

A Drinking Problem just like Grandpa's

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Mikkel Jensen's article "A Drinking Problem just like Grandpa's" is a close reading of a single short story from Douglas Coupland's 1994 short story cycle *Life After God*. The story, "Little Creatures", portrays a gloomy drive a father takes with his child up to meet the child's grandfather, referred to as "the golf-wino". In this story the journey is represented as two parallel narratives of development as both the father as well as the child faces some truths either about themselves and/or the world which neither of them is ready for. Seeing how the short story chronicles a drive from an urban center through a western Canada countryside, the article comments on – with specific reference to pastoral literature – how this story marks Coupland's departure from idealizing rural locations.

In 1991 Douglas Coupland hit the literary stage hard with his debut novel *Generation X*. Featuring sneeringly ironic narrators who appeared to be somewhat detached from the many stories they tell each other throughout the novel, the novel would soon gain attention for its ironic, distanced and rather world-weary characters, and Coupland's writer persona would soon come to be associated with the tone of these jaded 20-somethings he portrayed. How-

ever, it wouldn't take long before he took a sharp left into new stylistic territory in subsequent publications, and as a consequence he was excoriated, "presumably for attempting be serious and to express depression and spiritual yearning when his reviewers were expecting more postmodern jollity" (Greenberg, 2010: 7). Using an entirely different narrative tone meant that many people had trouble reconciling their image of the supposedly hyper-ironic Coupland with the new Coupland – pathos driven and seemingly painfully sincere – one could meet in the short story cycle *Life After God* (1994).

Coupland's debut overtly thematized *Bildung* and formation of character and one researcher has even noted that its literary mode – the generational novel – is a subset of/ or pastiche of the *Bildungsroman* genre (Sørensen, 2001: 10) and though the short story format seems too limited to contain elaborate portrayals of a *Bildungsreise*, *Life After God* nevertheless shows Coupland once again focusing on themes of character formation and life crises. This is perhaps particularly so in the first short story "Little Creatures" which chronicles a 30-year-old father who, accompanied by his young child, drives up from Vancouver to the city of Prince George in western Canada. The story starts *in media res* after the father has been living out of suitcase in the preceding month after an ugly break up between him and the child's mother having "angry re-priminating phone calls with You-Know-Who", i.e. the mother (Coupland, 1999: 3). The break up is obviously a divorce with lawyers being involved and this situation has clearly made the father distraught; he is constantly either thinking about the divorce rather explicitly or is obviously trying to keep his mind off of it by thinking of seemingly random subjects such as "what would buildings look like if they had been built by animals." He even discusses the breakup with his child in roundabout ways which the child fortunately doesn't seem to understand – at first. During a break from driving they stand in silence watching two bighorn sheep on a mountain ridge only to soon resume their drive:

I thought of my own likes. I like dogs because they always stay in love with the same person. Your mother likes cats because they know what they want. I think that if cats were double the size they are now, they'd probably be il-

legal. But if dogs were even three times as big as they are now, they'd still be good friends. Go figure (14).

The comparison the narrator draws between himself and dogs illustrates how he understands himself as a loyal person. That loyalty, however, is contrasted with the mother who isn't explicitly said to be disloyal, as the narrator leaves it at stating that cats (meaning *her*) "know what they want." This parallel reveals how the narrator feels betrayed by the "disloyal" mother whom he can't stop thinking or talking about. Stating that triple sized cats would be illegal (as opposed to dogs) only clarifies how the father bitterly considers his former partner – and perhaps more importantly here; the child's mother – to be untrustworthy.

This passage also seems to destabilize the ontological status of the narration: is this direct speech or stream of consciousness? The narrator states that that he thought of his own likes, indicating that he is summarizing his thoughts, but the remaining part of the section reads more like a transcript of what he says to his child. As Sørensen notes there is "obviously a secondary narratee in the story, as much of the narrator's discourse is not directed at his child, but at an intended reader who will understand the wider implications" of what the narrator says, meaning that a part of the discourse is understandable within the diegetic world of the story whereas other parts are directed at an extra-diegetic readership (Sørensen, 2004: 10). Thus the summarizing way of mentioning his own likes means that the reader is to understand this cat-dog comparison metaphorically, as a way of giving the reader insight to the parents' break up. This comparison is made roughly half-way through the story and there is no indication that the child understands what the father is *actually* (i.e. metaphorically) talking about. The child's innocence does, however, seem to be compromised at story's end.

As a whole, the short story's portrayal of the drive is metaphorical for character formation, and as one may expect there are "dangers" present in this journey. However, that element of danger is not something encountered during the journey, but it is rather figured as an element which has been there all along. The big-horn sheep offer no peril, and it is only the father's absentminded talking which endangers the child, and in this way the short story's journey is metaphorical for the pitfalls of growing up or even parenting.

Bedtime Stories

At the end of the long drive, the two principal characters are about to go to sleep when the child asks the father to tell some bedtime stories. At this point the father is exhausted both emotionally from the ongoing divorce, as well as physically from his chaotic way of living in the preceding month which only is exacerbated further by the 12 hour drive on the way to the grandfather's home. The child, however, refuses to settle down before hearing a story and due to being exhausted the father doesn't really manage to improvise any suitable bedtime stories for his child. Three stories are told, the first of which is the story about "Doggles – the dog who wore goggles"¹ (18). Apart from the rhyming title, the father doesn't manage to come up with anything lighthearted or humorous to add to the story and he – somewhat tragically - cannot really come up with anything for Doggles to do in the story:

You persisted and so I said to you, "Well, Doggles was supposed to have had a starring role in the *Cat in the Hat* series of books expect..."

"Except what?" you asked.

"Except he had a drinking problem," I replied.

"Just like Grandpa," you said, pleased to be able to make a real life connection.

"I suppose so," I said. (18 – 19)

To tell a child a bedtime story about a fictional dog, who misses out on career in a book series due to alcoholism, is black humor (and inappropriate) to say the least and the bleak narration of the entire story thus switches upside down here to a tragic, almost gallows-like humor. This dark humor, however, quickly turns to sadness in the following line as the reader sees the child's most immediate reaction to this piece of information, which isn't to ask "What's a drinking problem?" but instead to say "Just like Grandpa". Having been conditioned to make this knee-jerk parallel due to the father's free discussion of the grandfather's alcoholism, the child isn't consoled by any of the other bedtime stories s/he is told as they all involve heartbreaking fates too tragic to tell a child, a fact the father realizes only too late "feeling suddenly more dreadful than you can imagine having told you ... stories of these beautiful little creatures

who were all supposed to have been a part of fairy tale but who got lost along the way" (22). To the reader these stories come to reflect father's life and one sees a man who has met his measure of disappointment and adversity – a life story which he sugarcoats very poorly when talking to his child.

A characteristic visual trait of *Life After God* is its many drawings. "Little Creatures" alone contains 17 different drawings, which in some instances seem to reflect the child's understanding of what the father is telling him/her. This reading is supported by their simple and almost childlike style which thus would seem to reflect the child's immaturity. This innocence, however, is put at risk by the father's unstable behavior. When, at the end of the story, the child demands to be told some bedtimes stories these cheerful drawings reflect the innocence which may be compromised and therefore lost at the end of the story. As such they serve as contrasts to the bedtime stories which reflect the father's disappointment with his own life – how it went south due to circumstances outside of his control. Metaphorically speaking it seems that in the end the father finally "sees" these drawings, i.e. is reminded of the child's innocence and how s/he isn't ready for these tragic stories and this realization is what makes him feel "more dreadful than you can imagine."

"What is it that makes us us?"

As mentioned, to keep his mind off of the divorce on the drive up the grandfather's home, the father ponders the differences between humans and animals trying to identify some defining human traits: "What is it that makes us us?" he asks (12). His mind wanders pondering how buildings would look if they had been built to accommodate other kinds of animals, and to some readers this way of thinking could be read as an almost childish trait – and the thoughts can indeed seem silly at an initial glance.

While this could be read as a way of characterizing the father as immature or (merely just underlining how distraught he is), I would suggest that this aspect yields even more insight in terms of characterization. When the father thinks of what buildings built to accommodate animals would look like, the reader is again called upon to be a second narratee, though in a slightly different way from what I described earlier, where the reader was to understand the wider implications of the things the father tells his child. In the first case both

the reader as well as the father knows what is really the subject of the talk. In this case, however, the reader is to understand even more than the father does. It is clear that the father doesn't arrive at any useful insights of what makes humans human: "The only activities I could think of that humans do that have no other animal equivalent were smoking, body-building and writing" (12). According to the Danish historian of ideas Johannes Sløk, the defining human trait, however banal it sounds, is the fact that we have a history – this is the defining difference which sets apart from other animals (Sløk, 2008: 18); a lion's life today is identical to that of a lion living 200 years ago (aside from its worsened living conditions). On this historically determined cultural aspect of human life Sløk notes that "The cultural pattern one is born into becomes that guiding force for behavior which the human being doesn't hold in its nature"² (Sløk, 2008: 18-19, my translation). And an awareness of personal history and development is exactly what the narrator of the story is missing, which he is sadly unaware of. And Coupland highlights this absence of temporal thinking by having the narrator make such an outlandish outline of what it is to be human.

Another crucial difference which sets humans apart from other animals is that which all but defines the protagonist's life at this particular point in time, i.e. the emotional and sophisticated social aspects that are particular to humans, and the fact that the father doesn't even consider this shows his crisis. By so clearly not considering how he ended up in his sad situation, the father's naïve observations on "human nature" reveal how he still is yet to gain some perspective on his situation, which could offer him some introspective insight. The reader may also infer from the fact that the father doesn't recognize humans' fundamental difference (history) from animals, is because he doesn't think in these temporal, diachronic dimensions suggesting that he doesn't reflect on the past (other than the bitter experience of his wife being disloyal to him), which then draws attention to the fact that he expresses his feelings about the divorce without really dwelling upon the events that led up to and caused the break. Not contemplating the events leading up to the divorce suggests that the father hasn't managed to digest the traumatic events and turn them into a narrative, which he can use as an interpretative and explanatory tool to make sense of the situation he finds himself in, and as such *Life After God* acknowledges the idea

expressed in *Generation X* that people need their lives to “become stories, or there’s just no way to get through them” (Coupland, 1991: 10). And though Coupland doesn’t always condone his protagonists’ actions or priorities, he often portrays them empathetically as is the case here, where the father’s flawed reasoning and unsuitable parenting are perhaps best understood psychologically as a portrayal of a lost individual in distress.

A trip to the countryside

As a whole, “Little Creatures” is a story about growing up and parenting, and its journeys of development are figured physically in the drive the two characters take through western Canada. Here, the story’s portrayal of a journey mirrors the transitions both the narrator and his child go through, and as such the rural setting they enter is an external manifestation of this development. Seen in this perspective, the mountains they pass on their way symbolize how the father sees his future as an insurmountable task. A journey offers, by definition, an unstable setting, and this underlines the story’s transitional and unstable situation, and all in all this setting illustrates the precarious waters of prematurely exposing a child to stories and ideas it isn’t ready for.

As a story portraying people living in an urban center who travel to the country side, “Little Creatures” invokes the old literary format known as the pastoral. In its earliest forms the pastoral form was contingent on the presence and portrayal of the “simple” shepherd; “No shepherd, no pastoral” the American critic Leo Marx said about this format which has been known for its idealizing (though often quixotic and condescending) portrayals of a “simple” rural life (quoted in Gifford, 1999: 1). However, in a more inclusive usage the term refers “to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (Gifford, 1999: 2). The important thing to notice here is how Coupland earlier had used this sort of geographic contrast as a core idea in *Generation X*, in which different places signify “psychological choices” (Sørensen, 2001: 250). In *Generation X*, the three protagonists live in self-imposed exile in the middle of nowhere, which can well be read as that novel attributing the pastoral setting with a certain potential in so far as this space represents a locus in which the characters can make some sense of their lives. So though it is debatable whether “Little Crea-

tures" is a pastoral per se, the fact that Coupland had earlier embraced pastoral ideas establishes this literary mode as a relevant context in which to discuss "Little Creatures" by virtue of it portraying a journey through a rural setting in order to thematize character formation, which also was a central theme in *Generation X*.

In this perspective it is interesting how there in "Little Creatures" is absolutely nothing pastoral or idyllic about the portrayal of the rural setting the characters end up in. The pastoral way of seeing the dichotomy of *city* >< *land* as a metaphor of *depravity* >< *purity* is negated, as both the home and away settings only offer tragic and challenging circumstances for both the young child and the father: At home there is the messy divorce and away there is the alcoholic grandfather. As mentioned, *Generation X* is a form of *Bildungsroman*, meaning that it by definition portrays developments of character – traditionally in an edifying manner; and this is a perspective in which we can identify a development in Coupland's writing. In "Little Creatures" with the child's innocence being compromised and the father realizing his wrongdoings, the character developments aren't uplifting (only sad) and as such driving to a rural setting is figured as a meaningless venture for identity formation and emotional recuperation. In other words, "Little Creatures" then serves as Coupland's deconstruction of the notions of pastoral idealism, which had characterized *Generation X*.

Sørensen notices that the rural wilderness of *Generation X*, far removed from hectic urban centers, was portrayed as a form of identity reservoir which the characters could turn to in their search for meaning and identity (Sørensen, 2001: 258-270) and as mentioned this way of attributing rural settings with such a psychological potential is readdressed in "Little Creatures". This could seem to signal an increasingly jaded Coupland, though one also could see this as a mature development as *Life After God* abandons the "dreamland" of Mexico one finds in *Generation X*, meaning that the portrayal of contemporary life is now approached without the "fix-all" solution of pastoral romanticism, as "Little Creatures" disenchants the literary topography of the rural locations. So though while there are no easy fixes "in the world" there may be solutions in the word: the tone of *Life After God* is often sad and sometimes painfully sincere and this seems to be where Coupland goes to find the hope he once saw in his idealized version of the hotel in Mexico where

people could use stories to pay for lodging. The place where Coupland gets his hopefulness thus seems to have changed from idealized places to a new tone in his fiction. Sørensen has noted that generational texts operate with “potential ‘free spaces’ where the cultural choices of the characters can unfold” (Sørensen, 2005: 21) but Sørensen has also noted elsewhere that the characters of *Life After God* seek elsewhere than “generational, familial and religious” narratives “to create cohesion in their lives” (Sørensen, 2004: 10). As such Coupland’s use of the idealized rural free space seems more prevalent in his earlier narratives which engaged more strongly in a generational discourse.³ So while there has always been a hopefulness to be found in Coupland’s fiction, *Life After God* embodies the notion that hopefulness may well lie in a narrative sincerity that wasn’t very prevalent in his earlier work.

At one point in *Generation X*, the character Dag says: “I don’t know ...whether I’m just upset that the world has gotten too big – way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it” (Coupland, 1991: 5). Seen in this light, “Little Creatures”, then, is Coupland’s move away from trying to create narratives on grander issues and with “Little Creatures” surfing the harrowing emotional traumas of close familial relationships with the father realizing his shortcomings as a parent, this story seems to be a concrete way of turning to the intimate sphere. And though Coupland would eventually pick up his own challenge to really write about the immense issues of contemporary life (such as environmental concerns in *Generation A* (2009)), *Life After God*, at least in part, now stands as an introvert intermezzo dealing with sadness, life crises and interpersonal relationships. Though while a title as *Life After God* certainly invites readings focusing on spiritual themes (which especially Andrew Tate has focused on (Tate 2002 & 2007)), this short story cycle, however, does contain other aspects other than spiritual ones prevalent in the final story “1000 Years (Or Life After God)”.

Ethical concerns, however, are very much present in the story, as the way the father in “Little Creatures” jeopardizes his child’s innocence is figured as a cautionary tale. In this sense Coupland’s mode of postmodern literature⁴ continues the moral vein which has been present from the earliest days of postmodern literature, perhaps most strongly noticeable in the atheistic “postmodern moralist” Kurt Vonnegut (Davis, 2006). In Coupland’s own vein of post-

modern moralism, however, this morality seems to be concerned with the issues of the intimate sphere, because even though Coupland abandons solutions offered by believing in an idealist version of a rural setting, he does affirm that morality and even moralist literature has a role in this cultural setting, though the world he portrays sometimes seems rather bleak. As Sørensen puts it, Coupland is best described as a cautious though sometimes wavering optimist (Sørensen, 2001: 135). The moral vein in Coupland's writing, however, isn't rooted in any grand narrative in spite of the fact that the narrator of the final short story of *Life After God* seeks religion; the moral message isn't spelled out as much as it is demonstrated. That the father's behavior robs his child of innocence is something that this character realizes by himself and though his thoughts are the product of Coupland's imagination, the validity or authority of this moral message isn't grounded in authorial authority but very simply in its artistry; in its way of conveying this message. That the message can be moral in a believable manner is thus fully contingent on whether the reader accepts and believes in the father's disappointment with himself and doesn't dismiss it as mere bathos. As Louis Greenberg has noted, Coupland generally strives for psychological realism (Greenberg, 2010: 17), and seeing that this short story's use of the dramatic method of *showing* (rather than narrating) the inner lives of its characters, the moral potential or appeal of this story thus lie in the believable and plausible mode of Coupland's characterizations, and thus it does not depend on the (fallacious?) validity of any grand narrative.

In Closing

The fact that the father realizes that he had "forgotten that his role is to protect the innocence of his child" (Sørensen, 2004: 11) shows that he is capable of assessing how he should have protected his offspring from these realities. Sadly, that realization comes much too late as the narrator refers to the child's grandfather as "the golf wino" already in the very first sentence of the short story, suggesting that the child already is aware of what a golf wino is and that his/her grandfather is one. As such, the innocence the child may seem to lose had, in fact, already been compromised at the beginning of the story, and dismally the father's self-awareness comes much too late. As such, the double tragedy of the story lies in the

father realizing how he has exposed his child to something it isn't ready for, and the child coming to see the father at his most fragile state at a time when the father should have protected his child from seeing the emotional despair of his life and ongoing divorce. As such, they both face some truths either about themselves and/or the world which neither of them is ready for.

With the ugly break-up as the background for this story, its portrayal of a journey as a metaphor for transition also serves as a disenchantment of the rural locale, which was new to Coupland's fiction when *Life After God* was published in 1994. The hope this pastoral romanticism would have offered as consolation is absent and the psychological realism of the short story centers on the not very self-aware protagonist, whose distress is demonstrated to the reader through his haphazard thinking about his life, as well as through his discussing too grown-up issues with his child. As such, this despair and emotional exhaustion sets a bleak initial tone for the rest of this short story collection which still is yet to receive serious detailed analytical criticism (Sørensen 2004 being an exception), which does seem a relevant endeavor seeing how Coupland's output continues to remain interesting, a prime example being 2003's *Hey Nostradamus!*.

Notes

- 1 At the top of the page where the story of Doggles' begins, there is a drawing of a frisky, happy dog wearing goggles.
- 2 "Det kulturelle mønster man fødes ind i, bliver *den* retningsgivende vejledning for adfærd, som mennesket ikke ejer i sin natur."
- 3 By 1995 it seems that Coupland had had enough of the Generation X media frenzy and tried to put it behind him (see Coupland, 1995 and Sørensen, 2001: 153-157). I have argued that Coupland would later comment on generational literature and *Generation X* in his novel *Miss Wyoming* (2000) and that that novel can be read as Coupland's treatment of, and reconciliation with, what happened with the Generation X phenomena in the early 1990s (see Jensen, 2011).
- 4 As Mark Forshaw has noted "Coupland has never been a postmodern writer in the sense that we think of Paul Auster, for example, or Donald Barthelme, as being postmodern writers. Nevertheless, he is a novelist who writes *about* postmodernity and he has done so of late with increasing distaste for both its cultural and its economic manifestations" (Forshaw, 2000: 53).

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