

The Burden of Insight: Dramatic Irony
and the Rhetoric of Illumination in Selections from Elbow Room

James Alan McPherson's "The Story of a Scar" opens in a doctor's waiting room. The narrator of the story is a young man who, to ostensibly pass the time, asks a fellow patient to tell him the story of the scar she received on her face. As he listens to her story, he claims that he is struck by "the burden of insight" (127). That intriguing phrase yokes together two words with antipodal connotations. The positive resonances associated with the word *insight* are undercut by the negative feeling tones of the word *burden*. The concept of insight is essentially about transitioning from a state of relative ignorance to a state of more complete knowledge. It is about illumination, about the end of innocence and naïveté. Illumination then can only be construed as a burden when it brings to its bearers the notion of accountability. The curious thing about "The Story of a Scar" and the short story collection Elbow Room (1977) in which it appears is that more often than not the protagonists in the stories do not labor under the burden of insight.

Generally speaking, a rhetoric of illumination informs and shapes the vast majority of stories in Elbow Room. The unifying vision of the collection is governed by a discourse that critiques and assigns value to different stages and kinds of naïveté and which comments on the various modes of deliverance from it. McPherson's rhetoric of illumination is grounded in the values of liberal humanism, and it comments on naïveté by dramatizing characters caught up in, moving toward, and responding to satori-like moments and experiences. This is primarily evident in "The Silver Bullet," "The Problems of Art," and "The Story of a Scar," three stories that are representative of the vision that thematically unifies Elbow Room.

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To manifest this vision, McPherson employs dichotomized character pairs which he uses to comment on certain types of societal ills. Critic Patsy B. Perry says that the focus of sociological problems is emblematic of McPherson's collection. She claims that his "personae are indeed moving out of existing stereotypes, or they are contending with individuals who

would impose limits based on sex, race, class, or region" (192). The dichotomy in McPherson's character pairs is often based on generational and aesthetic differences as well. His characters' naïveté is typically a result of not being able to see beyond socially prescribed conceptions of self and reality, conceptions that are based on ideas and stereotypes rooted in the aforementioned divisions of difference. McPherson uses his protagonists' lack of critical insight, sentimentalized ways of thinking, and/or myopic ways of seeing the world to generate dramatic tension and thematic significance

In "The Silver Bullet," McPherson, employs a conformist/individualist dichotomy to make his point about the value of being able to critique and interpret the rhetoric of organized groups. In this initiation story, the discourses under investigation are masculinity and political revolution. The principal characters of "The Silver Bullet" are Willis Davis, Curtis Carter, the Henry St. guys, W. Smith Enterprises, and the proprietors of Slick's Bar and Grill. Willis, the protagonist, is an ingénue who is in search of a personal identity. He desperately wants to feel like a part of something, something manly and full of import and status. Willis, however, does not have any particular set of principles in mind to guide him in his quest. He simply wants a sense of belonging for belonging's sake, and he hopes to gain it by allying himself with one the various the groups of African American males in his working-class community.

The story opens with the Henry St. guys, a neighborhood gang, cajoling Willis to prove his loyalty to the group by holding up Slick's Bar and Grill. Willis protests against this particular initiatory act because he believes that Slick's is protected by the rackets (56-7) and he does not want to incur that group's wrath. But the intense outer pressure of the harangue and the equally intense internal pressure of his need to belong cause Willis to give in. He agrees to attempt the robbery, but before he does he goes to see his friend Curtis, who he invites in on the action. Curtis rebuffs both the robbery and the wisdom of joining the Henry St. guys. The narrator says that "Curtis did not want any part of the operation. He made a long speech in which he stressed the importance of independent actions, offering several of his own observations on the dependability of the Henry Street guys" (58-9).

Curtis serves as the voice of individuality, a quality that McPherson deeply cherishes and promotes in Elbow Room. However, Curtis's advice is not compelling enough to deter Willis, who is resolved to carry out the mission. Willis does attempt to rob Slick's, but he is so unconvincing as a thug that Jones, the bartender, easily dispels him. Willis, because he bungled the robbery, falls out of favor with the Henry St. guys. He again seeks advice from Curtis who tells him that he'll have to find protection by joining another group "with a new approach over on the West Side" (62-3). Willis goes to the new group for help. This West Side group is known as W. Smith Enterprises and it is tapped into social revolutionist rhetoric. W. Smith Enterprises is headed by R. V. Felton, but despite the distinction of its commercial name, it turns out to be just a gang common thugs. Felton and associates take Willis back to Slick's and try to extort money out of Jones, the bartender, a second time. McPherson heightens the situational irony of the moment by walking the Henry St. guys and their leader, Dewey, into this scene. Then he heightens the tension even more by bringing in the enigmatic Slick, the feared owner of the bar.

The situation resolves itself at the end of Jones's gun barrel and Willis has the opportunity to see that neither of the groups he tried to ally himself with possess the kind of ruthlessness and bravery with which he had imaginatively invested them. Willis is eventually left alone in the bar with both Slick and Jones, men who actually possess the kind of power he was searching for. Willis is scared for his life. The men, however, let him leave the bar alive, but not without the knowledge that African American men can have power without being in the rackets, which is to say they can have power as individuals, power outside of belonging to some type of group, African American or otherwise.

The message of "The Silver Bullet" stresses the importance of critically evaluating one's reality and beliefs. The situation Willis got himself in was his opportunity to learn the value of discretion, or the value of critiquing the received political or ideological rhetoric of any one particular group or person. One has to be divested of sentimentality and subjectivity to be able to see things as they really are. Because the story ends with Willis running off the scene,

McPherson does not intend for the reader to know if Willis learns this lesson, which is to say that Willis learns to change the way he interprets people and situations. The reader can never know if such a change is effected in Willis. That is the beauty of this story. It works by dramatic irony. Dramatic irony, is by definition, dependent on the reader's understanding and the character's ignorance of the meaning and significance of the character's own words, actions, or interpretations of events in a story. McPherson is not concerned with whether or not Willis becomes illuminated. He wants the transformative change to take place in his reader. If the reader has a moment of insight, then McPherson has promoted understanding in that individual; and that understanding may lead to actual social transformation. That, after all, is the issue with which McPherson is most concerned as it is evidenced by Elbow Room's preoccupation with faulty stereotypes.

The lawyer Corliss Milford, the protagonist in the "The Problem of Art," is as much of an ingénue as Willis Davis. Milford's sentimental, self-deluding, and naive view of the case he takes on sets him up to be duped by his client Mrs. Mary Farragot. Corliss and Mary's relationship sets up the dichotomized ingénue/sophisticate character pair that is analogous to the Willis/Curtis character pair. The narrator tells us that Mary "had been arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, although she insisted that she was a teetotaler" (95). The narrator says that Corliss did not know Mary well:

. . . the only consistent factual evidence about her that Milford knew was her insistence, over a period of two weeks, that no one but a white lawyer could represent her at the license revocation hearing. For her firm stand on this was now notorious in all the cubbyhole offices of Project Gratis. (95-6)

As he sits in her house waiting on her to return with her witness, Corliss suspects that there was something contrived about Mary's living room and by extension her and her case (95). But as he scans the furniture and the pictures, he convinces himself that Mary's face is "not the face of an alcoholic. It reflect[s] strength and motherly concern" (96-7).

Mary, Corliss, and Clarence, Mary's witness, eventually make their way to the hearing room of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Once he enters the hearing office, Corliss comes to understand the "relative sophistication" (108) of Mary's insistence on having a white lawyer. Corliss, however, is dumbfounded by Mary's subsequent machinations. She keeps changing her strategy, that is, the idea of letting Clarence testify. She changes it every time new factors enter the case. For example, she reverses it when she finds out that the hearing officer is a white woman and she reverses it again when she finds out that her case will be taped and forwarded to the central officer at the state capital. Corliss, the liberal-minded, good-intentioned white defense lawyer that he is, lacks the insight to understand the reasoning behind Mary's seemingly arbitrary and capricious reversals. Mary's insight into the nature of race and gender as socio-political forces is what informs her decisions, and, ultimately, it is what helps her retain her driver's license.

Corliss, ironically, prides *himself* on the success of the hearing: "Milford felt pleased with himself. He had taken command of a chaotic situation and forced it to a logical outcome. He had imposed order" (116). After the case is over, Clarence, who thought that Corliss was in on Mary's ruse, reveals that Mary is not the teetotaler Corliss imagined her to be. Corliss, in an attempt to assuage his ego, reminds himself that he did grant the possibility that Mary might have had a beer now and then. But he soon learns the depth of his self-delusion. Mary only drinks whiskey, Maker's Mark to be precise.

Critic Patsy Perry says that "'The Problems of Art' provides an excellent example of the individual who defies . . . stereotyp[ing]", this, of course, being Mary Farragot, and she goes on to say that the story "is against people guilty of assigning convenient labels . . . (192), people like Corliss Milford. The O. Henrich surprise ending of "The Problems of Art" definitely makes this clear. The ending, however, does not reveal Corliss's reaction to the fact that his capacity for self-delusion, which is fueled by racial and gender stereotypes, is greater than he thought it could be. Lacking his reaction, we, the readers, do not know if he is changed as a result of the initiation that Mary Farragot and Clarence Winfield usher him through. That is, we do not know if he will

alter his actions now that he has seen the error of his ways. But change in the protagonist is not important for McPherson. As with the ending of "The Silver Bullet," McPherson is most concerned with change within the reader and he uses dramatic irony as a narrative strategy to effect that change.

Several McPherson scholars have written about or made reference to "The Story of a Scar." Herman Beavers, author of Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fictions of Earnest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson (1995), uses it to explicate "The Story of a Dead Man" in his 1986 essay "I Yam What You Is and You Is What I Yam: Rhetorical Invisibility in James Alan McPherson's 'The Story of a Dead Man.'" Beavers argues in this essay that "the narrator in 'Dead Man' is distinctive because of his innocence and naïveté" (367) and his conclusion is that this story is "unique among McPherson's stories in that it is concerned with the narrator's search for a name with which he can live" (373). But, as shown above, the innocence, naïveté, and search of identity Beavers speaks of are not unique to "The Story of a Dead Man." Those qualities are equally indicative of "The Silver Bullet" and "The Problems of Art." Beavers goes on in his essay to claim that the narrator in "The Story of a Scar" as well as the one in "A Solo Song for Doc" "combines technique and strategy to complete a transaction with his listener. This involves an attempt to transform the listener, bringing him or her to a new level of awareness, concerned with providing the listener with a clearer image of the narrator" (367) Beavers suggests that the narrator of "The Story of a Scar" is an adept storyteller who "achiev[ed] a better understanding of women . . . having learned the art of listening" from the woman he met in the doctor's office (367).

McPherson scholar Jon Wallace is less partial than Beavers to the narrator of the "The Story of a Scar." In his essay "The Politics of Style in Three Stories by James Alan McPherson" he argues the narrator of this story seeks "a space within which [he] can defend [himself] against claims of intimacy, human involvement, and personal history. The tool [he] use[s] to accomplish this goal is language" (378). He goes on to call the narrator a "pompous" and "presumptuous" "liar who uses language [highly formal English] as a mask with which he attempts to protect

himself by intimidating others" (380). As Wallace sees it, the narrator is only concerned with "the continual validation of the assumptions that confirm his presumed superiority" (380). And for critic Patsy Perry, "The Story of a Scar" provides another graphic illustration of the danger of classifying individuals . . . [based] on incomplete information" (193).

As previously mentioned, "The Story of a Scar" opens in a doctor's reception room. The principal characters of the story are the narrator and the scarred, working class woman he meets in the waiting room. The secondary characters are part of the cast in the story the woman tells the narrator. The most important member of that cast is the woman's bookish and aspiring past boyfriend, Billy Crawford, who, like the narrator, prides himself on his love of scholarship. The dichotomized ingénue/sophisticate pair in this story is epitomized by the narrator's relationship with the woman with the scar. In their case, he is the ingénue and she is the sophisticate although she, ironically, is not as well-educated or cosmopolitan as he appears to be. In the case of the woman's past relationship with Billy Crawford, she functions as the ingénue and Billy functions as the agent that violently awakens her to the dangers of stereotyping people too hastily, the dangers of not using critical insight.

Perry points out that "The Story of a Scar," like "The Story of a Dead Man," and "The Silver Bullet" is set in the black community and deals with "the attempts of one or more characters to gain status and respectability" (193). Critic William Domnarski in his essay "The Voices of Misery and Despair in the Fiction of James Alan McPherson" says "'The Story of a Scar' comes to symbolize a reaction to yet another aspect of the problems associated with work and social mobility for blacks: peer pressure and the difficulty of being ambitious within the black community [the story] suggests the extent of the friction between . . . those living for the present, avoiding and resenting their opposites, attributing to them a sense of aloofness and superiority" (365).

All of this indeed is played out in the story, which opens with the erudite narrator, who takes a prurient interest in the woman with the scar. Although he is not interested in fostering a lasting relationship with her, the narrator crudely tries to ingratiate himself with the woman by

asking her about the origin of her scar, the first thing he notices about her. The second thing he noticed about her was that she "was a robust woman, with firm round legs and considerable chest" (119). The narrator, like many of McPherson's narrators, is finely attuned to the woman's aesthetic and what it signifies. He holds nothing but contempt for the woman's urban sub-culture style:

It [her scar] was as real as the honey-blond wig she wore, as real as the purple pantsuit. I studied her approvingly. Such women have a natural leaning toward the abstract expression of themselves. Their styles have private meanings, advertise secret distillations of their souls. Their figures, and their disfigurements, make meaningful statements. Subjectively, this woman was the true sister of the man who knows how to look while driving a purple Cadillac. (120)

The narrator's contempt for the woman's aesthetic rationalizes his purely sexual interest in her. It allows him to pursue her as a casual fling rather than a serious love interest. The narrator functions as the ingénue of this story because he thinks that he has the woman's situation all figured out. In his mind, she received the scar as a result of dating a callous-untutored-purple Cadillac driving-womanizing-no account-postal worker. This is what he likes to believe, needs to believe. This is the story he has to buy into because it allows him to promote himself as the alternative of choice.

When the woman tells the narrator the story of her scar, she very carefully states that it "was [her] boyfriend that caused it" (122). She goes on to say that the "more she looks at [the narrator] the more [she] can see [that he] is just like him. He had that same way of sittin' with his legs crossed, squeezin' his sex juices up to his brains" (122). She tells the narrator that she should have known better than to fall for Billy because he was an ambitious, scholarly, individualist who preached to her about the uselessness of her friends, "the lowlife in the back room" (122). She tells the narrator that Billy "hated the way they dressed, the way they talked, and the way they carried on durin' work hours. He said if all them tried to be like him and advanced themselves, the Negro wouldn't have no problems" (122-23). The woman's girlfriend,

Red Bone, tried to warn her that Billy was not the man for her nor she the woman for Billy. But the woman refused to listen. Red Bone also insisted that Billy was a punk, that is, that he was cowardly because he was bookish.

When the woman tells the narrator about Teddy Johnson—the Cadillac driving, "son of the Great McDaddy" (127)—who won her affections, a sudden "burden of insight" (127) causes him to cut her off. He declares that Teddy usurped Billy, treated the woman badly, used her up, and cut her face. He had assumed even earlier (121), under a previous flash of insight, that only one of the less ambitious, less well-educated men that the woman associated with could have cut her. And he continued to believe it in spite of the fact that she told him at the beginning of her story that her boyfriend, Billy, was the cause of the scar. This shows that the narrator is not listening, that he is receptive only to the story he wants to hear. As it turns out, the narrator's assumption about Teddy's violent nature is wrong, but what few scholars mention is that Red Bone's assumption about Billy's cowardice is also wrong.

Billy Crawford cut the woman after an altercation occurred when he confronted her about the affair he suspected her of having with Teddy. Billy also stabbed Teddy in the midst of the brawl. So the woman's scar was inflicted by a scholarly, disciplined man, a man much like the narrator. Neither the narrator nor Red Bone had the insight to consider the possibility that Billy could be violent. Red Bone thought Billy was too scared to fight and the narrator thought Billy was too smart and proud to fight. They both stereotyped him because of his bookishness and thus misread the text of his character.

Domnarski adeptly sums up the story:

"The Story of a Scar" shows that the apparently sincere interest Billy's girlfriend has in him, an interest grounded in her respect for his ambition, is not strong enough to withstand the dreaded feeling of isolation she will experience at work in the post office if she continues making Billy and what he represents her choice. Her ultimate rejection of Billy for Teddy and his view of life comes to mean much more than a failed romance. When Billy viciously attacks his girlfriend in a

moment of rage, he is symbolically attacking an attitude within his own cultural niche that represses and frustrates him. (365)

As Domnarski points out, "The Story of a Scar" is most definitely about class and caste divisions and values, but it is also a story about the danger of equating virtue with the presence or appearance of intelligence. The two do not necessarily go hand in hand.

By telling the scholarly narrator her story, the woman is letting him know that she does not consider him the prize that he considers himself to be. Hindsight is twenty/twenty, as the cliché goes. The woman has gained insight from her relationship with Billy Crawford. The insight she gained cost her, but she has it. She is able to see clearly through the pretense of the narrator. Although, this story ends in the narrator's point of view, it is not clear whether or not he has learned something about himself nor whether or not he will change his beliefs or behavior based on that knowledge. The narrator simply asks the woman her name at the end of the story. Wallace argues that this "is merely another defensive tactic—the narrator's way of keeping his distance by reducing intimate discourse to mere form" (381).

Since the narrator, who is a first-person narrator, is telling the story to the reader from a point after the events of the story have already transpired, he should know the woman's name, that is, if she gave it to him. What reason could he have for withholding the name if he knows it? Does he want to give the story a fable like quality by making the principal players nameless ciphers? Is he that concerned with his performance as a storyteller? What reason could he have for not telling us that the woman refused to give him her name if she did so? It could not be because he wants to save face. The story he tells already makes him look like a lout.

"The Story of a Scar" ends ambiguously, but it works because the purpose of McPherson's fiction is for change to take place in the reader. If the reader identifies with what the woman represents, then it seems "The Story of a Scar" can be rightfully considered the success so many critics consider it to be. The job of the woman's character is to initiate the narrator as well as the reader into the Epimethean wisdom of hindsight. The woman's lesson in learning to interpret human motivations was costly, but not as costly as never learning that lesson can be.

It is evident from the stories addressed here that the naive characters in these selections from Elbow Room lack the capacity to critically interpret themselves and their surroundings in ways that are consummate with McPherson's pluralistic politics. They buy into and act on stereotypes and are incapable of recognizing this shortcoming. For McPherson this is a tragedy, a sin against his vision of an enlightened life and society. The complex rhetoric of illumination in McPherson's stories is designed to spark change in those readers who most need it and to bolster the convictions of those who already understand the value of getting beyond the kinds of stereotypes that keep individuals and groups of people from intimately knowing each other. The burden of insight may be difficult to bear, but it is lighter than the kinds of burdens that one may suffer for the lack of it. This, ultimately, is what McPherson wants his readers to realize.

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