

The Eyes of the Gull



photo of Margaret Duley by Anonymous - http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/cns_enl/id/1990, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=91223059>

Rockwell Kent's stay in Brigus has inspired numerous literary works. One such work is Margaret Duley's 1936 novel *The Eyes of the Gull*, in which "Peter Keen," a painter, rolls into an unnamed Newfoundland outport and rents Head House, a deserted cottage set "on the edge of a bleak promontory." Keen is seeking seclusion, but he is soon confronted by a local named Isabel Pyke, who has lived her life in "spiritual rebellion to Newfoundland" and considers the Head her own "lonely sanctuary." For years she has been going there to dream of Spain, but Keen soon captures her imagination completely.

The two begin an affair which they easily keep secret. How do they do this? With a little help from a ghost story. No one else in the village will dare go near the haunted house.

Duley's ghost story is bizarre. It centres on a sixty-year-old history of a sea captain named Josiah who, after a two-year absence, returned to his betrothed, Elfrieda, to find she had recently died following the stillbirth of a child. Incensed by the

betrayal, Josiah dug up Elfrieda's grave in a horrific attempt to find some token identifying the father of a baby. When this was unsuccessful, he devoted himself to building the remote house where he would live out the remainder of his days. Six decades later, the sounds of the hammer and the pick are said to continue to echo "the rage Josiah hammered into the walls" and the violent desecration of a grave that wouldn't give up its secret.

While the town is cowed by the memory of "sinful" Josiah and his "worthless bride-to-be," Keen is untroubled by the ghost story as he realizes that it will effectively safeguard his privacy. Unlike the locals, Keen empathises with Elfrieda — not because she is thought to have been an artist like himself (a poet), but for her *carpe diem* spirit. He imagines she found love with a sailor who "blew in from the sea and swept her off her feet." He agrees with the town that Josiah was sinful, but for a different reason — Keen believes the captain should have never built the house in the first place but instead set out to sea again in search of new adventures — and new loves.

Despite Isabel's emotional distance from the town, the ghost story deeply affects her view of Head House, which in her provokes a "deep spiritual repudiation." She seems to identify with both characters in the tale: the sight of the house reminds her that she is like Josiah — doomed to never get what she wants. But the thought of going inside the dwelling fills her with the certainty of an Elfrieda-like death: the house is a tomb for Isabel. Keen realizes not even he can shake her from this vision, even as he attempts to liberate her from the environment that shaped it.

It's important to note that the house means different things to different characters in the novel. For pious Aunt Dorcas, it is a refuge from a storm; for Keen, it's an innocuous landing place, comfortable enough for a summer if the air is permitted to blow through it. Dorcas sagely suggests that superstitions about the house would quickly fade if people became more familiar with it, but "it's a long walk [to the Head] and the wind is strong." Not everyone has the energy or the inclination to see such a singular, solitary place for themselves.

In *The Rock Observed*, Patrick O'Flaherty rightly observed that *The Eyes of the Gull* is unsympathetic to and ultimately unconcerned with Newfoundland culture. The characters in this strange and dispiriting romance are stilted and largely unsympathetic. But the descriptions of the wind — chaotic, forceful, relentless, disruptive — are wonderful and believable enough.

--Nancy Earle