

Absence speaks louder: kriztina's subjugated role in embers



At times, a novel can communicate the most with the stories it chooses not to tell, rather than the ones it does. In Sandor Marai's moody, claustrophobic drama, *Embers*, such is the case of the Henrik's wife Krisztina, a woman who is already long dead at the novel's opening. Though essential to the narrative structure, and one third of the original hunting party, Marai forms Krisztina's character as a veritable cypher. Her character is first referred to as merely "the new countess" (11); her name is only brought up, entire chapters later, through conversational reference (71). Her first trait to be revealed: she was fond of crayfish (71). Krisztina's minimalist development, however, is far from banal. Though subtle, it is nonetheless critical to the work's overall themes of emotional abandonment, stifling social order, and the true cost of honor. Cursed to love men too proud to love even themselves, the woman's brief, tragic life is mirrored in the text by the perpetual shadow cast over the characters which survive her. By leaving a primary perspective vacant in the novel, Marai shapes Krisztina as the embodiment of the loss brought on by systemic emotional neglect, a collective social fate in which prideful misunderstandings, prejudices, and the inequalities of honor rob individuals of their very identities.

Though faint and sparse, the voice of Krisztina echoes damningly from the pages of the novel. In a recollection by Nini, devoted caretaker, an initial glimpse into her suffocating world is provided:

" " There is something I must tell you. When Krisztina was dying, she called for you." " Yes," said the General. " I was there." " You were there and yet you weren't there. You were so far away you might as well have been on a voyage. You were in your room, and she was dying. Alone with me, round

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about dawn. And then she asked for you. I am telling this because you should know it this evening." The General said nothing." (74)

Marai does not reveal her exact dying words; even in her final moments, Krisztina is doomed to speak ever through others. Understated by the domestic context of preparing for dinner, the extent of Henrik's cruelty in those final moments is obscene. A virtual devil, yet with a stiff upper lip, Henrik's behavior symbolizes a social code which held no empathy for those perceived to be in the wrong. In the opulent, merciless world of aristocracy, entitlements subjugate humanity. For the small transgression of a youthful infidelity, Krisztina's is quite literally fated to die alone, starved of love, respect, and all but the most superficial of company. Her pain as a human being is not seen as such, by her culture or her husband. It is seen as the pain of an unfaithful woman, a fate that has been duly earned by her transgressions. To look for the justice in such a heartless breed of morality is to find only the vast wastes of its victim's lives, an emptiness encapsulated by the General's inability to give even the feeblest of responses.

Once liberated by schnapps, however, the General at last finds the mind to elucidate Krisztina's life, kindling a small yet steady flame against the darkness of her death. He reminisces, " She was like an animal... underneath she was wild and untamable" (175). Though spoken in fondness, this memory houses a thread of bitter irony. This spark of life, this flaunting of convention, is exactly what Henrik is unable to cope with, shattering completely upon learning of her love affair with Konrad. Unquestionably desirable, Krisztina was desired on the terms of others; and though she may have been on some level understood, she was never truly accepted by the <https://assignbuster.com/absence-speaks-louder-kriztinas-subjugated-role-in-embers/>

world in which she lived. Such is the fate of those living in a patriarchal, moralist society, one unable bring its natural desire for self-realized, confident women in line with a rigidly oppressive social system. Krisztina is effectively trapped, as her most attractive, beloved qualities are brought as charges against her; and her own natural pursuit of happiness, though at first encouraged by her peers, is soon suffocated by the obligations of an emotionally dead relationship.

The most powerful symbol of Krisztina's spiritual subjugation comes near the close of the novel. Contained within a sealed, yellow velvet diary is, as Henrik phrases it, "alarming evidence of her inner self and her love and her doubts" (203), a confessional record her most truthful feelings. The fact that such things would cause Henrik alarm comes as no surprise; the revelation that the woman who he had from the beginning treated as an extension of his own body had thoughts and feelings of her own would be no doubt upsetting. Poised on the precipice of understanding, of allowing the woman whose life he effectively destroyed a mote of final respect, Henrik elects to retain his own massively self-centered character and, "with an almost lazy gesture, he throws the little book into the embers of the fire" (204). The cruelty of such an action, at the hands of one who once claimed genuine love, is monstrous. In this moment, the assassination of Krisztina's very existence is complete; a woman who was essentially, beautifully contrary has at last been vaporized. This turn of events is not surprising. Justified by abstract concepts of honor, obligation, and truth, Henrik commits one final act of treachery against the wife he forsook, and Krisztina finds herself once again at the hands of an artificial superior with no true claim to her life or

legacy. Marai seeks to detail the inevitability of distance, the inescapability of empty space; by choosing to have one of his principle's character's last testaments consumed quietly by flame, he writes his most powerful statement of futility in the ashes.

Throughout *Embers*, Marai asks pointedly via the reflections of his characters: at what cost comes honor? What value holds dignity, in the absence of love? High and little, are the answers that the desperate, softly tragic Krisztina provides. In a moment of extroversion, Henrik considers his wife's feelings, " She... had been wounded by those she loved" (191). This verbal acknowledgement comes as a notice of injustice, not as remedy or apology. Regret is difficult to express in the language of privilege, and therein lays the self-destruction of the empirical class which is the essential theme of the text. A beautiful, spirited woman, young love, youthful indiscretion, foolish pride: all are common elements of the human heart. But once that heart has been subjected to a stifling set of values, one in which humanity and weakness are shunned in favor of cheap, gilded decorum, forgiveness for these everyday sins becomes impossible, and healing ceases to occur. The novel offers no solutions, to Krisztina or to the world. Only creeping ash, and a harsh warning against rules left unbroken, truths left unsaid, and lives left tragically un-lived.

Works Cited

Marai, Sandor. *Embers*. New York: Random House, 2001. Print.