

Two Tableaux of (American) Life

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(In recognition of Professor Katsutoshi Hoshino's retirement from the university this year, I would like to humbly offer a couple of points of view that may appeal to his lifelong interest in considering the American culture, its myriad array of contrasting values, and its unique characters.)

People in another culture— What do we think of when we think about people living where they do, working at what they labor at, striving to make sense and purpose of their lives, of each other, of themselves? How do they define their *place* amongst all these considerations, making their place in each setting their own experience?

We may turn to the literature of that foreign land, that culture, to find insight, which is often a good window through which to gaze out onto the people and their lifestyles—to see what it is that makes them who they are. The best of such stories can chronicle and document the lives and times in a tangible way for us, and through a unique and specific narrative, they can convey to us a sense of the values in which the inhabitants function in their own society. This is ‘for better or for worse,’ since the myriad of human characteristics that are portrayed in literature comprise often enough the panoply of admirable traits and foibles that we ascribe to “being human” in any culture—persona and masks of pride and humility, slyness, treachery, brilliance, idiocy, modesty and pugnacity are shared knowledge recognizable across cultures.

I have selected two examples in American literature to examine, which offer, independently and also in concert, such perspectives of persona and place. Through the settings, the characters and their language, and the narratives, the reader may gain insights specific to the societies that are portrayed. While the two selections offer a contrast, they also coalesce to give us a wider view of American attitudes, or at least, those of two particular protagonists in American settings behaving in ways peculiar to their own *place* within their society.

As background to the authors represented here, Frederick Busch

(1942-2006) lived and wrote in the small town of Hamilton, in central New York State, where can be found several small, old-established colleges. It is an area that is primarily agricultural with harsh winters and short summers, and as such, far from affluent.

William Carlos Williams, who was a physician and has since become world-renowned as a seminal American poet (1883-1963), lived in a modest house in a rather poor area of Rutherford, New Jersey, across the river from New York. His patients were for the most part recent immigrants from Europe, illiterate in English and living in impoverished circumstances as they struggled to gain a foothold in their new land.

Let us take the first few lines of the story entitled *Widow Water*, by Frederick Busch, as they present the tenor not only of the story itself, but of the main character around whom the narrative revolves. The protagonist is a plumber in a rural region of upstate New York, who opens the story with a soliloquy, a kind of interior monologue:

What to know about pain is how little we do to
deserve it, how simple it is to give, how hard to lose.
I'm a plumber. I dig for what's wrong. I should
know.

[Busch p.3]

What jumps out at the reader (at least for *this* reader) is the association of the word 'pain', as in anguish, with the idea of what a plumber generally does. That a tradesman would be so keenly aware of this aspect in his clients' lives is a poignancy that is developed in the story.

The following exchange begins Williams' story *Comedy Entombed: 1930*, part of *The Doctor Stories*. The story, as the date in the title suggests, takes place during the economic Depression in the US. The narrator is a physician, an overworked general practitioner living and working in a poverty-stricken urban area of northern New Jersey. He is on the phone with the husband of a woman who is in a difficult time in her pregnancy:

Yeah, I know, I said. But I can't go three places
first.

When can you come then? he answered.

I told you I've already promised two people to see them as soon as I've had breakfast. Why don't you get somebody nearer if you're in such a hurry?

Because I want you. You know where it is, don't you?

I'll find it.

There's a little wooden house behind the shoe shop between Fourth and Fifth. I'll be looking for you. You sure you'll come.

[Williams p. 108]

In Busch's *Widow Water*, an intriguing title in itself, one finds that the plumber's way of presenting the narrative is as methodical and procedural as the way he accomplishes his workaday tasks. The language is spare and, as it were, to the point. He selects words and phrases as he would choose a particular tool for a job he is doing. We find a similarity in the way Ernest Hemingway went about describing how various people in his stories performed their various tasks—a fly-fisherman casting for trout (in *Two Big-Hearted River*), a waiter pouring whiskey into a glass (in the Evan Shipman piece in *A Moveable Feast*), or a bull-fighter in combat (in *The Undefeated*). These are people found anonymously in everyday life who do their work well.

Busch's plumber, whose name is Abe (short for Abraham), lives and works in a small town near a college, in a setting similar to the author's own circumstances. He is a competent plumber (one is sure Hemingway would have admired him), and knows the region and its structures just as intuitively, traveling the roads to get his work done, and knowing the histories of every house and the residents he visits.

A couple of pages after the opening lines included above, the story continues with the plumber relating how he had to quell a caller's plea for help, whose water stopped in his house; because the plumber was busy with other houses that were suffering the heavy rains of spring and basements were overflowing, he found it necessary (and one suspects, even desirable) to put the customer in check for the time being. It was a young professor calling from his dilapidated, rented farmhouse. While he begged the plumber to come help restore water to his family (his young son was not yet

toilet trained, and with no water in the house, the problem becomes more urgent), a challenging game of semantics ensues during the call, with the plumber obviously delighted to be in control. During the exchange, the plumber is in his kitchen with his lovely wife whom he greatly admires, enjoying homemade muffins and jam and a cup of coffee. The plumber narrates:

He said, "So you see, sir, we can use your help."

I said, "Yessir, sounds like a problem."

"No water, and we've got a boy who isn't toilet-trained. It gets kind of messy."

"I imagine."

"So do you think you could..."

"Yessir?"

"Come kind of soon?"

"Oh, I'll come kind of soon. It just won't be today."

"You're sure you couldn't..."

"Yessir?"

"Come today?"

"Yessir."

"Yes sir, what?"

"Yessir, I'm sure I can't come."

[Busch pp. 4-5]

We can find similarity in both of these phone conversations, the doctor's and the plumber's, in that they each take place between a skilled professional and a distraught caller who is relying on him to rectify a catastrophe of some kind in his life that threatens his home and family.

Williams' "doctor stories" are often told in the first-person, in much the same matter-of-fact way as the plumber delivers his narrative. Of course, the major difference for Williams is that he writes from his own real-life experiences. Even so, the work *Comedy Entombed* is no less of a story, with its share of skillfully designed dramatic irony, character conflict and resolution, and a certain compassion amidst pathos that is good to see in a physician.

Dr. Williams finally makes his way to the patient's home, a dilapidated structure, filthy inside, and crowded with old furniture that offends the eye. (Of note is that Williams had studied painting as well as medicine while a young student in Germany, and brings a critical eye to the scene.)

The whole place had a curious excitement about it for me... There was nothing properly recognizable, nothing straight, nothing in what ordinarily might have been called its predictable relationships. Complete disorder.

[Williams p. 113]

The husband is in a low-key panic, well-aware of the danger his wife is facing and what may be the outcome. She is still only 5-months pregnant, and he tells the doctor that his wife got scalded recently, and then the labor pains began.

He ascends a rickety stairway from the kitchen up through a hole to the second floor, where he finds her resting in a double bed, looking surprisingly peaceful, and at ease under the circumstances. Her other children, four boys, are causing a lively commotion downstairs. With a slightly amused expression, she describes her contraction pains as "not so bad," a complete contrast to her husband's attitude and the chaos and squalor of her own surroundings. We discover that with this pregnancy the husband is hoping finally for a girl. But we know that, with the impending delivery so premature, there is little hope for the husband's wish to be met, and tragedy will be the most likely outcome.

The wife seems resigned to the fate of her baby, though, in almost a humorous contrast to everything else in her life. The matter-of-fact,

relaxed aspect of the patient herself seems to give the doctor a certain confidence that things will be handled competently, one way or another. Her contractions have not increased; so, with nothing urgent happening there and a case-load of patients waiting for him elsewhere, Dr. Williams departs, and during the story he returns two more times into the next early morning.

In *Widow Water*, before Abe the plumber can get to the professor's house he has to attend the problem of an elderly widow whose well has stopped. He drives off to get some dry ice from an ice cream factory that he will use to force gas down into the pipe and clear whatever is blocking it. He arrives at her house and goes directly down into the basement from the outside cellar door, without telling her he is there. He gazes at the dusty covered furniture in storage down there, no longer used, no longer important to her life. It is like a tomb in the old cellar, as the plumber gets to work reviving the widow's well. Soon she appears at the top of the basement steps:

She was small and white and dressed in sweaters and a thin green housecoat. She said, "Whatever do you mean to do?" Her hands were folded across her little chest, and she rubbed her gnarled throat. "Is my well dead?"

"No ma'am. I'd like you to go upstairs while I do my small miracle here. Because I'd like you not to worry. Won't you go upstairs?"

She said, "I live alone—"

I said, "You don't have to worry."

"I don't know what to do about—this kind of thing. It gets more and more of a problem—this—all this." She waved her hand at what she lived in and then hung her hands at her sides.

Later he describes her lips "as white on her white face, the flesh looked like flower petals. Pinch them and they crumble, wet dust."

“But I don’t feel so good,” she said. “This. Things like this. I wish they wouldn’t happen. Now. I’m very old.... I can hear it come. When the well stopped, I thought it was a sign. When you get like me, you can hear it come.”

[Busch pp. 8-9]

He convinces her to go back up stairs. He calls after her, “You make sure and have my after-dinner coffee ready tonight, hear? There’ll be water for it.” With his command of tone, almost as if he regards her as a child, one senses that he feels uncomfortable with what he sees and hears in the widow’s predicament, as she faces the certainty of her own death. And of course, he recognizes his own limits in what he can do to remedy such problems other than resurrecting dead water wells.

When she leaves, he gets to work forcing the dry ice down into the blocked pipe, and caps it up for the present. Then he drives home, and after dinner he will return to complete the work. He arrives again at her house in the dark, only one lighted window in the house, and creeps back down into the cellar, hoping she was having a good rest upstairs. He uncaps the pipe, and “a deep stink of the deepest cold” rises up, followed by the sound of climbing water. He quickly fills up a water can with some of it.

“I capped the check valve, closed the pipe that delivered the water upstairs, poured water from the water can through the funnel to prime the pump, switched it on, watched the pressure climb to thirty-eight pounds, opened the faucet to the upstairs pipes, and heard it gush.”

[Busch p. 10]

He hurries to get his water can and tools to the truck (seemingly in a panic so he won’t have to see her), and leaves surreptitiously without saying anything to the widow, nor for that matter, keeping his promise of social contact (“after-dinner coffee”), leaving the old woman alone after ‘making a dead well live.’

After Dr. Williams returns to the patient’s home a third time it is

quite early the next morning and dark. He makes his way back upstairs, where he sees the four boys asleep across two big beds pushed together, all partially undressed, describing the scene whimsically ‘as if sleep had overtaken them in the act of removing their clothes.’ The following excerpt reveals what has happened during the doctor’s absence, in a simplicity of style that lends itself all the more to the chilling reality:

Did you have strong pains?

Yeah, all night but as long as I knew it was all right I could stand it.

It’s still in the sack, he said. It all came out together.

[Williams p.117]

Abe the plumber arrives at the house of the professor (named Samuels), in a setting which he describes as a catastrophe in itself: an old, long-neglected farm house that has tilted, lacking sturdy weather-proof walls or insulation, a rotted roof above the porch, and in general, a house ready to collapse. The professor is described as a puffy young man in a T-shirt with a black beard and dirty glasses. His little 3-year-old son Mac, by contrast, was ‘beautiful: blond hair and sweetly shaped head, bright brown eyes.’ At once, Abe is fond of the child, and seems to prefer his company to that of his father, who is nervous, inept, and quite in the way. Mac announces to Abe, “Daddy broke [the pump] last night, and we can’t fix it again.”

They make their way down into the basement through the back door, with Samuels leading the way quickly, turning on lights and pushing things out of the way, chattering to cover up his uncertainties. The son Mac tells Abe, “We’re the workers, okay? You and me will be the workers. But daddy can’t fix anymore. Mommy said so.” At that, the embarrassed Samuels tells his son, “We’ll leave him alone now, Mac.” And then, “Would we be in the way? I’d like to learn a little about the thing if I can.” In an apparent reversal of roles between father and son, Mac shakes his head and smiles at Abe. “What are we going to do with our daddy?”

Through the next several paragraphs, Mac goes outside to play, and Abe answers Samuel’s questions about how the pump works, and what he should do when certain things go wrong. “God, what I don’t know,” he

marvels in some perplexity and despair. Abe reassures him, "Well, we'll get it better for you." Samuels replies, "I'll bet you will." For Abe that significant phrase was "... a gift he gave me, a bribe," as he recalls his taunts against Samuels during the phone conversation the day before. And one senses, too, the humiliation rising in Samuels as the plumber in his house 'digs for what's wrong.'

Step by competent step the plumber locates and solves the problem, by pouring the 'widow's water' from the can he has brought from her house the day before, down into the blocked pipe, and coming up with a small stone, half the size of a fingernail, that was caught in the pipe, and causing all the misery in Samuel's household. But as the pump is reattached and the sump begins to empty the big puddle of water that had formed in the basement (because Samuels had unwisely turned the pump off the night before), his son Mac picks up the remains of a dead mouse in the drain. His father is horrified at the stench of death, but perhaps even more so, with the idea of a dead thing in his home that he has no dominion over. His nerves snap and he hits his son with a violent slap, demanding that he go upstairs and wash his hands 'this instant!' The violent change in his behavior reflects his own failure and ineptitude—feeling all the time that he was the cause of the problem with the pipes. This is conveyed when he yells at his son, "That's *filthy* in there—Christ knows what you've dragged up. And I *told* you not to mess with things you don't know anything about, Dammit!"

Abe calmly picks up the mouse by the tail and as he makes his way up the stairs out of the cellar, he passes Mac who is sitting on the steps 'not crying anymore, but wet-faced and stunned.' He whispers into his ear, "What are we going to do with your Daddy?"

He goes home full of remorse for the sorrow he feels he has caused father and son, and perhaps for the loneliness and neglect of the widow.

Dr. Williams is faced with the tragedy of death of the premature baby. He is in the room with the couple. He looks into the sack and sees the fetus.

Is it alive? he asked me.

No.

It was alive when it was born, though, she said. I looked and I could see it open its mouth like it wanted to breathe.

What is it Doc, she continued, a boy or a girl?

What do you want to know for?

I want to know if it's a girl.

I looked. Yes, it would have been a girl.

There she said, you see! Now you've got your girl. I hope you're satisfied.

I haven't any girl, he answered her quietly.

I'm hungry, yelled a sleepy voice from the other room.

Shut up! said the father.

[Williams pp. 117-118]

Of particular note are the sudden flashes of anger that ensue at the end of both of these stories. If we consider the father's hopes for a daughter, and the almost cavalier way his own wife, who has just delivered the baby, ridicules his wish, we can understand that he, like Samuels, must feel an ineptitude and impotence in his own life that causes him, too, to snap at his own child. In Williams' story, a son calls for something to eat from the next room, calling for sustenance... And the father refuses him with a violent "Shut up!" in the face of his own tragedy.

The plumber began his narrative *Widow Water* with '...What to know about pain is how little we do to deserve it, how simple it is to give, how hard to lose.' In both of these stories, the situations contrive themselves to engulf each of the characters in sorrow to some degree; and as in real life, the blame is often shared among the characters, wittingly or not, accurately or not, as they attempt to define their own purposes, reasons, and to establish their own sense of *place* in their immediate surroundings.

These are not uniquely American stories *per se*, nor are the protagonists uniquely American. Yet they are true as American stories as they would be true were they Japanese or French, and the point is that the stories could just as well have taken place in other cultures and societies. They are glimpses into lives and settings that may mirror those of us in our

own cultures striving to make sense of our own existences, and defining our own *place* and purpose.

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