

The grandmother

Family



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A writer's life can be characterized by danger and excitement. Those who pursue their vocation with passion and dedication cannot possibly live a dull life. A writer's life is full of danger because he or she will have to go the unconventional route in order to succeed. It is also a life of excitement because the unpredictable effects of the written word can either make a person famous, rich, or dead depending on the content and place where the piece was written.

Bozena Nemcova is the first major female writer ever produced by present day Czechoslovakia - formerly known as Czech Republic - in the middle of the nineteenth century. And this writer epitomizes the twin attribute of danger and excitement. Her life was fraught with risks because she had the misfortune to be born in a land torn by politics, ideology, and race. Furthermore, she lived in a time when women are considered a distant second to their male counterparts.

Yet, her life was also full of excitement. She was able to show that talent rises to the top irregardless of gender and economic status. One of her celebrated works is the story of a grandmother (Babieka) who was torn between love and duty, in which the writer has interwoven her views on social, political, and even religious forces that are shaping her country.

Background

The interesting life of Bozena Nemcova did not begin and end in her being a fiction writer. In fact, Nemcova is also a "...poet, journalist, collector and editor of folk narratives; key figure of the Czech National Revival and representative of the national literary canon. And if this was not enough she

was one of the first to publicly address the question of women's identity and their position in society" (Haan, Daskalova, & Loufti, 2006).

Bozena Nemcova was born in 1820, almost two hundred years after the Germans defeated the armies of the Czech Republic. The intense "Germanization" of the populace resulted in the deterioration of Czech literature and culture. The National Revival that occurred in the 19th century in which Nemcova played a major part was in response to the decline and The Grandmother is one of the major literary works that serves to awaken nationalistic fervor (Iggers, 1995, p. 49).

The Granny

The story of "The Grandmother" is a well-written piece. It is enjoyable to read because it came from another time and place, with the added bonus that it came from another language. It is always good to read translated works because it gives the reader a window to another culture. In most cases the study of these types of literature results in the realization that there is much in common even between two different people groups, race, culture, and nationalities.

This is especially evident when reading the introductory part of the story. Grandmothers in many parts of the world can relate to "Granny" - of growing old and living alone, their children far away having their own families. The dilemma, on whether to live independently or move in with one of the children is also common problem around the globe.

The trend continues when Granny began the journey from her ancestral hometown to a "foreign" land where her daughter now resides with her

husband and children. The universality of the story persisted in the longing of the grandchildren to know their grandmother and the same strong emotions were reciprocated by the grandma.

Then the story begins to show its unique flavor when Granny began to settle in. After a while, Granny began to notice the difference in language, culture, and manners being demonstrated in the household of Mr. Prosek. It was a clash between the new and the old, between the traditions of the countryside and new rules of modern living. In the story Granny remarked to herself that she hardly recognized her daughter because her idea of her is that of a merry country girl and here she is now, poised, elegant and yet there is something that is missing.

This nagging feeling is symbolic of what is going on in the hearts and minds of Czech intellectuals at that time. They were torn between the acknowledged benefits of the cultural and technological exchange with the Germans and at the same time uncomfortable because deep-down the real self is suppressed unable to break free in song and merriment.

Religion has always been a friction point and in this case, Nemcova would like the reader to know the inner struggle of the native Czechs when it comes to a seemingly haphazard view of God by their new rulers. In the story Granny always "cross" herself and wanted her convictions to rub-off on the children and the whole family.

In the latter part of the story one gets a huge dose of these types of comparisons. Mencova was able to contrast the differences in culture when he wrote about the pilgrimage to a church in Svatonovice. On the way the

children saw what they were deprived of; it is the joy and spiritual blessing that can be found in going back to their roots which is the intricate traditions of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the beauty of the countryside with its own unique wisdom and charms.

The story of *The Grandmother* is not only about symbolisms pointing to National Revival of ancient Czech culture, religion and its traditions. It is much more than that. It is also a piece where Nemcova was able to pour his heart out to express ideas and queries not acceptable in society. In one section of the story, Nemcova introduced Victorka to contrast it with the character of the grandmother. Victorka was imprudent and speaks her mind. By doing so she was able to communicate what may have been going through her mind and heart. This is because Nemcova had an unhappy marriage to a man 15 years her senior (Iggers, 1995).

Conclusion

In 1620 the Czech army was defeated by the Hapsburg army. This period began the decline of Czech culture and literature. Intense “Germanization” occurred, the expected result after victors would normally insist that their culture and language is far superior to the vanquished foe. And in most cases, the weakened spirit of the defeated people willingly oblige to the culturalbullying. In the case of the Czech Republic, Craig Craven remarked, “The Czech language had not died out, but it had retreated to the countryside and the kitchen to become the patois – slang or nonstandard language – of peasants, cooks, and servants” (2006, p. 88).

The above-mentioned discussion serves as the backdrop of *The Grandmother* written as a response to the Revival; Czech intellectuals doing proactive steps to regain lost ground in terms of culture, literature, and national identity. In these patriotic times Mencova was moving from town to town with his patriot husband and in the process was exposed to the politics and ideologies of the day. Thus, she began to be influenced by a new breed of Czech natives yearning for the good old days.

This hope of a new and better Czech Republic based on long forgotten ideals is very much evident in the story. As one would recall Granny reacted to the fact that her son-in-law did not speak Czech, only German while her children and grandchildren on the other hand - including the servants in the household - can easily speak her native language. This made Granny uncomfortable and made her to contemplate going back to her quaint little village.

She was persuaded to stay and to keep her mind off the things that bothered her, she began to plunge herself to work as some kind of an overseer to the household servants. Then she began noticing other things like the modern technology that made her more uncomfortable. This is also a symbol of the dilemma with regards to accepting the obvious benefits of German influence - especially in technology - while on the other hand rejecting the negative impacts such as the loss of piety especially when it comes to the traditional church.

Aside from the nationalistic undertones of the "Granny" what attracts the reader to an in-depth study of this piece of literature stems from the realization that this is a 19th century work of fiction, written by a woman in a

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time and place where tremendous odds are stacked against her. And yet she prevailed and showed her countrymen and the whole world that talent and a burning passion for truth is enough to overcome all obstacles.

Lacking in formal training and education required for a serious writer, Nemcova was able to compensate with her enormous talent. It is amazing to read a fine work, with such a vivid description of Czech rural lifestyle and the power of her prose to make the characters come alive. It is difficult to go through the story without agreeing to her insights or without wondering if Nemcova was really writing fiction because the dialogue could have easily have been recorded from actual conversations.

In this regard Nemcova should not only be emulated and celebrated as a writer but also as a heroine. She is a shining example for a country that has seen better times. She is also a good role model for all women who struggled to find their place in a male-dominated society. But her story should be retold in places where women are treated as objects and not as human beings. Her life will surely convince them that they can rise above it all if only they can focus on something other than themselves.

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