



### Washing Away Identity – Fear in Ling Ma’s “G”

In literature within the horror genre, fear is the central focus. How the reader comes to experience that fear – and how the author chooses to create it – is accomplished through various means dependent on the author’s style of writing as well as the particular story they are trying to tell. Often, horror writers use themes that are more *unreal* in nature and write their prose with this sense of unreality in mind, therefore giving their writing a sense of otherworldliness to the reader. Ling Ma’s short story *G*, however, is written in a realistic tone even with its somewhat fantastical nature. The fear and dread of this story is not immediately intrinsic in the style of prose itself. Instead, it builds; like the waves of the ocean, it seems benign, but can build to an extreme effect. While in an initial reading of this story a majority of details may seem irrelevant at first, but lead the reader into a buildup of dread – and later, a cathartic payoff of intense fear.

*G* features invisibility as a large focal point. The story starts off with a description of how to take *G* (the drug which induces the invisibility), detailing the dosage and symptoms of the drug. It also includes instructions on how to ingest it, and where to find one’s BMI. All of these things immediately ground the story into reality, despite the notably unrealistic nature of the drug’s invisibility symptoms. The first paragraph story recounts details of the drug in a detached, vaguely positive depiction, but one that subtly clues the reader in on the more malicious tones underlying the drug. “The sensation of invisibility is one of floating. You walk around with a lesser gravity, a low-helium balloon the day after a birthday party. You are neither in this world nor out of it—and you could, if you wanted, just give a little jump and go rushing past rooftops,

telephone wires, satellites, your ears popping, the air growing thinner and thinner, gently asphyxiating you into a soft numbness.” (Ma 49) This short description accomplishes multiple things early on in the story. Firstly, the nature of the drug feels literally weightless, with the line “neither in this world nor out of it” calling the reader’s mind to think of death and detachment from the body. The term “asphyxiating” adds fuel to this feeling, though the use of the word “gently” immediately prior to it gives a sense of mixed emotions both positive and negative. This paragraph immediately instills the idea of foreboding and dread, with the last sentence of it describing the feeling as “not the same as being bodiless,” but coming close. All of this is subtly intertwined into a seemingly normal description of the drug's effects, and is followed up by a clinical description of the dosage and administering of G, which then leads into the rest of the story. The foreshadowing here is an intricate use of dread, noticeable without becoming overly heavy-handed.

The narration in this is first person view, which draws the reader in as the protagonist, Beatrice, immediately. The closeness of the reader and the narrator allows for more personalized reader attachment to her, and later, when more malicious things occur to her, this style of voice makes the reader more closely empathize with her, feeling her fear as their own. The end of the story describes the drug overdose as a type of “drowning”. “I opened my mouth. A babbling brook came out.” (Ma 76) “Somewhere, a person was coughing up seawater” (Ma 76). These lines work together in a short but emotionally evocative sequence. The first, still in a first-person narrative, quickly puts the reader in the perspective of one who is drowning; the language used makes the reader feel the sense of “coughing up seawater” in a scene that is already emotionally stressful. While this is a disturbing sensation to think about for anyone, roughly half of all Americans have a fear of drowning. Horror of this nature – while potent on its own – is made

much more frightening for those who have this very common fear. The second quote works just as well in a slightly different way. While still giving the reader a sense of drowning, it also evokes another fear; here, Beatrice is – literally – fading away. The referral of herself in third person removes even her own thoughts and feelings from the situation entirely. With the idea of fading away in mind, it can also give the first-person narration a slightly negative attachment; in a way, the reader is put into the position of projecting onto her through the usage of first-person pronouns, which only changes as she is fully overtaken by the drug.

*G* also utilizes more day-to-day fears that many people have experienced. This story features anxiety the main character feels about her own body, and her struggles with an eating disorder as well as drug use. “As I bent forward to slide down my underwear, I could feel her gaze flickering over me for the briefest moment. Instinctively, I sucked my stomach in. Then, she released me.” (Ma 51). This passage also hints at Bea’s hesitance involving her best friend – Bonnie – as well as Bea’s need for her approval. As the story progresses, we see more of their toxic codependency and where their friendship came from. Their relationship acts both as a catalyst for Bea’s overdose and subsequent fading at the end of the story, as well as being a more metaphorical portrayal of the way a toxic and unhealthy relationship can “drown” one who’s in it. “Then, she released me.” – this line is itself showing how, though Bea cannot see Bonnie at this point, knows instinctively that she is being judged by her; and that she is only “released” after performing the way she believes *Bonnie* wants her to. Despite her own insecurities, Beatrice has been shown to have grown and overcome these issues, feeling like “a swimmer coming up for air” and “resuming a normal weight.” (Ma 66). The feeling of inadequacy is also a device used to create unease and anxiety through the use of word choice, saying “She wouldn’t stop, I thought, until she had totally consumed me.” (Ma 59) - this line gives Bonnie and Beatrice’s

relationship a cannibalistic, violent emotion. At the end of the story this metaphor is somewhat realized; Beatrice's identity is consumed by Bonnie, after she overdoses her and is implied to take her place.

Apart from her dysfunctional relationship with Bonnie, it is shown that Beatrice's other interpersonal relationships seem to have followed similar trends in which her identity is overtaken or overshadowed in some manner. Beginning at childhood with her relationship with her mother, Beatrice has dealt with others "metabolizing" her in the same way Bonnie does. She refers to Beatrice's physical features as her own, such as her cheekbones (Ma 62). When this happened, Beatrice was able to realize what was happening and "freed" herself from her mother's influence by embodying the things her mother hated about herself. The use of word choice here also reflects this active effort for Beatrice to be recognized as her own person – to "embody" herself, which contrasts with the word usage that is seen with Bonnie. Here, she is not described as weightless or floating; this also is the only relationship Beatrice is shown to have in which she attempts to stand up for herself, rather than letting herself be trampled. This scene also acts as foreshadowing for the overtaking of Beatrice's life and identity by Bonnie. The unease of her relationship with her mother contributes to the buildup of emotion affecting the reader.

The only other relationship Beatrice is shown to be in is her romantic relationship with Levi. While he doesn't want her features for himself, he does project his own views of Beatrice onto her instead of seeing her as her own person. Beatrice is aware of his behavior towards her, described as "caretaking" (Ma 70). Despite Beatrice suspecting that his interest would end with her recovery (Ma 72), she still continuously goes to him for intimacy, even after they break up. Her recurring visits to him bring the story back to the fear of being unseen; she only visits him while under the effects of G, and never talks when she does (Ma 57). This viewpoint the reader

has of her multiple toxic relationships gives the sense of an inevitable outcome with Bonnie; when Bonnie first gives Beatrice the overdose of G, she thinks to herself that “There were no options, really. She knew what I was going to do.” (Ma 54) Beatrice's former relationships and their flaws revolving around the overshadowing of her traits and identity is used as a method to build unease and dread within the reader.

This is the dread that Ling Ma uses throughout the story via word choice and metaphor. The horror that Beatrice experiences when Bonnie literally erases her life and takes it over herself – metabolizing her – is only as potent an experience as it is when understood with Beatrice's past with toxic relationships. It is also built up through repeated water and drowning imagery. Her personal distaste for the “waterlogged civilities of friends and acquaintances” (Ma 54) and the fear of drowning, both the physical and of the drowning one experiences in a smothering relationship, is intertwined with the fears of the story. The writing connects the reader to Beatrice on a personal level, and it is this perspective that makes her final fate as horrific as it is.

“Aquaphobia and Fear of Water Facts, Causes and Symptoms.” *LifeCycle Swim School*, <https://www.lifecycleaquatics.com/aqua-phobia-facts.html>.

Ma, Ling. “G” *Bliss Montage*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022, pp. 49-76.