

Straight forward novel about rape



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Discuss the role of supernatural and mythical elements in the representation of childhood in Sylvie Germain's *L'Enfant Méduse*.

Sylvie Germain could have written a straight forward novel about rape, incest and neglect, but "*Enfant Méduse*" is more profound. The novel intertwines magical realism, supernatural and mythical elements which help us understand the main character Lucie and her childhood. In this novel we find multiple mythological and biblical sources ranging from the Ogre, Eurydice, the Medusa as well as the themes of Vengeance and Redemption from the Old and New Testaments respectively. We aim to discuss the role of these various elements and how it influences the depictions of childhood within this novel.

The main character of the story is Lucie Daubigné, a little girl who lives a contented childhood in a quiet and rural village of Berry near swamps where magical creatures lurk in the shadows. This is reminiscent of George Sand's novels set during the nineteenth century in the same area where forests and swamps of Berry are linked to traditional beliefs and even sorcery. ()()

However this idyllic life stops when the ogre of fairy tales appears, rapes and kills two young girls within the village. Lucie herself is the third rape victim of the Ogre, her step brother Ferdinand. He repeatedly abuses her destroying her innocence and happiness. When Lucie is raped by Ferdinand she erects a mental barrier to shield and distance herself from the brutal truth. Lucie, " dont l'unique lecture était celle des contes et des légendes" p29 immerses

herself within a world of fairy tales. She transforms Ferdinand into the brutal ogre, a common childhood nightmare for all small children.

Another element from fairy tales is the presence of Lucie's mother, Aloise Daubigné. She is Lucie's natural mother, but she has all the attributes of the wicked stepmother: a child from a first marriage whom she adores Ferdinand " *élegance , la même beauté et cette blondeur rare,, ces cheveux soyeux ornés de boucles d'ange*" p80 as well as an attitude and comments that are both unfeeling " *Voix impérieuse celle qui scande les journées de Lucie, du saut du lit jusqu'au coucher..... la voix de l'ordre, la voix des ordres*" p 39 and cruel " *Tu t'amuses à me ridiculiser*" " *tu me fais honte avec ta maigreur de squelette*" p96

Fairy Tales are written about normal people the child can identify with. They have been used over the centuries to teach important lessons and give moral values. The children themselves use these stories to cope with difficult emotions and anxieties. Bruno Bettelheim explains in one of his books " *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*" () that fairy tales help children make sense of what happens in their life. The simplicity of the situations and the duality of the characters (good / evil, hero/villain) give the child a way of expressing thoughts or feelings that were repressed in real life. They help the child to understand the adult world.

The inevitable happy end gives the child the hope that his problems and pains will end and and that he will conquer all. This cannot be dissociated from myths which show that with efforts we often triumph over life's trials.

This is mentioned by François Dolto in her book : " *La cause des enfants*"

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Where as fairy tales deal with emotions, myths speak of great actions, victories and supernatural events.

The first myth in *L'Enfant Méduse* is a cosmic event: The Eclipse. Many mythologies have integrated eclipses as a sign of things to come. “ Les humains sont craintifs. Ils brûlent de savoir et s’effraient davantage” p17

The first eclipse foreshadows the rape of Lucie by the Ogre; Lucie is abused by her brother and her childhood has ended. What should have been a happy childhood is destroyed. Her childhood is returned during the artificial eclipse created by Lou Fé’s postcard. “ Sur la table il y a la carte postale, tache blonde sur le bois sombre. (...) Elle se penche vers l’image. Et son enfance aussi se penche.” p280

The next theme is the myth of Eurydice and the underworld symbolising evil and revenge which Sylvie Germain places opposite the sky symbolising innocence and purity. In the beginning, Lucie has a friend Lou Fé a future astronomer and great admirer of the stars (“ Le petit prince des étoiles”) p21 and later on she is alone. “ Elle ira seule désormais dans les matins de Septembre. Lou Fé sera en pension”. p71 Like Eurydice who descended into the Underworld, Lucie descends into the swamps. She feels closer to the creatures of the underworld, toads , salamanders and snakes than to humans. “ Elle avait renié tous les astres. Elle ne désirait plus que s’enfoncer dans la terre, creuser dessous la terre”

A very slow process changes Lucie from a beautiful little child into an unlikable, ugly girl. This is an attempt on her part to stop the abuse, to reclaim her own body defiled by Ferdinand who is always stronger always

more powerful than her. The strength of the ogre as an evil character leads Lucie to become an even worse and far more malevolent entity: The Medusa. The Ogre can inflict physical pain, however the Medusa eventually petrifies its victims killing just by looking at them. Lucie is beaten by grief and shame (“ son regard, – il a couvé au feu de la honte et de la peur longtemps) p 117, but she slowly becomes consumed by hatred “ pour fourbir en secret son regard de haine et de vengeance” p145. The myth of The Medusa is used to describe Lucie who is a helpless child. She has suffered so much that she has transformed herself into a Gorgon, an ugly creature which turns to stone those who dare look at her. When Ferdinand falls over in a drunken state and knocks himself out, Lucie uses this opportunity and for once goes to him instead of him always coming to her. Once she finally reaches him, Lucie only stares at him. “ C’est un regard qui siffle, et grince, et saigne, et qui verse sur lui les larmes des enfants qu’il a jetées en terre. Un regard de Méduse.” p 145. Lucie lives in a world full of magic and like every child she has the feeling that she can make her dreams come true. Her dream is linked to her hatred of Ferdinand, the Ogre. She does not need to cause the Ogre any physical harm as she is the Medusa, her stare will do the deed.

Lucie knows what her brother is capable of; he is a rapist and a killer. She is judge and jury. We see the influence of her religious education. The God of the old Testament is a God of revenge and she is his disciple, an avenging angel. “ Et soudain illuminée par sa haine pour le frère, Lucie se prépare pour accomplir son oeuvre de vengeance son oeuvre de justice” p110 . While she stares at her brother lying on the ground in the garden, Lucie wants him to remember his evil actions. She pins the pictures

of the two girls he has raped and killed where he can see them ” Elle pique une épingle en haut de chaque photo puis avec précaution se penche vers les tomates... et y plante les photos” p115 and just stares at him ” Le regard seul est en jeu- un regard fou échangé en miroir...la violence de ce regard immense et fixe”. 116

Many years later, Lucie receives a post card from her friend Lou Fé “ Elle se penche vers l’image... Et son enfance aussi se penche.” p280 . She can look back at her childhood and from then on starts her resurrection, an influence of the New Testament. ” Une seconde enfance vient de naitre en Lucie” p 280. She can cry once again “ une enfance aux yeux non plus brulés de larmes contenues, mais embué de douceur comme au sortir d’un songe” The child is no longer locked and Lucie can start living.

Had it not been for the supernatural and mythical elements in the novel, Sylvie Germain’s L’Enfant Méduse would have been a simple novel about the sufferings of a young girl. However Sylvie Germain has turned the basic story line of L’Enfant Méduse into a very profound and meaningful literary work involving age old myths and fairy tales like Euridyce, the Medusa, and the Ogre as well as the Bible.