

Readers' notes: Peter Kahn's Third Wife

By James Lasdun

James Lasdun is a fiction writer, poet and screenwriter whose work has gained awards and recognition in the UK and the USA. He is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry, the 1999 winner of *The Times Literary Supplement* poetry competition and, in 2006, the winner of the first UK National Short Story competition.

Peter Kahn's Third Wife is an enigmatic, tantalising love story. Its structure resembles that of a fairy-tale, revolving round three purchases for the hero's wives-to-be. Peter Kahn himself is powerful yet mysterious, appearing and reappearing to the heroine unannounced, more compelling each time, and with 'a more developed air of consequence about him'.

In contemporary terms, this is a story about the male gaze. Its opening three-line paragraph shows Clare, in the narrative present, modelling the first necklace for Peter Kahn. The nature of his scrutiny marks him out from other men. Its formal yet sensuous focus on the 'flesh below her throat' propels this modern-day Snow White into 'a realm glazed off from the everyday world' where, far from feeling anxious or oppressed, she experiences a sensation of 'effortless compatibility' with the gazer.

The story is written in the traditional past tense. Although we see its world from the heroine's point of view, we don't learn her name, or the hero's, until the second page. She thinks of him, between visits, in the seclusion of the dark and expensive boutique. Those chunks of her life which don't involve him are summarised, ignored or consigned to the background: where she met her husband, for instance, and how she spends her time outside work. Yet Lasdun's technique also allows him intimate forays into her mind: her hatred of her husband; her secret use of birth control.

Peter Kahn's Third Wife is also a tale about money, symbolised first by the necklace Clare models of 'lemon- and rose-coloured diamonds', then by a succession of pricey jewels. More than the sign of mere material wealth, they belong to 'a form of exchange that was

inexpressible in everyday human terms'. They also prompt psychological revelations. 'The man' buys a necklace which he had thought 'out of his league', revealing himself as prodigal, impulsive and desirous of beautiful things. On subsequent visits the jewels he buys – and the increasing ease with which he pays for them – signal his rising status. His action against the globalisation of the wine world likewise shows taste united with passion. More, it makes him a poet who can describe a wine 'as like having the Rose Window at Chartres dissolving on your tongue'.

Like most heroes, Peter Kahn changes and grows. Though self-assured from the start, he falters when buying a gift for his second wife, failing to recognise 'the assistant', using a cliché to describe his feelings, and attempting a clunky joke. The next time he appears, more opulent-looking than ever, he is accompanied by a woman who proves to be his third fiancée. Although his eyes have a 'melancholy cast', we fail to foresee the turn his courtship will take. His retreat to the Fingerlakes where he will buy his own vineyard suggests that he has learned from experience, and desires a life that is more about making than selling. Kahn's three fiancées pose an escalating threat to Clare's equilibrium. Yet it is her violent, jealous husband who finally provokes her into action: she lies, then embroiders those lies. Paradoxically, her falsehoods lay bare a potent truth to both: Peter Kahn means far more to Clare than Neil does. Though Clare is a Sleeping Beauty she does more than wait to be rescued. Her vision of the Fingerlakes resembles the 'glazed world' of the shop, and of herself held by Peter Kahn's gaze. But this time the scene is vitalised by glittering water and the 'calm greenness of a summer afternoon'. By the story's concluding line her decision is made. Like a snake with its tail in its mouth, the story's concluding paragraph, through its allusion to the boutique, returns us to its beginning. Yet the ending can also be seen as ambiguous: we never find out the result of Clare's trip to the Fingerlakes. Or do we? Peter Kahn has jilted his third fiancée at the altar. By the end of the story, he has only had two wives. The title has told us the rest.

For discussion

Unlike a traditional fairy-tale, *Peter Kahn's Third Wife* does not say that the couple live happily

ever after. What is your view of their eventual fate, and how did the story lead you to form it? How would you describe the series of settings? How much do they indicate about the characters' status and class?

At the start of the story, Clare is 'the assistant' and Peter Kahn is 'the customer' or 'the man'. Elsewhere Neil Gehrig is 'the husband', and another man is simply described as 'the host'. What is the effect of the use of these labels instead of names?

What part does jewellery play? To what extent does it illuminate the characters' psychology? Does its role change?

Why do you suppose that only one fiancée appears in the boutique? What do you learn from this episode about her and Peter Kahn?

In the story's second paragraph Lasdun uses the pluperfect ('had') to push the initial meeting between Clare and Peter Kahn into the narrative past. What is the effect of this authorial decision?

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