

## **Alice Walker's *Nineteen Fifty-Five*; Anna Lee Walter's *Apparitions***

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Alice Walker's *Nineteen Fifty-Five* is a delightfully wry short story that addresses serious defects in the "American Dream" even as it entertains. Anna Lee Walter's story *Apparitions* is more concerned with the cultural divide between races and how it informs behavior.

The plot of *Nineteen Fifty-Five* is a thinly-veiled take on the life and career of Elvis Presley, here known as "Traynor." As it begins, Traynor -- who's "sort of womanish looking, with real dark white skin and a red pouting mouth, his hair black and curly" -- and his manager (a man with "sweaty-looking eyeballs") come to the home of the narrator, Gracie Mae Still, a black woman who sings and writes songs. They want to buy the rights to one of her tunes, and she agrees. Only a year later, Traynor shoots to stardom with the song, thus establishing a career as the preeminent Emperor of Rock and Roll that will last two decades.

When Gracie Mae sees him performing her song on television, she immediately realizes that were she to close her eyes, she wouldn't know the difference between the young white boy's singing style and her own. She also notices that "it wasn't just the song the people in the audience was screeching and screaming over, it was the nasty little jerk he was doing from the waist down." The fact that Traynor possesses no real originality as a singer and that the reason girls squeal for him has precious little to do with his vocal prowess isn't lost on her, and as the story progresses, it's Traynor's search for self and inability to come to terms with fame and fortune that supply both comedy and pathos in the story.

Over the years Traynor becomes more and more disillusioned with his success, writing often to Gracie Mae, complaining about "all them dumb movies" he's forced to make and the crappy songs written by other people his agent keeps sending him ("I can hardly git through 'em without gagging"). He becomes obsessed with uncovering the true meaning of Gracie Mae's song, as if doing so would finally answer all of his questions. But he's unable to apprehend it's meaning because the

things the song is apparently about -- getting through tough times, having some kind of faith, *experiencing life* -- are things he knows nothing about. His life is a facsimile -- one long performance playing a part, be it rock icon or married man, that he neither enjoys nor understands. What's worse, the people who claim to be his fans don't see him for who he really is (not that he knows either), but for who they want him to be. "They want what you got but they don't want you. They want what I got only it ain't mine. They getting the flavor of something but they ain't getting the thing itself. They like a pack of hound dogs trying to gobble up a scent."

Hoping his audience will recognize "the real thing" and therefore respond in kind, Traynor arranges to have Gracie Mae sing her song on the Carson show. Though she sings beautifully, the audience isn't interested, "clapping politely for about two seconds." Only when The Emperor sings the song do they react, screaming mindlessly, as they always have. "Imagine squealing for twenty years," Gracie Mae remarks, "and not knowing why you're squealing? No more sense of endings and beginnings than hogs."

Eventually, Traynor dies, fat, drug-addled, and profoundly unhappy, his fans "crying and crying and didn't even know what they was crying for." The larger point of the story is that the American Dream can prove a disappointing dead end (as expressed here through that most quintessential of American dreams, rock n' roll stardom), however spectacularly realized. The tragic outcome of Traynor's story is emblematic of the illusory nature of fame, and speaks to the vacuousness of the American obsession with celebrity and media culture. "One day this is going to be a pitiful country," observes Gracie Mae. Damned if she wasn't right.

Anna Lee Walter's *Apparitions* addresses racism through the story of a Native American mother, Marie Horses, and her daughter, Wanda. The two take a trip to a city store to pay off one lay-away plan and purchase new shoes for Wanda under another. Before they enter the store itself, Wanda's mother stops just outside its front window to count her money and make sure she has enough. As she does, a white woman wearing spiked heels and a pink knitted dress uses the store window as a mirror, checking her lipstick. Wanda looks at her. The woman sees this and attempts to

say hello, to communicate, but Wanda doesn't respond. Realizing this, the woman frowns, glances over at the braided, plainly dressed Marie Horses counting money, and impulsively thrusts a fifty cent piece into Wanda's hand. In doing so, the woman forms an instant opinion; because mother and daughter are Indian and dressed differently (i.e. unlike whites), and Marie Horses happens to be counting money, she assumes that they must therefore be poor. Though perhaps by giving Wanda the half-dollar she thought herself to be helpful and kind, the possibility that this gesture is merely patronizing and probably motivated by a need to make *herself* feel good seems to escape the woman entirely. Evidently she doesn't see people who don't look like her as individuals, but as stereotypes.

The same misconceptions operate when Marie attempts to pay off the lay-away plan, only this time the attitude of the clerk, another white woman, is less indulgent. Rather, it's down-right nasty. Marie, who was "naturally quiet (and) soft-spoken," is treated with open disdain by the clerk, who's manner is brusque and dismissive. "Name?" she demands. "What?" replies Marie. To this, the store clerk "turned and put a hand on her bony hip and said very loudly, "I asked you your name. *Can't you hear?*" When Wanda's mother gives her name, the clerk sneers, "Horses? It figures." Marie wants to put the new shoes on lay-away, too, but the lady behind the counter doesn't acknowledge her request, ignoring her completely. Again, a white person in the story has formed an opinion -- a decidedly negative one -- based solely on erroneous preconceptions regarding Indians that have little to do with Marie or Wanda themselves. In mainstream American society, someone who doesn't speak up and averts their eyes may engender suspicion. In Native American culture, however, those very same traits might be accepted as the norm rather than as aberrations. What's clear in this story is that when the two cultures meet, the differences between them are interpreted by whites as "inferior Indian ways." Their hostility and condescension is a measure of their ignorance.

The ugliness of such presumptions of superiority is illustrated most keenly when Wanda is being fitted for her new shoes. To begin with, as the two Indians enter his store, the shoe salesman growls that the seats there are reserved for "pay-ing" customers, clearly implying that, by the look of

them, they cannot afford to pay for shoes. The salesman doesn't even bother to ask them what kind of shoes they want; he simply plucks a few from a display. He doesn't ask but *orders* Wanda to try them on, to sit or stand, at his command. To him she is a non-person. The only thing she's good for, apparently, is a furtive groping while Marie is out of eyesight. How did he manage to separate mother and daughter? By pressuring her to retrieve a slip. Without it, he won't sanction the lay away plan. He uses his petty authority to get what he wants, realizing that Marie can't buy the shoes outright. It hardly needs to be noted that were Marie and Wanda white and well-off, this incident probably never would have occurred.

Yet the mother and daughter retain their dignity, despite the shabby way they've been treated. Almost as an act of defiance, Wanda lets the fifty-cent piece slip through her fingers and roll down the street. She doesn't attempt to retrieve it. Nor does Marie. Certainly they could use the money, but discarding that *particular* fifty-cent piece becomes symbolic of their rejection of the white world, at least as they've just experienced it. They may not be rich, and they may have to go through hoops to get certain things done, but they refuse to think of themselves as inferior or deserving of scorn. Theirs is a quiet victory, the kind some people can't see.