

**A Critical Appreciation of Leon de Winter's Short  
Story *De Machine* (1976)**

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## A Critical Appreciation of Leon de Winter's Short Story *De Machine* (1976)

A part of his debut collection of short stories *Over de leegte in de wereld* (1976), 'De Machine' by Leon de Winter is representative of his early style, influenced by the French and German literary intellectualism of the 1960s. This is clearly distinguished from his later, more reader-orientated writings which, despite having attracted a wider readership, resulted in a worse critical reception. Just twenty-two when the story was published, the young author deals with the nature and experience of being a writer, as well as the author's role in the interpretation of a text. He does this through the description of the protagonist's dysfunctional relationship with his partner, which serves as a background to the exploration of the theme of activity and passivity, and his eventual transformation into what the title itself points to – a 'machine.'

'De Machine' is structurally divided into three parts (paragraphs), each characterised by one of the linguistic genders: female (she), male (he), and neutral (it, that is, the typewriter), and features two characters, the first person narrator ('ik') and his partner 'ze,' both nearly anonymous. The reader is told neither who they are, nor what the relationship between them is; however, it is immediately clear from the accusatory tone of the opening sentences that it is a dysfunctional relationship, in which one side is seemingly indifferent (or, in fact, oblivious, as is suggested later when the narrator asks himself 'waarom zo opeens?'<sup>1</sup>) to the other side's dissatisfaction.

She accuses, 'op de meest verachtelijke toon die haar mond ooit gevormd had,'<sup>2</sup> the narrator of being nothing more than 'een schrijfmachine'<sup>3</sup>, endorsing the metonymy by listing the everyday actions in which the narrator refuses to participate on account of being too preoccupied with his writing. Her tone is rendered agitated almost to the point of hysteria by the length of her sentences and the abundance of commas, creating the impression of complex, half-formed thoughts rolling off her tongue in one tumultuous breath. This is further articulated through the rhetorical questions she lists to paint a picture of their superficial, inconsequential remains of communication, expressing further her dissatisfaction by it as well as her desire for a different, better life.

The story largely deals with the fundamental contrast between action and inaction, activity and passivity, and the two characters serve as manifestations of each respective side. What is interesting, from a feminist perspective, is that the traditional gender roles, which would place the

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<sup>1</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 18

<sup>2</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 17

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

female as representative of passivity and the man as the active one, seem to be reversed. While traditionally in literature the woman has been presented as the passive object of the male protagonist's gaze and desire, here it is she that takes the action and decides to change what is unsatisfactory in her life. The woman readily articulates her disdain, determinedly making the drastic decision to 'kap[pen] met deze ellende'<sup>4</sup> and leave; the narrator, however, hardly lifts up his eyes from his work – 'Ik heb haar niet weg zien gaan, noch heb ik de deur achter haar horen dichtslaan.'<sup>5</sup>

He displays what Kees Fens calls 'een noodlottige passiviteit op een beslissend ogenblik'<sup>6</sup> and fails to intervene but rather quietly accepts her decision as permanent and irreversible, despite being obviously shaken by her words. The image of the echo of her sentences swirling in his head, causing him a sleepless night, as well as the detailed description of his physical impossibility of feeling comfortable without her in the big, cold bed, reveal the anguish of his solitude; yet he remains passive, to the point of self-destructiveness. His passivity seems to grow as the story progresses: what is his simple lack of reaction to her monologue in the first part is reinforced by the personified 'de slaap'<sup>7</sup> and 'de nacht'<sup>8</sup> which will not release him in the second part and culminates in his physical transformation into an inanimate object, a typewriter, in the third part, by which point his passivity has become involuntary.

The narrator is not only passive towards the woman but also towards reality, from which he is somewhat isolated and increasingly detached; when she suddenly decides to leave, he is not entirely sure whether what has happened is real or a part of his imagination, 'een passage uit een verhaal waarmee ik bezig was.'<sup>9</sup> He is so engulfed in his writing that he is no longer an active participant in his own life, but rather an observer, he is a metaphorical 'schrijfmachine' who is 'geboren om te leven, om dat leven te vertellen.'<sup>10</sup> This form of escapism, retreating from reality into one's creative output, is partly in the Romantic tradition of the "artist-genius," who retreats into his "ivory tower" from which he contemplates the world in order to describe it.

However, if one is to assume a connection between the narrator and the author, an interpretation informed by de Winter's autobiographical details would suggest that his lack of desire to fit into a normal, day-to-day social world as well as his inability to form functional intimate relationships are consequences of his experience as a second generation Holocaust survivor. De Winter was born into a Jewish family in the Netherlands in 1954, although not alive during the war period, has undoubtedly experienced the effect the Holocaust had on his parents and consequently

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<sup>4</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 18

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.knipselkranten.nl/literom/>

<sup>7</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 18

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 18

<sup>10</sup> *Benali Boekt*, Abdelkader Benali, NTR, April 10th 2011

their relationship with him. Typical of the work of second and third generation survivor writers is a certain need for silencing of the past, escaping from the unspeakable horrors of the war years, (subconscious?) remnants of which can perhaps be read as the underlying causes of the narrator's own form of escapism. In conversation with Abdelkader Benali in his TV series *Benali Boekt*, de Winter stated that 'Die verhalen hebben me gered... Het lezen en zelf verhalen verzinnen'<sup>11</sup> after the death of his father and that therefore 'Elk boek is een rouwproces,'<sup>12</sup> encouraging a positivist reading of his works; however, the text itself suggests otherwise, raising questions of authorial status and his or her role in hermeneutics.

Writing in the mid-1970s, when the debate between the followers of the intentionalist and the anti-intentionalist perspective on interpretation of literary works was at its height within literary theory, de Winter was likely to have been familiar with such works as Roland Barthes' 1968 essay *The Death of the Author* which triggered the debate; its influence is clearly visible in this short story. Barthes, in his essay, supports the anti-intentionalist side of the debate, claiming that the author's intention is not a valid criterion for interpretation as there is a large discrepancy between his or her intention and the result. From this it follows, as Cuddon's summary of Derrida's deconstructionist argument explains, that 'the text reveals that there is nothing but the text,'<sup>13</sup> and the author, instead of chronologically preceding his work, 'is born simultaneously with the text.'<sup>14</sup> In 'De Machine,' the protagonist's metamorphosis from a traditionalist artist-genius figure into a typewriter can be interpreted as a metaphor for the transformation that the approach to literary interpretation went through following the death of the author. It symbolises the ultimate separation of the author and the text: the author is eliminated from the equation, disappears into the typewriter, leaving the text effectively writing itself. This metaphor cleverly summarises Barthes' notion that 'every text is eternally written here and now,'<sup>15</sup> manifesting what can be described as its meaning "in potentia" in the moment of being read by each individual reader rather than a deified author figure.

The motif of the transformation itself, apart from being the ultimate manifestation of the narrator's passivity, a metaphor for his near obsession with writing and a symbolic representation of current developments in literary theory, is a clear reference to Kafka's classic 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis*, in which the protagonist wakes up one morning to find out that he has turned into

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<sup>11</sup> *Benali Boekt*, Abdelkader Benali, NTR, April 10th 2011

<sup>12</sup> *Benali Boekt*, Abdelkader Benali, NTR, April 10th 2011

<sup>13</sup> ed. by J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 210

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author' in *Modern Criticism and Theory, A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge and others, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2008), pp. 313-316 (p. 315)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

an insect. De Winter's metamorphosis, however, differs from Kafka's in the fact that Kafka immediately establishes in his readers what Coleridge referred to as a "willing suspension of disbelief" by starting his story with an absurd declarative sentence describing Gregor Samsa's transformation; de Winter, on the other hand, is not as direct and requires the readers to conclude what has occurred. He places cues throughout the third paragraph, such as the mentioning of 'de verandering die ik had ondergaan,'<sup>16</sup> the image of the narrator 'wild met mijn drieenvierig armen gaan zwaaien,'<sup>17</sup> and his concern about being kept in a dust and moisture-free place and someone turning the paper in him over. In addition, whilst the metamorphosis is treated by Kafka's readers as something that, although improbable and inexplicable, is a perfectly possible turn of events, de Winter, by mentioning the narrator's uncertainty about what is real and what is in his imagination earlier in the text, plants a seed of doubt in the readers' minds, making them unsure whether the transformation has in fact taken place or whether it is merely a result of the narrator's deteriorating mental state. Whether this takes away from the effectiveness of the story on account of the readers' confusion or adds to it on account of ambiguity of interpretation is left to the readers to decide.

Additionally, by referring to Kafka de Winter addresses another point brought up by Barthes, that of originality, or, more precisely, the impossibility thereof. Barthes states that a text is 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'<sup>18</sup> and that a writer can therefore, 'only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.'<sup>19</sup> The fact that the "centre of culture" de Winter draws from is one of the most well-known and accepted authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could perhaps be seen as revealing a trace of youthful need for approval. The ending of de Winter's short story, however, is effective and original enough to ward off any of his possible insecurities. The closing sentence (which, in fact, is not closing at all) at first sight makes no grammatical sense whatsoever: 'Gooi me niet weg, ik "Jij leef bent zoals een jij schrijfmachine," leeft, had ze in deze gezegd typemachine huist op en ziel meest'<sup>20</sup>. If, however, one compares the last sentence to the first sentence, one notices that approximately every other word of the last sentence (or, in some cases, a word cluster, depending on the length of the words in question), is in fact a word from the first one. Thus a consequence of the narrator's transformation into a typewriter is visible in the physical body of the text; as a result of no one having turned over the paper roll in the typewriter,

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<sup>16</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 18

<sup>17</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 19

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Leon de Winter, *Alle Verhalen* (Amsterdam: Rainbow Pocketboeken, 1994), p. 19

the opening sentence is overwritten by the closing one. Thus a cyclical structure is established, embodying the aforementioned notion of the text being 'eternally written here and now.'<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, de Winter skilfully explored complex themes and concepts within the very limited space of this densely-written short story, and thus showed considerable promise at the beginning of his writing career. His use of the physical appearance of the words on a page as well as their meaning is truly ingenious, leaving the readers, after they have "broken the code" of the ending sentence, with a certain sense of excitement and satisfaction.

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<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author' in *Modern Criticism and Theory, A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge and others, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2008), pp. 313-316 (p. 315)

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