Article by Professor Charles E. May

Sarah Hall, ‘Mrs Fox’ BBC Winner, 2013

Mariella Frostrup, chair of the 2013 judges of the BBC National Short Story Award, said all the judges were “seduced” by Sarah Hall’s “Mrs Fox.” Although inspired by the classic literary motif of metamorphosis and thus hardly original, Frostrup said its “poetic use of language,” and the “dexterity and originality” of its prose made it “utterly unique.” However, most readers who have talked about the story seem to have been “seduced” by the fairy-tale metaphor of metamorphosis and its possible thematic meaning rather than how the uniqueness of the language and the rhythm of the prose explore whatever universal theme the story might have.

Laura Ludtke, Managing Editor of the Oxonian Review, saw the short story as a “not-so-simple fable of the perils of the failure of understanding.” She says the attraction of the story is that it “brings the personal and the magical together in a reverberant way,” using the shapeshifting metaphor of the mysterious woman as fox to examine the difficulty the husband has in knowing his wife.

Simon Savidge, on his “Savidge Reads” blog, is more direct in his interpretation of the meaning of the story, arguing that it “brings up the age-old, and always fascinating, question of how well we know our partners. What secrets do they
have to hide? Can we ever really know someone or what they are thinking?"

In her essay for the web site *Thresholds*, Erinna Mettler (interviewed by TSS [here](https://www.theshortstory.co.uk/professor-charles-e-may-what-makes-a-great-short-story-no-6-sarah-halls-mrs-fox/)) has a more focused interpretation—that the story is “the most successful depiction of the experience of parenthood” she has every read. Mettler says the story spoke to her of the “sheer visceral physicality of becoming a mother.” Hall has confirmed that she “seeded” the pregnancy early on in the story, for being pregnant, she observes, is a very strange state for a woman—her body being transformed in a frightening way. Hall says, “There is a metaphoric level to this story which links the ferality of Mrs. Fox to the pregnancy.”

Although it seems plausible that on its broadest, most general, level the story may be about the inaccessibility of the secret life of the other, embodying this theme by means of the trope of a woman transforming into a fox seems more than a little limited and extreme—the metaphor too loaded with particular implications for such a general idea, although that idea may lie somewhere deep within the metaphor. The pregnancy theme seems more closely bound to the details of the story, but perhaps too particular for the broader implications of the transformation of woman into fox, especially given the persistent focus of the husband’s attempts to come to terms with that transformation. Both of these possible interpretations of meaning ignore the significance of the foxy animality of the wife’s transformed state.

The diction and the syntax of the story that suggests the timeless, mythic nature of the natural vs. the civilized.

Perhaps it might be well to look more closely at what Mariella Frostrup says “seduced” the judges into choosing this story—that is, the poetic use of language and the originality of the prose—not as provocative a procedure as generalizing about the secret self theme or the pregnancy metamorphosis theme, but maybe more apt to account for the “seductive” quality of the story. When I was teaching, I always told my students that when they came up with a theory about the theme of a story; they simply had to support that theme by referencing the technique of the story—it’s structure, its use of language. If “Mrs Fox” has a theme, we should expect that it derives from the specificity of the metaphor and the “originality” of the prose—an analysis of which should lead us to an understanding of its meaning.

The language of “Mrs Fox” seems to suggest that beneath the civilized veneer of modern life exists a mythic primal reality and that woman is the embodiment of that reality; man is merely an astonished observer who is helpless to control the primal reality that is woman. Throughout the story, the language maintains a juxtaposition between the primal animal and the rational human, the natural world and the world of encroaching civilization. Here are some examples, many that describe the wife before her metamorphosis:

The man imagines his wife’s “form, her essence, a scent of corrupted rose”—the former an abstraction that his desire imposes on her, the latter the living/dying reality of physical life.

Around her neck is a “dribble of fine gold, a chain on which hangs her wedding ring”—“dribble suggesting animal drool, the ring implying that which society says makes her “his to kiss.”

“There is no corrugation on her rump”—rump suggesting the body of an animal rather than the buttocks of a human.

The wife’s harsh pubic hair contrasts with the “mystery” of what is inside—a mystery the husband wants to solve every night. But, of course, there is no mystery beyond the mystery of flesh, except what man imposes on woman. Henry Miller in the *World of Sex* says perhaps the female genitals may be one of the “prime symbols for the connection between all things. To enter life by way of the vagina is as good a way as any.” And Georges Bataille says in his novel *Madame Edwarda* that the paradox of the female genitals is that it is an emptiness, but that he wants to go as far as the emptiness itself. “I lusted after her secret and did not for an instant doubt that it was death’s kingdom.”
After the husband and wife have made love, she "cleans herself"—an animal image—and then she dreams of "burrows, roots and earth."

“She is called Sophia”—not “her name is Sophia”—a name that in the Greek means wisdom or the soul—the syntax suggesting not what she is, but the title man has imposed upon her.

When the wife vomits in the toilet one morning, she makes a clicking sound in her “gullet,” a term that suggests animal more than the human term "throat." And, of course, there is no other reason for a woman to have morning sickness in a story than that she is pregnant. It is a literary shorthand, the way a character’s coughing in a fiction or film is a literary shorthand for impending death.

When the wife drinks, she does not sip, but takes “long sucks of water,” like an animal.

When the husband bends down to her to perform oral sex, he describes a wide “badge” of hair “undepilated” at the top of her thighs. In Alice Munro’s book, Lives of Girls and Woman, there is the line "Love is not for the undepilated"—suggesting that “love” (not sex) is a human construct, in its ideal form at a remove from the animal. It reminds us that “Mrs Fox” begins with the line, “That he loves his wife is unquestionable.” But “love” here raises the question throughout the story that the word refers to fascination, adoration, desire. Does the word mean that the man perceives his wife as an object of his desire on whom he imposes his need to idealize and thus tame the physical? Or is something more complex required to justify the term?

It seems clear that the wife’s transmogrification is indeed a magical transformation that takes place in a mythic realm of reality.

When the two walk through the forest just before the wife’s transformation into a fox, the husband is aware that two miles away on the other side of the heath bulldozers are levelling the earth.

After the transformation, he carries her home like a "sacrifice, a forest pieta”—an image combining the animal with the ultimate Christian embodiment of the spiritual that transcends the physical.

He looks at the old, “colloquial tract of land…lathed away by bulldozers…rife with a minority of lifeforms.”

The old trees “bear the weight of mythical, hollow thrones. Lungs of fungi hang from their branches.”

On being shown the fox’s lair and pups, the man thinks he will lie down in front of the diggers before they level this “shrine.”

The diction and the syntax of the story that suggests the timeless, mythic nature of the natural vs. the civilized. Consider the use of the following obsolete, archaic, uncommon words—primarily adjectives—that run throughout the story: “gauntening,” “chicanes,” “confliction,” “chromic,” “kiltering,” “hectoring,” “fresnel,” “contraspective,” “arch,” “missable,” “furling,” “staling,” “skulling,” “thirled,” “mutism,” “unbelonging.”

“Mrs Fox” emphasizes, as Simone de Beauvoir notes in The Second Sex, how the male is “an easy dupe of the deceptive privileges accorded him by his aggressive role,” because, as de Beauvoir says, unlike woman, he “hesitates to see himself fully as flesh.”

The characteristics of animal in “Mrs Fox” might be understood as characteristic of her role as anima, that personification of the feminine which Jung says has “‘occult’ connexions with ‘mysteries,’ with the world of darkness in
general.” When in “dreams or other spontaneous manifestation,” Jung says, we meet with an ambivalent, unknown female figure, “it is advisable to let her keep her independence and not reduce her arbitrarily to something known... In all such accounts, the anima... is a being that belongs to a different order of things.”

It seems clear that the wife's transmogrification is indeed a magical transformation that takes place in a mythic realm of reality. The syntax of the story emphasizes the shift from the world of ordinary, everyday reality to a mythic world. Here are some examples:

“Nerve and instinct. Her thousand feral programs. Should she not flee into the borders, kicking away the manmade world?”

“As if only now, after her walk and purging of the disease of being human, she is ready for breakfast.”

“The texture of her belly is smooth and delicate, like scar tissue: small rubbed teats under the fur. Her smell is gamey; smoky, sexual.”

“Her poise so still she is entirely missable, the way all wild things are, until the rustic outline comes into focus. The surprise of seeing her, every time, in proximity; a thing from another realm that he has brought home to belong.”

“His dreams are anguished, involving machinery and dogs, his own brutality, and blood.”

“He cannot quite reclaim himself. He feels victimhood strongly. Something has been taken from him. Taken, and in the absurdist possible way.”

“To be comfortable inside one’s sadness is not valueless. This too will pass. All things trend towards transience, mutability. It is in such mindful moments, when everything is both held and released, that revelation comes.”

“What he sees is the core of purpose. His mind is stupefied. They are, they must be, his.”

The story ends with the man having given up “looking for meaning.” He accepts that “Why is a useless question, an unknowable object.” Although he imagines the fox returning to him as his wife, a “forgivable romance, high conceit,” he also thinks that it is the absence of the fox that strikes fear into his heart:

“Her loss would be unendurable. To watch her run into the edgelands, breasting the ferns and scorching the fields, to see her disappear into the void—how could life mean anything without his unbelonging wife?”

For Marlowe, Joseph Conrad’s story-telling surrogate in Heart of Darkness, the meaning of an episode is to be found “not inside like a kernel, but outside enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze.” In his attempt to convey to his listeners the significance of the story of Kurtz, Marlowe understands the difficulty of verbalizing those characters which inhabit the heart of darkness. “Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream-making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...”

Sarah Hall’s “Mrs Fox” conveys just that strange sense of being captured by the incredible. Joy Williams says short story writers love the dark and are always fumbling around in it. “The writer,” says Williams, doesn’t want to “disclose or instruct or advocate, he wants to transmute and disturb. He cherishes the mystery.”

**Prof. Charles E. May** is professor emeritus at California State University, Long Beach. He is the author/editor of ten books, including ‘Short Story Theories’, ‘New Short Story Theories, The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice’, ‘I Am Your Brother: Short Story Studies’, and over 200 articles and reviews on the short story. He publishes weekly essays on the blog Reading the Short Story.