



Winter 2019

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Recommended Citation

Bressler, Caroline, "Detachment: An Analysis of Nugent Barker's "Mrs. Sayce's Guy"" (2019). *Modernist Short Story Project*. 30.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/30>

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ENGL 376

23 April 2019

Detachment: An Analysis of Nugent Barker's "Mrs. Sayce's Guy"

"Mrs. Sayce's Guy," by Nugent Barker is an inconclusive, mysterious ghost story centered around the events of the British national holiday, "Guy Fawkes Night," which takes place on November 5th. In particular, the story focuses on Mrs. Sayce as the main character; a sickly woman who finds herself in a conflicted family situation. Nugent Barker uses unlikely characters, such as the face, to give depth and mystery to his story. As a personified actor, the face is a performative aspect of what is happening psychologically, resulting in a story about consciousness, interiority, and a distrust of humanity and the self. Ultimately, Nugent Barker uses these theories to showcase not only the zeitgeist of the time, but also the dangers of detaching oneself from emotion and feeling.

By way of context and introduction, Nugent Barker's story, "Mrs. Sayce's Guy" was found in the English Periodical, *Life and Letters* in the May 1929 edition. *Life and Letters* was a periodical that concerned itself with literature and the dialogue surrounding the analysis and critique of literature. "Mrs. Sayce's Guy" is a story that fits within this context—it is meant to be read more than once—fine-tuned and analyzed. Even after multiple readings, the story is opaque. This is amplified by the darkness of the outside world, but the reader's increased familiarity to the anxiety, self-consciousness, fear, and distrust that embodies the interior world of Emma Sayce's experience. The little that is known about the outside/physical world of "Mrs. Sayce's Guy" centers on the British

holiday, Guy Fawkes Night. Guy Fawkes Night is an annual holiday that celebrates the end of a coup to kill King James I. On November 5, 1605, a group of anti-Protestant men wanted to kill the King and place a Catholic head of state on the throne in his place. However, the plot was discovered before the violence started. Guy Fawkes was found with the explosives and firearms that were intended to aid the assassination of the king. From this time on, celebrating the safety of the king became a national celebration that took place in the evening. Traditionally, fires were burned, and explosives and firecrackers set off to celebrate. As it became cemented as a national tradition, people began to construct Guy Fawkes effigies and would throw them into the fires. "Mrs. Sayce's Guy" begins on the morning before the celebrations.

Mrs. Sayce, the main character, is calling out her kitchen door for her son, Bertie, to come eat breakfast. Bertie never comes, and Mrs. Sayce continues with her morning duties. She hears voices and noise, "[a] whole conglomeration of near and distant sounds together" (Barker 362). Mrs. Sayce becomes paralyzed by this dissonance, and begins to cry in her kitchen, "where. . .there was no further necessity to hold back her sobs" (362). Soon enough, she becomes distracted by her "Guy", sitting in the corner of her kitchen. Mrs. Sayce is in the process of making an effigy to be burned in the celebrations that will take place later in the evening. Her Guy has a "goblin body", which "was the essence of dislocation" (362). Mrs. Sayce is absorbed in her thoughts, hoping that the effigy will meet the expectations that her son, Bertie, would have wanted. Mrs. Sayce herself is concerned that the effigy meets the expectations of those around her. "Anything that might bring a nod of approval, or a shrug of jealousy. . ." (364). As Mrs. Sayce is working on her effigy, the narrative notes, "Into the tiny grotesque body, Mrs. Sayce had pushed, and prodded, and

stuffed, and bundled, all the deformity of the world” (364). The narrative continues on to say that this is her “precious burden” and that for Mrs. Sayce, “there were so many things to be put right, little things that must not be forgotten” (364). “Tuck it tightly everywhere,” she thinks as she works.

Mrs. Sayce eventually leaves her home, headed towards the place where the effigies are to be burned. Along her way, she hears voices that question her actions. They question why she has a Guy and what happened when her husband came back last night. “Dassay ‘e come back for little Bertie. . . (365). Mrs. Sayce ignores these voices and continues on her way, thinking about how cunning she has been, tricking people by calling to her son Bertie for breakfast. As Mrs. Sayce nearly arrives, she runs into a drunk man who seems to know much about Mrs. Sayce and her family. “Come ‘ome drunk, ain’t’e—larst night? Wheer’s Bertie?. . . Took the kid away wid ‘im, ain’t’e—larst night? I ‘eard him! Left yer quite alone!” (366). Mrs. Sayce eventually breaks free from this man and scurries on her way. Mrs. Sayce’s thoughts become confusing and disoriented. “Poor, dear Bertie. Dear little Bertie. *Why* couldn’t they understand? Would she ever forget it? God in Heaven, would she ever forget it?”

Mrs. Sayce finally reaches the destination of the fire. She begins crying. She thinks of her son, Bertie, and her day. She thinks about how she will end her day and believes that Bertie would have wanted her to end the day in the way she has planned. “What a wonderful finish to her day’s journey! Yes! *He* would have ended it so!” (370). Mrs. Sayce becomes nearer to the fire, cognizant of a policeman standing near her. She begins to refer to the effigy as a boy. She gently picks the effigy up and carries it to the edge of the fire. “Bertie’s mother cried in her heart: ‘If only his eyes could peep through, now! If only

Bertie's eyes could peep through the mask, and see me, for one last moment, standing here!" (371). In this moment, the policeman walks over, believing Mrs. Sayce to be slightly crazed. He pulls the effigy from her, and thinks ". . .[it] surely was too heavy to be stuffed with straw. . . ." (372). The policeman recognizes that the effigy is much too heavy to be an effigy, and he begins to pull the mask off of its' face. . .and then the story ends.

Reading this story is disorienting. From the clues given throughout the story, combined with Mrs. Sayce's thoughts, the reader comes to recognize that in the dysfunctional family life of the Sayce's, either Mrs. Sayce's drunk husband killed her little boy, Bertie, or Mrs. Sayce, (in an act of hysteria,) killed her son to save him from her drunk husband. Having read the story over multiple times, I could never resolve the answer. As a result, this story is particularly chilly and ghostly. This is appropriate, considering that the author, Nugent Barker, is not known for anything other than writing a few particularly terrifying ghost stories.

Being familiar with literature analysis, I had a few ideas in regard to the underlying meanings of this story. However, using voyant-tools.org, the digital analysis led my thoughts in a different direction than I had anticipated. The cirrus tool showed common words that I had not noticed as being particularly interesting. In particular, "face(s)" and "voice(s)" were prominent. Using the "Trends" tool showed me that "face(s)" and "voice(s)" followed a similar pattern throughout the story, with their highest usage in the middle of the story. The "links" tool showed me that the word "faces" was connected with words such as "masked" and "detachment." And finally, utilizing the "Contexts" tool, I found that the face is often personified. It is a character that acts independently of a body. From all of these findings, I connected that the voice is an extension of the face. Additionally, the voices

and faces within the novel are masked, literally and figuratively, indicating that the face (and the voice, as an extension of the face) are important factors in signifying what is taking place psychologically.

As I began researching the psychology of the face, I was reminded of a philosopher named Emmanuel Levinas, who was particularly concerned with the face and how it “performs.” Levinas saw the human body as something that could be hidden by clothes and other means. However, the face is one aspect of the body that is exposed and naked. It cannot be hidden, or “without defense.” Levinas wrote, “There is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask his poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance” (Levinas 85-86). I interpret Levinas’ ideas to mean that as much as an individual might attempt to disguise his or her face by facial expressions, vocal intonations, etc., the face cannot be “masked” successfully. The answers to an individual’s internal well-being are on his or her face. In “Mrs. Sayce’s Guy,” Mrs. Sayce seems to be aware of the candid nature of the face, as she takes great lengths to use her voice as a decoy and to cover up the face of her son. Additionally, I mentioned that the Voyant findings indicated that the face is personified, acting independently of the body. Levinas’ ideas add further credence to this claim—if the face is the true answer to understanding the human psyche, then the face would act independently from the body, as the body has the potential to cover up how it truly feels. This becomes evidenced by Mrs. Sayce looking at the mask of her son, hoping for any kind of “expression [to] crack or wrinkle the stiff surface of the magenta mask” (369). Mrs. Sayce has done her best to disguise her son’s body, but she wishes to see some true emotion, thus, she looks to his face.

Sigmund Freud's ideas concerning the "uncanny" have relevance alongside the ideas of Levinas. In his discourse, "The Uncanny," Freud writes about words that are similar, yet have different connotations. He uses the word, "Heimlich" as an example. Heimlich can mean either "what is familiar and agreeable" or "what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud 827). The uncanny takes place when two definitions of the same word are in conflict with each other. Freud uses this point to define the "uncanny" as a feeling that occurs when two of the same objects are seen or interpreted differently. In context of the experiences of Mrs. Sayce, she uses the "Guy" as something that is familiar and agreeable to those around her, yet the truth of the Guy (as her son, Bertie) is something that is concealed and kept out of sight. The Guy is both a Guy Fawkes effigy and Bertie. Two of the same things have come into conflict. This truth is uncanny, and thus, is something that "ought to have remained secret and hidden, but has come to light" (Freud 828). Mrs. Sayce uses the Guy as a means of "masking" her reality, and the truth of what has happened to her family. This sense of uncanny is heightened for the reader because the reader is left "in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton. . ." for the majority of the plot. (Freud 829) The uncanny effect is heightened when imagination and reality become blurred. "The uncanny effect [is produced] when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality. . ." (Freud 835). The reader experiences the "uncanny" as he or she recognizes that the imaginary Guy Fawkes becomes the reality of Bertie. Barker uses this sense of the uncanny as a type of mask that blinds the reader from the intentions of Mrs. Sayce. This is evidenced in the line where Bertie's Guy is described as being a "goblin body" which was "the essence of dislocation" (Barker 362). This idea of dislocation is the idea of the uncanny—two pieces of reality and the imaginary

that ultimately do not fit together. Barker described Mrs. Sayce creating the guy by “stuff[ing] and “prodd[ing]” “all the deformity of the world” (364). Mrs. Sayce had a need to “stuff” and “prod” because her story did not make sense—she needed a mask to hide the dislocated, deformed nature of her life.

Near the end of the story, Mrs. Sayce thinks to herself, “If only Bertie’s eyes could peep through the mask, and see me, for one last moment, standing here!” (Barker 371). Mrs. Sayce recognizes that the mask blocks her from the emotional connections and understanding that she wants. In “Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image” authors Phillipe Crignon, Nicole Simek, and Zahi Zalloua analyze some of Levinas’ ideas. In accordance with Levinas’ ideas on the face, these authors write that there is a type of violence that occurs when the human face is reduced to one particular facial expression, or if the face is hidden from view (Crignon 104). In the case of Mrs. Sayce, she experiences a type of emotional violence because she cannot access her son, nor her own feelings as she has tried desperately to mask them. In my research, I discovered a type of experimental psychology that comes from a particular brand of thought known as the Gestalt School. This type of thinking notes that the “. . .interpretation of the same facial movement might change depending on how much of the face is made visible” (Powell 87). Mrs. Sayce’s understanding of her son became masked because of his masked face and body—she could no longer fully connect with him emotionally, despite her desires for Bertie to “peep through” his mask (and his death) and see her in the last moments (Barker 371). The image of her son through the lens of a “Guy” could not convey Bertie’s body or his emotions accurately. Additionally, Mrs. Sayce has masked herself from those around her, particularly with her voice as she tries to cover the truth. In the beginning of the story, she calls Bertie

for breakfast, attempting to hide his death. Mrs. Sayce thinks, “Lor’! Hadn’t she been an artful one? Hadn’t she, now? Hadn’t she been a cunning one, jest!” (Barker 365). When asked about her drunk husband and her child, Mrs. Sayce responded, “It’s a great day wid the children, Mrs. Macquisten. It’s Guy Forks day” (Barker 367). As a result, Mrs. Sayce has been masked from not only her son, but also from the human connections around her. Mrs. Sayce has reduced herself to a two-dimensional character that lacks emotion; she has masked herself from the humanity she deserves because she distrusts humanity. She also distrusts herself. She is conscious of the crumbling nature of her inner world, but no one, not even herself can fix it. As a result, she becomes detached from herself.

“Mrs. Sayce’s Guy” is a complex and conflicted story, particularly in its concern to what is taking place psychologically. As evidenced above, Mrs. Sayce finds herself conflicted between her emotional needs and the social pressure to appear in accordance with social expectations. Historically, this story may be representative of feelings following the aftermath of World War I. At this time, there was a conscious sense of what had happened as a result of war, but how could the complexity of feelings resulting from the war be framed? How could the intricacy of inner emotions be described? Additionally, who was to blame for the war? Where did it start? How could human innovations in science and technology allow for the extremes in brutality the war saw? As a result of this questioning, a distrust of humanity became prevalent. “Mrs. Sayce’s Guy” exemplifies these emotions—just as it became hard to see Bertie, it was (and is) hard to understand the purpose of the war, even one-hundred years after its conclusion. Mrs. Sayce wanted to hear her son’s voice or see his eyes for a sense of closure, but never found that feeling she so desired. This seemingly exemplifies the need for emotional and mental closure to the Great War, but how

can closure ever be found after something so dramatic? Just as “Mrs. Sayce’s Guy” does not have a definite conclusion, the War can never have a succinct explanation or conclusion. The historical implications of this story are significant. Blending all of the findings together, I believe Barker is writing a story about the importance of personal, meaningful connections in establishing emotion and feeling, particularly in times of darkness. When removed from these kinds of associations, one has detached and masked themselves from the value of connection that they deserve.

“Mrs. Sayce’s Guy” is a story about disguising the face, the polar opposites of reality and the imaginary, and detachment from others and the self. Nugent Barker reflects attitudes of his time in this ghost story, but it is also a narrative about the dangers of becoming immune to feeling and reason. When Mrs. Sayce turned away from these connections, she became crazed, distanced, and unrelatable. As a result, her son died, and it is assumed that Mrs. Sayce would be punished for her actions as well. In the end, no amount of “disfiguring” or “stuffing” of the emotions will ever result in positive consequences.

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