

Not either an
experimental doll



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Ryan Shellady Professor Mtisi Paideia October 31st, 2012 Placing Fault: A Look at Determining Who is to Blame for Lily Moya's Downfall in Not Either an Experimental Doll The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women In today's Western culture, it is hard to imagine a world without education. Adults and children alike view education as a common practice that is essential to everyday life. For Lily Moya, this is not the case. In Not Either an Experimental Doll, edited by Shula Marks, letters of correspondence reveal a relationship between Dr.

Mabel Palmer, a well-known European supporter of black education, and Lily Moya, a girl growing up in apartheid South Africa. Lily writes to Palmer requesting acceptance into a school. Due to Lily's amusing writing style, Palmer feels a connection to her. In turn, Palmer decides to find a way to fund Lily's education. Throughout the letters, Lily alludes to this idea that she desires a more intimate friendship with Palmer; however, Palmer continues to assertively state that the relationship Lily seeks is impossible.

In the end of the correspondence, Dr. Palmer releases her sponsorship from Lily's education which means Lily can no longer attend school. For these two reasons, some critics will argue that Palmer is to blame for Lily's mental breakdown at the end of the book. These people are mistaken; Mabel Palmer's actions are not to blame for what happens to Lily. Fault lies in the differing cultures between Lily and Palmer, and in Lily's stubbornness, egocentrism, and her inability to follow simple instructions.

It is easy to infer that there are inevitable differences in culture between a European woman in her seventies and a fifteen-year-old African girl living in apartheid-ruled South Africa. In the introduction of the book, editor and

expert in the field of South African studies Shula Marks articulates that the cultural differences between Lily and Dr. Palmer make for a difficult understanding of correspondence etiquette. Not surprisingly, the world of the busy academic was remote from the concerns of a lonely and aspirant fifteen-year-old in Umtata.

For Lily, still living in a world in which misfortune was explained in terms of individual wickedness and witchcraft, Mabel's failure to reply could only be the result of the evil counsel of her advisers (Marks 18). Lily has been raised in a place where academia is not prominent. To understand why Dr. Palmer didn't reply swiftly and quickly to each of Lily's letters, Lily would have to understand all the work Dr. Palmer's occupation entails. Lily would have to realize that people are sometimes simply too busy to write; however, as Marks notes, Dr.

Palmer's failure to reply was likely explained to Lily in terms of "individual wickedness." Later in the same paragraph of the introduction, Marks goes on to describe Palmer's point of view. For Mabel, Lily's intense if adolescent religious experience was to appear as 'religiosity' and 'self-righteous', while she had difficulty remembering whether her 'protegee' was an Anglican or a Catholic, and had no idea that she was Xhosa, not Zulu (Marks 18). Palmer is under the impression that she understands Lily's background, but Marks exposes Palmer's ignorance of Lily's culture.

This lack of knowledge leads to poor communication between Lily and Palmer. However, Palmer does attempt to lessen her ignorance by asking Lily to write a paper, "The Life of a Native Girl in a Native Reserve" (Marks 87). In this paper, Palmer asks Lily to detail activities, problems, and daily routines

experienced by a girl living in Lily's society. Due to this attempt, Palmer's failure to comprehend Lily's expectations can be forgiven. Palmer tries to understand Lily and her background, but Lily cannot communicate any information in return.

In the greater scheme, neither Lily nor Palmer is to blame for cultural variances. The only thing at fault in this particular case is that the two grew up in completely different environments. Circumstance is not solely to blame, however. In other cases, Lily's personal faults are also to blame. The first of Lily's individual weaknesses that lead to her demise is stubbornness; it plays a large role in why Palmer has such a difficult time dealing with Lily. On a number of occasions through the correspondence, Lily attempts to treat Palmer as though the two of them are close, intimate friends.

Lily even goes as far as saying to Palmer, " I hope you stay for years, with me" (Marks 113). If this is not pressure enough, Lily goes on to guilt Palmer by proclaiming, " You cannot leave me alone in this merciless world" (Marks 113). When faced with these remarks, she needed to address Lily's outlook on their relationship to make sure Lily understood that their interaction had to remain professional. You say that one of your reasons for wishing to be in Durban is that you want to see more of me, but have you ever asked yourself whether I wish do see more of you?

As a matter of fact I do not. Your romantic and self-centered imagination has built up for you a picture in which you are to be my devoted and intimate friend. Now you must forgive me for saying that this is all nonsense. Even if you were a European girl of your age it would still be nonsense (Marks 136). Palmer makes it very clear that Lily's feelings for her are simply not

reciprocated. Palmer says she does not wish to see Lily, and that Lily's perception of their connection is just "nonsense". Critics will argue that Palmer's tone here is too aggressive though.

They'll argue that Palmer should have anticipated that her words would hurt Lily deeply. They'll back up their assertions with quotations like the following where Lily jumps to drastic conclusions about Palmer not responding swiftly enough. "Your silence impresses me severely, in so much that patience fails me" (Marks 87). "I'm really worried now. It is a long time I have been waiting for yours [letter]" (Marks 91). One might claim that Lily displays great sensitivity and anxiety because of Palmer.

These critics therefore argue that if waiting for a response from Palmer causes Lily this much distress, then it should be obvious to Palmer that critical words would cause Lily worse sorrow and anguish. These critics are wrong for two reasons. First, Lily still goes on to address Palmer on January 28th, February 6th, and again on February 16th of 1951 (Marks 143-145). All of these dates are after Palmer's direct note from page 136 mentioned previously. Lily did not receive a letter from Palmer between these three instances.

It is fair to say that Palmer's annoyance is justified when she very recently asked Lily to respect boundaries. Secondly, the quotes these critics may use do not show that Lily is sensitive; rather they show that Lily is impatient and bullheaded. Lily keeps writing to Palmer so Palmer does not neglect her promise to help Lily get into school. Lily actually reminds Palmer of this promise. "So, please do not forget your promise that you would send me to school to complete the Matriculation Course" (Marks 94).

Because Palmer does not write back quickly, Lily is worried that she isn't getting her way, and stubbornly writes another letter out of impatience. Lily's stubbornness to both get her way and to create a friendship that is deeper than a professional level shows a character flaw that certainly leads to her downfall. Lily cannot accept anything less than her own expectations; when she is faced with a disappointment, she spirals into a depression. Stubbornness is not the only character flaw leading to Lily's downfall though. When Palmer addresses Lily about their relationship, she notes that Lily is "self-centered".

Lily's egocentrism is yet another trait that ultimately leads to her breakdown. Palmer is correct when she states that Lily writes amusingly when it is about herself. "Looking back over my correspondence with you I realize that you only write interestingly and amusingly when you are writing about yourself" (Marks 138). For example, in Lily's letter written on the 26th of January, 1949, the tone she uses in her writing has a pleading, begging feel because it is one Lily is writing to further her own attempt at finding an education.

Kindly sympathise with me, a helpless orphan, I beg you ... I can be very glad if you answer me at your earliest possible and please I beg you do sympathise with. You can only show your sympathy by taking me to a college where I shall work with my level best my school work, and, I'm sure I'll please you in any way in my character (Marks 59). For being a student with so little education, Lily really shows finesse in her writing ability. Her use of description in the "helpless orphan" bit tugs at Palmer's heartstrings. Lily is even smart enough to know that tone and word choice can sway a person's ethos, but like Palmer says, Lily only uses this for personal gain.

Palmer, however, is not the only person that notices Lily's egocentrism. Palmer notes that one of Lily's caretakers also feels that Lily focuses on self too much. "...I understand Mrs Bomback thinks that she [Lily] is already inclined to think too much of herself..." (Marks 128). Lily's self-centered personality is clearly not seen by Palmer alone. This egocentrism leads Lily to see only her own needs in Palmer. When Palmer revokes her funding, Lily sees it as a great personal loss.

This is yet another fault leading Lily to her mental breakdown at the end of the correspondence; moreover, it also leads to her difficulty following rules. An inability to follow instructions has already been demonstrated in Lily's inability to accept a non-personal friendship with Palmer. This is, in fact, one of many instances in which Lily defies rules. In one instance, upon being told not to do so, Lily "entered a men Lecturer's hostel with the purpose of receiving a lesson from one of them" (Marks 133). This is a clear violation of rules laid out by caretaker Mrs.

Bomback. In another instance Lily was expected to come to an appointment with Palmer, yet she failed to show up (Marks 183). Arriving at an appointment punctually is an easy task to accomplish, yet Lily failed to do as she was told. This reason alone is one that Palmer lists as a reason for revoking funding for Lily's education. Palmer confronts Lily twice for not following directions (Marks 136; 161). It is very clear to see that obstinate behavior causes Palmer to withdraw her funding leading to Lily's mental break down.

Some argue that Palmer's withdrawal is ultimately to blame for Lily's downward spiral. It is easy to see how misguided these people are if one

considers that Palmer never wished to stop funding Lily's education. She went out of her way to ask Sibusisiwe Makhanya for help to try and repair the problems Lily had been facing (Marks 121-122). It was only when Lily continued to break rules and disrespect Palmer's wishes that Palmer had to quit. Lily made herself a lost cause. Is it fair to blame Palmer for Lily's affairs after Palmer spent money out of her own pocket to assist Lily in all of her needs?

No, it is absolutely absurd to claim Palmer is at fault. In *Not Either an Experimental Doll*, it is clear to see that Dr. Mabel Palmer is not to blame for Lily's depressed state. Circumstance is responsible for the cultural differences between the two main characters throughout the correspondence. It is easy to identify Lily's sense of stubbornness through her insistent attempts at making an intimate friendship with Palmer. Lily's egocentrism shows in how her writing style changes depending upon whether she is writing about herself or others.

It also is fair to call Lily egocentric due to the fact that more than one person identified her self-centered personality. An inability to follow instructions is apparent in different examples and Palmer notes that this is a reason why she terminated her sponsorship for Lily. Critics can continue to argue that Palmer is to blame for Lily's psychiatric state, but ultimately the circumstances in which the two grew up, and Lily herself, are truly at fault. Works Cited Shula, Marks, ed. *Not Either and Experimental Doll*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987. Print.