

An Exegesis of Seneca Paris

Cast:

General Seneca Paris – seventysomething military man with a soulful southern accent and a somber mannerism.

Georgia – a sixtysomething ghost, recently deceased, a beauty in spare, elegant dress and a moody, reflective way of speaking and there should be a southern accent as well.

Michael – boulevardier, bon vivant and incidentally head of the committee presenting the evening's edifying delights.

Michael: Good evening members of the Chicago Literary Club, dignitaries, guest and members of the press. This evening I thought we were to present three short plays. However, it has come to my attention that it is Veteran's Day, formerly known as Armistice Day, the anniversary of the conclusion of World War I at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. I have taken the liberty of asking our fellow club member retired General Seneca Paris to make a few brief remarks. The General is perhaps the most recognized and most decorated general of our modern era. He began his career in 1966 as a second lieutenant leading a platoon at the base serving the Khai Tri province of South Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, one of the most shocking and deadly strikes by the North Vietnamese forces, began just hours after he arrived in country. He later served as a senior military assistant to Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger during the 1983 invasion of Grenada and the air strikes on Libya in 1986. Over the course of the next forty years, General Paris has served on the National Security Council and as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Seneca should enter with Ned. Ned immediately takes a seat behind the podium. Seneca submits to a little jovial ribbing from Michael.

Michael: He has commanded troops in armed conflicts in Somalia, Chechnya, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Outspoken, controversial, unwavering in his devotion to our country. But, of course, we know the general as a longtime member of the club although, of course, given some of his career he has been a bit lax in his attendance at our meetings.

Seneca takes the podium. Ned leaps up to put speech in front of him. Michael and Ned sit and are attentive listeners.

Seneca: Thank you, esteemed president, fellow club members, thank you guests. Many people use the occasion of this day to talk about peace and the senselessness of war. As if all the sacrifices of that terrific conflagration and all other battles were and are ultimately unnecessary. But, of course, all those sacrifices, all those ultimate sacrifices, are completely necessary. That is the awfulness of war and that is the greatness of the peace that war secures. I have long since resigned myself to what is essential in my nature. I am a soldier, part of a band of brothers . . . and sisters. . . who will fight, who will face the enemy, who will live an unnatural life of conflict, so that you may live with security, serenity and sanity. So that the gardener may anticipate that the tulips he plants in fall will bloom in spring, without ever considering that the garden might be the target of a missile delivered from a far off land. So that the mother may take her child to school the first day of classes without planning an escape from country before the semester's end. So that the wedding feast can be arranged with every prospect that the marriage will be a long and happy one. I look back on my years and I know it has all, every bit of it, been worth it. Still, there are many comrades I have stood beside, have loved and admired and . . .

Georgia has risen from her seat in the audience. Seneca stares. Michael looks alarmed at the General. Ned gets up and is alarmed. . .he places a hand on Seneca's shoulder. That action becomes the lodestar for how we know that time has been suspended.

Georgia: Corporal George Andrew . . .

Georgia and Seneca together: Hale Spencer Smith.

Georgia: Killed on that first day of the Tet Offensive.

Seneca: Oh, Lordy, Spence. I think of both of you often. I wish. . . I regret. . . there is nothing I look back on with such sorrow as that afternoon when he and I were ...we were so unprepared.

Georgia: You were both young. The two of you thought you were going to be saving the world, one square inch of Vietnamese soil at a time. He wanted to be there, you know.

Seneca: Georgia, you have grown to be a beautiful woman.

Georgia: Thank you.

Seneca: And I'm sorry if you are angry with me for leaving, if nothing else. You'd have every right. I was a coward.

Georgia: No, not at all. You rescued me that summer. You made me eat, you made me get up out of my bed, you even made me believe that life could be good again. And it was. I remarried you know. It was brief. And perhaps a compromise of sorts.

Seneca: I remember Johnson's drive-in movie theater.

Georgia: The time you won me that giant stuffed frog at the arcade on the boardwalk. I kept that, you know.

Seneca: Boone's Farm apple wine.

Georgia: Orange creamsicles.

Seneca: The taste of the orange creamsicle that melted and dripped down your wrist. That afternoon at the forest preserve.

Georgia: Would you mind if I come sit by the fire? I'm awfully cold being dead and all. It only happened a week ago. Was working on the New York Times crossword puzzle, trying to think of a eight letter word for a critical explanation of text and poof! I'm dead. Doctor always warned me about high blood pressure.

She is always downstage from Seneca and he takes her hands in his to warm them.

Seneca: I'm sorry I didn't stay past the summer. I should have taken you with me.

Georgia: You couldn't have done that. We loved each other. We did. But we loved Spence more and he would have always been--as he was that summer--between us. I know that especially now that I'm dead. Death has given me some perspective on all sorts of things. If I had known then what I know now, I wouldn't have spent so much money on wrinkle cream or lottery tickets and I most certainly wouldn't have watched all those episodes of Project Runway.

Seneca: Is Spence there too? Wherever you are?

Georgia: He's there. He's there because of you.

Georgia: no, no, what I mean is that, well, I should explain. The dead arrive first to Remembrance. It's a city. Sort of reminds me of Birmingham. Nice public transportation. Good restaurants. Beautiful gardens. Houses are awful pretty. People are friendly. I don't rightly know if I have a house or if I do where it is because I don't ever feel the need to sleep or decorate or hide from anyone. And parties? They just happen. So the dead appear, often baffled as to how they ended up in Remembrance. And we stay. . . well, we stay in Remembrance until the last person who thinks of us has died. And then we go. . . I'm not sure where we go on the bus, it leaves from the Village Green. Socrates, George Washington, Martin Luther King, they are itching to clear out of Remembrance because, quite frankly, they're bored. That's the problem with being dead. Boredom.

Seneca: And Spence?

Georgia: You and I were the last to remember him. His mother died, father too. He had no brothers or sisters. A cousin in Saugatuck, she's already passed. An old girlfriend, still living, but can't remember his name. So when you die, Seneca, he will get on that bus and leave me.

Seneca: I think of him often. And when I die, he will be. . .

Georgia: Gone before you actually make it to Remembrance.

Seneca: But you. . .?

She rises and, cheating outwards, circles the seating arrangement, her ultimate aim to place him back in position at the podium.

Georgia: Remember I remarried? Civil Engineer. I moved to Louisville with him. We divorced. He remarried. He thinks of me. Just often enough that I'm like a firefly disappearing in the dusk and then suddenly charged. I'm in Remembrance until he dies. And I guess you think of me sometimes.

Seneca stands and faces her, keeping her on his left side.

Seneca: More often than I should.

Georgia: I have loved the time I have had with Spence because, truly, he was the love of my life. He has remained forever young, forever twenty two and yet, he loves this tired old lady as if we were newlyweds again. We've gone dancing every night and afterwards we lie in the park and count the stars, and he brings me coffee every morning from the café. He is fascinated by everything that has happened in the last fifty years. He's baffled by computers, cell phones, anything Kardashian.

Seneca: When I die, I get to spend time with you until your civil engineer ex-husband dies!

Georgia: Yes, because I will be forgotten by everyone else. But I don't want you to die anytime soon. I love Spence. I love this time with him. Let me be a newlywed for just a while longer please. I only had 36 days, four hours and eighteen minutes as a bride before Spence deployed. I was his widow for far too long. In Remembrance I am his wife. I know you have had death threats, assassination attempts, thoughts of ending it, two heart attacks only one of which was reported to the press. Please. I want you to live. As long as you can live, do it so that I can have my time with him.

Some suggestion of melancholy at this prospect.

Georgia: I love you. I loved you that summer. I love him too and I want more time to love him. By the way, you and I have been talking for roughly a Max Plank unit. There are roughly ten to the forty third power plank units to every second. Nobody has noticed us at all. Please . . . finish your speech. Promise you'll live a lot longer. Just so I can be with him.

Placing him firmly back into Ned's arms. . .

Seneca: I will try.

Ned: General, are you okay?

Pause. Seneca regards her and then notices Ned.

Seneca: You know, I used to think that I was the blessed one because I survived but lately I have thought that a guy like Spence is luckier. Because I am surrounded by a great many ghosts. And I will be surrounded by a great many more.

Georgia is at the exit, looking back. Ned is to be completely and utterly baffled as the General speaks to a ghost who disappears.

Seneca: I loved you.

Ned: General, please, your speech.

Seneca: I'm sorry. I lost my train of thought.

Ned sits down.

One of the consolations of being the senior member of this gathering is that you will forgive me for this. I was talking about the sacrifices that are required of every free nation, that are the welcome chores of the armed forces. All I ask is that you remember those who have sacrificed so that you may be at ease. Memory is the greatest gift that we can give. Thank you for your kindness as you have endured my many absences on Monday meetings and thank you for giving me the opportunity and the honor of serving . . . well, of serving. .. you.

Michael rises, applause applause, shakes hands. Ned retrieves text from podium. Prepares to escort General from the scene, shakes hands with Michael