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Resolution

7. "Resolution: the act, process, or capability of distinguishing between two separate but adjacent parts, objects, or sources of light or between two nearly equal wavelengths."
– Random House Webster's College Dictionary

"So, who was the gorgeous blonde that had you cornered at the grad student party?" his wife Florence asked.

"Oh, uh. I don't know, I talked to lots of people yesterday." Laura Klein, as Professor T. Roland Wibbles well knew.

"Well, you chatted her up for quite a while."

"Really? Oh yes, Miss Klein. She's new to the grad program, but she took a couple of my courses when she was an undergrad. Seventeenth-century Brit lit, I think. Really bright. She's signed up for my Melville-Dickinson seminar. Great student."

"And a real looker, that Miss Klein."

"I hadn't noticed." Wibbles prides himself on his formality, even with his graduate students, some of whom like Laura Klein, are "nontraditional." She's what? Mid-twenties at any rate, maybe 27-28? "I guess she is rather attractive."

"Of course."



Professor Wibbles wavers in his resolve. He reads once more the passionate declarations from Laura Klein's journal entries at midterm, and he resolves once again to ignore some of them, difficult as that may be. Her comments on what she's read consistently run Freudian. Throughout Melville's prose she has detected authoritative father-figures hungry for voluptuous, nubile daughter-figures. Billy Budd, she argues, is in fact a "sublimated daughter" for whom the ship's Captain Vere has conceived an unnatural lust, and that explains why he must hang the handsome young sailor even though he knows the boy is innocent. She does not offer much in the way of supportive evidence for her intriguing and, Wibbles thinks, quite wrong-headed interpretation.

Sporadically in her sprawling journal, handwritten in neat cursive that seems little short of calligraphy, she has inserted passionate poems of her own composition:

*Clouds drift over my aching soul.
Rain on me, love,
Dampen my ebony negligee,
Wet my willing body—
Penetrate my tender flesh.*

Other students in the seminar have typed their journals, or more commonly printed them from their word processors. Laura Klein has opted for

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what the professor feels is the intentional sensuality of cursive. He recognizes she is flirting with him, and that realization simultaneously frightens and titillates him. "After all these years," he tells himself. "After all these years." He regrets Miss Klein is not a more accomplished poet.

Professor Wibbles has a weakness for the poems of Longfellow and Whittier that he would never confess to his colleagues, who share the universal Modernist let alone Postmodernist disapprobation of the Fireside Poets, and he nurses a secret disaffection for free verse. Although he has mated the prose of Herman Melville to the poetry of Emily Dickinson for this seminar in a (successful) effort to attract the women who make up the majority of students in the modest grad program (IPU offers no doctorate in English), Wibbles keeps largely to himself the heresy of not being particularly fond of the poems of the Belle of Amherst. He shares this heresy only with Walter Bagley, whose interests run to Swift and Voltaire and to early American writers like Washington Irving.

Privately, Roland Wibbles thinks Miss Dickinson tries to get away with too much poetic license, that her poems tend to be evasive and coy. Her frequent use of dashes irks him, and he refers to them as "random punctuation," though not in class, where the women, eight of the dozen inmates, are clearly enamored of the "virgin poetess," an epithet to which he also has the good sense not to give voice. He sometimes complains, out of class, that Dickinson's poems are "redundant": "Read one of Emily's poems and you've read 'em all," he grouses to Walter, particularly if Sandra McGint is within earshot. Ms. McGint teaches poetry writing courses. "Imagine Keats, or Dickinson for that matter, taking a creative writing class," Wibbles grumbles.

"If Sandy McG hears me, she'll accuse me of sexual harassment," he adds with malicious glee. He enjoys "needling" the young CW prof, "teasing" her (not "harassing," he insists). It's the 1980s, which Wibbles calls "The Age of Sexual Harassment." His wife Florence says she "understands" his annoyance, but Professor Wibbles believes her expressed commiseration intentionally ambiguous. She will not elaborate, but privately she's concerned that one day someone might take his playful misogyny seriously. "Well, dear," she will purr amid one of his rants about gynocritics, "you know I do understand." He will not be mollified. "Viragoes at the gates of literature!" he grumbles.



Four months ago, the professor turned forty-two, an age he regards as not quite "middle" and hence felicitously ambiguous. He wavers, therefore, in his resolution when it comes to the poetic effusions and the prosaic innuendos of perilously blonde and piercingly blue-green eyed Laura Klein. He suspects if he continues to waver in his resolve, these effusions and innuendos will continue, inappropriate as they may be. Maybe he should say something, but what? If he were to critique her "sensual discourse," as he decides to intellectualize the matter, would he not be inviting a charge of sexual harassment? "Mature love is best," she writes in her commentary on a story by Hawthorne when invited to reflect on important 19th-century American writers other than Melville and Dickinson. "Like a ripe pear," she adds. This observation appears to have relatively little bearing on the story under scrutiny. He reads no further but flips to

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her comments on Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Safer, less voluptuous territory.

That night he imposes on his wife even more clumsily than usual, and she is not impressed. "Why are you clambering all over me when I'm already fast asleep, pawing at me?"

The professor sulks and does not respond for what seems a good while, and by the time he does say something, Florence has fallen asleep again. "We're married," he whispers. "Dammit!" He feels a curious, primitive sense of satisfaction mingled with righteousness.

"Did you say something?" she mumbles.

"No," he mutters. "Nothing."

Half dreaming, Wibbles indulges his fantasies with lurid details of an illicit affair with the voluptuous Laura Klein. Where would they go? Nowhere around here, not even to Seattle or Portland. He remembers running into a guy from the art department a few years back at Jake's Famous Crawfish in Portland, the awkward introduction of the art prof's young, redheaded friend, his protégé presumably. They were there for an exhibition of some sort presumably. Maybe she was his model? But even if so, the guy was married with three kids.

Maybe he and Laura could go camping somewhere. He could tell Florence he was going fishing for a couple of days. By himself. But what if he had an accident? He imagines the sheriff calling his wife: "There was a young woman with him. We were afraid maybe it was you." The conscious sector of his mind, the part that debates his dreams and fantasies, that awakens him from them at the climactic moment, is quite practical. His head wants to be rebellious, and it would like to cooperate in this dangerous liaison of the heart, but it must raise a few objections.

Now he is fully awake. They could go to her place, probably a typical grad student apartment, but there would be the danger of casual visitors. Also, she likely has a roommate, an inquisitive girl, a good Mormon perhaps, from a small town in southeastern Idaho, the most conservative part of the deeply conservative state. Everything is too risky. He imagines himself at the Best Western in town, but no sooner do the images coalesce than the whole melodrama becomes hopelessly banal, tawdry: "Lit Prof Caught in Love Nest with Student!!!" Definitely an item worthy of three exclamation marks. The local paper hungers for whiffs of scandal, especially when they involve the university, without which institution, he has often noted, the rag would not exist.

Florence begins to snore, a new weapon in her sexual arsenal, a sort of V-1 rocket feared more for its noise than for the damage it inflicts. She has not snored until recently, but now she snores often, perhaps her subconscious mode of vengeance. No amount of nudging or light pummeling will stop the racket. Perhaps Laura Klein would be worth the risk. Hasn't he merely been trying to dodge the issue, wavering in the face of a dilemma, as he has always done, taking the path of least resistance? Choosing inertia over action.

Restless, Wibbles goes downstairs and pours himself a stiff scotch, neat, but he does not turn on the lights. He sits there in the dark, the only

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light the red glow from the VCR, and he listens to the hum of the refrigerator. A dog barks somewhere and a semi grinds its gears down Coyote Grade south of town, probably loaded with wood chips for the paper mill. The driver is young and single, his arm tattooed with a Celtic cross and a motto in Gaelic, and he moves recklessly from woman to woman. When he gets to the mill, all he's got to do is dump this load and pick up a phone. "It's late," the woman will protest sleepily, "but sure, come on over."

Surprised to see how quickly he has cruised through the scotch, the professor pours himself another, and he finds his mind racing over the next day's classes. "This is more like it," he tells himself before falling asleep on the couch.

But when he gets to the seminar the next afternoon, he discovers Laura Klein has moved so that she's sitting right next to him at the long, oval table, and she is wearing a sheer white blouse, and now she touches his arm and casually shifts her shoulder against him when she asks a question, then brushes his cheek with her full moist lips. It concerns Seamus Heaney's love life, not at all the subject of the Melville-Dickinson seminar, and he does not know the answer. He knows very little about Heaney or his poems, and when he tries to maneuver his way around her question, an obnoxious graduate student named Jeremy MacMillan, noted for his plodding intellect and shaggy goatee, objects. Then Wibbles sees Florence is in the classroom. She raises her hand, waves it frantically. What the hell is going on here?

He has been dreaming of course.

Seamus Heaney. *Field Work*, yes, he had read a review of that collection—"superb work," "eloquent and far-reaching." Making his way back up the stairs to bed, he tries to recall the look on Florence's face in his dream. Did she suspect something? He falls asleep convinced his wife knows all about Heaney's sex life, and so does Laura Klein. When he awakens, Wibbles feels wretched.



Having consigned "the whole thing," dream and all, to the mid-life crisis compartment, Professor Wibbles makes a point of not agonizing over what might happen the next day during the once-weekly seminar, which begins at two and runs for a sometimes interminable two hours and fifteen minutes. He noticed only five weeks into the semester, the five-minute break following the first hour ballooned into a ten-minute break, give or take a minute or two, usually give. In his undergraduate survey course Wibbles says "eighteenth century" twice when he means "nineteenth century," and he rambles on at tedious length about the stanzas in Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" when he meant to say "lines." By the time he reaches the seminar, then, it has already been "one of those days." On the other hand, the professor feels regretfully confident that the undergraduates were not paying attention anyway. What's a line or two of verse, or a century one way or the other, to them?

He is relieved to discover that Miss Laura Klein, who never misses a class, as he recalls from having had her as a student in two classes when she was an undergraduate, is absent. Dear, dull Jeremy MacMillan proves

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as annoyingly present as ever, but Wibbles decides to let him prate on about the visionary aspects of Melville's cetology. It seems a small price to pay. Obviously, Mr. MacMillan has stumbled across an essay or a book about whaling in *Moby Dick*, and he wishes to ingratiate himself with the professor and to intimidate his fellow seminarians, one of whom rather obviously coughs "bullshit" into his fist to the delight of his classmates. Wibbles chooses to overlook the vulgarity. The woman seated across the table from him rolls her eyes, whether at Jeremy MacMillan or at the vulgarity the professor cannot tell.

Wibbles lets his mind wander into Laura Klein's erotic journal entries anticipating (eagerly?) what might come when they shift back to Emily Dickinson for the next two weeks. Will she ask in class about "Wild Nights," about that closing metaphor? "Might I but moor— Tonight— / in Thee!" Does that mean what Laura thinks it does? Naughty Emily!

The professor's mental digression is interrupted first by silence following Jeremy MacMillan's expatiations on whales, symbolic and mystic qualities of, and then by his question, directed to Wibbles, as to "the salient features of Melville's religio-mystical experiences in the sketches from the novella, *The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles* (1854)" and "whether these might be akin to those of the British mystic William Blake."

Two matters instantly occur to Professor Wibbles' distracted mind. First, he has never been particularly drawn to Blake's poetry, not even to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or to the much anthologized and excessively explicated "Tiger" and "London." Second, he has not read the *Encantadas* in many years, which text he never found fascinating and had planned to read before the seminar got underway but has not yet found the time. Under the circumstances, he mumbles something vaguely agreeable and announces it's time for their break, during which he will hasten to his office for a quick look into the *Encantadas*.



Wibbles is frantically searching for the novella when Laura Klein appears at his office door, her arms dangling against her shapely hips, and he thinks "she's lingering" and then "no, she's lurking." He notices she's wearing a green silk blouse that shows her figure to disturbingly good advantage and must have been strategically selected for that end. He thinks in tennis terms: Advantage Klein. But it is not the diaphanous white blouse of his dream, and he's grateful for that. So, deuce?

"I need to talk with you," she says firmly. "Okay if I shut the door?" She pulls it to without waiting for him to answer.

The professor's fingernails digging into his hot, moist palms inform him palpably that he knows what she is about to say. Laura looks at him ("gazes fondly," a harlequin novelist might write), and he looks at her but quickly glances away. ("Should work on eye contact," several of his student evaluations advise. Under the circumstances, he corrects: "less," make that "less eye contact.")

"I'm sorry I had to miss class today," she says. She sits on the edge of the uncomfortable brown easy chair that has served him well over the years by assuring that office conferences will not be prolonged. After an initial session, most students prefer to stand.

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"It's break time. You can still catch the rest of it if you like." He directs his gaze at the place on the bookcase over Laura's left shoulder where a selection of Melville's short novels ought to be standing. He resolves to play it straight. Best to avoid her blue-green eyes and green silk blouse and . . .

"I really can't," she says. "I really can't . . ."

Can't stop thinking about you.

". . . make it today. I do hope you understand. I'm crazy about the course."

I'm crazy about you.

"Of course. I mean yes, well good. I think it's going pretty well so far."

"Really, I've just loved it."

I love you, really.

"Good, good. We'll get back into Dickinson next week. Your journal entries on her poems do far have been excellent." So, has the alluring Laura come in merely to explain why she's going to miss the other half of this class session? Wibbles feels a powerful urge to open the door. The university has no written policy requiring that office doors be kept open during student conferences, but the issue has come up at department meetings. "Comfort zones" for both students and professor. "Avoid awkwardness" for all concerned. But then as matters now stand, he would feel very awkward to rise from his desk and casually pop open the door. "Right?" he asks himself. Resolutely.

"Yes," she says. "It's about my journal."

Surely you must know from my journal how I feel about you.

"Your journal?"

"Well, it's probably silly of me, but . . ."

Silly of me to fall for my favorite professor, but . . .

"My roommate read it over the weekend, and he said, 'This is awful.' He said you might very possibly misconstrue a couple of things in it. The poems, you know, and my roomie said."

"Your . . . roomie?"

"Jeremy. You know, Jeremy MacMillan. He's a sweetie. He loves the course, too."

Of course.