

Peter Taylor's "The Throughway": The Death of a Marriage

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Common to Peter Taylor's early and recent work is the depiction of marriage as a doomed institution. What should be the most comforting and enduring of relationships is presented as a paradox that ultimately defies comprehension, for, as Jonathan Yardley observes, "nobody knows what is happening inside that most intimate human arrangement... except the two people in it — and often they don't know themselves" (E8). Perhaps no story more poignantly illustrates the dangers, deceptions, and disloyalties inherent in matrimony than Taylor's "The Throughway."¹ In this disturbing tale, what appears to outsiders as an ideal marriage between "sane and sensible and unsuperficial people" (59) is revealed to be a neurotic, destructive liaison dependent upon victimization and capitulation.

This revelation, which slowly heightens in intensity during the course of the twenty-page story, is communicated to the audience via a structure closely resembling the one-act play, a genre familiar to Taylor.² His merging of the two genres is suggested by the descriptive tag — "a sort of a story, a sort of a play, a sort of a dream" — attached to one of his works, "The Early Guest," where stage directions call for the two protagonists, reunited lovers, to wear actual masks in a symbolic attempt to conceal the inevitable changes that the passage of time has wrought. Though no such artificial device is used in "The Throughway," this story can also be viewed "as a sort of a play, a sort of a dream," with perhaps "nightmare" a more appropriate substitute for the latter term. As in "The Early Guest," we witness here the painful "unmasking" of a relation-

ship, but unlike the characters in the first story, who safely resume their protective shields and go their separate ways, the protagonists in "The Throughway" are doomed to remain together in an undisguised state of contempt, fear, and hatred.

Before the figurative curtain rises *in medias res* on this highly charged scene of marital discord, an omniscient narrator, assuming a chorus-like function throughout the story, provides a brief prologue, telling us that Harry and Isabel, a happily married couple of many years, "had lived always in the same house since they had first married." Though the once fashionable neighborhood, "where they had themselves been young" and where they had raised their daughters, gradually deteriorated, precipitating the flight of most of their old friends, they were content to remain. Their settled, unpretentious life causes their "contemporaries," who "had all prospered more than they had...and had moved into newer developments," to express some envy, albeit condescendingly, of Harry and Isabel's situation: "In a changing, uncertain world it was good to know a couple who enjoyed such stability" (59).

Their stability, however, was suddenly shaken when they learned that one section of an elaborate new throughway system connecting the suburbs to the city was slated to come down their street, necessitating the destruction of the entire block. Upon receiving this news, Harry, previously viewed as a "sane and sensible" man, "revealed himself to all the world as nothing more than a local crank" (60) when he initiated, without the support of his wife, a fruitless protest against the impending demolition. Consequently, the two were shunned by their friends and, even worse, became "almost strangers to each other. . . . The routing of the new throughway, which was considered to be in the public interest, seemed to have undermined the very serenity for which Harry and Isabel were envied" (60).

The narrator's exposition might suggest that "The Throughway" constitutes a topical commentary on the ills of progress, dramatizing the heavy price the victims of such progress must pay. In reality, however, this story is not merely an indictment of a contemporary problem but also a subtle

dissection of a doomed relationship. As Albert J. Griffith accurately notes:

Taylor goes to great pains to strip his situation of those possibilities which might give it undue social significance. . . . Harry and Isabel are nobodies; and they do not in an ostensible way represent any tradition or any historic values. Even the house they are losing is rented, not inherited or even earned by work or sacrifice. The house is, moreover, not a thing of beauty, of economic worth, or of sentimental attachment. The story obviously, then, cannot be the expected melodrama about old values being crowded out by new. (150)

The couple take center stage on "the day scheduled for their removal from the old house . . . not as two who were allied against an intruding world but as two adversaries" (60). And the psychological warfare is made all the more acute by various trappings that give this story its theatrical dimension. For one thing, all the traditional unities are scrupulously observed. Once the short expository section ends, the action is restricted to depicting the death throes of a thirty-one-year marriage within the confines of a few hours, the morning of Isabel and Harry's expected exodus from their old neighborhood. So too, from beginning to end, the story takes place in one interior setting consisting of the living room, connecting hallway, and dining room of the condemned house, where the chaos attendant upon any move — half-packed cartons, misplaced personal effects, precariously stacked furniture — mirror the emotional turmoil of the inhabitants.

The setting also contains stage props that further illustrate the couple's mounting crisis. On a dreary autumnal day, the rain pelts a curtainless plate-glass window and increases in intensity as the pair's pathetic attempts at communication become less and less successful. The window itself offers a depressing vision of the external world, an objective correlative of Harry and Isabel's lonely inner landscape: "[N]obody passed on the sidewalk. There wasn't another house in the block that hadn't been vacated. Two across the street had already come down[,] . . . [leaving] empty lots . . . with the gaping holes that had once been basements" (67) and, more importantly, that had once been homes.

Isabel and Harry, the last living souls on their block, have become public curiosities, like animals on display in a zoo. An ambience of entrapment and isolation is pervasive, enhanced by two additional stage props. A caged canary belonging to Isabel sits among the packing crates, a "poor, protected creature, so innocent and unsuspecting" that the woman "couldn't bear to look at [it]" (74). In addition, "four little mottled fish" remain unfed in their glass bowl, like their master, who sits without breakfast amidst the "jumble and disarray and . . . terrible, blank bareness" (61) of his soon-to-be-demolished home. Throughout the story such animal imagery is evoked to describe the protagonists' desperation: for example, "All weekend he [Harry] had wandered about the house like a sick animal who only *sensed* there was going to be a change" (62); Isabel "uttered a little shriek[. . .] the cry of a small animal suddenly finding itself trapped when it thought it had escaped" (74).

To a certain extent these two symbolically imprisoned characters are both victims, Harry of his own inadequacies, which have crippled him in a highly competitive world, and Isabel of her inability to establish an identity strong enough to counter Harry's demoralizing domination. Since the narrator alternately slips into the consciousness of each character, the internal monologues promote understanding and sympathy. Thus Harry is not presented as some two-dimensional villain but as a complex individual who has lost touch with reality and feels betrayed by a wife unable to share his warped perspective. And in his Quixote-like stand against a nebulous enemy designing to rob him of the life he has led for over thirty years, he elicits a compassionate response, reminded as we are of other Taylor characters whose lives, Donald Phelps notes, "have gently petrified around locations: little shrines, sometimes houses, sometimes towns or localities, by which they can certify the reality of their lives, and their very identities" (78). When Harry pleadingly asks, "'Can't you have a right to something without owning it?'" and explains, "'I own nothing. . . . I thought that nothing was something they could never take away from me'" (68-69), he becomes a modern-day Bartleby in his passive but stubborn refusal to vacate his abode.

It is apparent that this man's bizarre behavior is indicative

of some form of mental collapse, and Harry's allusions to deep emotional difficulties that date back to childhood make his callous and paranoid treatment of Isabel at least comprehensible. Yet, no matter how unbalanced and pathetic Harry is, the narrator and reader's sympathies rest predominantly with Isabel, for her husband, whether sane or insane, nonetheless victimizes his wife.

The narrator spends far more time in Isabel's consciousness than in Harry's, and her gradually deepening perceptions ultimately lead to the story's disturbing climax. Her stature grows and Harry's diminishes as she repeatedly attempts to communicate with the man she has loved for over three decades, only to be cruelly rebuffed. But each rejection fosters her reexamination of their marriage and the humiliating role she has unwittingly played.

Many of Isabel's progressively disturbing revelations take place during the painful duologues engaged in by the couple, parallel conversations that expose the inefficacy of words to bridge the emotional chasm between husband and wife. On the morning of their intended move, Isabel patiently tries to reason with her distracted husband, gently pointing out all the flaws of their dilapidated house and deteriorating neighborhood; however, her words are met with silence, and her presence is ignored: "He descended the stairs as though he didn't see her. . . . [I]t seemed that his not looking at her during the past weeks had been what hurt her most. Presently, in a tone so dispirited and soft that he may not have noticed that she had spoken, she asked, 'How can you even want to stay on here?'" (60-61).

When Harry finally responds, he accuses his wife of caring too little for their home, and, accustomed as she is to his domination, Isabel must fight against being sucked into the vortex of her husband's madness since "[i]t was never easy for her not to see things the way he saw them or the way he wanted her to see them" (63). Struggling to preserve herself and Harry, she becomes the aggressor for the first time in her life, a role she finds perplexing: "She wondered at her own fierceness. She was saying things she couldn't have said to him six weeks before. . . . [S]he wanted to stop her ears to shut out her own voice" (64).

Unfortunately, her "fierceness" is short-lived. As Harry calmly announces that he intends to die in the house they are expected to vacate within the hour, aggression turns to fear, for Isabel is finally forced to see in her husband what she has tried too long to deny:

Her fright seemed like something new to her, and yet it seemed familiar too. . . . It was not the throughway that was the cause of their distress. It was Harry's drawing away from life. All through the years, really, he had only been waiting for the throughway, even wishing for it in his own way, wanting to be cornered. (65)

Isabel realizes that Harry's desire for death is stronger than any other force in his life and poses a danger not only to himself but to her. After attempting to escape his influence by exclaiming, "I'm not thinking of dying, Harry! . . . And you shouldn't be," she plaintively asks, "Isn't it enough just to go on being alive? No matter where it is? Isn't our love anything at all to you any more?" (65). This last question reveals an awful truth: "But at once she felt she had spoken the word 'love' exactly as she would have spoken the name of a long-dead child" (65-66).

With that truth come others in rapid succession. Harry had claimed all of his life he wanted nothing when, in reality, he wanted everything. Knowing the impossibility of acquiring all he desired, he settled instead for a self-inflicted martyrdom, which Isabel had unwittingly undermined. Being an efficient homemaker and nonmaterialist, she "made their nothing such a great plenty. She had never allowed him to feel poor, to feel himself a nobody. But he had *wanted* to feel himself a nobody, to know that he was poor. He had needed to need" (66). Isabel momentarily believes that simply because she now understands Harry's smoldering frustrations, this understanding will unite them once again, and she loyally reaffirms her commitment to him: "I've never had any thought but to be what you wanted me to be. My one desire in life has been to give in to you . . . and make you comfortable" (68).

Harry verbally confirms Isabel's assessment of her altruism, and, encouraged by this response, she believes she can convince him that she fully comprehends the symbolic signifi-

cance he has attributed to the throughway. Isabel is shocked to discover, however, that her insights provide no comfort to her husband, ironically eliciting from him "open hatred" instead of tenderness or appreciation. Penetrating the ego-protecting defense Harry has erected over a lifetime, she succeeds only in increasing his hostility, for his unachieved ambitions and chronic failures have been suddenly laid bare. He ultimately tells her, "No matter how you make me out or how you explain my coming to where I am, it doesn't alter anything" (75), a perception his wife reluctantly comes to share.

Thus compassion, love, reason, and truth fail to save a marriage precariously sustained for too many years by daily routine, familiar surroundings, and debasing domination. As the disillusioned wife recalls a bit earlier in the story:

Wasn't it that she had really known all along that in his meekness he was far stronger and more willful than she and would never yield an inch to her in any struggle there might ever be between them? His self-righteous withdrawal from the contest of life she saw not as a negative thing but as a positive force pulling her with it toward a precipice somewhere. (71)

Isabel struggles to save herself when she finally sees there is little she can do for Harry and even attempts to exit the house without her demented husband; however, his overpowering determination and her ultimate recognition that "those long, peaceful years they had known together seemed but . . . a brief interlude almost forgotten" (78) leave her literally prostrate upon the floor, her emotional defeat registered in her physical collapse. After Harry announces that he has cancelled the moving vans and makes a number of veiled threats about setting fire to the house with the two of them in it, Isabel tacitly encourages him to do so to avoid "the terrible eternity of life there seemed left before her" (76). But this suicidal pact is never implemented. Ironically, the telephone and throughway, two intrusive emblems of the outside world, protect them against themselves:

[S]he became aware of the ringing sound.... Of course it would be one of the girls! And there was no not answering it. For if they did not answer, then the husband of one of the girls would leap in his car and, traveling the one already completed leg of the throughway, would arrive at their

door within a matter of minutes. And if they did answer, it would no doubt bring the same son-in-law, because there would be no concealing that everything had gone wrong. (77-78)

The thought of a future with a man who has become a menacing stranger and children who will soon insist upon making "all important decisions" for her so overwhelms Isabel that she remains "crouched on the floor" (78), an abject creature with no will to escape. Perhaps, as one critic has charged, Isabel's initial failure was "in putting up with [her husband] . . . and not sending him forth to the fray" and her subsequent "punishment is their life together in his now narcissistic senility" (Lytle 15). Yet is this woman deserving of punishment for a lifetime of devotion? The narrator, a more sympathetic observer than the critic, provides a highly dramatic epilogue that conveys the hopelessness of the couple's situation, for, in essence, what is depicted is the death of a marriage:

Across the bare floor of the hall Harry and Isabel looked into each other's eyes with cold indifference. . . . Who was that stranger standing awkwardly with one foot on the cellar stair? . . . Who was the odd-looking old woman. . . ? Ah, yes, ah, yes. . . a husband. . . a wife. . . a fellow human creature, . . . estranged from one. What matter if it took a quarter of an hour, a year, or a lifetime? (78)

There is no happy exit from "The Throughway" for these two people, with Harry trapped by madness and Isabel by responsibility. Unfortunately joining the ranks of many women in Taylor's fiction who discovered that from "the moment they pledged their love they were all, somehow, widows" ("The Dark Walk" 304), Isabel must sacrifice her own needs and seek what little comfort she can in the knowledge that her loneliness and victimization are often the sad legacies of her gender. In "The Throughway," the death of a marriage is even more tragic than the death of a spouse as this couple become for one another "merely a hand one holds in the dark so that sleep will come" ("Guests" 206). ♪

Notes

1. "The Throughway" first appeared in the *Sewanee Review* 72 (1964): [559-78], and was subsequently published in *In the Miro District and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 57-78. All citations in the text are from this volume.
2. Taylor has written several plays, including a collection of one-act dramas entitled *Presences: Seven Dramatic Pieces* (Boston: Houghton, 1973).

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