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Marcel Arbeit



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Are Emotions Contagious? Elizabeth Spencer's "Judith Kane"

Marcel Arbeit

- 1 As a short story writer, Elizabeth Spencer very often chooses as her protagonists young southern women who try to reconcile their personal ambitions with the needs of their families or communities. The focus is usually on the process of emancipation and on the dilemmas the severing of ties with the native environment brings about. A part of the liberation is often a new relationship, mostly with a man who is very far from a beau whom southern mothers typically recommend to their daughters; nevertheless, love and emotions are scarcely central points of the narrative—the focal points are female creativity and freedom.
- 2 From this perspective, "Judith Kane," a short story that appeared for the first time in the collection *Ship Island and Other Stories* (1968), is an exception to the rule. It is one of Spencer's best and most complex stories, and her only story where the flames of love are so hot that they burn even the narrator, who enters the scene as a seemingly uncommitted observer.
- 3 The nameless narrator of the story recollects her college days in the late 1930s when she was a nineteen-year-old student assistant of a professor. She decides to attend summer school and finds cheap accommodation in a boarding house in the town. Here she meets Judith Kane, a 24-year-old former student, who has a reputation of a *femme fatale* whose favorite pastime is to break men's hearts. Judith confides to her that a few months previously she discovered that a boy was regularly watching her while she was naked and brushing her hair, from an attic window of the opposite building, but when she addressed him on the street, he did not want to talk and moved out. At the same time, the narrator finds out that her best friend Scott, a graduate student, married with one child, had dated Judith, who broke up with him, and still loves her deeply. Against her own will, the narrator becomes a go-between, helping Judith to find the young voyeur again but, to the narrator's dismay, Judith finally ends up with the married Scott, who found the courage to rejoin her.

- 4 In a 1981 interview with John Griffin Jones, Spencer said that at the beginning of "Judith Kane," which, as she revealed, is set in Nashville (the name of the city is not given in the story), there were two real people. One was an "extraordinarily good-looking girl that was rather statuesque," who developed the habit of walking naked in her room and once found out that there was a boy in the house opposite who was watching her; it "gave her the creeps" and then she simply "pulled down the shades," which was the end of it ("Elizabeth Spencer" 99). About the other person Spencer was vaguer and more secretive; she only said that there was a man she knew who was determined "to get something back whatever the cost" ("Elizabeth Spencer" 99). When the interviewer mentioned "Judith Kane" for the first time, calling it one of his favorites, Spencer responded: "A lot of people feel this is a strange story. Some people don't like it. I thought it was very powerful. I thought it was a study of evil" (98).¹ In her 1985 monograph on Spencer, even though she did not go so far as to consider Judith a personification of evil, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw characterized her, rather stereotypically, as "'la belle dame sans merci,' the beautiful lady without mercy, who feels compelled to bewitch or possess every man she meets" (145). Correspondingly, for Betina Entzminger "Judith Kane" is a less successful exploration by Spencer of "the threatening aspects" of a female protagonist "who destructively manipulates men" (*Belle Gone Bad* 142).
- 5 In spite of the author's statement, as well as the opinions of Prenshaw and Entzminger, I do not read the story as a study of an evil lady vamp. For me it is rather a study of the hardships three southern intellectuals face when they strive to break down the wall of stereotypes, habits, and social expectations, including their own, in order to achieve personal happiness. I will also look at the narrative and its protagonists in the light of the personality theories of the Israeli sociologist Shlomo Giora Shoham, but will occasionally also refer to the ideas of Walker Percy, the leading southern existentialist novelist and essayist (and also Spencer's friend),² as well as to a frequent source of Percy's ideas, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Last of all, this study will focus on the contagiousness of emotions and its role in the transformation of the narrator. I will also briefly comment on the typology of southern belles by Entzminger and her predecessor Kathryn Lee Seidel, challenging Entzminger's interpretation of the story.

Three Young Intellectuals in the Anti-Intellectual South

- 6 The narrator enters the boarding house where Judith Kane lives as a pragmatic young southern woman who is concentrating mainly on finishing her studies, trying to save as much money as possible through extra work. Her favorite pastime is having coffee or beer with her friends or going to movies. Even though she enjoys literature, favoring the English Renaissance, she is currently living through a period in which she is "tired thinking of anything that came out of books or went into them," desiring "to think of nothing, for one whole year at least" (247). Her anti-intellectual sentiments come to the surface when she speaks about the professor for whom she is checking sources and verifying footnotes and who can hardly remember her name: "He never really noticed anything that wasn't down in print. . . . I wondered if he ever would have thought there was any such thing as good and evil if he hadn't come across the words in books" (252).

- 7 The reason why she enjoys the company of Scott, even though he is "older even than twenty-four," which, in her mind, is almost old age, is his rationality—one teacher even said about him that "he had a classical, unsentimental mind" (251). Unlike most young southern men, he is unconcerned about his good looks, and emanates the flair of respectability both through his speech, which acquires "a clean, intellectual turn" through his pronunciation of R, "harsh, back-country R, almost like a Yankee" (251), and through his pipe-smoking rituals. His relationship with the narrator is free of any emotional or sexual tensions: they are merely colleagues chatting in a grill or a café about intellectual matters and everyday life.
- 8 When the narrator unexpectedly meets Judith Kane in the boarding house, it is like meeting a celebrity:
- The only reason I knew her was the same reason everybody knew her; she was so beautiful, tall and put together like a Greek statue, with corn-silk hair brushed back and hanging or drawn up in a swirl behind. The boys all talked about her for obvious reasons, admiring her and wishing they had a chance to date her and all; and the girls all wanted to look like her. (244)
- 9 Before that day, the narrator knew Judith merely by sight. She has never talked to her before and now she is left almost speechless in her presence: instead of answering a simple question, she only nods politely. In her eyes, Judith is not only one of the southern girls who "come pouring out of little towns and from way up in the hills to get elected Miss Pickle Queen and Miss Watermelon Queen, Miss Centennial Year, Miss America, Maid of Cotton, Miss Universe, and so on" (245), but an exceptional, charismatic individual, not "for contests or advertising copy, but for aesthetics; she was, simply, a creation" (245). Every detail the narrator gives about Judith contributes to her uniqueness and elusiveness, be it her dress, her habits, or her behavior.
- 10 The part in which the narrator meets Judith echoes a famous scene from Walker Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), in which the narrator Binx Bolling, another southern intellectual, notices the actor William Holden on a New Orleans street and witnesses his brief encounter with a young couple on honeymoon. Like the narrator of "Judith Kane," Binx is rather a watcher than a participant. From a distance, he interprets the mind of the young man, who, in his opinion, "can only contrast Holden's resplendent reality with his own shadowy and precarious existence," but who, a moment later, after he lights the actor's cigarette and exchanges a few words with him, becomes "a citizen like Holden; two men of the world they are. All at once the world is open to him" (*Moviegoer* 16). Binx, even though he claims that he has no desire to talk to Holden or get his autograph, betrays, earlier in this section, how important the episode was for him: "Today I am in luck" (*Moviegoer* 15).
- 11 Spencer's narrator is like the young newlywed from Percy's novel: when she met Judith, the world opened up to her. Percy implies both in the novel and elsewhere that the euphoria finally wanes and a human being must wait for another unexpected event that will renew it; this is the principle of rotation, similar to the agricultural technique of cultivating the soil through the regular alternation of the crop, which Percy borrowed from Søren Kierkegaard's essay "The Rotation Method." While in *The Moviegoer* we can only guess what will happen with the honeymoon couple, Spencer's story deals with the consequences of such a world-opening meeting. After the world closes again, which it will inevitably do, the female narrator will grow up from her comfortable equilibrium into the world of constant emotional chaos, while her friend

Scott, who fell under the spell of Judith, whom he perceives as a star, long ago, is willing to sacrifice both his professional and personal life for a fleeting period of happiness.

- 12 The effect is all the graver in "Judith Kane" than in Percy's novel because Judith is no famous actress but, considering class and social position, one of them—a young middle-class southern woman, a former student of literature who worked in the library all the students regularly attend. The narrator immediately notices that Judith reads modernists, from T. S. Eliot to Marcel Proust, and hastens to add that she approaches them "with concentration, paying that close sort of attention that does not seem to have enjoyment or future conversation anywhere in mind, the matter being more urgent than that" (247). How else should a student of literature read books, especially in the South of the late 1930s with the upsurge of the New Criticism that called for close reading? Concentration and urgency are needed in reading English Renaissance texts as well; in spite of that, whenever the narrator points at obvious similarities between her and Judith, she sees them as differences: "I was in literature, too, but might as well have been analyzing Tennessee rain water for all she would care to talk to me about" (247).
- 13 This preference for down-to-earth thinking is a traditional defense of educated southerners against an accusation of intellectualism. Richard Weaver, a well-known southern philosopher and intellectual historian, confirmed that "the South has a deep suspicion of all theory, perhaps of intellect. It has always been on the side of blood and soil, of instinct, of vitalism" (26). Tara Powell, drawing on Weaver and other thinkers dealing with the southern situation, distinguishes what she calls "three significant variations of the anti-intellectual trope" (3). While Spencer herself, who spent most of her adult life in Italy and Canada, is a model example of the exiled southern intellectual, in "Judith Kane" we can find the other two categories of southern intellectuals: the masked one and the dysfunctional one. According to Powell, the masked intellectuals pretend, or even believe, that their "life of the mind" is "a private avocation, not real work" (4). As most southern communities consider intellectual pursuits such as reading books or writing fiction a mere hobby, intellectuals, including writers, tend to perform some "real" work which the public would perceive as their main professional activity. On the other hand, the dysfunctional intellectuals become immersed in abstract thinking to such an extent that they do not leave the ivory towers of their minds any more and are unable to face the challenges of everyday life.
- 14 The professor of literature for whom the narrator is working is a typical dysfunctional intellectual, whom life among the old New England sermons whose influence on Nathaniel Hawthorne he studies has distanced from everyday problems and taken his strength and attention. As Powell notes, such intellectuals are often "the butts of many a satire, gentle or not so very" (14), and Spencer's narrator treats her employer exactly in this manner: for example, when he comes up with the idea that in Melville's *Moby Dick* it is the white squid that symbolizes the good, she, instead of appreciating his sharp wit, cannot help "but think what his wife had to listen to while cooking supper" (252).
- 15 The narrator herself is a masked intellectual, downplaying her intellectual ambitions all the time. She never mentions her future plans, but as early as in the second paragraph of the story, before she starts describing the price her family had to pay to be able to send her to college—her "sisters were going around in hand-me-down clothes, the house needed a coat of paint, and the fence was falling"—she laconically

announces: "My education had to be given me somehow . . ." (243), even though southern women, including the most intelligent ones, could hardly take a university education for granted in the second half of the 1930s. On the other hand, she pays close attention to Scott's reasons for working hard to get his Ph.D. They are, of course, not academic but entirely pragmatic; his doctoral dissertation, if finished on time, will enable him to "qualify for a higher salary somewhere" (251). When the narrator, in the final scene, reproaches Judith for returning to Scott, she, before finally letting out her emotions, rationally points out that distraction from work will have disastrous consequences for his career: "It's his most important time. . . . Right at the end. Exams and all" (259). Still, Scott makes his attempt at a reconciliation with Judith, not knowing in advance that it will be successful, with the awareness of all possible backlashes in mind. When he earlier told the narrator about his short relationship with Judith, whom he loved deeply, and their separation, he implicitly expressed doubts about his career as a college teacher: "She broke everything off with me. Reason? She couldn't see herself as a professor's wife in some pokey little college town. . . . Do I think she was right to give me up? Sure, I think she was right. I agree with her" (250-51).

- 16 Judith is what I call "a liminal intellectual," dwelling on the border between the world of education and aesthetic pleasures and the world where reason and common sense rule. Even though she shares an interest in books with the narrator, she does not continue her studies and gives up her job as a librarian, yet stays near the university, unlike other inhabitants of the boarding house, "elderly ladies," who, after graduating from the teacher's college nearby, return "back to wherever they came from" (248). For some time, Judith tries to reconcile the two worlds, dating a rich student of law with a fancy car, who paid her rent, but, after being rejected by a man for the first time in her life, also a liminal intellectual (a college graduate but first of all an athlete and sports instructor), she realizes that there is no middle road and succumbs to a deep depression.
- 17 Her reunion with Scott can then be read not as a selfish act that will ruin her regained male object of interest but as the solution of her dilemma of choosing between emotion and intellect—with Scott she can have both, at least temporarily. At the same time, her return to Scott (as well as Scott's return to her) can be taken as a daring, albeit futile revolt against the Kierkegaardian reasoning which stood behind their original parting. Kierkegaard, preferring the continuous changing of "the crop and its cultivation" (288), warns against long-term emotional involvement: "When two beings fall in love with one another and begin to suspect that they were made for each other, it is time to have the courage to break it off; for by going on they have everything to lose and nothing to gain" (294). This is exactly what Judith did several years before, obfuscated by her fear of becoming a small-town housewife; now their second chance illustrates another of Kierkegaard's ideas—that on the poetic level even short moments of happiness, "which can just as well be limited to an hour as to a month," can acquire "poetic infinitude" (294).

You Never Get What You Really Want

- 18 In her 1994 interview with Entzminger, Spencer said, referring to another story of hers: "You don't go out specifically looking for passion, but it might just happen" (603). In

"Judith Kane," it happens to all three of the main characters. Scott, the oldest of them, confesses to the narrator, who has just told him the story about Judith and the reclusive voyeur: "I was never so in love in my life" (250). He appreciated both Judith's good looks and her intelligence, the combination which he called "a happy miracle" (250-51). When she broke up with him, he believed that she did not consider him good enough for her, even though he admits that she did not say it explicitly: "What's good enough? What's great enough? What could possibly be good or great enough for Judith Kane? Not that she'd come right out with it, nothing blunt or corny" (251). Even though he related the story of his failure in love to the narrator "in the self-amused way he had, half-bitterness, half-gaiety" (251), the narrator understands that he never overcame the pain, married "on the rebound," and "was never to be really happy now" (252). She blames Judith for ruining his life but she should have rather blamed the psychological and neurological configuration of human beings, who, in their *status quo*, welcome any change, but if there are too many turbulent changes, they long for quiet and harmony.

- 19 In his book *Society and the Absurd* (1974, revised edition 2006), Shoham, using relevant discoveries in the fields of sociology, neurology, and psychology, divides people into separants and participants. Separants try to maintain their privacy and, to be able to defend it, they must "devour" everybody who threatens to cause their equilibrium to tumble down, while participants identify with a person, an object, or an idea outside themselves and aim at losing their identity by fusion (see 82). The paradox is that separants, who want to be left alone, must actively look for the perpetrators of their comfort zone and get rid of them, while participants, who wish to lure someone who would merge with them, frequently stay alone, as people are afraid of them.³ Separation and participation are two "opposing vectors," which can nevertheless meet in one person. At the same time, all human beings possess an efficient defense system, which adjusts stimuli from the outer world in such a way that everything seems to be in accord with a particular person's wishes. In this system, love, defined as "participation through affect," is seen as an "institutionalized melting down of partitions between individuals" (83). Like any other emotional attachment, a love relationship is a closed competition, which has a winner and a loser, or, to use Shoham's words, "a dyad of a victor and vanquished . . . a subjugation" (19).
- 20 Scott seems to be a typical separant, but Judith arouses in him an ultimate wish to merge, awakening his hidden participant self. When the relationship fails, he returns to separant models of behavior and, out of reason, marries a woman whom the narrator describes as "rather pretty" but who "had begun to look tired of the life there" (251). This is a solution most people perceive as wise and sane—as the proverb says, there are other fish in the sea. Separants always look for the approval of friends and community members; as Shoham formulates in a direct and straightforward manner, they tend "to accept the erroneous consensus of others and not the dissenting yet true perception of [their own] senses" (216). Scott is permanently frustrated and tries to persuade himself that what happened was the only possible end of his love affair with Judith; nevertheless, the participant vector remains volatile in him, waiting for a chance to show up in the open again.
- 21 Besides believing that Judith aimed higher and he was not good enough for her, Scott imagines her as a dangerous narcissist, someone like the Evil Queen from the Brothers Grimm's "Snow White," who, watching herself in the mirror, asks every day: "Mirror,

mirror, on the wall, / Who's the fairest one of all?" Scott explains to the narrator: "She has this idea about herself, about her own image. . . . If she doesn't say it to herself, she's letting the mirror say it, forty times a day" (250-51). With the same logic, he interprets Judith's obsession with the young voyeur as the result of her illusion that "a mirror could look back, admire, finally possess. . . ." (257). Ultimately, he concludes that Judith, in fact, "had fallen for herself" (257).

- 22 The narrator, who devotes so much effort to labeling Judith as a narcissist, speaks in unison with Spencer, who said that it was Judith's "narcissistic obsession . . . what was victimizing the man and the girl that happened into the house" ("Elizabeth Spencer" 98). No wonder, then, that Entzminger calls Judith a narcissist and claims that "she loves most her own image reflected back to her in another's eyes" (*Belle Gone Bad* 142), thus adopting both Scott's opinion conveyed through the first-person female narrative voice and the perspective of Preshaw, who, using a very similar argumentation, comes to the conclusion that Judith "becomes a witchlike shell of a woman" (146). Then, logically, Entzminger dislikes the ending of the story, which, according to her, "leaves both the narrator and the reader unsatisfied," especially because Judith "escapes unscathed" (*Belle Gone Bad* 142). "The readers," however, do not form a homogeneous crowd and, if we apply Shoham's categorization of human types, the conclusion of the story makes perfect sense. Preshaw herself, even though she also took "Judith Kane" first of all as "a powerful story of crippling self-consciousness" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 145), warned against one-sided interpretations of the story: "But Spencer allows us to see too much of Judith from the inside, to see her struggles with the insecurities that give rise to the narcissism, to make us believe in her as a personification of evil" (145-46).
- 23 While for Entzminger it is of major importance that the narrator "seems to be the voice of the young Elizabeth Spencer" (*Belle Gone Bad* 142), I do not consider it necessary to pay too much attention to the relation between narrator and author. In support of this approach I use Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald's paraphrase of what Spencer told them about her relation to her fictional creations: "Once her characters take form, Spencer imagines a continuing life for them beyond the end of their stories, but she lets them do as they please, even when she sees they are going to make mistakes" (236). During the same conversation, Spencer also discussed the endings of her stories, and this time Brown and McDonald quoted her directly: "I don't think you should end with a marriage or a divorce. You should end when the character has the hold [sic] card and sees it clearly" (242). This is exactly when "Judith Kane" ends—all the major characters of the story emerge from the dark into the light, even though it might blind them for a while.
- 24 To understand the ending of the story better, I will apply Shoham's classification to Judith. As becomes obvious, Judith suffers from the struggle between the separant and participant vectors inside her. On the one hand, like a separant, she is, in Preshaw's words, "unable to allay her fears except by dominating a man" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 146); on the other hand, in a participant's way, she wishes to submit completely to her spouse. Yet what is she supposed to do to find a mate with whom she could merge? There are especially two things that prevent Judith from getting the right man: her intellect and her beauty—men lose their self-esteem in her presence; the narrator is right when she speaks about the "strong disaster of her looks" (257). However, there is also a rule Shoham calls "the Least Interest Principle," which is valid both for separants and for participants. It states that "the keener the interest we display in a certain

objective in dyadic/social relationships, the less likely we are to attain it" (Shoham 92); if applied to a love relationship, then "the deeper the totality of affective relationship expected by one party . . . , the shorter the duration of the encounter" (95), or, in simpler and harsher words, the "ultimate participation through love longed-for, sung to and worshipped, is unattainable" (95).

- 25 Therefore, I perceive Judith's breaking of men's hearts not as an evil intention, carelessness, or as proof of her immorality, but as a series of logical steps in her search. To explain it, I will look more closely at Judith's relationships with all three of the men in the story—the law student, the young voyeur, and, finally, Scott—as well as at Judith's reactions after she understands that a long-term working relationship based on love and mutual communication is never possible.
- 26 According to Shoham, in "a separant competitive society one has to play-act, to misrepresent oneself as disinterested, in order to raise the chances of getting what one wants" (137). It is, however, even better when you do not have to pretend a lack of interest, because you are truly and completely uninterested. To want to date, or even marry, a person whom you do not love is a paradox but, as such, it has its inner logic: with such a person you do not live in constant tension and fear that he or she might depart and abandon you—if this does happen, the lack of emotions on your side makes it a banal episode you can easily overcome. While the narrator, being idealistic and naïve, cannot reconcile herself to this rule, Scott does, when he marries a woman he does not love. In Judith's case, her separant self successfully benefits from the paradox. The law student she dates, Grant Exum, is well-known especially because of his car, "the fanciest thing around," as well as his pedigree: he is a member of one of the old southern "money families" (246). Grant, a participant, would like to marry Judith but "his parents wouldn't let him . . . till he finished law school" (246). The combination of luxury, as well as the comfortable postponement of any serious decision about the future *sine die*, makes Grant an ideal provisional substitute. The more Grant loves Judith, the less probable it is that she will take him seriously, and when a new challenge appears, he is entirely forgotten. The narrator, still in her position of an onlooker, describes it coldly and matter-of-factly: "The law student had called about a million times, but she never would come to the phone, and even he had given up" (253).
- 27 The young voyeur, the swimming and physical education teacher named Yancey Clements, is at first only another one of the long queue of the boys enchanted by Judith's body: when she finds him watching her naked through the window, "his face wore the expression of one who breathes the air of paradise" (248). It is only when he becomes elusive and unattainable, having moved out of the flat and left no trace, that Judith becomes obsessed with him, precisely in accordance with the Least Interest Principle—we desire most those who have absolutely no interest in us:
- "I began to see that boy's face everywhere—car hops, movie ushers, students on the bus, taxi drivers—for a while, every face could make me look at it at a certain distance, but once the distance lessened and it wouldn't be the face, after all, I would get a sick dizzy feeling, and wild . . . wild!" (248-49)
- 28 This reaction corresponds faultlessly with Shoham's words; in fact, it could serve as a prime illustration of them. Judith feels that she is losing her mind and the only reason why she did not seek help from a psychiatrist is her lack of resources. The fact that Yancey is neither rich nor good-looking—the narrator later depicts him as a boy with "a very funny face, with protuberant teeth that crossed each other in front" and humorless expression (255)—does not play any role in Judith's fixation. Shoham

describes how such extreme cases of infatuation can “result in psychosis,” which he aptly defines as a series “of communication disjunctures” (99). The situation becomes even worse after Judith finally meets Yancey, talks to him briefly, and finds out that he does not want to see her any more—only after she begs him does he agree to have a drink with her, but later he changes his mind again and does not appear at the agreed place. Another proof of her deep despair is Judith’s decision to confide in the narrator, who is not even her friend—as Kierkegaard wrote, a friend is not “the necessary other, but the superfluous third” (291)—and only listens hesitantly to her tirade; at first she feels that she “might have done better to stick to books” (248) and then, inappropriately and tactlessly, she bursts out laughing, even though she can see that Judith “turned pale” and the whole affair “had succeeded in stirring her as ordinary things did not” (249).

- 29 During a later, middle-of-the-night conversation Judith tries to explain to the narrator how she feels—Yancey’s rejection penetrates all of her mind and body; it becomes a “voice inside, on a record as big as the moon” (253). The musical metaphor she uses is accurate: there is the record but she does not own a record player to externalize the sounds. She lives in a constant stupor; in the stifling southern heat she just smokes, drinks lemonade, and reads. Even the landlady becomes concerned about her after she enters her room where she can at first “hardly see anything through smoke,” and then desperately watches the mess, from full ashtrays, through heaps of books, to the unmade bed that “looked to have had a wild cat in it” (254). Shoham calls this state “accidia” and defines it as “an individual’s breakdown of involvement with social norms and values” (6). According to him, accidia is dynamic and involves three stages. First, there is an initial “gap between previously internalized norms and newly transmitted ones” (9)—for Judith, it used to be the norm to have the upper hand in relationships, but now she is not the one who pulls the strings. Second, the person tries to bridge the gap but to no avail—even though Judith finally finds Yancey and even knows in which gym he works, she does not achieve her objective. Third, “there is a value-breakdown, a disengagement, . . . the subject mentally ‘cops out’” (9)—Judith is unable to function on an everyday basis, does not care about her looks, eats very little, and rarely leaves the house.
- 30 Yancey is a typical macho man, who would never date a woman superior to him; he is always the one who chooses. His voyeurism is in accord with the stereotypical masculine approach to women as objects. In her article on Spencer’s *Landscapes of the Heart* (1998), Peggy Whitman Prenshaw writes about the “eroticizing or fetishizing of female submissiveness” as “endemic in southern culture and literature” (15). When she later mentions the “ever present masculine will to dominance, threatening of female autonomy” that “recurs throughout the Spencer canon” (18), she necessarily underpins “Judith Kane” as an exception to the rule—and really, even though Spencer’s fiction is brimming with strong women, this is her only story where a female character fights with such determination and relentlessness for a partner she chose.
- 31 When Judith actively tries to attract Yancey’s attention, she hits the wall of his defenses; as Spencer said once, explaining why she never talked to William Faulkner, even though she had opportunities to do so: “There’s nothing worse than trying to talk to somebody who doesn’t want to talk to you” (“Elizabeth Spencer” 88). Yancey, another typical separatist, rejects Judith so harshly because he cannot understand her motivation: a woman being secretly watched naked for days, weeks, or even months on

an everyday basis should get angry or try to forget the incident but definitely should not attempt to get closer to the perpetrator. As Shoham opines, we need "to ascertain the motivations of others in their interaction with us" but because we cannot even guess them, we project our own motivations into the other people (188). Yancey's evaluation of the situation is directly proportional to his separant self-projection: "That girl is nuts. . . . She's beautiful but she's nuts" (255). More than repulsion, there is fear of the unknown and strange: "I couldn't stay over there and have her hanging around, that's a positive fact" (255). He cannot understand that Judith wants to meet him again, not to launch a new affair but to break up the existing one. She tells it unambiguously to the narrator: "I've got to break it up, you see. It's got into everything" (250).

- 32 In spite of all this, Judith's participant self enables her both to weigh up the burden her separant self fell under and to see the scope of her immersion into the dark corners of her own collapsing mind: "I'm a mass of neuroses, . . . and everything I do or think is in a world by itself and can't get out" (254). In a state of total mental helplessness, she is, for the first time in her life, waiting for her fairytale-like savior: she is Snow White, immobilized not by an Evil Queen's poisoned apple, but by a southern athlete, an epitome of masculinity and a symbol of physical and mental healthiness.
- 33 The fairytale prince who hastens to liberate the damsel in distress is Scott, whose downtrodden participant self finally wins out over his stronger separant twin. Informed by the narrator about Judith's situation, he enters the boarding house like a hero, without knocking and in such a confident way that not only the narrator but even the house itself (with only two tenants, the narrator and Judith, during the vacation time), "that ramified abode of women, women, women, over the long years" (257-58), knows that a real man is coming. Then Judith, in the narrator's description, "with a low cry, filled with surprise" is "opening toward joy" (258). Not seeing what is actually happening, the narrator follows the sounds: "She must have risen then, out of her ruins, to go to him. I heard her stumble, fall and get up, or be lifted by him" (258).
- 34 This sounds like a romantic happy end, and to a great extent it really is, in spite of the narrator's moralizing, but happiness is always fleeting. As Shoham shows, anybody's "emotionally loaded behavior is liable to unsettle and harass" a prospective spouse, and the inevitable reaction of the spouse is to retreat immediately; Shoham considers it "one of the most painful paradoxes of human interaction" (146). At the moment of Scott and Judith's reunion, the emotions are reciprocal and in congruity because both reached the very bottom, and for similar reasons; they are both currently experiencing what Shoham calls "ecstatic unity" (95). This unity, however, will necessarily be of short duration, as no two partners can stay equally keen and absorbed in the mutual relationship for long.

"Do you want to hear a story?" The End of the Narrator's Distance

- 35 The narrator enters the story as a naïve separant and leaves it as a separant who is at least able to admit that she has emotions, even though she does her best to put them to rest. When she finds out that the beautiful Judith lives in the same boarding house, she cannot suppress her envy and jealousy. Describing Judith's looks and attire, she feels "tired and unattractive" (245). Point after point, the narrator loses the imagined battle

with her: "Whoever came to take me somewhere, any fool could plainly see, was bound to get interested in her" (245). The only thing to please her is Judith's age, but even this is no solace for her, as Judith never pretends to be younger and proudly tells everybody the truth. Soon it becomes obvious that the narrator's worries that she will be seducing their male friends were groundless, but Judith's dangerousness lies somewhere else: her emotions turn out to be contagious and get passed on to the narrator.

- 36 The narrator's initiation starts with a question to which no southerner can ever give a negative answer: "Do you want to hear a story?" (242). Telling her story is therapy for Judith, and even though she is sure that her listener will not keep it to herself, she at least demands: "if you tell, get it right and don't make it sound silly" (242). The narrator feels offended by this remark but at that time she does find Judith's story silly, as her irrelevant questions betray. For example, when Judith tells her about her habit of combing her hair without any clothes on, she asks: "Even in the winter?" (248). Yet in spite of the narrator's reluctance to become involved, Judith's emotional narrative soon gets under her skin: "Her anguish . . . was so intense it got across to me something of the force the experience had had for her" (248). The germ took root, and when the narrator, years later, retells Judith's story in the context of her own life, it does not sound silly, foolish, or stupid, but acquires more sinister qualities; she sees Judith as a disturbing element, "threatening . . . for a long time" everybody in the "big, friendly old comfortable innocent house" (250).
- 37 The safe distance the narrator keeps from Judith and her story at the beginning is a typical policy of Spencer's fictional protagonists. Spencer confirmed and explained it in an interview: "Detachment means irony. You can be ironic if you're detached" ("Interview" 605). In her study of emotional distance as narrative strategy in Spencer's stories, Entzminger (who did not include "Judith Kane" in her analysis) draws attention to the fact that "in many of her stories, emotional denial is also an important defence strategy, becoming a part of their character and not just an incident of style" ("Emotional Distance" 73). Even more importantly, for Spencer's characters "the rebellion against the control of others sometimes means a rebellion against emotion" (74).
- 38 The narrator tries with all her might to bring people back to reason, "rebellious" against their emotions. When Judith tells her that Yancey will not see her again, she replies, with noticeable relief, "So that finishes that" (249), becoming frustrated when she has to listen to the details of another of Judith's self-degrading attempts to scrounge a date from Yancey. After the narrator tells Judith's story to Scott, not knowing that they used to be a couple, she regrets having mentioned her, even more so because Scott asked her to follow Judith's progress in contacting Yancey: "What business was it of mine? I had wasted time over there talking and would have to work till ten instead of nine" (252). When Judith relates to the narrator the update on her desperate search for Yancey and recounts her feelings, the narrator, who at first tried to remind her that Yancey is several years younger and therefore not suitable for her, gives her the only piece of advice she can think of: "I'd stop it. . . . Shut it off. . . . Just do it" (253).
- 39 It is Judith's perseverance that finally leads the narrator to ruminate about life from a different perspective: "She made me think there must be times when the world is separated from yourself with something like a wall of glass that you cannot find a foothold on . . ." (253). Observing Judith in the final stage of *accidia*, as she lives in a daze and focuses only on her deprivation, does not induce a similar condition in the

narrator—as Shoham emphasizes, no one “becomes accidic by proxy, . . . as a mere spectator” (9). But is the narrator still a spectator at that time? In *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy notes that an alienated person, reading a novel about an alienated person, does not become doubly alienated, but “rejoices in the new triple alliance of himself, the alienated character, and the author” (83). Oral narratives work in the same way as books, and therefore the same would have happened to the narrator of “Judith Kane” if she had really been detached from the personal stories Judith and Scott had told her. However, at that time the narrator is far from being only a watcher.⁴

- 40 When Judith replies to the narrator’s well-meant recommendation to start the next morning with breakfast, “What’s it to you? . . . What should it be to you?” (254), the narrator, despite originally refusing to act as a go-between, decides to contact Yancey and persuade him to open his ears to Judith. The reason is, logically, not her worries about Judith but her fear that Judith might revive her interest in Scott—which finally happens. The climactic scene that inaugurates the termination of her already too fragile distance is set on the bus from the quarter where Yancey teaches gym back home. During the ride, colored beads suddenly begin to fall off the narrator’s hat, a hat she had owned since high school, her only one, which “went with everything and was never out of style and showed no age at all” (256). The beads, “rolling and tumbling” on the bus floor, symbolize the disintegration of the narrator’s separant self, but the collapse was less sudden than it appears to be: “I had often in moments of stress reached up and twisted the wire which threaded the beads together, and I must undoubtedly have twisted it several times that day . . .” (256). Nevertheless, the symbolism of the scene reaches farther: the driver, who at first thinks that she was throwing the beads on purpose, admonishes her that they can become dangerous to other people: “Them things . . . are worse’n banana peel, and if you think of old people and all . . .” (256). The narrator, from now on in the clutches of her long-hidden emotions and desires, can be equally harmful for others as Judith is.
- 41 This is why it is very difficult to typecast the narrator as either a typical southern belle, sweet and virtuous, or its more recent version, a fallen belle, who, in Kathryn Lee Seidel’s words, “discarded her cloak of gentility and purity to reveal depravity, destructiveness, rebellion, or neurosis” (xii). Seidel herself claims that there is no wide gap between the two, as even the traditional belle we know from nineteenth-century literature “has within her the seeds for her own literary metamorphosis, since she has been taught by her society to repress instincts and displace emotions that linger in her unconscious, awaiting release” (xiv). Entzminger, on the other hand, considers the two completely different, albeit complementary types and, unlike Seidel, claims that the bad belle did not gradually evolve from her benign predecessor, but existed, simultaneously with the “morally pure heroine” (*Belle Gone Bad 2*) and as her antipode, from the very beginning. She defined the “belle gone bad” as “a type of femme fatale—sexually knowing, physically powerful because of her allure, and morally dangerous” (*Belle Gone Bad 2*) and put her against the “white southern lady,” who “is required to suppress all strong passions” and even “tames the passions of men” (*Belle Gone Bad 9*).
- 42 Preshaw, in her analysis of “Judith Kane,” indirectly suggests that the two young women, the narrator and Judith, are, to a certain extent, each other’s mirror reflections when she claims: “The narrator’s acute self-consciousness and need for privacy are a mirror reflection of Judith’s preoccupation with finding a mate who matches her perfection. Both women live under a kind of spell of their own making; both are fearful

of and fascinated by sexuality" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 146). The narrator's fear of sexuality is much stronger than Judith's, but there is a more telling parallel between them: neither can imagine herself as a mother at this stage of their lives. When the narrator rationally explains to Judith that Yancey is not a good match for her, Judith replies: "I wasn't considering matrimony" (253). Two pages earlier, the narrator recollected a visit to Scott's home, where his baby "had cried with a heat rash" (251) and, instead of expressing a worry, she, when the weather gets even hotter, amusingly imagines that "it must by now be about melted away like a snail" (251). Both Judith's and the narrator's distance from motherhood is the residue of the historical feelings that, according to Seidel, always accompanied the transition from southern belle into matron, "from indulged and self-concerned to selfless and self-sacrificing" (34), which usually meant the complete loss of her power over the rest of her life.

43 The suddenly awakened yet still timid participant tendencies of the narrator, which bring her even closer to Judith, make themselves patent on the very same day in the evening. When Scott, talking about Judith, clenches his hand, the narrator grasps it, "trying to get the fingers open and relaxed" (257). Scott unclenches his hand and gives a squeeze to hers but while for him it is only friendly affection, the narrator feels it almost as an erotic act that goes through her "deep and clear" (257). If we take the narrator's strong separant self as the outer one, and the weak participant self as the inner one, we can agree with Prenshaw, who aptly notes that Spencer often focuses on the collision of the outer and inner selves of her mostly female protagonists, who are "shaken with the discovery that satisfying both one's public role and one's private needs is impossible" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 143).

44 The narrator of "Judith Kane" prefers her public role in the end, but it is mainly because the development of events is directed against her personal wishes—if the decision were up to her, she would choose the gratification of her private needs. She finally admits to herself and the reader that she was in love with Scott all the time, even though he was married, but there is no practical result of this disclosure, and, even worse, she has the causality all twisted:

I wanted to run after him, had wanted to maybe for months now, but all this of Judith had trapped and denied my own feelings for him. They rose now, swept over me and fell; my heart ran after him, but I never moved at all. (257)

45 Judith is not the one who "trapped and denied" the narrator's feelings for Scott but the one who helped to bring them to light. When the narrator, overwhelmed with feelings she is not able to handle any more, tells Scott, "If you don't stop it, . . . it's just going to go on forever, like the bottomless pit" (257), she again achieves the opposite to what she longs for: on the very next day, Scott goes to see Judith. It is the narrator who will finally fall into "the bottomless pit," accusing Judith falsely of plotting against her in order to get Scott again. Her charge of Judith not being able to "tell the difference" between Yancey and Scott, wanting them both, is even more pathetic—Yancey was the threat whom the separant Judith wanted to neutralize through personal contact, while Scott is the man her participant self wishes to merge with, and the fact that Judith herself cannot fully understand her motivations—as her "I don't know" amidst her unexpected tears clearly shows (259)—does not make it different. As Seidel appropriately wrote, "no author has yet had the belle embark on a five-year course of psychotherapy" (71), and Spencer is no exception. Nevertheless, in an interview Spencer made a general statement which might explain the essence of Scott and Judith's relationship: "Some love relationships sometimes, they can just take hold of

you and you can't find either the opportunity or the inclination to break out" ("Interview" 604).

- 46 Still, with the approaching end of the story the narrator becomes more candid than ever before. First, she recognizes strength, majesty, and dignity in her opponent, seeing her "as some tall white bird, one with a great latent wingspread for long flight" (258) and, through the metaphor, she even attributes to Judith the potential for a stable partnership. Second, when she expresses her fears that Judith would "drop [Scott] when she moved furiously on to some other high perch" (258), a worry which is in contradiction to the previous bird metaphor that emphasized the length of the flight, she found the courage to admit that the dread "was more than just for him" (258), that it was also for herself. Third, she finally confesses to Judith her sentiments for Scott, changing her "Yes, but I . . ." into a clear "Yes" (259). The image of the narrator, watching the empty street through the window, finally seals her initiation into the world of suffering and loss. When her sight follows the departing Judith, she is in the position of Yancey, even though, unlike him, she would now prefer not to be a mere viewer. Admitting openly that she is jealous of Judith, who enticed Scott into forgetting that he had a wife and a child, the narrator becomes more human. The emotions with which Judith infected her and which she initially took as a burden became her own and she emulates them, even though they may signify a loss of her moral purity. This is when the narrator's story becomes equally relevant as the story of Judith, if not more so.
- 47 "Judith Kane," one of Spencer's finest stories, offers a different point of view than the rest of her short fiction—maybe this is why it does not appear in the volume of new and selected stories *The Southern Woman* (2001). Through a topic of general appeal, here Spencer explores the behavior of urban southern intellectuals in the late 1930s, at the same time providing a fresh and ambiguous look at the character of the southern belle. The story also outstandingly illustrates the inexorable logic of the seemingly illogical relationship patterns, which, from the point of view of existentialist theories of personality, are universally valid. According to these patterns, permanent happiness with a partner you love deeply is impossible and any rebellion against this is doomed, as we cannot defeat our own psychological layout. The story subverts the traditional layout of Spencer's characters: the narrator, occasionally taken as the author's younger *alter ego*, is the only one in the story who does not seem to receive her longed-for piece of cake in the end. She can also hardly swallow the fact that she is indebted for her maturation to her antagonist, who could understand the world of paradoxes much better and therefore, at the end, achieved what she strived for, although we can only speculate how long-lasting her happiness will be. In spite of that, the narrator does not leave the story entirely empty-handed: she grows up into an emotional being stripped off her original detachment.

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NOTES

1. The evidence of the author's dislike of the title character is her name; both Judith and Cain are Old Testament murderers. There is a similar case in the work of Spencer's mentor and friend Eudora Welty, who repeatedly expressed hatred toward Fay Chisom, a character from her novella *The Optimist's Daughter*, published in the *New Yorker* only one year after "Judith Kane" (Welty 97). As Fay is also detested by the focalizer in the novella, she is almost universally interpreted as an evil person, even though the text, stripped of bias, clearly shows that most of the accusations by members of the community against Fay prove to be false. Both examples legitimize the New Critical opinion of W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, voiced in their well-known essay "The Intentional Fallacy," that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (469).
2. For a history of their friendship, see Spencer's essay "Remembering Walker," published shortly after Percy's death in 1991.
3. Shoham takes it for granted that the world, being built on paradoxes, is an absurd world, defining the absurd as "a breaking down of norms, or a series of grave disharmonies within them, as perceived by the individual" (1). I agree with him, even though my own definition of the absurd is broader and adds social and aesthetic aspects to it. I abstain from the use of the term "the absurd" in this article because "Judith Kane" is not a comic story that shows the absurd but a psychological study that, through the growing-up of the inexperienced narrator, rather tells about it.
4. At another place in *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy gives examples of rotation through one's own unexpected tragedy: a visitor to the Grand Canyon can see the famous place in a new way only if there is, for example, an outbreak of typhoid fever or the occurrence of a disaster when he comes there (see 46). Then such a person ceases to be a mere watcher and turns into a participant.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article analyse la nouvelle "Judith Kane" d'Elizabeth Spencer, qui figure dans le recueil *Ship Island and Other Stories* (1968). En dépit des commentaires de l'autrice, ou des opinions de critiques et d'universitaires, il ne s'agit pas ici de lire la nouvelle comme l'étude d'une femme fatale malfaisante. Dans la première partie, le texte est exploré comme une réflexion sur les difficultés auxquelles trois intellectuels du Sud sont confrontés lorsqu'ils s'efforcent de briser le mur des stéréotypes, des habitudes et des attentes sociales, y compris les leurs. La deuxième partie examine les personnages à la lumière de théories selon lesquelles les relations humaines et la communication interpersonnelle sont quasiment impossibles, notamment à partir des travaux du sociologue israélien Shlomo Giora Shoham, parfois complétés par les idées de Walker Percy et Søren Kierkegaard. La dernière partie, qui s'intéresse à la transformation psychologique de la narratrice, convoque également la typologie des belles du Sud de Betina Entzminger et celle, moins récente, de Kathryn Lee Seidel.

AUTHORS

MARCEL ARBEIT

Marcel Arbeit is Professor in the Department of English and American Studies at Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic. He is the author of a monograph on the novels of Fred Chappell and Cormac McCarthy published in 2006 (in Czech) and the main editor of the three-volume *Bibliography of American Literature in Czech Translation* (2000). He co-edited the *Mississippi Quarterly* special issue on Lewis Nordan (2007, with Thomas Ærvold Bjerre), *The (Un)Popular South* (2011, with M. Thomas Inge), and *Where Is History Today? New Ways of Representing the Past* (2015, with Ian Christie), and edited *The South from Elsewhere* (2014). His recent publications focus on Doris Betts, Fred Chappell, Harry Crews, Richard Ford, Lewis Nordan, and Chris Offutt. Between 2005 and 2013 he was the President of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies. He is the editor-in-chief of the *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film*.