) that follows Mary's visit, which is clearly attributed to Mary's thoughts, we are told that Margaret "stayed not to watch these picturesque effects" (52), much less created them out of her own alternately doubting and hopeful thoughts, as Mary perhaps does. Since we have seen that Margaret's visit does occur, and since there likewise seems no doubt that her visitor is sincere and his report accurate, the only thing that may seem "unreal" to Margaret is the welcomed shock, still sinking in, that her husband is alive after all.

After her visit, Margaret runs to tell Mary, but, realizing that doing so might make Mary feel worse, she "turned away. . . . Her mind was thronged with delightful thoughts, till sleep stole on" (53). Speeding the reader on, the narrator now turns to detailing Mary's experience.

He tells us that even before going to bed, Mary,

all of whose emotions were influenced by her mild, quiet, yet not feeble character, began to recollect the precepts of resignation and endurance, which piety had taught her. . . . Her misfortune, besides, as earliest known, should earliest cease to interfere with her regular course of duties. (50)

The slightly ironic tone of parts of this passage is reminiscent of the narrator's earlier subtle criticism of the superficially sympathetic mourners who had left "one by one, whispering many comfortable passages of Scripture, that were answered by more abundant tears" (49). However, the narrator may also be subtly chiding Mary for yielding too quickly to those "precepts of resignation and endurance." Margaret, obviously still very upset by her loss, is "given" back her husband, perhaps via the actual facts of the incident, but perhaps only via the narrator's story. Will Mary, then, since she seems much more accepting of her loss, remain without her husband? Mary fixes a meal, begging Margaret to join her in both her meal and her resignation. "Arise, I pray you, and let us ask a blessing on that which is provided for us" (50). Margaret protests that "There is no blessing left for me"—further evidence that Margaret's visit will not be a creation of wishful thinking—but Mary feels that life must go on and that other blessings can still befall her. Does she, then, dream her visit, out of wishful thinking? Or is she thinking of other blessings?

When Margaret, after her visit, enters Mary's room to tell Mary what has happened, she notices that upon Mary's face

a look of motionless contentment was now visible, as if her heart, like a deep lake, had grown calm because its dead had

sunk down so far within. Happy is it, and strange, that the lighter sorrows are those from which dreams are chiefly fabricated. (51)

The reader who moves too quickly over this passage might later assume that Mary looked happy here because she was dreaming that her husband was alive. However, the passage does not say that Mary looked happy. The narrator describes her look as one of "contentment," which echoes the "resignation" to her husband's death more than it suggests the elation a grief-stricken wife would feel on finding her beloved alive after all. The rest of the passage also supports this: Mary's heart "had grown calm"—again evoking an image of peaceful resignation, acceptance of the situation—"because its dead had sunk so far within." If the narrator had said "deadness," we might take that as the sorrow Mary was feeling. But the nominative use of "dead" here may just as likely mean Mary's dead husband, and thus it would be he who, in Margaret's view, has "sunk so far within" Mary's heart that it has "grown calm." In either case, the entire passage, especially in conjunction with Mary's actions before going to bed, suggests that Mary is practically over her loss—at the least, resigned, and at most, content. Then we come to the final sentence of the passage, which, in light of our analysis of the sentences before it, now makes perfect sense: "Happy is it, and strange, that the lighter sorrows are those from which dreams are chiefly fabricated." We find out in the next paragraph that Mary has in fact been dreaming, and her sorrows, relative to Margaret's, are "the lighter" sort, because she no longer fights them. We must read further to see how this information can help us determine the truth or unreality of Mary's visit.

Though "a vivid dream had latterly involved her in its unreal life" and although the description of Mary's coming to recognize a knock on the door is clearly that of a person who has been asleep, the narrator also adds unequivocally that "Mary awoke" (53). She does not answer her summons—that is, the actual meeting with her visitor does not begin—until, clearly, she is wide awake: "The pall of sleep was thrown back from the face of grief . . . she unclosed her eyes. . . . [She] hastened to the window. By some accident, it had been left unhasped, and yielded easily to her hand" (53). As with Margaret, however, that Mary is awake when her visit occurs does not necessarily mean that her visitor's report is true. And upon examining Mary's visitor and his story, we find many suggestions that neither is a reliable source of information, but rather that Stephen is either lying or mistaken.

A few brief but important details in the first paragraph describing Stephen can help us. We are told that "the storm was over, and the moon

was up," and that Stephen's "livelihood was gained by short voyages along the coast" (53). How and why, then, is Stephen "wet as if he had come out of the depths of the sea"? The phrase suggests that Stephen is not merely rain-soaked or wet from shallow coastal waters; if this is so, then a possible explanation is that Stephen has drowned—whether Mary's husband has also or not—and, as a ghost, has come to tell Mary either the truth (to do penance?) or a lie (to seek revenge). All of this information about Stephen may just be the narrator's misleading us, but it certainly serves to cast doubts on Stephen, which further information from the narrator increases.

First, we are told that Stephen, "previous to [Mary's] marriage . . . had been an unsuccessful wooer of her own," and the narrator refers to him as "the rejected lover" (54). Mary herself is at first suspicious of Stephen's intentions, and we might well be also. It does seem odd that a "rejected lover" who "got home not ten minutes ago" would rush to tell the woman who had spurned him that his rival for her affections was in fact alive rather than dead as reported. That is exactly the opposite of what one would expect Mary's "unsuccessful wooer" to do. Since we have established that Mary is awake and that, therefore, her visit occurs, what we must ask is not whether Stephen has "run" to tell Mary, but *why* he has. The most likely answer in light of Stephen's being a "rejected lover" is that he is lying, either to give Mary false hope in revenge on her for having rejected him—or perhaps to resurrect his chances for winning her affections by seeming to do her a kind deed. The narrator refers to Stephen as "the generous seaman" midway through Stephen's account, and this label may also suggest that, if Stephen is not intentionally lying, he may still be mistaken, exaggerating what he has seen or heard in order to please Mary.

The status of Mary's husband is ultimately harder to prove than that of Margaret's, but the evidence seems to cast doubts on Stephen and his story's legitimacy. After the visit, Mary watches Stephen

with a doubt of waking reality, that seemed stronger or weaker as he alternately entered the shade of the houses, or emerged into the broad streaks of moonlight. Gradually, however, a blessed flood of conviction swelled into her heart, in strength enough to overwhelm her, had its increase been more abrupt.  
(54)

Instead of the unquestioning conviction with which Margaret leaves her visitor, even Mary's positive feelings seem just that, feelings—a rush of emotion that may be as inconsistent as Stephen seems to be. And if, as

may well be the case, the narrator is giving us more than a straight retelling of the story he came across, Mary may be getting the false report he feels she deserves for too quickly getting over her loss.

Finally, the "she" in the story's last sentence is purposely ambiguous, but it necessarily refers to Margaret. Mary is definitely awake already, and the grammar and syntax of the surrounding sentence make it appropriate for the "she" to refer to Margaret. "The Wives of the Dead" clearly presents to the reader "realities" shrouded in—but not necessarily made less real by—an atmosphere of unreality, exuding mystery and suggesting dreams without actually presenting them. If we succumb to false assumptions, such as that the wives must be dreaming because (1) the story is written by Hawthorne, or (2) what transpires in the story is exactly what the wives would be likely to dream, or (3) the mood and setting of the story suggest dreaminess, with the "rainy twilight of an autumn day" and the use of light and dark imagery throughout—we miss the point, and the narrator has succeeded in deceiving us. His deception is that a story by Hawthorne the dreamer, which is seemingly full of dreams, and the interpretation of which seems to hinge on the interpretation of those dreams, in fact contains only one dream, which is not described and which is of no direct importance to interpreting the story. Thus, "The Wives of the Dead" turns out to be not a darkly ironic treatise on the hopelessness of the wives' dreams, but simply a caution against ignorance of the distinction between dreams and reality.

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