The Quite Unconnected Story

by

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There are many novels that have famous opening lines, such as Melville's "Call me Ishmael," or the one that begins "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan," or when Jane Austen kicked things off with the assertion of a universal truth.

The first line of the book that is the subject of my paper, unfortunately, doesn't rank high on the all-time list of great beginnings. It does rank quite high on the dullness scale, however, except for those scholars who have an abiding interest in obscure archaeological-historical-geographical questions.

Here is how this book begins: "I had always suspected the geographers of not knowing what they were talking about when they located the battle of Munda in the country of the Bastuli-Poeni, near the modern Monda, six miles or so north of Marbella."

Yes, this is the opening sentence of a work of fiction.

If Scherazade had opened one of her nocturnal stories with such a line, you can be sure that the tales would not have been stretched out for 1,001 Arabian Nights.

And yet, that opening line from the subject of my paper is a story so celebrated that I dare say everyone in this room knows of it, or at least a version of it.

Prosper Merimee's novella *Carmen*, from which that opening sentence is taken, was published in 1845, and Bizet's opera premiered three decades later, in 1875, with a libretto by the famous team of Halevy and Meilhac, who turned out opera librettos by the hundreds.

This premiere performance did not earn the rave reviews that one might expect from a work that today is probably the most popular, and frequently performed, opera in the world.

The 19th century dean of French opera critics, Jean-Pierre-Oscar Commettant, described the 1875 performance as "a delirium of castanets." He also suggested that Carmen "should be gagged, [and] a stop put to the unbridled twisting of her hips."

Commettant concluded by suggesting that Carmen be cooled off by having a jug of water poured over her head, and then, for good measure, she should be confined in a straight-jacket.

In this puritanical response, one can certainly see what made *Carmen* so popular to later audiences: she is sexy, flirtatious, and way too independent to be a role model for the proper ladies who attended the 19th century Paris opera.

The story of Carmen became so popular that it was even produced on the silent film screen, if one can imagine the story without Bizet's score, although in some theaters a version of the music was possibly pounded out on a piano. In 1915, there were two versions, one from Raoul Walsh and the other from Cecil B. De Mille.

There were three other versions in the silent film era, but perhaps the most interesting was Charlie Chaplin's *A Burlesque of Carmen* [1917?], which turned Don Jose into Darn Hosiery. At the conclusion of Chaplin's film, the sock man, Darn Hosiery, and Carmen stab each other with stage knives, fall to the ground in apparent death, only to rise up laughing at each other and, one assumes, the gullible audience.

Once the silent films gave way to "talkies," new film versions of *Carmen* appeared at least once a decade, the most notable being, perhaps, the 1954 African

American version, starring Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge, based on the 1943 Broadway hit, *Carmen Jones*.

A recent production (February 2018) of Bizet's *Carmen* at London's Royal Opera, directed by Barrie Kosky, has a conclusion that turns things around a bit. In the finale, it is Carmen who does the stabbing and, as Don Jose slumps to the ground, Carmen shrugs her shoulders, as if to say, "What else would you expect?"

And the curtain comes down.

My personal favorite of all of these variations on *Carmen* is, however, Carlos Saura's 1983 *Flamenco Carmen*, where the passionate intensity of the Don Jose-Carmen relationship sizzles in the clicking heels and castanets of the dancers for all 102 minutes of the film.

The music from *Carmen* has, of course, also been used in a variety of ways, to sell everything from refrigerators to pasta.

And where advertising goes, Tin Pan Alley is never very far behind.

The Andrews Sisters' 1952 hit "Carmen's Boogie," had this catchy opening:

> Hate the opera, it's too high brow
>
> But there's one number I can dig right now!
>
> Just like shifting without a clutch,
>
> I ride that boogie with the Carmen touch.

And speaking of great lines, after Beyonce played the title role in the 2001 MTV - movie, *Carmen: A Hip Hopera*, she made a commercial, using a Bizet melody from *Carmen* to enhance this immortal couplet:

It's a tale of a guy named Zeke

Who comes here from Battle Creek.

The music from Bizet's Carmen has tickled the ears of kids watching Sesame Street and the Muppets-- and many more, no doubt, including even a cartoon or two, such as the Tom and Jerry 1962 spoof, *Carmen Get It*.

And who could forget the film *The Bad News Bears*, a 1976 comedy about a truly terrible kids' baseball team. Themes from *Carmen* are used throughout the film to ironically emphasize the hapless play of the Bad News Bears.

All of this, of course, takes us far away from Prosper Merimee's *Carmen*.

Just as all of Russian literature is said to come out of Gogol's *The Overcoat*, so all of these versions of *Carmen*, often wildly different from the original, come out of the unconnected story that forms the major part of Prosper Merimee's novella.

The first-person narrator of the story is quite satisfied that his own soon to be published research will, as he asserts, “leave no further uncertainty in the minds of all judicious archaeologists that “the neighborhood of Mantilla” is the correct location for that famous battle of Julius Caesar.

The narrator, to while away the time until his monograph can be printed, proposes to tell us a story, a story that he readily acknowledges is “quite unconnected with the interesting question of the exact whereabouts of Monda.”

The “quite unconnected” story he tells persuades most readers that the narrator has another dubious distinction.

He is a classic illustration of the unreliable narrator, not one who willfully tells lies, but one who, like Huckleberry Finn, does not see the true significance of the events that he relates. As when Huck Finn explains that he has had quite enough of schooling, for he already knows the times tables up to six-times-seven is thirty-five.

Just as Huck Finn would not be a very desirable guide to the world of higher--or even lower--mathematics, so the narrator of this French novella is not a very reliable commentator on the passions of other people.

The narrator of the quite unconnected story is, in contrast to Huck Finn, a man of learning, an archaeologist of some repute, a scholar, at home in Latin and Greek, and also in several modern languages, including a few that are well off the usual linguistic paths.

And yet, he doesn’t see the heart of the matter he relates, although he thinks he does.

The unconnected story the narrator tells is, in his mind, not nearly as important as finding Caesar’s correct battle site. The unconnected story is just a way to idle away the time.

The narrator, as he begins his unconnected tale, tells us he is travelling very lightly, carrying only a few shirts and, of course, Caesar’s *Commentaries*.

He has hired a local guide, however, to make things easier for himself.

One afternoon, the narrator and his Spanish guide seek a rest spot in a shady grove along a river, and startle a man who has been sleeping there.

The man leaps up, blunderbuss in one hand, his horse’s bridle in the other.

The narrator offers the startled man food and a cigar. “I knew enough of the Spanish character,” he declares, “to be certain that I had nothing to fear from a man who had eaten and smoked with me.”

That should strike any alert reader as frightfully arrogant or terribly naïve.

His Spanish guide, however, is petrified, for he is not only wiser in the ways of the world, but he also recognizes the man they have startled. He is a notorious fugitive from justice, a man wanted for a number of robberies and several murders.

The guide’s frantic attempts to convey this information to the narrator are brushed aside as of no consequence and, a short time later, the narrator actually assists the fugitive's escape by warning him of the approach of the local gendarmes. The guide is understandably outraged by the narrator's assistance in letting the culprit escape, for the guide had hoped to win the 200 ducats reward by leading the police to the fugitive's hiding place.

The narrator eases his own conscience by giving the guide, as he says, "as large a gratuity as the state of my finances would permit."

Even Huck Finn might have been able to deduce from that evasive language that the gratuity fell far short of 200 ducats.

The narrator continues on, spending a few days in Cordova, doing some additional research in the library of a Dominican convent. He also joins the local idlers each evening in what he characterizes as a “not unattractive spectacle,” watching the local ladies stroll down to the river just after sunset to disrobe and bathe.

It is another triumph of hope over experience, for there is not much to be seen.

The narrator can’t resist describing the bathers, however, with a classical allusion: “The array of vague white forms against the dark blue of the river appeals to the emotions of those poetically inclined, and with a little imagination it is not difficult to envision Diana and her nymphs at the bath, with no risk of sharing Actaeon’s fate.”

This rather strained language distances him, of course, from the prurient thoughts of the local voyeurs. He puts himself far above such emotional follies, but doesn't mind looking, for he is confident that he won't be turned into a stag, as Actaeon was in the myth.

One of the bathers, on her way back from the river, pauses to rest on a bench near where the narrator is smoking a cigar. He notices, even in the fading light, that she is “slim and young, with a good figure, and fine eyes.”

The narrator, eager to demonstrate that he is a perfect gentleman, extinguishes his cigar so that it will not offend the lady. She, however, says she doesn't mind his cigar, and that she actually likes to smoke herself, which is rather shocking for, as everyone knew, only prostitutes smoked.

He nevertheless offers her a cigarette, which she accepts, and they have a long chat before he takes her to a café for ice cream, but he says not a word about what he discussed with the young lady.

Later, he escorts her home, and asks her to tell his fortune.

It is not of course because he has any interest in the fine eyes or the good figure, but because he “welcomed an opportunity to discover how far the arts of magic had been pursued among the gypsies.”

Yes, this is the story of *Carmen*, not the more familiar version of Bizet's opera, however, but novelist Prosper Merimee's *Carmen*, which, in part, suggested the scenario for the opera. In Merimee's tale, however, you will not find a bullfighter named Escamilo, or a village maiden called Micaela.

The narrator of Merimee's *Carmen*, so central to the novella, does not even cross the stage in the opera as a supernumerary.

In the novella, the unconnected story gathers a few incidents together--Carmen has, by some subterfuge (magic, no doubt) stolen the narrator's gold watch which chimes the hour. That watch was in the possession of the notorious fugitive-- the Don Jose of the opera--when he was later recaptured.

Learning that Don Jose will be executed the next morning for his crimes, the narrator resolves to visit the condemned man in prison that very evening.

The third chapter in this unconnected story is by far the longest, and is entirely devoted to a story-within-the-story, as Merimee's Don Jose relates his life history to the narrator.

If one can read this chapter without getting too distracted by Carmen, it will be clear that Don Jose is an unreliable narrator of another sort, for he is a man who is incapable of ever assuming any responsibility for his actions.

Although he was born into a Basque family of some consequence, he was forced to abandon his patrimony and flee, eventually enlisting in a military cavalry unit. He had killed a young man, after an argument that came about because of a tennis match. Don Jose, in relating this episode to the narrator, makes no mention of his temper, but does explain that it was his "passion for tennis" that led to the fatal altercation.

The obvious lesson to take away from this is that we should be careful in choosing our tennis partners.

In Seville, Don Jose was put in charge of the military guard outside a tobacco factory that employed several hundred women.

This leads to the scene we all know in the opera. In the novella, however, Don Jose's first reaction, on seeing Carmen outside the factory, is rather different. He tells the narrator that if Carmen were to appear in his hometown, "people would cross themselves at the sight of a woman dressed in such a fashion."

There is soon a disturbance inside the factory, with wild reports of murder, and Don Jose is sent to investigate. It was not a murder, but in a confrontation, Carmen has slashed the face of another worker.

Don Jose arrests her, as ordered, but she cajoles him, addressing him in his native Basque language as "the companion of my heart." He melts, allows her to escape, and his "negligence" earns him thirty days in jail.

What follows is another variation on the temptation of Adam by Eve.

Don Jose, this self-proclaimed honest man, allows passion to carry him down the "primrose path of dalliance" to his ruin. He becomes a thief, a smuggler, a co-conspirator in all of Carmen's diabolical plots, and all because she has said, "you are my *rom* and I am your *romi*." "Rom" and "romi" are sometimes translated from the Romany gypsy language as "husband" and "wife," but it also means "man" and "woman," as when Porgy, in Gershwin's opera, says, "Bess, you is my woman."

It is somewhat difficult for Don Jose to get a sense of what being Carmen's "rom" means, however, for the Carmen of the novella picks up lovers left and right, and, in a fit of jealousy, Don Jose kills a lieutenant of his regiment who is also pursuing her.

There is another complication for Don Jose. Garcia One Eye, a gypsy who has been in prison, returns, and it seems that he is also Carmen's *rom* (husband). Don Jose, with the quick thrust of a dagger, eliminates this new competitor for Carmen's affections.

Garcia One Eye does not rate a part in Bizet's opera, however, and in the novella his brief existence might allow one to conclude that Don Jose's three murders--all Carmen's fault, of course--would not earn him a very high ranking on Aristotle's scale of moderation.

In this third chapter, longer remember than the other three taken together, Don Jose tells of two more murders. He conspires with Carmen to kill and rob a British officer. He does this quite willingly, for he also saw the British officer as a potential rival for Carmen's affections.

Don Jose also tells the narrator that he enjoyed his life of thievery and smuggling. Ah, but then another rival appears, not the matador of the opera, but Lucas, the picador.

Don Jose, fearing that Carmen will once again bestow her affections on another, fights back in two ways.

He, first of all, forbids Carmen to speak to Lucas, and I don't need to tell you how effective that was. His second strategy is to urge Carmen to run away to America with him, where they can enjoy "the quiet life." The quiet life he imagines, it seems, is not necessarily one where the deer and the antelope play, but one where he will be able to

possess Carmen exclusively. It is clear that he does not understand this woman he lusts after.

When these attempts to control Carmen fail, he kills her, not outside the bullring, however, as in the opera, but in the wide-open spaces that Carmen associated with freedom.

Don Jose also tells the narrator that Carmen was like a cat; one who does not come when called, but does come when not called. He, unlike the narrator, acknowledges her sensuality: "she swung her hips when she walked, like a filly from the Cordova stud [farm]."

When she ran away from Don Jose's custody, after the cigar factory incident, Don Jose thought less about an escaping prisoner than he did about her splendid legs.

"Would you believe it, Sir?" he says to the narrator during his confession, "the tattered silk stockings that I got so plain a glimpse of when she ran off was always before my eyes."

Don Jose does not hesitate in blaming Carmen for his descent. "A pretty girl turns your head, you fight about her, and you kill your man, you must take refuge in the mountains, and a smuggler is soon transformed into a thief." It is significant that this brief summary of his downfall, he does not mention the word "murder, " not even of Carmen.

When Carmen had taken up with Lucas, the picador, and refused to go live in the Americas, Don Jose says, "I am sick of killing your lovers: I shall kill you this time."

She acknowledges that, as her rom, he has the right to kill her, but she "will always be free. Gypsy she was born, and Gypsy she will die."

"Fury came over me," Don Jose tells the narrator, "I drew my knife, meaning to frighten her and make her plead for mercy, but the woman was a fiend."

Fiends should not be allowed to live, of course, so Don Jose stabs her twice, buries her in the woods, and then turns himself in to the police, confesses to killing Carmen, exerting the control he never had while she lived by refusing to say where she is buried.

His final judgment, as one might expect, exonerates himself: "Poor child! It was the fault of the Gypsies who had brought her up to be what she was."

Don Jose, then, in relating his history to the narrator, admits to five murders, but always blames the victim, and does not utter one word of remorse about any of them. The narrator says nary a word in response to Don Jose's lengthy confession.

There is, however, that final chapter, where we might expect to hear what the narrator thought about these two passionate people whom he briefly encountered while awaiting the publication of his monograph.

Prosper Merimee's *Carmen*, then, is more about the narrator than about the fascinating gypsy woman of Bizet's opera.

The narrator tells the story of Don Jose and Carmen, the quite unconnected story, that has, alas, very little to do with the correct location of a Roman battle in Spain. The narrator's encounters with Don Jose and Carmen are interesting to him only because they allow him to conclude his unconnected story with, of all things, a disquisition on gypsy culture.

The novella's fourth and final chapter, although all about gypsies, does not make a single reference to Don Jose or Carmen. The narrator does offer, however, a few bits of

pedantry: the gypsy words for bread, water, and salt, for example, are identical with the Sanskrit words for the same items, and he describes the various professions of gypsy men and women. But the narrator also states that gypsies are dumb about money; that gypsies show much fidelity to other gypsies; and that gypsies show contempt for gentiles. He also adds, just in case you were wondering, that German women are prettier than Spanish women.

Merimee's narrator, in other words, may be very learned about some things (such as the correct location of Julius Caesar's significant battle in Spain), but he also falls into that fallacy of assuming that because he thinks it, it must be true.

His allegedly learned disquisition on gypsy character, for example, amounts to little more than a catalogue of contemporary stereotypes about them.

The narrator, in fact, could be a disciple of the famous Thomas Gradgrind school, in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, where the prevailing philosophy was, "In this life, we want nothing but facts, Sir, nothing but facts."

The narrator, in fact, shows not a single trace of emotion. He can describe the powerful passions of Don Jose and Carmen, but he seems incapable of understanding them.

In the novella, when the narrator meets Carmen for the first time, he does offer a flattering compliment: "I think you come from the land of Jesus, two steps off paradise."

The narrator also explains that he "learned this metaphor for Andalusia from my friend Francisco Sevilla, the well-known picador." He does not admit this to Carmen, however, but only to the reader.

His private estimate of Carmen is rather different. He sees her as "a witch, the handmaid of the devil." He reveals an unconscious racism in finding her too pretty to be a pure-blooded gypsy.

The narrator's fear was also was reflected in his description of Carmen's eyes:

"...There was a sensual, yet savage look that I have never seen in any human countenance. There is a wolfish glint in a gypsy's eye, the Spaniard's think, and they are right, it is like the look in a cat's eye when it is stalking a sparrow."

Prosper Merimee's novella, then, although titled *Carmen*, is more about the narrator, a man who runs away from passion, and who does not even realize how fast he has been running.

It was the composer Bizet, and the librettists, Halevy and Meilhac, who dramatized the passionate Carmen in the "unconnected story" of the narrator of Prosper Merimee's novella, giving immortal life to the very woman that the narrator unconsciously feared.

The final irony, of course, is that the unconnected story made connections that were well beyond even the dreams of Merimee's scholar/narrator.

Of one thing I am certain of, however: if the narrator of the unconnected story were apprised of what opera, film, and flamenco have made of Carmen, he would dismiss it all out of hand, as not being worthy of comparison with the significant discovery of the true site of the Caesar’s battle at Munda.

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