In Praise of the Stepmother Short Guide

In Praise of the Stepmother by Mario Vargas Llosa

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Contents

Characters

The four characters of the novel are sketchily described, and their present circumstances are limited to the details that permit the development of the action of the novel. Since the story takes place in a few day's time, the characters remain largely devoid of a past.

Don Rigoberto is, by far, the novel's most interesting character, not because he is especially complex but because Vargas Llosa relishes in his quirks and describes them in titillating detail, creating what Anthony Burgess calls "the pornography of hygiene."

Don Rigoberto is compulsive about his personal cleanliness and his bodily functions. He appreciates them as marvelous and necessary, to be worshipped both for their sake as well as for the sake and welfare of the whole body. He devotes a day a week to the care of a different member or organ: Monday, hands; Tuesday, feet; Wednesday, ears; Thursday, nose; Friday, hair; Saturday, eyes, and Sunday, skin. He cleans, soaps, oils, dries, buffs, and trims, and then contemplates his handiwork with the satisfaction of having reached — or at least approximated — however momentarily, perfection. After such nightly ablutions, he goes into the bedroom, where Lucrecia awaits him in readiness. In their lovemaking, he pretends to be a different lover each time, finding inspiration in art; he pretends, for example, to be Candaules, King of Lydia, after the seventeenth-century painting by Jacob Jordaenes by the same name; he owns a copy of Kenneth Clark's book The Nude, which he views with relish in the privacy of his living room.

Lucrecia, the wife, is loving, warm, and well meaning. Wishing to be accepted and loved by her stepson, she allows herself to be seduced by him, a circumstance that in her own mind, foments family unity. She also comes to believe that it enhances her own enjoyment of sex with her husband. In fact, she asserts that through the experience she has finally learned the meaning of emancipation. Of course this sense of elation is temporary and ends when little Alfonso exposes her.

The reader never learns how she reacts to this betrayal and to Rigoberto's decision to banish her from their home.

Throughout, Lucrecia seems somewhat naive, even after her supposed "emancipation." She does evolve somewhat as a character, a development indicated when Rigoberto, coming to bed without having assumed a sexual identity for the night, asks her to choose one for him, to which she responds that she would rather choose one for herself.

Alfonso is the real perverse character of the novel. Though sweet in both appearance and speech, he possesses a precocious intelligence and a masterful ability to deceive. He seduces his stepmother by threatening suicide if she does not respond physically to his affectionate advances. Although he does not appear to be old enough for adult sexual relations, he is able to perform. Lucrecia comes to believe that their sexual

encounters are perfectly innocent and harmless because the child is devoid of malice. She is, of course, completely wrong. Alfonso has deliberately entrapped her; he seduces her in order to get rid of her. He exposes his stepmother to his father (asking him what "orgasm" means, a word he says Lucrecia uses after lovemaking) and by writing about it in a free composition assignment for school.

The fourth and last character of the novel is Justiniana, the maid, who serves as messenger, witness, and interlocutor for Lucrecia, Alfonso, and the author. At the end of the book, aware of Alfonso's role in the step mother's downfall, she confronts the child only to hear that he did it for her, not for his own dead mother. A startled Justiniana (called Justita, an endearing diminutive used only by Alfonso) rushes out of his bedroom as he begins to shower her with passionate kisses, just as he had done with his more naive and unsuspecting stepmother at the start of the novel.

Social Concerns

The upper-middle-class Peruvian family of In Praise of the Stepmother is an affluent and congenial group.

While the novel takes place exclusively within the confines of the family home in Lima, it is clear that they enjoy a seemingly normal relationship with the outside world: business associates, friends, and school. Don Rigoberto, the head of the household, is the manager of an insurance company. A widower, he marries Lucrecia, a forty-year-old divorcee. Dona Lucrecia enjoys the fruits of her privileged lifestyle; during the day she directs the household staff, goes shopping, plays bridge, and attends to the care of Don Rigoberto's son, the angelic looking Alfonso, a prepubescent boy of indeterminate age.

At night, she partakes of her husband's rich sexual rituals and fantasies and is a passive yet willing partner to his imaginative sensual flights of fancy and constant experimentation.

Dona Lucrecia, a warm, sensual, and "still beautiful" woman is happily married and loves Don Rigoberto. Her new life is clouded by only one worry, her concern over gaining young Alfonso's love and trust. Her friends caution her about this all too common challenge of stepmotherhood. And while for much of the novel the reader is led to believe that Lucrecia has been able to escape the stereotypical forebodings of her friends, Vargas Llosa delivers a potent surprise at the end: a stepmother, if not inherently evil as in Cinderella and Snow White, can be made evil, and the seemingly innocent stepchild is the vehicle through which this unlikely goal is achieved. Traditional expectations of the roles of child and stepparent are completely reversed when the potential victim becomes the victimizer; the frail motherless child turns into the avenger and the helpless stepmother becomes an unsuspecting casualty. Here Vargas Llosa gives a new twist to the age-old family dynamic.

Techniques

In Praise of the Stepmother consists of fourteen chapters and an Epilogue. As he did in Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter (1982), Vargas Llosa interpolates related materials into the main plot of the story. Chapters 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, and 14 contain a color print of a famous painting accompanied by a narration, each from a separate voice, associating the narrator's reading of the picture to the authoritative version of the plot provided by an omniscient and detached third person narrator who controls the more realistic aspects of the novel.

Rigoberto, Lucrecia, Alfonso, and perhaps even Justiniana, all become the protagonist/narrator of one of the paintings by Jordaenes, Boucher, Titian, Francis Bacon, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Fra Angelico. This rather heterogenous collection of prints share the fact that they could be viewed as depicting various aspects of sensuality, from the voyeuristic to the immaculate.

The remainder of the chapters relate the domestic life of Don Rigoberto and his family and his diligent bathroom rituals and techniques. Vargas Llosa excels at describing the details of Don Rigoberto's grooming, especially in the chapter devoted to the ear.

Aside from the technique of interpolating chapters about art, enhanced by the inclusion of color reproductions, Vargas Llosa avoids the use of more complex structures. The novel is easy to read and brief, under 150 pages long.

Themes

Conceived as a novel of eroticism, this short work is centered on the quest for worldly happiness and the individual's prospects of attaining it. The medium of the quest is sensory and sexual fulfillment, and Vargas Llosa's characters conduct their lives assuming that this fulfillment is both the cause and the effect of their happiness. As in other erotic texts, the characters' responses and relationships are fueled exclusively by sensual and sexual stimulation, and the mutual satisfaction gained from sexual encounters is in turn a reaffirmation of their sense of contentment and well being, of success and happiness. Sexual stimulation for Rigoberto, however, is not spontaneously generated but rather slowly achieved through an elaborate nightly toilette and the inspirational power of the artistic erotica he keeps locked up in the living room. By appealing to so much external stimulation, the character's predicament revolves around a number of questions: Is worldly happiness really possible? Are reality and happiness essentially incompatible?

How long can happiness last? Is happiness only possible, as in the story, when one resorts to fantasy?

Although at times risible and esoteric, Don Rigoberto's habits and sexual poses are essentially harmless. In spite of the ritualistic even fetishistic way in which he pursues his pleasures, he is neither prurient nor abusive; his obsessions are diverting rather than threatening and his goals lofty rather than demeaning and malevolent. He is reasonably certain that in Lucrecia he has found an ideal mate, and that the happiness they enjoy at the beginning of the novel is sure to last forever.

He, of course, is wrong, and the threat to their eternal contentment comes from none other than his son Alfonso, the seemingly pure and angelic child who has never given his father any trouble, whose innocent appearance and habits belie a shrewd and manipulative mind and a malevolence that is truly formidable. In fact, innocence, its role and meaning, is the second important theme of the book. It is clear that the father, for all his eccentricities, is a good, kind, innocent and honest individual. His son, on the other hand, for all his cherubic appearance, his youth, size, age, and fragility, is a monster.

A third, and less explicit, theme that emerges from the novel is the historically recurrent predicament of women, portrayed as the embodiment of the virgin, the whore, or the fallen Eve.

Vargas Llosa makes productive use of this traditional topology. Chapter 14 of the novel, for example, revolves around a description of Fra Angelico's painting The Annunciation in which the presence of a rosy youth with wings informs Mary of her impending maternity and the virgin birth of a son. And while the angelic youth helps Mary prepare for her unexpected fate of "queen of all men," the youth of the novel, unlike Jesus, brings betrayal rather than exaltation to Lucrecia. At the same time, Lucrecia represents sexual fulfillment for Don Rigoberto, and this carnal aspect of a woman's role is reinforced through painted images in which the female is portrayed as the object of a

specific sexual fantasy. Lucrecia, in the end, fails both as (step)mother and mistress. The rosy youth of the story, Alfonso, rejects her as his stepmother, in this case his virgin mother, and he conspires to end her relationship with Don Rigoberto by manipulating and seducing her. Lucrecia, like Eve after the Fall, becomes an outcast.

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