

Reading Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" in a Cultural and Political Perspective

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CLCWeb Volume 4 Issue 4 (December 2002) Article 3**Erkki Vainikkala,****"Reading Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in a Cultural and Political Perspective"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/3>>

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Abstract: In his paper, "Reading Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in a Cultural and Political Perspective," Erkki Vainikkala examines Rosa Liksom's short story as well as one reader's response to the text. In Vainikkala's analysis, the short story is described as a structure of inversions and reversals where sequences are opened and cut short, standpoints are offered and taken back immediately, and where the code of realism is suggested but not carried out as the development of the story lacks convincing motivation. The resulting effect of exhaustion, evident also in the manifestation of pathological narcissism in the story, is seen in connection with the state of culture in late modernity. The reading of the story by an Estonian woman, in turn, is interpreted as a political allegory of the situation in the country: it is shown how the dynamics of the reader response is influenced by the type of the research questions and also how different elements of Liksom's story are grouped together to serve the respondent's struggle of allegorization. A part of this rearrangement is a strong transformative reading of the male character. Vainikkala also reflects on the nature of reading and draws attention to the function of narrative thresholds. The latter aspect qualifies contextual approaches by pointing to the pedagogical importance of a text-oriented ethics of reading.

Erkki VAINIKKALA

Reading Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" in a Cultural and Political Perspective

Introduction

There are three readings included in this paper. The first is my reading of Finnish writer Rosa Liksom's short story "We Got Married" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>, the second is a reading of the same story by an Estonian woman, and the third is my reading of this woman's reading. Her name is not known to me, as she was one of an anonymous group of readers involved in the research project "Cultural Rules of Interpretation in Six European Countries." This project was carried out by scholars in each of the six countries and their work was put together in the publication *Reading Cultural Difference: The Reception of a Short Story in Six European Countries* (Ed. Urpo Kovala and Erkki Vainikkala). The essentials of the project are given by Urpo Kovala in his introduction to this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, and my present study is indebted to the many discussions that led up to it. It is important to make a note of a difference of purpose in this connection: while the project had to do with the analysis of the responses of different groups of readers with respect to ongoing cultural changes, I am here concerned with the story itself and one individual reading. The cultural context certainly figures here, too, but individual response texts require a different kind of attention because they are specific narratives in their own right. In this kind of approach, both the story and its readings acquire a textual force that rearranges the text-context relationship as compared to (even) qualitative studies where texts are used as a source for data.

The difference between the two readings arises partly from the fact that the first one adopts an "outsider's" perspective, which leads to an emphasis on structural properties of the story and their relation to larger cultural issues, whereas the second one is a non-professional reading with remarkable personal involvement. "Outsider's" is in quotation marks because it is a relative characterization and not a strict definition. Everyone is part of their cultural matrix, but there is a difference between a more cognitive interest and a predominantly affective involvement. In the latter case, the reader begins a moral and emotional struggle with the story; in other words, s/he enters the fictional story as a character with real attributes. All "real" reading takes place on this interface between the fictional (or more generally, the representational, and even more generally, the symbolic) and the real. Scholarly reading in principle steps back from this situation. It produces the special effect known as analysis. It is a double-edged procedure -- alienating maybe to the point of engendering an impenetrable jargon, but also liberating in that it is able to show connections which readings based on immediacy cannot perceive. In reality, this is a gliding scale, especially in view of new forms of scholarly writing where the personal experience and individual involvement on the researcher's part have gained in importance. Still, however we look at this, the working difference between analysis and experience, or concepts and emotions, remains.

Apart from these differences in kind, there exists a difference of cultural context. Context, in fact, is always many contexts leading to an overdetermination of meaning, so that the notion rather opens up issues of interpretation instead of solving them. But this is of course the point. It is the arrangement of contexts, and the determination of their relative weight, that matters. Thus the contexts of these readings are different, and they are also different in kind, even at cross purposes. As I am reading both the story and another reading of it; or, to put it differently, as I am the producer of my own reading and the commentator of the other, a necessary asymmetry arises that may suggest a hierarchy of interpretive levels. Difference and asymmetry, however, are not only a matter of power but also of complication. An asymmetry of power in speaking positions is a crucial issue, but looking away from the particular situation we can also say that reading goes on.

Fast Forward to Future Perfect: Reading the Story as a Late Modern Predicament

"We Got Married" first appeared in Liksom's collection of short stories *Tyhjän tien paratiisit* (*Paradises of the Empty Road*). The collection came out in 1989 and since then it has been translated into several languages. Anselm Hollo's English translation of this particular story is included in the volume *One Night Stands* (1993), which is a volume with texts from several sources. Born in Lapland, Liksom has lived in several countries and accumulated a variety of personal and professional

experiences (see, e.g., *Rosa Liksom* <<http://www.rovaniemi.fi/lapinkirjailijat/rosa/erosa.htm#tuotanto>>). These circumstances are discernible in her stories, where she often mixes the life and language of the far North with those of cities. She has published a large number of story collections, two novels, and several comic books, and she has made short films. Her stories are short, compact pieces, often desolate and comical at the same time. It has been noted that there is often a "flaw" in the stories which suddenly makes things suspect.

This particular story, namely *We Got Married*," takes place in a nameless city, which Finns might recognize as Helsinki. It is a first-person account of a marriage cut short. The protagonist picks up a man in a restaurant and marries him. The husband turns out to be a pain in the neck and she solves the problem by stabbing him to death. She claims it was a suicide and the police rather surprisingly take her word for it. The story ends with the words, "Hell, if a guy wants to live with you he's got to take on some responsibilities" (Liksom <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>). The story is told in a colloquial no-nonsense manner, in urban slang. The text brings to the foreground the tension between work and laziness, citizens and authorities; it portrays a man-woman relationship of frustrated expectations, and raises the question of family violence. These are the thematic interfaces which connect the story with the times and with readers' expectations and values regarding such matters. Everything is rendered so that it takes a low turn, the effect being that the story seems closely connected with developments associated with the erosion of values in late modernity. Apart from the incidents, the language and the setting suggest alienation and a slackening of traditional social connections.

However, this is not presented as a straightforward thematic elaboration. These topics are approached through inverted roles, the woman being the abuser, which poses an extra challenge to many readers. This inversion can be framed within the discourse of equality (which actually happened in the readings, too), as an expression of the woman's active role and thus as a matter of emancipation and empowerment. What this reading requires for its adoption, however, is an abstraction from the violence of the woman's actions, or else an acceptance of that violence. For this reason, mixed feelings or a downright dismissal of the story were common even among readings with an interest in the empowerment of women. But another discourse can be applied to it too: it can also be read as an expression of the late modern ambivalence of behavior and values. This reading is supported by many other features of the story. What the story takes in is different from what it puts out. Although there are rigid oppositions and inversions, it also creates ambivalence arising from contradictions between what is said and what is done, from out-of-character opinions, or from the contrived vacuity of the moral center which makes it possible to cite apparently incompatible discourses to the same intended effect. The last sentence of the story, which was quoted above, is a case in point. Taken separately, it indicates a traditional attitude to gender roles, which however is incompatible with the inversion of roles just mentioned, and in addition to that, even "personally" out of character with the narrator-protagonist.

Thus the story contains elements where traditional values connected with heterosexuality, wage labor, and gender roles seem to be supported. However, this is done in ways which leave open the option between face value, irony, and satire, on a gliding scale. Readers can actualize these possibilities even in opposite ways depending on the level of interpretation; the story may be seen as ironic of traditional values, or it can be taken as a negative example of sorts, in which case the ambivalence would be solved on the level of the "implied author" behind the unreliable narrator, and it could be read even as an indirect endorsement of the nuclear family and other traditional values related to its key themes. In consequence, the possibility of such different readings is not only dependent on the different contexts brought to bear on the story by the readers. Such bearings are shaped by the formal properties of the story itself. One important feature is the consistent use of first-person narration, which by definition precludes any direct authorial commentary in the text. As the story's content is likely to raise moral passions, it follows that readers are left to their own devices in their efforts to tackle its overall moral import -- or, more precisely, in their efforts to deal with formal and semantic ambivalence in the context of a morally outrageous act. This narrative situation gives a certain immediacy to the text, and it is reinforced by the fact that there is

virtually no reflexive distance between the narrating and the experiencing or acting self. The lack of authorial guidance, together with the lack of internal distancing between the functional positions of the narrator-protagonist, creates a situation where the moral perspective and other issues of interpretation are very effectively locked open.

What is formally open does not necessarily remain so in reading. In this case, the solution for many readers was to make the author's and the narrator-protagonist's positions fall together. This of course is a possible rhetorical effect of such openness, even though theoretically and analytically the functional differences stay in place. Taking up this effect and following it through led many respondents to read according to the principle of expressive causality: the whole story was taken to be a direct expression of a moral stance preceding the story itself -- an immoral author was at work. Thus the narrator-protagonist's position tends to make certain functional differences recede from view; this is particularly the case with readers that emphatically read "from life." This tendency seemed quite strong, as it asserted itself in spite of the fact that there are other features in the text that serve to foreground it as something constructed, not simply expressed. The "realism" of the story is connected with this issue. It suggests real-life plausibility as it evokes a story-telling situation where someone recounts to her friends -- in a bar, most likely -- some "unbelievable" things that have happened to her. The kind of language used and the unreserved description of violence make it realistic (in the ordinary sense of the word) to the point of naturalism which, however, is at the same time so matter-of-fact and extreme that it verges on the absurd. But if the story is straightforward in one sense, it is straightforward in a fast-forward manner. There is no realistic elaboration of motives (even though some are cited); sequences of action are opened and closed at short notice. We could say that a realistic code is activated and then suspended with somewhat absurd effects. In fact, we have two kinds of realism, or forms of plausibility, at work here: realism as an effect of oral storytelling, and realism as a mode of representation. In the former, the emphasis is on the moment of enunciation, in the latter, on the represented world. If realism as a mode of representation is a promise which is not quite kept, the same goes for specific contents. Traditional values of manhood and modern values of equality and women's rights are cited in the text, but are no more than citations -- they are lacking in substance and are not convincingly motivated in the story world. Instead there is an empty circulation of values.

What is mentioned above as an impression of immediate reality is put to question by such means. There are two aspects in this. First, what at first may seem simple enough turns out to be contrived, made out of complicated and heterogeneous elements. Second, what is specifically achieved by this, both thematically and in terms of the mode of presentation, is a certain hollowing out of the contents -- corresponding to what has been described as effects of late modernity. A striking feature connected with this is the fact that the changes described in the story all take the form of abrupt *reversals*. For example, when the protagonist approaches her future husband, she does so by using an expression ("Haista jätkä paska" -- Up yours, man; somewhat played down in Anselm Hollo's translation) more likely to end or preclude a relationship. Further examples: "We went to my place, but then it turned out there was no way I could get the creep to leave again" (Leksom <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>). The man proposes and then, after fateful success, stops doing anything (apart from sex). A party is thrown on the occasion of the marriage; but it is not in order to celebrate the marriage -- rather, the marriage takes place because it is "a nice excuse to party." Thus reversal may take the form of using rhetorical turnabouts or changing the normal order of cause and effect. Reversal of some kind is characteristic of any story, whether it takes the form of a tragic turn of fate or follows from a looser development where the end situation stands in some significant contrast with the beginning. In this particular story, this general feature of narrative is compressed in short repetitive sequences, with the effect of emptying out any deeper significance they might have. These reversals mark the unresolved status of the relationship, suggesting the end in the very beginning. On the level of action, they are synecdochic anticipations of the (end of the) union; symbolically, they are condensed refutations of it. The final resolution is precisely by reversal, when a filleting knife gives the final consummation to the marriage.

As the story proceeds by such sudden reversals, the effect is one of hollowing out or precluding

any possible deeper meanings or interpretations regarding the relationship between the two characters of the story. This of course may be the nature of any tallish tale told at a bar counter. But if we look not in the horse's mouth but at the structure of its whole body, it is also about what was above called the erosion of values in late modern times. Moreover, the structure of repetition and non-serious citation of codes, be it of literary realism or social values pertaining to gender roles, can be taken to point towards artistic postmodernism. Then there is laughter. Not that anyone laughs in the story. The large majority of the readers in the countries involved in the research project did not seem to have laughed either, from what we can tell from their written responses -- even though there were readers who were sensitive to the ironies of the story or read through ironic lenses of their own. This seriousness, often coupled with a dismissal of the story on account of its brutality and foul language, was certainly partly due to the fact that reading was framed for the purposes of research; this was serious business, and it may have also evoked institutional expectations of high seriousness regarding literature itself. Still, it seems difficult to pass by the comical qualities of the story. The compressed reversals themselves make for such effects, simply by their repetitious disruption of expectations. Also, there is always something mechanical in such repetition, and the juxtaposition of the mechanically repetitious with individual and human aspirations turns out comical effects. This textual offering, of course, may be met with mixed feelings or even turned down. The varieties of the comical are deeply ambivalent phenomena -- they can be a necessary outlet to cope with anxiety, a way to topple harassing superegos, or a method of an endless evasion of important issues.

With regard to the psychological economy of the story, we can perceive a certain division of psychic properties as they have been ascribed to the two characters. While the man is depressive, the woman is cold, with no empathy for the man or feelings of guilt or remorse at the stabbing. Stephen Frosh discusses late modern articulations of pathological narcissism in his *Identity Crisis. Modernity, Psychoanalysis and the Self* (1991). Quoting Otto F. Kernberg, he notes that narcissism as a character disorder is about "the desperation of a self which has no content of its own" (75). Such persons are incapable of "genuine feelings of sadness" and any kind of depressive reactions. A sense of emptiness and fragility is covered up by feelings of grandiosity and self-confidence, but despair and death are always lurking nearby. Such a person, it has been said, is always "between the mirror and the mask" -- the self affirmed in the mirror, others controlled from behind a mask (74). Thus there is nothing beyond the manipulation of surface, or rather, what there is has been suppressed out of recognition. There is no space left for a recognition of the self or for feelings of empathy for others, and this lack goes along with a suppression of feelings of depression. In this way, the system is kept in place; but it is only by allowing feelings of depression to enter the system that any recovery is possible.

With respect to the two characters of the story, the possibility of depression has been transferred, as it were, from the woman to the man -- by a structural necessity located in the economy of the story, determined by, or spreading out on, the story's structure of opposition and reversal. The opposition between the narcissistic woman and the depressive man is not a "modern" opposition with an ideological invitation to the characters and to the readers. Neither is the role inversion simply a matter of a liberating turnabout of the opposition, even if such readings, were also offered. The violence of the act may be a liberating fantasy for some, but what really matters is that there is no emotional contact between the two characters, whatever the hierarchy between them. Or, to push this further, the inversion is significant in the sense that, stereotypically, the groundwork for positive emotions has been provided by women while the efficient manipulation of the scene has been the domain of men. In this particular case, the situation is indeed reversed, which gives a sharper edge to the knife used in the story. On this level, we may regard the two characters as *one figure* -- a figure of pathological narcissism with a psychological split typical of such cases. As the woman kills the man, she allegorically annuls her own chances for recovery, as recovery can only take place through the recognition of guilt and the experience of depressive feelings. By the same token, the story functions as an allegorical piece of cultural diagnosis -- narcissism of this kind has been considered to be a characteristic of late modern malaise. The story enacts this situation.

How does this relate to the comical elements of the story? They can hardly be thought to assist a critical diagnosis of any sort, apart from the general function of breaking down high seriousness, including perhaps this particular piece of interpretation. But I may want to resist. In some ways I think the story functions against itself. The comical effects subdue the impact of the desolate mental landscape; on the other hand, it may be only on that condition that such features can be presented at all. The comical falls out in two dimensions. The basic dimension is coextensive with the narrator-protagonist's perspective: she tells a funny story. The secondary dimension exceeds that perspective as it arises from a recognition of the latter's limitations. It is recognized as the perspective of a character without inner life or moral consciousness, and in this dimension the comical emerges from a discrepancy between the actions and the lack of any attending consciousness of what is going on. The narrator is taken to be unreliable, not only in her actions but also in a narratological sense. The spacing created in this way brings back a critical potential extending towards the whole cultural malaise. The issue of the comical thus turns out to partake of the issue of narrative thresholds discussed above. Recognition of such thresholds is important for the reflexivity of one's reading, and it is noteworthy that many readers passed by them without noticing. Thus it seems to me that a formal textual analysis of this kind is an important asset in any critical or pedagogical project. Such considerations do not usually figure in empirical studies of reading, but even there pedagogical questions may suggest themselves, perhaps to be used in other connections. If so, an ethics of reading with an orientation towards the text will assert itself.

Taking the Characters to Task: Reading the Story as a Political Allegory

In spite of the formal emphasis of the preceding section, questions of reading kept appearing in it. This has to be so, because there is no way to bypass meaning even in structural considerations. And reading is never one-way -- the reader is also being read by the text, although s/he has to lend his or her mind to the text for that to happen. This special quality of the act of reading is reflected in phenomenological accounts of it (of which this passage is one), which also depend on introspection and are thus situated between the pseudo-communication of reading and communicative accounts of it. I call reading pseudo-communication because of this ventriloquism which disrupts the ordinary deictic positioning of the interlocutors. But even if this phenomenological basis of reading is "pseudo," reading does not exist in a vacuum, and its processing is necessarily connected with the world of communication proper. Still, it is important to remember that any discussion or writing about one's reading changes the situation, as reading then enters the sphere of communication.

The readers of Liksom's story were asked to respond with short essays to the following three questions: 1) "What is the story about, in your opinion?"; 2) "What kind of feelings did the characters of the story arouse in you?"; 3) "Imagine that you do not know how the story ends. Please write a new ending to the story yourself." These questions imply different text types as answers. The first question implies answers of an *argumentative* or *descriptive* type. It asks for a thematic interpretation, but leaves the option open for a paraphrase as well. The second question implies answers of a *descriptive* type focusing on the readers' emotional responses to the characters, and raising issues of identification, aversion, indignation, amusement, and the like. Thus the first two essays were meant to chart the cognitive and the emotional dimensions of the response. These lead up to the request to provide a new ending to the story, the idea being that creative "solutions" could be sought to the interpretive and emotional problems called forth by the first two essays. Writing a new ending also implied the necessity for the respondents to choose the point from which they would continue on their own. This third question suggests a *narrative* text type, particularly of a fictional kind, where imitation as well as parody are possible (about these text types see, e.g., Chatman 6-21). In my own reading, obviously, I did not follow this scheme of questions. Below are the responses given to these questions by an Estonian woman, a social worker. My comments on her response follow the English translation below (I also had a Finnish translation at my disposal):

Question: "What is the story about, in your opinion?"

Answer: "About the lack of culture. More precisely, about lumpen-culture. In some sense about pragmatic attitude toward life. Relationships mean no more than the satisfaction of temporary

needs. The future perspectives are "stuff" in the refrigerator and some money. The loser that recognizes his/her loss has no right to live at all. Getting out of such a circle is hard if not impossible. I believe that similar situations are not rare in life. The sense or senselessness of life? A kind of survival struggle where the weakest will lose. An example of feminism. (About unsuitable role relations)."

Question: "What kind of feelings did the characters of the story arouse in you?"

Answer: "Conflicting. Especially the male character -- he was at least capable of thinking about the meaning of life, looked for causal reasons, was disappointed with his life. As far as the woman is concerned -- a "no problems" type. A person for whom nothing is sacred. One that does not know what life and suffering are about. Or, on the contrary, has become such a person as a result of pain and suffering. In that case it's about revenge on the whole male sex."

Question: "Imagine that you do not know how the story ends. Please write a new ending to the story yourself."

Answer: "I'd end it typically. Like in life. Met in the pub, bunked down, got married, had a bunch of kids. Beating each other, fighting, drinking. If they are not dead, they still live today. Well, now the story became a sketch."

The reason why I chose this particular subject's response is that it moves the story into a context that differs interestingly from the one that presented itself in my own reading. What I had consciously thought of had to do with the ways in which the story seemed to respond to the effects of late modernity in the West. In the Estonian woman's response the story is articulated into the rapidly changing social and cultural environment of Estonia during the early part of the 1990s. It is read in terms of a dissolution of values (which I also dealt with in my reading), but it also has a dimension of political allegoresis. The reading also shows well the dynamics created by these questions. □

Looking at the first part of the response, we can see that a paradigm is formed by equating lumpen-culture, pragmatic attitudes, immediate satisfaction, and feminism. The implied and positively valued oppositions to the elements of this paradigm are, on a personal level, deep attachment and permanent relations; as opposed to the pragmatic attitude would be both spiritual pursuits and unselfish attitudes; as opposed to feminism, traditional gender roles; and opposed to lumpen-culture, civilized behavior or all these good things put together. The consequence of the bad state of things as perceived by the respondent in the story -- and in real life as well -- is a "survival struggle where the weakest will lose" and where losers have no right to exist, especially if they recognize the state of things themselves -- i.e., if they have some share in the good culture where people have the ability to problematize. Thus the man of the story (who really, it seems to me, only laments without problematizing) and the respondent (who does problematize) are united by being both under threat. This threat is strong enough to create a pattern of identification. Here we can see contradictory and transformative processes at work. As a first approximation, the story as a whole -- including both the man and the woman -- is seen as a description of "lumpen-culture." But within this culture, there are winners and losers, and already in this first part of the response, the loser is getting some sympathy. If feminism is one reason for the misery, then the man is even more a victim of perverse circumstances, to be rescued by the reader. □□

In the second part of the response, where the question calls for a description of feelings and identification, the man is credited with positive qualities. The positive attributes of the implied oppositions in the first part of the answer are now directly and explicitly ascribed to the man: he is said to think about the meaning of life, and thus incorporates spiritual pursuits and deep feelings. He looks for "causal relations," which is to say that he transcends immediate pleasures even by his rationality. In my reading, this is not supported by the text, which makes the point even more salient in this response. Thus one way to examine the dynamics of -- and transformations in -- readings at least in texts with strong ideological investments is to look for explicit or (as in this case) implicit binary oppositions setting up the initial value orientation of the response. As shown above, it often leads to paradigmatic series where quite disparate phenomena may be drawn together to serve the purposes of the inclusions and exclusions of this orientation. It then remains to be seen how this works out in the course of the whole response text -- which qualities are suppressed,

which foregrounded, what kinds of attribution are made. The tensions inherent in the initial setup will be dealt with one way or the other. □□

This is an interplay between the textual features and the context of reading. A good example in this response is the local (ethnic) investment in the word "lumpen." At this point it becomes pertinent that the respondent is Estonian. In Soviet times, "lumpen" was a common derogatory word for those whose way of life was regarded as below standard -- lacking in socialist culture, officially speaking, or lacking any culture, less officially. In a post-communist society, this specimen of Soviet vocabulary still connotes a threat to the established (or emerging) order. Feminism, in turn, is a modern Western threat to traditional values, as it doubtless was portrayed already in Soviet times. Thus a complex interplay of meanings takes place between these two terms, one harking back, the other being part of an ongoing Westernization. The present seems to be under siege from the past as well as from the future. The same word, "lumpen," also seems to contain an allegorization of the relations between the ethnic Estonians and the Russian minority of the country (a minority backed by an immense majority behind the borders, adding to the theme of threat in the response). It seems from the answers and from other sources that the Russians are often regarded by ethnic Estonians precisely as "lumpen" (alcoholized, lacking culture). The story, which basically revolves around a man-woman relationship, is thus politically allegorized as an instance of the national contestation between the Estonians and the Russians. What could be characterized in general terms as a fragmentation of values in late modernity is (re)articulated in this response in terms of a local political struggle -- within the framework of a conservative humanist value orientation. □□

As for gender politics, it may not be striking that the female respondent does not side with the murderess. What is striking is that the identification with the man is so unambiguous. First, the whole story is dismissed; then the dismissal is focused on the female protagonist. This opens up the story for continued reading beyond sheer dismissal. Still, the initial setup stays in place in this rearrangement. This is shown by the "new ending," too, as the difference created between the characters in response to the second question is canceled: both characters are now again portrayed as equal parts in the same run-down culture. The earlier attribution of positive qualities to the man might have led to a new ending where he is able to take his stand and give a different turn to the state of things -- personally and allegorically. The fact that this narrative potential is not actualized may be perceived by the respondent herself in her final words: "Well, now the story became a sketch." □□

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