

Pygmalion

"He could not know the world, was his fear, unless a woman translated it for him"

JOHN UPDIKE

JULY 1981 ISSUE

Source:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1981/07/pygmalion/376304/>

What he liked about his first wife was her gift of mimicry; after a party, theirs or another couple's, she would vivify for him what they had seen, the faces, the voices, twisting her pretty mouth into small contortions that brought back, for a dazzling instant, the presence of an absent acquaintance. "Well, if I reawy—how does Gwen talk?—if I *re-awwy* cared about conserwation—" And he, the husband, would laugh and laugh, even though Gwen was secretly his mistress and would become his second wife. What he liked about *her* was her liveliness in bed, and what he disliked about his first wife was the way she would ask to have her back rubbed and then, under his laboring hands, night after night, fall asleep.

For the first years of the new marriage, after he and Gwen had returned from a party he would wait, unconsciously, for the imitations, the recapitulation, to begin. He would even prompt: "What did you make of our hostess's brother?"

"Oh," Gwen would simply say, "he seemed very pleasant." Sensing with feminine intuition that he expected more, she might add, "Harmless. Maybe a little stuffy." Her eyes flashed as she heard in his expectant silence an unvoiced demand, and with that touching, childlike impediment of hers she blurted out, "What are you reawy after?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing. It's just—Marguerite met him once a few years ago and she was struck by what a pompous nitwit he was. That way he has of sucking his pipestem and ending every statement with 'Do you follow me?'"

"I thought he was perfectly pleasant," Gwen said frostily, and turned her back to remove her silvery, snug party dress. As she wriggled it down over her hips she turned her head and defiantly added, "He had a *lot* to say about tax shelters."

"I bet he did," Pygmalion scoffed feebly, numbed by the sight of his wife frontally advancing, nude, toward him and their marital bed. "It's awfully late," he warned her.

"Oh, come on," she said, the lights out.

The first imitation Gwen did was of Marguerite's second husband, Ed; they had all unexpectedly met at a Save the Whales benefit ball, to which invitations had been sent out indiscriminately. "Oh-ho-ho," she boomed in the privacy of their bedroom afterward, "so you're my noble predecessor!" In aside she added, "Noble, my ass. He hates you so much you turned him on."

"I did?" he said. "I thought he was perfectly pleasant, in what could have been an awkward encounter."

"Yes, *indeedy*," she agreed, imitating hearty Ed, and for a dazzling second allowing the man's slightly glassy and slack expression of forced benignity to invade her own usually petite and rounded features. "Nothing awkward about us, ho ho," she went on, encouraged. "And tell me, old chap, why is it your child-support check is never on time anymore?"

He laughed and laughed, entranced to see his bride arrive at what he conceived to be proper womanliness—a plastic, alert sensitivity to the human environment, a susceptible responsiveness tugged this way and that by the currents of Nature herself. He could not know the world, was his fear, unless a woman translated it for him. Now, when they returned from a gathering, and he asked what she had made of so-and-so, Gwen would stand in her underwear and consider, as if onstage. "We-hell, my dear," she would announce in sudden, fluting parody, "if it wasn't for Portugal there *rally* wouldn't be a country left in Europe!"

"Oh, come on," he would protest, delighted to see her pretty features distort themselves into an uncanny, snobbish horsiness.

"How did she do it?" Gwen would ask, as if professionally intent. "Something with the chin, sort of rolling it from side to side without unclenching the teeth."

"You've got it!" he applauded.

"Of course you *knoaow*," she went on in the assumed voice, "there *used* to be Greece, but now all these dreadful *Arabs*..."

"Oh, yes, yes," he said, his face smarting from laughing so hard, so proudly. She had become perfect for him.

In bed she pointed out, "It's awfully late."

"Want a back rub?"

"Mmmm. That would be reawy nice." As his left hand labored on the smooth, warm, pliable surface, his wife—that small something in her that was all her own—sank out of reach; night after night, she fell asleep.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.



JOHN UPDIKE was a prolific writer of poetry, art and literary criticism, and fiction. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1982 and 1991 for two novels in his "Rabbit" series, becoming one of just three authors to win the award more than once.