

ANALYSIS

“The Blue-Winged Teal” (1950)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“‘The Blue-Winged Teal’ parallels Bruce’s relationship with his father in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Through a ‘duck feed’ in the poolroom of his father, whom he despises, a college boy comes to an understanding of their shared humanity. When he tells the father he’ll be leaving, ‘he did not say it in anger, or with the cold command of himself that he had imagined in advance. He said it like a cry, and with the feeling he might have had on letting go the hand of a friend too weak and too exhausted to cling any longer to their inadequate shared driftwood in a wide cold sea.’”

Robert Canzoneri
“Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence”
Southern Review 9 (1973) 796-827

“Although not often anthologized, Wallace Stegner’s ‘The Blue-Winged Teal’ is one of the finer short stories in American literature to deal with what is perhaps its most prominent theme, the ‘initiation’ theme. The story’s twenty-year-old protagonist, Henry Lederer, undergoes an experience which makes him feel ‘as if orderly things were breaking and flying apart in his mind,’ but it is an experience from which he emerges with new knowledge of himself and, significantly, of the father from whom he is at first estranged.

This estrangement is in part the result of his father’s having returned to the proprietorship of his ‘old failure of a poolhall,’ a malodorous basement-level establishment which Henry privately likens to Avernus, just ten days after the death of Henry’s mother, as if for thirty years of respectable marriage ‘his wife had been the jailer and he was now released.’ Moreover, Henry cannot forgive his father for the affair he is having with a ‘red-haired woman who sometimes came to the poolhall late at night and waited on a bar stool while the old man closed up.’

Hostile toward his father and poolhall environment, Henry thinks of himself as ‘the alien son’ who ‘must gravel’ his father, a man of ‘many failures,’ when, on the Saturday evening when the story begins, he presents him with the nine ducks he has killed on a successful day’s hunt. Yet by the following Sunday afternoon, when Henry takes his leave from his father at the story’s end, he does so without ‘the cold command of himself that he had imagined in advance.’ He has perceived that he has himself been ‘sullen and morbid’ and ‘a difficult companion,’ and he has discovered within himself understanding and compassion for the father to whom he had thought ‘he would not bend again toward companionship.’ Subtly and beautifully, though the repeated images pertaining to the hunt, and through the recurrent symbol underscored by the title of the story, the author has established grounds for the plausibility of the protagonist’s self-discovery and change of attitude.

Four times in the first ten paragraphs Henry is referred to as ‘a hunter’ or ‘the hunter,’ suggesting that he is a hunter not only of ducks but of something more elusive (returning to the poolroom from the duck hunt, he realizes that he is ‘ready to be dead again’); he seeks to know the character of his father (whose eyes cannot ‘quite meet, not quite hold, the eyes of his cold son’), and he seeks his own identity. This last object of his search is further suggested when he tries to sleep Saturday night in the hotel room which he is sharing with his father: ‘his mind was out again in half a minute, bright-eyed, lively as a weasel, and he was helplessly hunted again from hiding place to hiding place.’ Although he is reluctant to meet Henry’s eyes, his father has ‘restless, suspicious eyes that [seem] always looking for someone,’ and in what might be referred to as the recognition scene of the story, when he finally meets Henry’s gaze in the backbar mirror, his eyes are twice described as ‘hound eyes,’ suggesting that he too, though sick and exhausted, is in his own way a hunter.

Among the ducks which Henry has killed is a blue-winged teal, 'a drab little duck' which nevertheless reveals a 'hidden band of bright blue' when John Lederer, the father, spreads its wing, an act which brings 'sentimental moisture' to his eyes. Later, he again spreads the teal's wing and sees 'the band of blue hidden among the drab feathers,' and finally, in the climactic recognition scene, Henry notices that his father has 'tacked two wings of a teal upon the frame of the backbar mirror, small, strong bows with a band of bright blue half hidden in them.'

Against the 'bright blue' which is 'half hidden' in the duck's wings, the author has played the suggestive color red. When John Lederer first observes the spread wing of the teal he comments, 'You can have all your wood ducks and redheads, all the flashy ones.' His preference for the teal seems especially significant after we learn of his occasional companion, 'the red-haired woman,' whose 'cheap musky perfume' taints his clothes when it touches them 'like some gaseous poison,' and whose hair is after all not genuine, being 'unreal' or false. Red is introduced early in the story in the person of Navy Edwards, perhaps another of the flashy ones, for he not only wears a flashy silk shirt with pearl buttons but serves as 'dealer and bouncer' for Max Schmeckebier, 'a stingy, crooked, suspicious little man' who runs a 'cheap' and evidently illegal game of blackjack in a room adjacent to the poolroom. When he places an arm on Henry's shoulder, Henry turns 'to see the hand with red hairs rising from its pores.'

While this realistic detail reinforces the theme of red with its connotations of cheapness, falsity and flashiness, a later detail strengthens the counterposed theme of blue. During the final poolhall scene, a young patron who has been engaging in 'abstracted whistling' at one of the tables begins to sing about a girl named Annie and, significantly, 'the guy that she's been waiting for' (i.e., her true, genuine love), concluding 'She told me that I'd know you by the blue of your eyes.'

Finally, employing a device for overcoming his insomnia on the Saturday night in the hotel room, Henry wrestles, perhaps unconsciously, with both colors at once: 'Yellow [this first color perhaps picking up the image of his father's 'sallow face']] and blue and red, spotted and striped, he shot pool balls into pockets as deep and black and silent as the cellars of his consciousness.' This descent into deeper levels of consciousness is, of course, the archetypal pattern of experience in the initiation story, but it has seldom been managed as artfully, or within a framework of associations as rich with suggestion.

These dark 'cellar of his consciousness' are flooded with sudden light for Henry in the final recognition scene. Catching him looking at the wings tacked to the backbar mirror, John Lederer recalls that Henry's mother had decorated a set of 'plain white china' with blue-winged teal: 'Just the wings, like that. She thought a teal was about the prettiest little duck there was.' Henry watches his father's face in the mirror, and he realizes with 'a cold, skin-tightening shock that the hound eyes were cloudy with tears.' Overcome with emotion, the father leaves the counter where the duck feed is taking place, but Henry interprets 'the anguished look his father had hurled at the mirror': 'The hell with you, the look had said. The hell with you...my son Henry. The hell with your ignorance, whether you're stupid or whether you just don't know all you think you know...you know less than nothing because you know things wrong.' Among other things Henry has known wrong is his father. Although his father is perhaps a failure, there is hidden within his experience a 'band of bright blue' which is painful but beautiful to recall, even if the outward appearance of his life is like the outward appearance of the 'little drab duck,' the teal.

Moreover, Henry has also known himself wrong, and he realizes now that his own coldness, antipathy and lack of understanding is at least in part the source of his father's 'anguished look.' With this new insight comes at least a fleeting moment of reconciliation as Henry takes his leave of his father: 'He said it like a cry, and with the feeling he might have had on letting go of the hand of a friend too weak and too exhausted to cling any longer to their inadequate shared driftwood in a wide cold sea.' Ironically, he has earlier in the day 'been for three hours in the company of a friend,' a friend from whom he has borrowed money to leave his father, but at the story's end he has discovered the existence of a friendship far more profound."

J. M. Ferguson, Jr.
"Cellars of Consciousness: Stegner's 'The Blue-Winged Teal'"
Studies in Short Fiction (1977) 180-82

“‘The Blue-Winged Teal’ (1950) is one of Stegner’s best known pieces. It, too, ends in a ‘situation revealed’...in puzzling ambiguity, raising more questions than it answers. As much as any other short fiction that Stegner ever wrote, this is a story of atmosphere—and atmosphere that is dreary, shabby, and charged with barely suppressed hostility and despair. The story’s setting, time and place, is patterned on a very traumatic period in Stegner’s own life.

After graduating from the University of Utah (in 1930) and going on to graduate school at the University of Iowa for two years, he was staying with his father in an apartment in Salt Lake City. His mother had just suffered a terrible death from cancer, and when her pain had become too severe, his father had fled the scene, leaving Wallace to care for his mother until his death. Wallace never forgave his father and had come to hate him, not only for abandoning his wife during her crisis, but for the outlaw pattern of living over the years that had isolated her and deprived the family of any kind of normal existence. While Wallace had been in graduate school, the banks had failed, taking all his savings, and having left school to take care of his mother, he was not stuck with and dependent on his father until a new semester started and he could resume his studies. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

While the superficial circumstances are changed and the events and supporting characters are imagined in the story, the central emotion, the son’s hatred for his father, remains, patterned after the author’s actual feelings. One might guess that ‘The Blue-Winged Teal’ was, among other things, an exorcism of emotions that Stegner had struggled with for much of his life. The dominant scene in the story is a poolroom that is managed by the father. In life Stegner’s own father was between occupations, having sold his interest in a Reno gambling house. In the story father and son share a single furnished room, making the situation for the son even more claustrophobic and unbearable.

Although the son is called Henry here, one could think of this as the last of the ‘Bruce stories,’ the stories based on Stegner’s growing up. (Indeed, as the story appears in the novel *Recapitulations* the son’s name is Bruce and the father’s name is George Mason rather than John Lederer, as he is called in the story.) ‘The Blue-Winged Teal’ can be seen to serve as a coda to the father-son relationship at the heart of these stories. The son, now an adult, reflects back on the relationship and in an epiphany near the end of the story he finds himself having the disturbing suspicion that there may well be another side to the story of his father and that in judging his father so severely he may have been at least in part mistaken.

At loose ends, and at odds with his father and the world, Henry has, on an impulse he doesn’t understand, borrowed his father’s shotgun, waders, and car and has gone duck hunting. Standing in front of his father’s pool hall and loaded down with nine ducks, he wonders whatever possessed him to go. In the description that follows, Stegner reverses that sense of space and naturalness in prairie or woods he uses so often in other stories to define the condition of his protagonist. Henry’s emotional condition, depressed and antagonistic, is revealed in the dark, enclosed, and shabby scene he anticipates he will encounter after descending the stairs from the street down into his father’s pool hall.... After entering, Henry slides the string of ducks off his shoulder and swings them over onto the bar: ‘They landed solidly—offering or tribute or ransom or whatever they were.’

The story goes on to trace the emotional swings of Henry’s relationship to his father. Like a man in prison—and he feels as if he is—whose mood may alternate between despair and hope, Henry’s attitude toward his father alternates between hatred and disgust on the one hand and a reluctant movement toward some slight sympathy on the other. What really sticks in his craw, however, is his father’s easy return to his old pattern of illegal activities before he was married (managing an establishment that provides gambling and drinking) and, especially, his taking up with the red-haired woman who comes into the pool hall late at night waiting for him to close up. Henry considers her an insult to his mother’s memory.

The father is pleased that there are enough ducks to give them a ‘real old-fashioned feed,’ and that, in turn, reminds him of good times in the past that he and his son have shared. But Henry is determined to hold on to his hatred and not be drawn into his father’s nostalgia. He refuses to let the moment ease the strain that has been between them: ‘He did not forgive his father the poolhall, or [was he willing to] forget the way the old man had sprung back into the old pattern, as if his wife had been a jailer and he was now released.’ A climax to the story comes that night as Henry lies in bed in the furnished room, awakened by

his father coming home late and undressing in the dark. While pretending to be asleep, Henry smells [perfume]... The perfume drives him to rage at himself for the sympathy, as slight as it was, that he had felt for his father earlier in the day....

Henry is able to block out his anger and lead himself into sleep by bringing into his mind a lit pool table. It is a deliberate, almost too obvious irony, yet it works well to suggest Henry's internal battle to take control of his mind and to suppress his rage in response to the perfume. Mentally, he carefully racks up the balls, breaks them, and one after another lines up each shot and pockets the balls. He knows that eventually 'nothing would remain in his mind but the *clean* green cloth traced with running color and bounded by *simple* problems' [my emphasis] and that sometime in the middle of an intricate shot, he will slide off into sleep. That is to say, 'If only life could be so simple; if only we had such control over our lives when we are awake.'

But Henry's feelings shift yet again. The next day his anger leads him to find the old friends that, for some reason he cannot fathom, he has been avoiding and borrow some money to break out of his paralysis, get to the coast, and renew his life. He has been deliberately nursing his hatred, bringing to mind those things that might most stimulate his anger, but now he seems willing to let go. With a sense of release, he returns to the pool hall to tell his father he is leaving, only to find that he had forgotten about the duck feed. During dinner at the counter in the pool hall, once again his father reflects on times gone by, and when he recalls the mother's hand-painted china, his son responds by sitting 'stiffly, angry that his mother's name should even be mentioned between them in this murky hole.'

His father has taken duck wings and tacked them up on the mirror frame behind the bar: "'Blue-winged teal,' his father said... 'Just the wings, like that. Awful pretty. She thought a teal was about the prettiest little duck there was.' The teal and their feathers are seen in the story as soft, gentle, and beautiful—their fragility and beauty a reminder of a soft and loving woman who is gone and a family that has been broken. Pinned up on the wall, they become an emblem of what was tender between the father and mother that their son will never take part in. Self-centered in his own mourning, Henry focuses almost exclusively on his own feelings, not even recognizing the possibility that his father, in his own way, may have cared deeply about his mother.

After talking about his wife and how she responded to the beauty of the teal, Henry's father suddenly breaks apart. His eyes fill with tears and he stumbles down the stairs and through the pool tables to the toilet in the back. His son, shocked by his father's anguished look before he ran, thinks: 'The hell with you, the look had said. The hell with you...my son Henry. The hell with your ignorance...' This moment of revelation tears away the foundation of the son's anger, leaving him empty, somewhat bewildered, and wondering 'if there was anything more to his life, or his father's life...or anyone's life, than playing the careful games that deadened you into sleep.'

Later, after returning to his counter, Henry's father starts to clean up the dishes from their dinner. His son takes that moment to say what he has come to say—telling his father that he will be leaving town... The story has, like so many Stegner endings, multiple suggestive meanings. One such, certainly, is that the son realizes that despite his father's seedy life he did love his wife and the three of them did have a family, regardless of its flaws. Without the mother, the warm, loving center of their lives, they are now both cast adrift on the cold sea of life. And further, Henry seems to realize that of the two of them, he and his father, he is the strongest, least dependent, and best able to make a life for himself. But still clinging to his driftwood on a frigid and barren sea, his life would seem to old minimal promise—but he will survive, while his father is clearly lost.

This step toward forgiveness was not taken in life by Stegner until old age, when his anger dissipated and sorrow took its place, long after his father took his own life. The fiction provides an occasion for insight and forgiveness that life did not. What may strike us most about 'The Blue-Winged Teal' is how, once again, the field has been reversed: how we are seduced by the son's emotions surrounding his father, which seem so justified until we and the son discover how mistaken we are. The lesson seems to be how easily we are led to be judgmental, lacking clarity, lacking empathy, and lacking insight into the emotional

condition of others. The path of Henry's emotions is even more complex than summarized here. The story is a masterpiece of counterpoint, overtone, suggestive imagery, and skillful employment of point of view."

Jackson J. Benson
Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1998) 37-41

Michael Hollister (2015)