Undermajordomo Minor Study Guide

Undermajordomo Minor by Patrick deWitt

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Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: DeWitt, Patrick. Undermajordomo Minor. New York: HarperCollins, 2015. Print.

Lucy says goodbye to his mother and sets out for the Castle Von Aux as the book begins. Having nearly died from pneumonia, Lucy has been given a second chance at life by a mysterious stranger. He uses the chance to set off on an adventure in the hopes that something might happen.

Before leaving home, Lucy also says goodbye to his ex-girlfriend, Marina. Although he would have preferred to leave things on a high note, his plans are foiled when Marina shows up at the train station and catches him in a series of lies.

In a brief interlude, the narrator shares a tale of violence and envy that takes place a few villages away. In the story, a man is so enraged by his junior colleague's advancement that he chops off three of his fingers.

Lucy takes the train to the Castle Von Aux, and starts his adventure with a run-in with a couple of thieves who continually steal his pipe. When Lucy arrives at the castle, he finds that a war is being waged in the nearby hills. Inside the castle, he finds that things are dark and cold and nearly abandoned. His boss, Mr. Olderglough, warns him about the Baron, and insists that Lucy be in his bedroom by ten o'clock so that he can lock himself in. Lucy learns that one of his new duties will be to deliver a daily letter from the Baron to the missing Baroness.

Lucy goes to the village to retrieve his pipe, and meets Klara, the daughter of the thief Memel. Sooner than later, Lucy is in love. He acquires a puppy and keeps it, for much of the novel, in his breast pocket.

Breaking a direct order, Lucy opens the Baron's letter and finds that his new employer is poetic and tragic and suffering from the worst kind of unrequited love. That night, a strange man attempts to get into Lucy's room, but Lucy has locked his door.

Lucy gets a note from Klara inviting him to her house. He goes to another village to get a new suit for work, and he purchases a cape for Klara. She likes the cape, and their relationship grows closer.

That night, Lucy happens across a bestial man creeping around the castle in the dark, eating a live rat. This man is the Baron.

The next time Lucy goes to Klara's house, he is greeted by Adolphus, a handsome soldier, who states that he will be marrying Klara. Lucy almost gives up hope and returns home, but he is inspired by another one of the Baron's letter and so decides to profess his love. His profession works, and he and Klara begin to date in earnest.

Lucy writes a letter to the Baroness, begging her to return for the sake of the Baron. After delivering the letter, Lucy immediately regrets his decision.

The relationship between Lucy and Klara continues to grow, but Lucy is suspicious of her true feelings for Adolphus, who has returned to war.

A letter from the Baroness arrives, expressing her intention to return. Lucy and Mr. Olderglough work tirelessly to restore the Baron to a fit state, and to revive the slumbering castle.

While waiting for the Baroness to arrive on the train, Lucy learns that his predecessor, Mr. Broom, died when he fell down the Very Large Hole.

The Baroness arrives. The Baron falls to his knees and weeps. They leave together, reunited at last.

While visiting Klara, Lucy learns that Memel became a thief because of a thief he met when he was a boy. The thief stole a tremendous amount of money from Memel's father, who Memel was quite close with. Nonetheless, Memel professes that he believes a man ought to take what a man wants.

The next day two couples arrive as guests of the Baroness. They bring chaos into the castle. The three couples sit down for dinner, and begin to drink heavily.

Lucy sneaks into the ballroom for a quick romp with Klara. Afterwards, Klara leaves, but Lucy gets stuck behind a curtain when the nobles enter the ballroom. There he must hide while a twisted ritual involving sex, violence, food, cigars, and candles ensues.

The orgy ends, and Lucy makes his exit at last. But, to his dismay, he learns that Klara is alone with the Count. When he finds them, the Count is in the process of attacking Klara. Lucy knocks all the man's teeth out. The next day, the guests decide to cut their stay short.

Lucy goes to Klara's and is heartbroken to see Adolphus has returned from the war, injured and in need of care. Lucy takes to bed because his heart is broken and he is depressed. He does not get up until Memel takes him for a walk and shares a story about how he killed his best friend, who slept with his wife.

Inspired by the story, Lucy decides to kill Adolphus. He tries to push Adolphus into the hole, but Adolphus dodges, and Lucy falls in. Inside the hole, he finds Mr. Broom and Tomas are alive and (sort of) well. The three attempt an escape. Lucy is the only one who makes it out.

Lucy returns to the village to kill Adolphus, but Adolphus is dead. Lucy learns that Memel is dead and Klara has gone to the ocean with the Baroness. Lucy says goodbye to his friends at the castle and gets on a train headed for the ocean. On the train, he runs into Father Raymond. They spot the stranger who saved Lucy's life, but the

stranger turns out to be a simpleton who cleans the floors of the church. The book ends with Lucy writing his own epitaph.

Chapter 1: Lucy The Liar

Summary

The novel begins with our omniscient narrator giving us a look at Lucien “Lucy” Minor as he says farewell to his mother and sets out on a journey to a castle. After his mother reenters the house, Lucy lingers, lights up the pipe that he has purchased for the occasion and is determined to learn to use, and reminisces about the series of events that led to the present moment.

Six months prior, Lucy had been struck with pneumonia. The sickness was so severe that the village priest, Father Raymond, came to read Lucy his last rites. But when Lucy’s godless father came home from working the fields, he kicked the priest out of the house. Late that night, while Lucy was fighting death in his bed, he received a visit from a strange man. The man sat in Lucy’s rocking chair and asked Lucy what he wanted from life. Lucy replied that all he wanted was not to die. The man asked what Lucy would want were he to live. Without thought, Lucy answered that he would want “something to happen” (6). The man asked if Lucy was not satisfied with his life, and Lucy admitted that he was bored and then began to cry. While Lucy slipped closer to death, the stranger approached the bed, puts his mouth to the boy’s ear, and inhaled. Holding his breath, the stranger slipped down the hall to Mr. and Mrs. Minor’s bedroom.

Lucy woke up the next morning, but his father was sick. The better Lucy felt, the worse his father’s condition became. The next morning, Lucy’s father was dead. Curiosity compelled Lucy to seek out Father Raymond and ask him about the stranger. Glad for the company, Father Raymond invited Lucy in and listened to his story. Lucy asked if the stranger might have been God, or Death, but Father Raymond had no true answer. But when he learned that Lucy had no future plans, Father Raymond offered to write letters to all the nearest castles in the hopes of helping Lucy get a job as a servant. There was one response: a letter from Myron Olderglough, the majordomo of Baron Von Aux’s castle. In the letter, Mr. Olderglough offers Lucy Minor the position of undermajordomo. Father Raymond and Lucy agreed that the title was silly and made-up, but Lucy—in part because he was afraid of the stranger returning—accepted the offer.

Returning to the moment of Lucy’s departure, the narrator describes Lucy surveying the village of Bury from his yard, reflecting that he never did quite fit in. These morose thoughts are interrupted when his mother opens his bedroom window to shake out his rug and ask him why he is lingering outside. Lucy sets off down the path that leads to the train station and is met by a man walking up the path. After a brief exchange, it becomes clear that Lucy’s mother has rented out Lucy’s bedroom to the man. Although Lucy shows no emotion during their chat, he does ask that the man inform his mother of their meeting, and about their conversation. The narrator tells us that Lucy is visited by an evil thought as the man departs, and that a rush of wind swarms about Lucy just as the thought strikes.

On his way to the station, Lucy decides to make a stop at the house of Marina, his ex-girlfriend. Before knocking on the door, Lucy checks to see if Tor—who we later learn is Marina's fiancé—is there. Since Tor's boots are not on the porch, Lucy knocks and Marina answers the door. Although he has intended to be cool and indifferent, one look at Marina has his true feelings—"a cleaved combination of adoration and acrimony" (14)—shining through. He attempts to impress her by fabricating impressive details of his underwhelming new job (e.g. that he has been given a first-class ticket), but instead of taking the bait Marina mocks him. He attempts to end the conversation on a high note—not out of kindness but so that eventually Marina might regret breaking up with him—by stating that he hopes she and Tor will be happy together.

Marina is moved by the apparent kindness, and she embraces Lucy in a farewell hug. The hug prompts Lucy to remember their time together. After a short period of courtship, Marina had insisted that they move their relationship beyond "eye-gazing" (16). The couple began to make love in the field below the village daily, and Lucy was ecstatic not just with the love-making, but with dreams of a life spent married to Marina. But one day Lucy told Marina how happy he was with the state of their relationship, and Marina's face "darkened" (17). She explained to Lucy that she did not like being handled so gently, and later she broke off their affair.

With the old wound reopened, Lucy abandons his original plan and decides to tell Marina that Tor is engaged to a woman in another village. At first Marina refuses to believe this lie, but Lucy soon shakes her faith. Musing to himself that a lie just might be the finest achievement of man, Lucy leaves. The narrator informs us that Lucy's getaway would have been perfect had it not been for a train engineer in Ravensburg eating a second helping of cheese the night before.

At this point, we are treated to an interlude entitled: Eirik and Alexander. In this brief chapter-within-a-chapter, the narrator flies over to Ravensburg and gives us a look into the inner life of Eirik, an assistant train engineer drinking in a tavern because his junior colleague, Alexander, has just been made full engineer. Nine drinks in, Eirik looks up to see Alexander enter the tavern. Alexander offers to buy Eirik a drink, but stubborn Eirik refuses. Fed up, Alexander says that he hopes there will not be any problems. At this point, Eirik looks at Alexander's neck and decides—not that he will kill Alexander—but that he could.

Eirik says there will not be any problems, and heads home. His mood does not improve when his wife serves him a small portion of cheese. She always gives him a small portion, and Eirik believes that his wife eats the cheese in secret while he is at work. A fight breaks out between the two about the cheese. The narrator reveals that eating the cheese while her husband is at work is her one pleasure in life. The wife gives her secret stash of cheese to Eirik and then runs up to the attic to cry. Eirik listens to her sobbing. He sits at the dining room table and eats half a wheel of Gouda. When he passes out he has a series of horrific, violent, and sexual nightmares.

The next morning Eirik gets up and goes to work where he is greeted by Alexander. The two men work amicably for most of the day. Half an hour from Bury, Alexander asks Eirik

to offer him his congratulations. Eirik's rage returns, and this time it does not go away. He waits for an opportune moment, and then cuts off three of Alexander's fingers with a spade.

The interlude ends and our narrator informs us that Lucy, "knew none of this, and would never know" (26). Lucy simply gets onto the train and watches as the two engineers are led away by the constable. Forty-five minutes later, Lucy hears a knock on his window. Marina has come, along with Tor, to mock Lucy, who is sitting in third class, not first, like he had claimed.

The train leaves the station, and during the night Lucy awakens to find two thieves (Mewe and Memel, we later learn) robbing the travelers in his compartments. Frightened of a confrontation, Lucy decides that his best option is to feign sleep and allow himself to be robbed. But Lucy is spared this humiliation when a loud noise frightens off the thieves.

The next morning Lucy wakes up alone in the compartment save for one other man. Lucy brags to this man that he chased off a pair of thieves in the night. The man (who is Memel) teases him a bit, and then admits to being familiar with the Castle Von Aux. He adds that he was saddened about Lucy's predecessor, Mr. Broom, but refuses to give any more detail.

The train approaches the station, and Memel points out the castle to Lucy, then calls to a boy who had been sleeping under the bench. He and the boy leave the train, and as they walk away, Lucy realizes that these are the thieves. Frightened, he tries to keep his distance from the pair as he too departs the train, but they insist on walking together. The trio arrives at the village and Memel points out his house. Lucy looks up and notices men moving about in the mountains beyond the castle. Memel explains that there are two groups of men at war. Though Memel insists that Lucy is in no danger, he declines to give further explanation about the war. Instead, he walks Lucy to the edge of the village and gives him a suspiciously long hug.

Lucy walks up to the castle but finds the doors locked. He tries to ring the bell, but it is too high for him, so he sits down and closes his eyes. When he opens them he finds himself surrounded by a dozen soldiers with bayonets. An exceptionally handsome man —who seems to be the leader—steps forth and asks Lucy for food and money. Lucy hands over his purse. The soldiers disappear into the forest, but the handsome man pauses. He turns, raises his gun, and fires. The bullet hits the bell Lucy could not reach. Lucy is let into the castle.

Analysis

This first chapter is the longest in the book, and it is the only one that deals primarily with the character and the psyche of our protagonist. The rest of the novel is jam packed with action, drama, romance, and orgies. But in this chapter we see the truth of who "Lucy the Liar" is: a sad, bored boy who would do anything—including construct

elaborate lies about himself to himself—to escape the sheer mind-numbing monotony of his trivial life. In this way, the novel seems to be suggesting from the start that entertainment is the primary function of a work of fiction. Because the rest of the novel shows little concern for Lucy's interior-self, one might argue that his character is important only as a device to move the plot forward. But he is the lynchpin that allows the narrative to weave together multiple genres.

Despite being the star of a chapter entitled "Lucy the Liar," Lucy is a horrible liar. As is clear from the title of the novel, however, Patrick DeWitt delights in word play and humor. And so, while one might expect a character with the epithet "liar" to be an accomplished liar, DeWitt dubs Lucy a liar not because Lucy is ever able to convince his fellow characters of any untruths, but because the boy acts the performer in the story of his own life, a story which is being told by an omniscient narrator who sounds very much like a fabulist—his diction is high, straight out of Old-England, and at times comically formal—as he spins out a tale that is shaped very much like a fairytale.

And, despite being the hero of our tale, Lucy is cast as a comic figure by DeWitt. Lucy rarely lies, and when he does he is not all that convincing. Lucy piles up lie upon lie while speaking to Marina, who is hesitant to trust him, and confirms her suspicions when she shows up at the train station with Tor. And, while on the train, Lucy makes a fool of himself again when he lies to the thief, Memel, about the robbery. To make things worse, Lucy is so unaware of his inability to lie that he believes he "deflected his [Memel's] interrogation handily" (33). DeWitt's comic irony emerges from the tension between Lucy's false bravado and the reader's knowledge of Memel's true identity.

Although we never see Lucy pull off a successful lie, we do witness him performing, almost from the start, as if for an audience. For instance, Lucy imagines and constructs himself as a hero on the cusp of heeding the call to action. The book begins with Lucy in his room, morosely lamenting the fact that he is leaving home and his mother, although he admits that he has nothing to mourn. We sense that he believes a gloomy manner befits a hero.

As the chapter progresses, we learn that Lucy is compelled to entertain himself with a continual performance, i.e. a series of elaborate lies. We see this a few paragraphs later, as Lucy sits outside, alone, and takes out his new pipe. As he lights up and takes a puff, he, "felt very dramatic and wished someone was watching him to witness and perhaps comment on this" (4). After a few moments of pondering his own attractiveness, our narrator states that Lucy: "adopted the carriage of one sitting in fathomless reflection, though there was in fact no motion in his mind whatsoever" (4-5). Here, it is obvious that Lucy is performing a role. And a role, no matter how well-intentioned, is a lie. Lucy is alone, he has no audience, and yet he is unable to be himself with himself.

We learn here, too, that our omniscient narrator is much like Marina and Memel. When Lucy lied to these two characters, they mocked him, they tried to trip him up, they pretended to believe him only to further humiliate him. As Lucy lies to himself with a theatrical performance—and, by extension, to our narrator, who sees and hears

anything he desires—our snide narrator takes care to point this out to the reader and earn a few chuckles at Lucy's expense.

But our narrator is not always cruel to Lucy. In fact, the narrator treats Lucy with tender care when the boy is sick and dying from pneumonia in his bed. The stranger appears inside the bedroom and asks Lucy what he wants from life, and Lucy answers that he wants something to happen because he is bored. Lucy then starts to cry at what a pathetic thing he has just admitted to, and there is nothing snarky in the narrator's tone during the entirety of this honest scene, perhaps because, for once, there is nothing false or theatrical about Lucy that night.

It is no coincidence that the lying comes to a halt by the time this lengthy chapter brings Lucy to a mysterious castle in a faraway village full of thieves and soldiers and intrigue. All along Lucy had been putting on a show to entertain himself, but now that things are happening, as he wished, he has no need for entertainment or lies or performance. His life becomes a fairytale for the narrator to entertain the reader with as the fantastical world within his own psyche is externalized.

And the narrator has been on a mission to spin a fantastic tale for the audience from the beginning. Much like Lucy, the narrator is not at all interested in the humdrum realities of life, and DeWitt is not interested in realism. The year the story takes place is never mentioned, the reasons for the war are never discussed, and it is anyone's guess as to what continent the action takes place on. Like Lucy, the narrator wants something to happen. And just a few pages into what at first appears to be a realistic bildungsroman about a boy leaving home, a mysterious stranger appears inside the boy's bedroom, steals his sickness by sucking it out of his ear, and deposits the pneumonia inside the father, who promptly dies. The stranger leaves, and it soon becomes clear that he has granted the boy's wish for something to happen. Thus begins one of the novel's overarching projects: the weaving together of an absurd, supernatural, often comical fairytale with a realistic, coming-of-age tale.

When Lucy leaves Marina's house believing that she believes his lie, he muses to himself on the nature of lying: "Walking away on the springy legs of a foal, he thought, How remarkable a thing a lie is. He wondered if it wasn't man's finest achievement, and after some consideration, decided that it was" (18). On the surface, one might take this to be yet another instance of the narrator mocking Lucy for comic effect. It is pathetic and silly that a boy incapable of telling a decent lie ought to believe that lies are the zenith of human achievement. But aside from weaving in elements of folklore and fairytale, part of this novel's mission is to take on the postmodern task of self-referentiality. And so, if we take this hyperbolic statement at its word, and if we remember that the trivial untruths we tell each other on a daily basis are not the only type of lies, and are certainly not the most important, it becomes apparent that DeWitt is concerned with a different species of lie, one much more closely related to the lie of Lucy's performances: the lie that is artistic creation.

This novel—which is full of mysterious strangers, castles, beautiful peasant girls, mad Barons, cunning thieves, and handsome soldiers—is well-crafted and fine-tuned in a

way that none of Lucy's lies ever were. Never is this more apparent than in the interlude: Alexander and Eirik. In the interlude, two men clash when they want the same thing. It is no accident that the narrator chooses to focus in on Eirik, who is the jealous engineer. Like Lucy, he is full of envy and a slow, festering, murderous rage. Like Tor, and—later, Adolphus—and, much later—Tomas, the train engineer Alexander, who is the object of envy and rage, is a sympathetic character. Although the narrator gives us insight into Alexander mainly through the lens of Eirik (just as we learn about Tor almost exclusively through Lucy), Eirik's bitter jealousy is not enough to cloud the reader's judgement. In fact, Alexander is painted by the subtle narrator as a sympathetic character. He does not brag much, he tries to make peace with Eirik, and he grew up an orphan. Unaffected by overwhelming jealousy, the reader can see these qualities. This creates a different, far less comic sort of irony within the text.

And the irony persists outside the microcosm of the interlude. Tor is not the most sympathetic character in the novel, but his actual words and actions are far less damning than Lucy would have us believe. And Adolphus, who in many ways functions as the antagonist, has already been painted in a sympathetic light. When Lucy meets him outside the castle, Adolphus is shown to be charming and witty and humorous. And, although Adolphus does rob Lucy, he does so out of necessity and with a certain gentlemanly good grace. After acquiring the money, Adolphus even turns around and helps Lucy out of his predicament by ringing the high bell with a bullet from his gun.

Discussion Question 1

While the novel could hardly be described as realism, the incident with the stranger in the night is one of the most blatantly supernatural scenes. Why does the book open with such a strange and magical premise? What does it do to set the tone for the rest of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

The first chapter is formatted as a frame narrative. Like a Russian doll, the interlude, "Eirik and Alexander," is nestled within the chapter. Is the connection between the overarching story of Undermajordomo Minor and the interlude arbitrary or essential?

Discussion Question 3

The soldiers are as much a part of the background in this novel as the mountains in which they play their "silly games." No explanation for their existence or their feud is ever given. One might argue that their sole purpose within the novel is comedic relief. What does the war do for the story? Would the story be different without the soldiers? What does this say about war? What does this say about the timeless, placeless world of the story?

Vocabulary

chary, valise, mien, miserly, fanatical, waylaid, benign, detritus, shanty, majordomo

Chapter 2: Mr. Olderglough

Summary

The chapter begins as Lucy steps inside the castle gates and gets his first look at Mr. Olderglough. The majordomo is 60, skeletal, and wearing a decrepit old suit of velvet with mismatched buttons and stains all along the lapels. On top of this, Mr. Olderglough's right arm is in a sling and his knuckles are bruised and scabbed.

In addition to his unpleasant appearance, Mr. Olderglough is in a foul mood. Just as the previous chapter ended, Mr. Olderglough shouted at Lucy through the castle's gates to: "push the fucking door" open (47). Now, he apologizes to Lucy for his vulgar language, explaining that he awoke to find himself in a bad mood. His day has not improved since, and Mr. Olderglough blames the whole affair on a bad nightmare he had during the night.

Lucy asks Mr. Olderglough whether he has had an accident. The majordomo shakes his head and says that whatever happened to him was no accident, and then takes Lucy on a tour of the cold, dark Castle Von Aux. The castle only gets darker and colder as Lucy is lead deeper into it. Lucy soon comes to learn that most of the castle has been abandoned. Even the rooms that are still in use are dusty; the furniture is all cloaked in velvet shrouds and none of the fireplaces are lit.

Mr. Olderglough leads Lucy into the ballroom. Portraits of long-dead Barons and Baronesses line the walls. The majordomo informs Lucy that the room was once "filled with music and dancing and laughter and gaiety. And look at it now. Quiet as the grave" (54). Lucy becomes uneasy as he stands in the large room, and he suspects that some "godless occurrence or other" (54) has taken place within its walls.

Lucy asks Mr. Olderglough where everyone has gone. The majordomo explains that the castle fell into a decline after the Baroness left. Mr. Olderglough admits to being quite fond of the Baroness, and says she was always kind to him as he points out her portrait to Lucy. Mr. Olderglough describes her as a "light in a dark place" (54). Lucy comments that she looks afraid, and the majordomo confirms this, and adds that she was a very brave woman.

Next, Lucy inquires about the Baron Von Aux. Mr. Olderglough answers the inquiry in riddle: "The Baron goes where the Baron wishes. And often as not he wishes to go nowhere at all" (55) Lucy persists, stating that he would like to thank the Baron for his new job. Mr. Olderglough explains that the Baron rarely leaves his room. When Lucy decides that he will wait until he sees the Baron to thank him, Mr. Olderglough warns the boy not to speak to the Baron, and to not let the Baron see him. Lucy asks if he is meant to be at the castle, and Mr. Olderglough says no one is meant to be there. At that point, the majordomo is seized up with a shiver, which he says is caused by something other than the cold.

The duo resumes their tour of the castle, and Lucy tells Mr. Olderglough about his run-in with the thieves. Mr. Olderglough confesses to knowing one of them, Memel, and then states that villagers can be dangerous because they are “godless” (56). After this, the majordomo tells Lucy that his duties will be varied, but light. Lucy’s primary job will be to assist the majordomo, and Mr. Olderglough comments that the former undermajordomo was quite gifted in that area. When Lucy informs Mr. Olderglough that Memel has already told him a bit about Mr. Broom, Mr. Olderglough grows upset, and refuses to discuss the matter further. The majordomo is similarly close-lipped when Lucy tries to learn more about the war going on in the hills.

Next, Mr. Olderglough takes Lucy to the scullery to meet Agnes, the chef. The majordomo explains a few more of Lucy’s duties. When they arrive at the scullery, Agnes is not there. Instead, the pair finds a couple of rodents fighting in the corner.

Mr. Olderglough leads Lucy up a spiral staircase to his new bedroom. Before he leaves Lucy alone, Mr. Olderglough tells Lucy that the Baron leaves a letter for the Baroness on a table in the entryway every morning. Lucy’s job will be to take the letter to the morning train. The engineer will not stop the train. Instead, Lucy must hold the letter up in the air, and the engineer will pluck it out of his grasp. Lucy asks if he ought to expect the engineer to deliver any letters, but Mr. Olderglough explains that the Baron does not receive any letters.

As he turns to leave, Mr. Olderglough warns Lucy that he must be inside his room by ten o’clock each night, and that he must lock his door. When Mr. Olderglough leaves, Lucy finds Mr. Broom’s telescope inside a dresser drawer. He uses it to look down on the village, and spies Memel, speaking with a girl and smoking from a familiar pipe.

Analysis

Mr. Olderglough is a complex character. In this chapter, we see him in the archetypal role of the mentor as he guides Lucy through the castle and explains the boy’s new duties. Throughout the novel, the majordomo is always there to answer questions and provide advice for his underling. But Mr. Olderglough is not a typical mentor. He opens the door to the castle cursing and leads Lucy around the castle with a lackluster manner that suggests apathy: “And here, here too is a room, just a room, serving no purpose whatsoever” (53). The absurdity of a disgruntled and apathetic mentor is highlighted by the fact that Mr. Olderglough is not just a mentor, but a servant. These two contradicting roles create a tension inside the character that often comes across as comic.

More importantly, however, this tension forces the reader to acknowledge the fact that the nameless, dateless society Lucy has come to inhabit is severely stratified. Although most of the castle staff has disappeared, Mr. Olderglough, Agnes, and Lucy are all members of the lowest class in the castle. But Mr. Olderglough, who represents the class of servants, has a contemptuous attitude toward the villagers, which implies that he considers them an even lower class than the castle servants. He tells Lucy: “‘The villagers are like children, and children can be dangerous entities in that they have no

God'" (56). Giving further explanation, he explains that the villagers have no reason to be good because there are no consequences to their actions.

Mr. Olderglough is a victim of internalized oppression. He is a fiercely loyal servant to the Baron Von Aux, who has gone mad, and who, it is implied, beats the majordomo when he sees him, leaving his bones broken and his skin scarred. Mr. Olderglough looks down on the low villagers who have no God. Mr. Olderglough is not ever shown to be a religious man, but he does have a master of sorts in the cruel, insane Baron. And this, it would seem, is the only thing that inspires him to "do right by his fellow man" (56).

The overall tone of this chapter is one of gloom, and this atmosphere introduces us to yet another genre DeWitt has woven into the novel: The Gothic Romance. The nearly abandoned castle, dark and dreary and cold, creates a setting where fear cannot help but creep in.

In addition to the castle, the Baron is a character who would be almost perfectly in place in a Gothic Romance. Like a twisted version of the Byronic Hero, the Baron's presence in the castle turns the place into a haunted mansion of sorts.

The Baron's character is also used to create a mystery for Lucy and for the reader. Before we arrive at the castle, the only suspense in the novel is the question of what will become of the protagonist as he sets out to start his new life. With the introduction of the Baron, however, the stakes are raised and there is a new, more tantalizing question at play: Who is the Baron?

The Baron is introduced slowly, by little bits of information that cause the reader to want more. Most of what we learn in this chapter comes from Mr. Olderglough, and this is no exception. Mr. Olderglough refuses to go into detail about three things: the war, Mr. Broom, and the Baron.

Because Lucy (and, by extension, the reader) is denied access to this information, these become the most interesting aspects of the mysterious castle. But the language Mr. Olderglough uses to describe these three things shapes the level of intrigue.

The war is bizarre, but Mr. Olderglough seems bored with it. When Lucy protests that there are bullets flying around outside, Mr. Olderglough responds: "That doesn't make it a war. A war is a much bigger production. This is a trifle by comparison" (58).

Mr. Broom's unspeakable disappearance does raise some questions, but, again the language Mr. Olderglough uses to refuse indicates a boredom with the tired subject. When Lucy asks what happened to his predecessor, Mr. Olderglough simply says they will discuss it later. The language used to talk of the Baron, however, is thick and ripe with intrigue. When Lucy starts asking questions about the Baron, Mr. Olderglough says: "Don't speak to the Baron if you see him. As a matter of fact, don't see him at all if you can avoid it. That is to say, don't let him see you" (56). A moment later the majordomo shivers.

This language creates a tremendous amount of suspense, and marks a drastic turn from the first chapter. While “Lucy the Liar” was essentially shaped like a bildungsroman with elements of fairytale thrown in, DeWitt is now widening his net and adding in a heavy dose of Gothic Romance, a touch of Mystery, and a hint of Horror for good measure.

Discussion Question 1

The chapter starts out with Mr. Olderglough blaming away his bad mood on a nightmare. In the previous chapter, nightmares also play a part in Eirik’s chopping-off of Alexander’s fingers. What other ways do nightmares figure into the text? Is it possible that Lucy has entered a nightmare?

Discussion Question 2

Mr. Olderglough fits the archetypal role of mentor, but he is also a loyal servant. What other archetypes exist within the text? Do any of them have more than one role? Do their roles contradict one another?

Discussion Question 3

When Lucy and Mr. Olderglough go into the scullery searching for Agnes, they find, instead, two rats fighting a bloody battle with one another. What does this small scene of violence do for the novel? After the violence, envy, and rivalry of the first chapter, does this scene comment upon the bestial nature of all three?

Vocabulary

predecessor, apparatus, correspondence, gristle, incongruous, melodrama, hearth, reverie, scullery

Chapter 3: Klara the Beguiler

Summary

The chapter starts out with Lucy heading down into the village to retrieve his pipe from Memel, who has stolen it. The local children make a game of following Lucy through the streets, and this pleases Lucy and makes him feel as if he is being announced to the new village.

As Lucy passes the shanty that belongs to Mewe, he stops to have a look inside the open window. He spots the boy sitting at the table, playing cards with a beautiful girl about Lucy's age. After taking a moment to admire her appearance, Lucy notices that her beauty is at odds with her coat, which is hardly more than a rag. Lucy listens to the girl, who we later learn to be Klara, scold her brother Mewe for cheating at cards. The two play cards for awhile, and then they spot Lucy at the window. When Lucy's eyes meet Klara's, he is "filled with shameful panic" (73).

Lucy turns and runs to Memel's shanty, which is right next door. He knocks and asks for his pipe back. Memel hands it over and then invites the boy to stay for dinner. Lucy agrees and steps inside. There are puppies everywhere, and Memel explains that his dog just had a litter.

After this, Memel has a conversation with Mewe and Klara, who can be heard clearly from the other side of the wall. Once Mewe and Klara realize Lucy is in their father's house, they proceed to tease Lucy for spying on them. He claims he was not spying, only "lingering momentarily" (75). The conversation ends with Lucy admitting to being "idly curious" (75), and then Klara says that they will come over after the card game.

While they wait, Memel asks Lucy if he would like a puppy. Lucy refuses, so Memel takes a puppy and proceeds to drown it in a barrel. He grabs another one, but Lucy stops him and takes the puppy as his own.

Mewe and Klara arrive and the quartet sits down for dinner. While they eat, Lucy is overcome with emotion for Klara, who continues to tease him with Mewe. Lucy drinks quite a lot, and takes out his pipe. When he lights up and inhales, he coughs, splattering tobacco all over his face. Lucy drinks more, and comes to suspect that the family has invited him in for ridicule. When he realizes that Memel did not drown the first puppy, only pretended to so as to force Lucy into taking one, he storms out of the house and returns to the castle. When he gets to his room, he realizes that Memel has stolen his pipe again.

Analysis

After the Gothic atmosphere of the last section, "Klara the Beguiler," takes us back to the more charming world of the first chapter. The children stalking Lucy through town

are playful and full of joy. The narrator comments that, “while there was an element of danger to this adventure, they themselves knew, in the way children know such things, that Lucy was not a bad man” (71). The text seems to be reassuring the reader: Though the castle is a gloomy place, it’s dark only to add a bit of danger to the adventure of the overall story, which, like all good fairytales, will surely have a happy ending.

The chapter is entitled “Klara the Beguiler,” but from this first scene Klara shows herself to be neither a cheater nor a deceiver. Just like with “Lucy the Liar,” the title is a misnomer. When Lucy spies Klara playing cards with Mewe, Lucy hears her chastising her brother for cheating: “Even when you win, you lose, don’t you understand that?” (72).

Much is made of Klara’s beauty in this chapter. When Lucy sees Klara through the window of Mewe’s shanty, it is the second time he has seen her. The first was from up in the castle, through a telescope. The novel seems to demand that the reader acknowledge the male gaze with which the female characters are viewed by their male counterparts. Klara is framed, like the portrait of the equally beautiful Baroness, and this is no mistake or chance occurrence. When Lucy watches Klara play cards with her brother, he even “had the feeling he was watching a painting come to life.” Women in this book are often treated as possessions, and almost always become the subject of male feuds and envy and violence.

This doubling of women in portraits has another meaning within the text, however. The Baroness and Klara are painted as opposites for most of the novel. Klara is always associated with light, and the Baroness with dark. But, in the end, the two women have more in common than Lucy would like to believe, and they even skip town together to go off to the ocean.

But, long before that, Lucy falls in love and the book turns into a genuine romance. When Lucy gets his puppy, he falls in love with it: “There is in instance of import when one experiences the conception of love, he realized.” Paragraphs later, he looks into Klara’s eyes and “he felt the instance of import, only more powerfully than before” (79). Here, DeWitt’s wordplay leads us to believe that Lucy’s past flame was just “puppy” love. Now, with Klara, he seems to have found the real thing.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Klara dubbed a beguiler? Is it a misnomer? If so, what is so important about the misnomer that it has been given the honor of a chapter title?

Discussion Question 2

Does Lucy really fall in love with Klara on this first night, or is this another instance of puppy love?

Discussion Question 3

Klara is the object of Lucy's affection, but she also has a vivid, rambunctious personality which is often (perhaps always) overlooked by Lucy in favor of her appearance. In what ways does her personality come through? How is her character built?

Vocabulary

shanty, clambered, ideal, prematurely, intuit, silhouette, corrosion, precipitated, conception, innate

Chapters 4 & 5: The Castle Von Aux & Enter Adolphus

Summary

“The Castle Von Aux” begins with Lucy waking up for his first full day at the castle. He finds Agnes, the cook, standing at the foot of his bed. She scolds him for not locking his door like Mr. Olderglough told him to, and when he asks why he has to lock his door, she says, “It’s not for nothing, and that’s all you need to know” (86).

Lucy goes down to the servants’ dining quarters and finds Mr. Olderglough. He tells him that he has adopted a dog. Mr. Olderglough admits that he keeps a bird, Peter, in his room in the hopes that its chirping might brighten his room, but the bird has been mute for years.

Mr. Olderglough tells Lucy that it is time to take the Baron’s letter to the train and to go to the market. Lucy goes to do as he had been told, and realizes that he is “enjoying the position, enjoying being told what to do, the marvelous simplicity of it” (92). As he waits in the entryway for Mr. Olderglough to bring him money for the market, though, he becomes bored, and decides to sneak a look at the Baron’s letter.

The letter is a very personal message from the Baron to his wife. He writes as if he expects an answer, although Mr. Olderglough has made it clear that the Baroness has never written back. The Baron asks if she has fallen out of love with him, and wonders if a confession of this sort would be an improvement on the “damning silence” (93). He asks why his memory is full of bad memories, while the good ones are fading, and then asks why he is even asking questions. After musing over how his days can be “so full of someone wholly absent” (93), he writes that a part of him hopes the Baroness has died. Her death would explain her absence, give him comfort, and “make it simpler” for him to die. “And yet I love you still and more, with every day that floats past” (93).

Lucy puts the letter down just as Mr. Olderglough arrives to give him the money. Leaving the castle, Lucy realizes that he has lost his cap. He makes his way down to the village, and spots Memel and Mewe having a fight over a dead hare at the station. He turns from them and moves into position to deliver the Baron’s letter. Standing at the edge of the platform, he holds his hand up in the air and waits for the train to pass. The engineer reaches out and snatches the letter. Lucy turns to see Memel and Mewe standing behind him, holding the hare between them. They invite him to dinner again, but he declines and heads off to the market.

While Lucy tries (and fails) to haggle with the butcher, he runs into Klara. She asks why he is not coming to dinner, and he makes a series of excuses. Finally, he admits that he doesn’t want to be made a fool of.

That night, Lucy hears a noise at his door, which he has remembered to lock. A man calls out, asking Lucy why he is in his (the man's) room. Lucy calls back that it is his room. The man disappears. In the morning, he tells Mr. Olderglough about the occurrence. Mr. Olderglough, once again, remains tight-lipped.

Later that day, Mr. Olderglough brings Lucy a package. In it, is his lost cap, and a note from Klara. "It's because we like you that we tease you, Lucy. Please will you come and visit us? Your Klara" (108).

The next morning, Lucy travels to Listen to purchase a new suit befitting an undermajordomo. After he is fitted, Lucy spots a blue ladies' cape. He charges it to the castle's account, using his first effective lie, and heads back to Klara's house to give her the cape.

The next day, Lucy runs into Klara at the market as she is showing off the cape in the market. They talk about his past, and he fabricates most of it, claiming that Marina killed herself when Lucy refused to marry her. Klara believes his story, and she invites him back to her house. They decide to call the puppy Rose together. Klara admits that she has an ex-boyfriend named Adolphus.

Lucy goes back to the castle, quite late, and is disturbed by a sound coming from behind the stairs. Rose goes to investigate first, and Lucy follows. He finds a man, crouched down like a beast, chewing on a small animal. Lucy fears it must be Rose, but it is a rat. Lucy passes out from revulsion.

When he wakes up, he is again greeted by Agnes. He tells her what he saw in the night. She suggests that he ought to go home because he is in danger, and even gives him money for a train ticket. Lucy refuses but keeps the money. Agnes tells him that Mr. Broom is dead and that the man from the night before was the Baron.

Lucy goes down to the village to see Klara, but is instead greeted by the exceptionally handsome soldier. He is holding Klara's cape in his hands. The chapter ends and "Enter Adolphus" begins with Lucy and Adolphus having a conversation about Klara. Adolphus gives Lucy the cape and tells him that he is not to give it to Klara again, and then explains that he and Klara are to be married after he finishes his war campaign.

Lucy leaves and finds Klara in the market. She has been crying. Lucy returns to the castle to pack and leave, but he finds another letter from the Baron. In the letter, the Baron writes that he longs for suicide, but that he pledges to wait for his wife's return or to die waiting. The Baron's letter fills Lucy with shame, and he decides to stay. He goes back to Klara's house and gives her the cape, then tells her that he loves her and that she cannot marry Adolphus. She invites Lucy inside.

The next day, Lucy decides to write a letter to the Baroness on behalf of the Baron. The moment the engineer snatches the letter out of his hand, Lucy has a premonition that he ought not to have written the letter.

Analysis

In this chapter, we get a bit of a return to the old “Lucy the Liar.” Our fickle protagonist contradicts himself when he muses about what a wonderful thing it is to be a servant and then immediately disobeys a direct order. The narrator informs us that: “He knew he must not do this, that it was in direct opposition to what Mr. Olderglough had told him, but the desire grew and grew further, and soon he gave into it” (92). The reason given for Lucy’s disobedience is a “candid boredom” (92). And so we see that the moment Lucy is bored he once again slips into his old ways.

But this time Lucy does not turn back into a performer. Instead, he finds entertainment in the form of the Baron’s letter. Before opening the forbidden letter, he “scan[s] the shopping list but this offered nothing in the way of entertainment” (92). The letter, however, is much more literary than a shopping list. It is poetic and romantic and full of angst and unrequited love. And, in this scene, we see the text comment once again on the nature of literature and the role of entertainment within it.

The letter gives us the best look into the Baron’s psyche we will ever get. Because DeWitt has made such a mystery of the Baron, the letter, which answers many of the questions posed over the past couple of chapters, is gratifying. Like Lucy, who “read this in a rush, and then again, more slowly” (93), the reader is hungry for information regarding the Baron. It is in the letter that he becomes a truly tragic, Heathcliff-type character, taken right out of a Gothic Romance.

And, with this letter, the Baron becomes less of a potential antagonist for our protagonist to conquer, and more of a hero in his own right. The language of the letter is poetic and sincere, and the love the Baron feels for his wife feels genuine in a way Lucy’s love for Klara, or Marina, never do. Like Nick in The Great Gatsby, our hero Lucy seems to suddenly find himself on the sidelines of a grand love.

Lucy realizes that the Baron’s emotions are more genuine than his own have ever been, and is envious of it. DeWitt writes: “he found himself feeling envious of the Baron’s heartsickness, which was surely superior to any he had experienced. This jealousy struck him as childish, and yet he was not ashamed of it” (93). Here, we also see a return to theme of envy.

In the last chapter, we saw two rats fighting in the scullery, and in this chapter we see more symbolism involving animals. We witness Memel and Mewe engaged in a fierce argument over a dead hare. They cannot come to an agreement on whose snare the hare was caught in. “The pair wrestled about in the snow, pulling at the hare and gritting their teeth and damning each other in the most base and common manner” (96). This mirrors the fight men are continually fighting over women in this novel, and the dead hare mirrors the women who are being fought over like dead meat.

Clothing figures prominently in this chapter. Lucy takes a trip to get fitted for a new suit. He will not be able to pick it up for a few weeks, but it is in the process of being made. The suit represents his new and emerging self. He is no longer Lucy from Bury, but

Lucy the undermajordomo. Moreover, he is now able to lie well enough to get the shopkeeper to add the cape to the castle's tab. Klara is given the blue cape by Lucy to replace her old rag of a coat. When he places the cape around her shoulders, Lucy is, essentially, claiming her as his own. Both characters undergo a transformation that is symbolized by the changing of their outfits.

We have our first glimpse of the Baron, and he does not make a pretty picture. The scene in which the mad man is squatting, in the dark, chewing on a live rat is so at odds with the poetic romance of the letter that it seems like two different characters. Like Mr. Olderglough, who fills to separate roles, the Baron is also a split between a romantic hero and a monster, a split which is not altogether unheard of within the fairytale genre, although not even Bell's Beast was ever caught eating live rats.

The second letter does more than entertain Lucy, it inspires him. On the verge of abandoning the castle and his fledgling relationship with Klara, Lucy finds the letter. After reading the Baron's declaration of eternal pain and suffering on behalf of the Baroness, Lucy is filled with shame. Instead of wallowing in it, he takes action and goes immediately to profess his love to Klara. Here, we see the text commenting on another aspect of literature: moral guidance. All fairytales have morals, after all, and one of their primary functions is instruction.

Discussion Question 1

We are given access to three letters in these chapters: two from the Baron to the Baroness, and one from Klara to Lucy. What do the letters add to the novel? How do they develop character and plot? Why is the letter Lucy writes to the Baroness not included?

Discussion Question 2

How can the Baron from the letters be the same man as the monster under the stairs? What does this split in his character do for the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Who is the antagonist in the novel? The Baron? Adolphus? Explain.

Vocabulary

unheralded, feral, cretinous, gusto, slavishly, capstone, endeavor, compounded, gristle

Chapters 6 & 7: Lucy and Klara in Love & The Location, Apprehension, and Restoration to Normality of the Baron

Summary

As the title suggests, “Lucy & Klara in Love” details the young lovers as they begin their romance in earnest. Weeks pass and Spring arrives. Lucy spends his days working at the castle and his nights with Klara. One day, he asks Klara what they should do about Adolphus. He offers to fight him, and Klara says that would be “unwise” (143). Lucy says that he could fight Adolphus and win if he pictured the soldier in bed with Klara. Klara says that she never slept with Adolphus. Lucy asks who her first lover was, if not Adolphus.

Another interlude ensues, this one entitled “The Inveigling of Klara by the Strange Eastern Stranger, Godless Corrupter.” In the interlude, we learn how the stranger came to town to sell merchandise in the market. He approached Klara and kissed her hand. She was attracted to him, but unsure what to do with her feelings. After a few days of heated flirtation, the two head off to a field together and make love.

The interlude ends, and we return to the present moment, where Lucy is not at all happy. A wasp is caught in a spider’s web. The spider approaches the wasp, and the wasp stings the spider in the face, killing it. Lucy is displeased and offended. He kills the spider. Klara is disgusted. The next day Lucy apologizes and they never “speak of the spider or the strange Eastern stranger again” (153).

A village woman falls ill, and Lucy and Klara play house with her infant daughter for a few days. One morning, Lucy wakes up with a brilliant idea. He brings a mirror to the bird Peter, and the bird, full of joy at seeing what he thinks is a friend, lets out a song. Mr. Olderglough is delighted.

Lucy is intimidated by the “sadness” (156) he sees in Klara. She often disappears into the forest to be alone and think. One day, Lucy follows her. He sees her weeping. That night, Klara is morose. The next morning, Lucy learns that Adolphus has been wounded in the war.

Lucy goes to the train to deliver the Baron’s letter. Only, this time, the engineer drops a letter into Lucy’s raised hand. Lucy runs to the castle and gives the letter to Mr. Olderglough and Agnes. The majordomo reads the letter and announces that the Baroness is coming. Agnes is upset. Mr. Olderglough says that there is worse news: The Duke and Duchess, and the Count and Countess, are coming two days after the Baroness will arrive. After a brief panic, Mr. Olderglough decides that they must bring the dormant castle “back to life” (163).

Their first task begins as the well-titled “The Location, Apprehension, and Restoration to Normality of The Baron” begins. Lucy waits in his room with the door unlocked. When the Baron appears, Mr. Olderglough comes in and knocks him out. They tie him to his bed and wait for his madness to subside. The madness comes and goes for a few days, and then, finally, the Baron is untied, shaved, and given a bath.

After the Baron has been returned to normality, Lucy and the other servants proceed to bring the castle back to life. On the night before the Baroness is set to return, Lucy watches the Baron speak to himself in the courtyard.

Analysis

In “The Inveigling of Klara by the Strange Eastern Stranger, Godless Corrupter,” we are treated to a backstory of one of our main characters, rather than a separate story as in “Eirik and Alexander.”

The interlude is essential to Klara’s development as a character. Up until now, her primary function has been acting the object of Lucy’s affection. The narrator, though omniscient, never delves into her mind. We only see her through Lucy’s gaze. But, with this interlude, we see a Klara unfiltered by Lucy. To Lucy, Klara is all light and cherry blossoms and purity. But in this interlude, she is bold and reckless, sexually deviant, and proud of it. Of course, Lucy fabricated quite a few details of his own past, and it is possible that Klara has done the same, but there is no hard evidence for this.

The interlude contains another misnomer in its title. The stranger is dubbed the “Godless Corrupter.” But the stranger does not corrupt Klara. On the contrary, Klara seeks out the stranger in the hopes of sleeping with him. These repeated misnomers indicate a certain unreliability on the narrator’s part.

There is yet another example of animal symbolism when the wasp gets caught in the spider’s web. The incident occurs directly after Klara has told Lucy her story. The spider is killed when the wasp stings it. The spider represents Klara, who—not innocent—has spun a beguiling web and caught a wasp (the stranger). The wasp penetrates the spider, and kills it, just as Klara is inveigled by the stranger. Lucy is “displeased, even offended” (152), and squashes the spider with his boots. This upsets Klara, who recognizes that Lucy has not killed a spider, but her strange Eastern lover.

But animals can and do represent better things in this novel. Right after the wasp and spider scene, Lucy gives Peter the bird a mirror. The bird sings when he sees his reflection. Just like Lucy, all the bird needed was someone else to be happy. Here, the novel concentrates on developing the romantic plot.

The triangle between Klara, Lucy, and Adolphus is told through the perspective of Lucy alone. But there is some doubt as to Klara’s true feelings. She insists that Adolphus is not a bad man. When Lucy asks her what it is that Adolphus wants, Klara says that he wants to be a hero. When Adolphus is wounded in battle and Klara hears the news, she becomes gloomy and morose.

There is no actual, specific magic in the novel, but the Baron seems to be brought back from total insanity by a magical force. So, too, is the castle turned from a haunted mansion into an enchanted palace. Here, the novel most closely resembles a fairytale.

And the Baron, rather than a monster or a Gothic hero, becomes a sort of Prince Charming. Groomed and cleaned, he is now handsome. But, more than that, Lucy describes him as “the most alluring sort of gentleman imaginable” (179). This new development further splits the Baron’s character, placing him firmly into three separate roles.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Klara’s interlude similar to “Eirik and Alexander?” In what ways is it different? Why has DeWitt included these sections?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Klara cry in the forest? Is she upset about Adolphus? Does she still love him? Does this mean she is not in love with Lucy?

Discussion Question 3

The repeated misnomers in the titles of chapters and interludes create a certain unreliability in regards to our narrator. In what other ways is he unreliable? What does this do for the novel?

Vocabulary

inveigling, dormant, countenance, boon, danseur noble, behemoth, accoutrements, personified, commiserative, meticulous

Chapter 8 & 9: The Baroness Von Aux (185-209) & Chapter 9: The Count & Countess, Duke & Duchess (213-248)

Summary

“The Baroness Von Aux” begins with Lucy and Mr. Olderglough at the station, standing back and watching the Baron, flowers in hand, as he watches for the train containing his wife, which is late. The Baron believes the Baroness herself has made the train late just to spite him, and that she will arrive with a “handsome young valet at her side” (185). After the “fiasco with Broom” (185), the Baron says, he would not put anything past her.

Lucy asks again about Mr. Broom, and Mr. Olderglough finally comes clean. “A wickedness took hold of him, so that his position became untenable” (186). Lucy asks how he died, and Mr. Olderglough says that he fell down the Very Large Hole.

The train arrives and the Baroness steps out. Lucy is afraid of her. The Baron drops to his knees and weeps. She takes off a glove and strokes the Baron’s hair. The Baron rises and the two embrace, then take off for the castle.

Another interlude, entitled “Memel’s Lesson to the Children” ensues. Lucy goes to Klara’s house and finds Memel sick in bed and surrounded by a group of village children. Memel tells the story of how he went to the market in Listen with his father to sell the family cow for food to get his family through the winter when he was a child. The father made a large profit, and so decided to treat the young Memel to a night in a hotel in the town.

On the way to the hotel, Memel got lost. His father found him. “You mustn’t cry, my Memel. Don’t you know I would never leave you on your own? His father assured Memel that he was safe. The father and son arrived at the inn and sat down for dinner in the tavern. A man came up to them and pretended as if he knew Memel’s father, who was confused by the man. The man pretended to be embarrassed and then left, winking at Memel on the way out. In the morning, Memel’s father realized that he had been robbed. Although Memel admits to feeling sorry for his father, and scared for his family, he also felt “a curious sympathy or kinship with the thief” (196). Memel tells the children that he soon after decided to become a thief, and that he has never regretted it. He tells the children that if they want something, they have to take it.

The interlude ends, and Lucy and Klara speak. He asks her about Adolphus, and she apologizes, but will not say anything else. They drink some wine and have a nice night together, and Lucy hopes that all is back to normal.

He returns to the castle and serves the Baroness breakfast in her bedroom. The two talk about books, and then the letter that Lucy sent her. As she does her hair and makeup, she asks Lucy to feed her. He does. She asks him to go on a walk with her.

Another interlude begins, this one entitled “The Very Large Hole.” The Baroness walks Lucy out to the hole, which turns out to be a sort of canyon. She tells him that Mr. Broom’s death was not an accident, and admits that she and Mr. Broom used to come to a nearby field together. Lucy asks her why she has returned, but she does not answer.

The interlude ends and “The Count & Countess, Duke & Duchess” begins. Before the guests arrive, Mr. Olderglough tells Lucy that Lucy must look after the Count and Countess, while Mr. Olderglough himself will take care of the Duke and Duchess. Mr. Olderglough admits that he has arranged their duties this way because, while neither couple is “desirable company” (213), the Count and Countess are the worse, and Mr. Olderglough is too old to deal with them. He warns Lucy to be on his guard: “They answer to no one. They never have, and they never will” (214).

Lucy and the majordomo wait at the station. The train arrives and the two couples disembark. The Count and Countess are corpulent and foul-tempered. The Count tips Lucy and the porter with coins of no value.

Back at the castle, Lucy draw a bath for the Count, who has asked Lucy to bring him a secret snack. While in the bath, he asks Lucy to describe the tart which will be served at dinner. He asks for his snack, and Lucy attempts to take the salami out of his sleeve, where he has hidden it, but the Countess comes into the bathroom before he can manage it.

Lucy and Mr. Olderglough gossip about their guests before dinner is served. The Duke and Duchess are much like the Count and Countess, only more attractive. Mr. Olderglough tells Lucy he is proud of him, and Lucy is touched. Mr. Olderglough tells Lucy that Agnes has hired Klara to help out in the kitchen for the night. Lucy finds her dressed in a maid’s uniform. He finds himself falling in love with her over again.

Dinner is served and, as more and more wine is consumed, the party turns raucous. Lucy notices that the Count has an eye for Klara. The Baron tells the Count that Klara is taken, and the Baron jests that they ought to duel at dawn. Lucy imagines what it would be like to stab the man.

Lucy finds Klara in the hall, and they sneak off into the ballroom for a quick and passionate session. Klara leaves first, but, before Lucy can get out, the party moves into the ballroom. Caught with his pants down, Lucy hides behind a curtain and watches. The Count walks in, carrying the tart, puts it on the table, and punches it through the center.

Another interlude, “The Strange and Terrible Ballroom Goings-On,” begins. Having smashed the tart, the Count grinds it into the rug with his shoes. The Baron and Baroness are amused. The Count picks up a fistful of tart and slaps his wife with it. The

Countess takes the plate of tart up and gives it to the Duke, who asks the Count's permission and then hits the Countess with another fistful of tart.

The party begins to undress. Lucy is shocked to see the Baron and Baroness participating. The Duke leads the naked Countess to the Baron. She gives him the tart and the Baron asks the Baroness what he should do. The Baroness scoops up some of the tart and puts it in his hand. He slaps the Countess, lightly, and the others tell him he must hit her harder. He does. Then, "there came a phase of general copulation among the partygoers" which lasts longer than Lucy can tell. The salami falls out of his sleeve, and the Count picks it up and beats the Duchess with it as they couple.

The orgy ends, and the Baroness climbs onto the table. A lit candle is placed in her rear-end, and the men light their cigars from the candle.

When the cigars have been smoked, the party clears out, and Lucy is able to leave. He runs into Agnes and asks where Klara is. Agnes says Klara is in the scullery with the Count. Lucy runs to the scullery and finds the Count attacking Klara. Lucy hits the count with a marble pestle, knocking out all his teeth.

In the morning, the Count has no memory of Lucy hitting him, and the other members of the castle assume that the Count tripped sometime in the night. The Count and Countess decide to go home early, and the Duke and Duchess fall in line. The Baroness is most upset by this, and locks herself in her room.

Mr. Olderglough tells Lucy that he does not believe the Count fell. It is implied that the majordomo knows what Lucy did, and is proud. He gives Lucy the day off. Lucy goes to Klara's house and finds a crowd surrounding it. Adolphus is in the front, injured and barely able to walk. Klara takes him inside. Lucy walks away.

Analysis

In "The Baroness Von Aux" the Baron is finally reunited with his wife, but all is not happily-ever-after for the couple. Although he has been turned into a Prince Charming over the past couple of chapters, the Baron is not the protagonist of the story, just a member of a subplot. As such, the novel does not center around the fulfilment of his desires. Although the plot has been gearing up toward a happy reunion, with the castle coming back to life and the Baron becoming handsome and sane, a twist takes the story elsewhere. "I for one," the Baroness tells Lucy, "find it an annoyance when a story doesn't do what it's meant to" (201). Here, DeWitt shows us that he is quite aware of his own manipulation of standard fairytale tropes.

Mr. Broom's fate foreshadows Lucy's own. As his predecessor, Mr. Broom is a sort of double for Lucy. And, although Lucy admits to being "afraid"(188) of her, there is a certain chemistry between Lucy and the Baroness that mirrors the affair that occurred between the Baroness and the former undermajordomo. The Baroness asks Lucy to feed her, which, given what occurs in the ballroom, is an almost sexual act. Also, she brings Lucy to the place where she and Mr. Broom used to meet. But, although Lucy

dangles on the precipice of falling into the Baroness's "large hole," he is saved by his love for Klara, who acts as a foil for the Baroness, light where she is dark, pure where she is corrupted.

But at the dinner, Klara becomes another person. Dressed up in her elegant maid's costume, she is no longer a simple, sweet village girl. "Here was Klara, only a wholly separate version of her, all the more elegant and feminine, and as Lucy absorbed the unprecedented dream of beauty, then did he feel himself falling in plummeting love a second time" (222). When the couple meets in the ballroom, Klara is sexually aggressive and Lucy remarks that she was "possessed by some spirit he hadn't yet known" (228).

Like Klara, not to mention Mr. Olderglough and the Baron himself, the Baroness is also given duel personalities. When Lucy first sees her portrait, he imagines she is a frightened swan. But when she gets off the train: "Her face was sublimely beautiful, and yet there was a darkness residing in her eyes, a cold remove, and Lucy knew that the woman in the painting was not she who stood before them."

The text is clearly playing with the Madonna/Whore complex in regards to these two female characters as a comment on the absurdity of the mutual exclusivity of the concept. Neither woman has a split personality. The Madonna Baroness is one that exists in Lucy's imagination alone, created at a glance at her portrait. And the Madonna Klara is one that exists in Lucy's lovesick heart. The Klara of the ballroom is, after all, very similar to the Klara of the interlude "The Inveigling of Klara by the Strange Eastern Stranger, Godless Corrupter," in which the girl tells her own story.

But, while Klara's sexuality is simply a bit more aggressive than Lucy expects of the girl he loves, the Baroness is, almost inarguably, a corrupted and evil character. She invites the two couples over and sets the "Strange and Terrible Ballroom Goings-On" in motion. Note that her beauty is described as "strange and terrible" (222) a few pages earlier. And, although Mr. Olderglough had previously commended her character, describing her as a "light in a dark place" (54) the first time he took Lucy into the ballroom, it becomes clear now that the only light the Baroness brings to the castle is in the form of a twisted ritual involving cigars and a well-placed candle.

Although the Baroness invites the couples, it is actually Lucy who sets the whole series of events in motion. Just as in a fairytale, Lucy must pay for breaking an order. Like Bluebeard's wife, Lucy cannot help his curiosity and so opens the Baron's letter. Reading the Baron's letter compels him to write to the Baroness, which brings her back to the castle. Despite the regret he feels after delivering the letter, there is no way to escape the consequence of his disobedience.

And the consequences are grotesque. The Count and Countess, Duke and Duchess, are veritable embodiments of lust and gluttony. The Count's motto, which he learned from his father, is "A modesty of appetite represents a paucity of heart" (218). That lust and gluttony are combined within these four characters, and given such grotesque features, is the novel's way of commenting on the darker side of love. Much of the novel

has been a romance, following the relationship between Klara and Lucy, preparing for the reunion between the Baron and the Baroness, but the novel is not a romance because the text is all too aware that romance is easily, and possibly always, corrupted and turned from puppies and walks through meadows to something closer to the goings-on in the Ballroom, either through jealousy or spite or boredom.

The novel also uses the scene in the Ballroom to comment on entertainment in literature. At many points in the text, the content seems to suggest that entertainment is essential to literature. But in the ballroom, “It struck Lucy that they were each of them watching the scenario as though it were some type of entertainment or diversion; and indeed, judging by their rapt faces, their reverent silence, that is precisely what it was for them” (234-235). The grotesque nature of the entertainment seems to suggest a step-back from the claim that entertainment is vital to a work of literature. The abridged message might look something like: entertainment is one essential element of literature, but it is not the only thing that counts.

In terms of class, the ballroom scene serves to separate the nobility from the other characters with an irreparable chasm. Up until this scene, the Baron and Baroness seem just like anyone else in the story. Perhaps they are better looking and better dressed, and the Baron is a little more mad and eccentric than a servant could get away with, but their characters are not foreign or alien. With this scene, they become something “other,” and none of them can ever come back from the change.

Mr. Olderglough warns Lucy to watch out for the noble couples because they answer to no one, which contradicts (or, at least, complicates) his earlier statement about the villagers being dangerous because they have no god. If the villagers are dangerous in this way, then so too are the nobility, leaving only the castle staff as good, God-fearing citizens.

But, in “Memel’s Lesson to the Children,” Memel claims that he does indeed have a God. “All through my apprenticeship and my eventual mastery of the art of thieving, you may be interested to learn I never for a moment misplaced my religion. In actuality, I became more devout all the while, though my God was not the God of my elders. For it has always been unattractive to me that He should reward His servants for drudge work—indeed, that He should desire servants in the first place. Being dissatisfied with their God, then, I created a God of my own, and mine was not one to honor labor, but one who repaid the bold” (197). And it is no coincidence that, shortly after hearing this speech, Lucy defies his role as servant in a major way by knocking out all of the Count’s teeth in the first of his bold, violent actions.

Although these chapters are tense and twisted, there is an element of light that shines through: the growing friendship between Lucy and Mr. Olderglough. Having put the castle and the Baron back into shape together, the men are now closer than mentor and mentee. Mr. Olderglough acts as a pseudo-father for Lucy’s. The old man tells Lucy that he has been impressed with the boy’s character and actions over the past few months, and, when Lucy knocks out the Count’s teeth, the loyal servant is proud of him for standing up to the noble.

Discussion Question 1

Memel's father is robbed by a thief, and his family is thrust into poverty because of it. Why does Memel admire and imitate the thief?

Discussion Question 2

Why has the Baroness invited her friends over after such a long absence from the Baron?

Discussion Question 3

The Count & Countess embody gluttony. Are there any other characters who act as symbols? Which ones? How do they function in the text?

Vocabulary

corpulent, raucous, promenade, settee, peculiarity, cutlery, timorous, peripherally, apprehensive, pruning

Chapters 10, 11, & 12: A Blue Boy, Mr. Broom & Tomas the Gambler & Lucy, Liberated

Summary

A week goes by and Lucy does not speak to Klara. The Baron and Baroness retire to their separate rooms and stay there. One day. Lucy watches Klara and Adolphus speak through his telescope. She strokes the soldier's cheek and Lucy's heart is broken.

Lucy takes to bed and refuses to get up. Mr. Olderglough tries to talk the boy out of his depression, but to no avail. Memel, still sick, comes to take Lucy out for a walk. At first, Lucy says he is "too sad" (255) to go anywhere, but Memel convinces him. They go to the cemetery and Memel shows Lucy the gravestone of his wife. Memel tells Lucy he will soon join her, and that he has already written his epitaph. He asks Lucy what his gravestone will say, but Lucy does not know. Memel tells Lucy that Klara's mother did the same thing to Memel that Klara is now doing to Lucy.

Another interlude, "How it Came to Pass That Memel Murdered his Bosom Confidant, Tomas" begins. In the interlude, we learn that Memel found his best friend, Tomas, in bed with his wife, Alida. The two friends went out to the Very Big Hole to talk. They threw rocks into the Hole like they did when they were boys, and then they agreed that they must leave the decision up to Alida. Tomas began to cry and said he hoped they could remain friends. Memel pushed Tomas into the hole. We return to the present moment, and Memel reveals that Mewe is Tomas's son.

That night, Lucy decides that his best course of action is to murder Adolphus. The next day, Lucy lures the soldier out to the Very Big Hole. Lucy tries to push him in, but Adolphus dodges and Lucy falls instead. He hits water, and shortly hears the voices of two men as they pull him out. They ask him if he likes fish. The next chapter, "Mr. Broom & Tomas the Gambler" begins, and we learn the identity of the men in the hole. Neither Mr. Broom nor Tomas is dead. They have been living in the Hole, surviving on raw fish. They have tried to escape twice, but the only way out is a maze of tunnels.

Neither men is keen on another escape. They nearly died the last time, but Lucy tells Mr. Broom that the Baroness has reunited with the Baron, and he tells Tomas that he has a son named Mewe. The men decide to try to get out of the Hole, but they cannot decide on a plan. Another interlude, "The specifics of the Method of Departure and Escape from the Very Large Hole" begins .Lucy bites into the belly of a dead fish. Roe explodes onto his face, and an idea comes to him.

The men tie a string to a fish in the hopes that, since it is spawning, it will lead them up river and out of the Hole. The men embark on their dark, wet, and dangerous journey.

They wade upstream through the river in complete darkness for days. Lucy loses his companion, and his fish, but he sees a light up ahead.

“Lucy Liberated,” the final chapter, begins, as Lucy escapes from the Hole. He walks to the village, intent on killing Adolphus, and finds that the soldier has died in an explosion. Mewe tells him that Klara has left town for the ocean with the Baroness, and Memel has died.

Lucy goes to the castle and says goodbye to Mr. Olderglough, who professes that he will remain at the castle, despite the Baron’s surefire return to his previous state now that the Baroness has left again. The majordomo tells Lucy he thinks of him as a son, and claims that he wishes to spend the rest of his life looking out a window. Finally, Lucy says goodbye to the Baron and leaves the castle forever.

Lucy gets on a train and heads to the ocean. On the train, he meets Father Raymond, who is headed to back to Bury from Listen. The two chat, and when they reach Bury, Lucy sees the stranger who saved his life. Father Raymond says that the stranger is just a simpleton who mops the church floors. Father Raymond gets off the train and Lucy is left alone. He asks the conductor for a pencil and pen, and then writes out his epitaph: “His heart was a church of his own choosing,/ and the lights came through/ the colorful windows” (317).

Analysis

Lucy is inspired by Memel’s story. Just as the Baron’s letter compelled Lucy to profess his love to Klara, and Memel’s first story compelled Lucy to hit the Count, so too does the story of Memel and Tomas propel Lucy to the Very Large Hole in the hopes of pushing Adolphus in. In this we see the text’s final comment on the instructional value of literature, especially of the moral variety as seen in a traditional fairytale. DeWitt twists this tradition, of course, by having the moral of Memel’s story be the immoral suggestion that Lucy ought to go murder an innocent man in cold blood.

But for Memel, who is near on his deathbed, his suggestion is not immoral. His God, remember, is the one that rewards the bold. He believes men must take what they want. In his eyes, it would be immoral not to murder a nemesis. Winning back the girl, however, is not in Memel’s agenda. When he kills Tomas, it is to repay a debt to a friend who has betrayed him. Alida dies in childbirth soon after, and Memel makes little mention of his wife. In fact, the story he tells is entirely about Tomas; Alida is mentioned once.

And, while Mr. Olderglough has acted the mentor from the start, it is Memel who turns out to be Lucy’s best and truest teacher. Although Mr. Olderglough claims Lucy as his own son, and professes that he is proud of the boy in the way a father might be expected to praise his own son at the end of an arduous journey in a traditional myth, it is Memel who shapes Lucy into the man he becomes at the end of the novel, not Mr. Olderglough.

When Lucy falls into the Very Big Hole, he is entering the belly of the beast. While the Hole is not an actual beast, but a geographic location, the setting is cold and damp and not unlike the insides of a giant whale. Adding to this is the image of Lucy biting into the belly of this fish. The escape from the hole is the most trying task of the entire novel. And, when Lucy makes his way out of the labyrinth and into the light, he is essentially reborn in a manner Memel would find most befitting. He goes to Klara's house armed with a rock, ready to kill Adolphus and take what is his or die trying. Lucy is not given the chance to carry out his mission, which frustrates the revenge-plot, but allows Lucy to remain a hero.

The escape scene also introduces the final genre into the novel. Although it is a bit late in the game, DeWitt ends his book with a daring escape that would be more at home in an adventure tale than a Gothic romance.

While Klara has been playing the Damsel In Distress for quite a few chapters, starting with the Count's attack and ending when Adolphus returns out of the blue and seemingly forces her to take him in, in the end we see that she is able to solve her own problems. After she thinks Lucy is dead, but before Adolphus dies, she calls off the engagement with Adolphus and sends him away, verifying that she had the power to choose which suitor she wanted all along. And in the end Klara leaves town with Baroness. This cements their connection and turns the two into a pair of doubles rather than foils for one another.

Discussion Question 1

Adolphus dies before Lucy can slay his enemy. What does this disruption of the vendetta-plot do for the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Memel's story about Tomas is another example of male competition over a female. How is this one different from all the others? How is it the same? Why is it included?

Discussion Question 3

What does it say about Klara that she leaves town with the Baroness?

Vocabulary

burlap, accumulating, penchant, apace, rendered, tedious, askew, transient, quivered, diligence, outcropping, spawning, demoralized, roe

Characters

Lucien “Lucy” Minor

Lucy is the 17-year-old protagonist of our novel. Tall, pale, and “pretty,” the boy is on a quest to find something meaningful. After a near-death experience in which a mysterious stranger gives him his life back, Lucy sets off to the Castle Von Aux in order to become the undermajordomo.

As his new, exciting life begins, Lucy meets a series of oddball characters, including a pair of thieves, a band of soldiers, and a mad Baron. Along the way, he meets and falls in love with Klara, a village girl whose father is the local thief. After Lucy wins her affections and the couple seems destined for a happily-ever-after, her ex-boyfriend, Adolphus, returns from war and pushes Lucy out of the picture.

To get revenge, and win Klara back, Lucy plots to murder Adolphus. For, although he is our hero, Lucy has a fatal flaw: the tendency toward jealous rage. Time and time again the reader watches as evil thoughts flare up within the boy when others take or are given things that he wants. From his mother renting out his room to his partners being stolen away by other men, Lucy cannot stand to be denied his wants.

And, like all fatal-flaws, Lucy’s jealousy gets him into trouble. It compels him to push Adolphus into The Very Large Hole, but Adolphus sidesteps Lucy and Lucy falls into the mysterious hole where two likewise jealous men from the village have, in the past, disappeared. Once in the hole, Lucy must find his way out, and when he finally does he sets out again to kill Adolphus, but Adolphus has already been killed in the war. Lucy sets off on an uncompleted journey to find his love, Klara, who, believing him dead, has left town.

Memel

Memel is the biological father of Klara and the adoptive father of Mewe. A thief and a trickster, Memel steals Lucy’s pipe over and over again, but he seems to genuinely like the boy and, at any rate, has no qualms about Lucy dating his daughter.

A thief by choice, Memel was raised by good, honest parents. He was close with his father who was, one day, robbed by a treacherous thief. Memel witnessed the robbery, and, although he felt pity for his father, became enraptured by the thief and, ever after, aspired to become just like him.

Toward the end of the book, Memel becomes sick and writes his own epitaph, which he shares with Lucy: “He wandered here and there over rolling hills./ He never saw the ocean but/ he dreamed of it often enough” (256).

Before he dies, he admits to Lucy that he once murdered a man: his best friend Tomas. Tomas had an affair with his wife, Alida. Memel, unable to abide the betrayal, pushed his friend into The Very Big Hole. Despite this, Memel raises Tomas's son, Mewe, like his own.

The Baron Von Aux

The Baron is mad. His first appearance is the middle of the night, and Lucy finds the Baron crouching beneath a staircase, chewing on a live rat. For half of the novel the Baron is a malignant presence hovering around the castle like a dark aura. He is the reason that the servants must lock their doors at night, and Lucy often hears him creeping about the halls.

But despite his monstrous appearance and behavior, the Baron writes a letter to the absent Baroness Von Aux every day and leaves the letter in the main hall. The letters are always passionate and eloquent and tragic.

When the Baroness agrees to come back to her castle, the Baron is restored by Lucy and Mr. Olderglough. He becomes a kind, civilized gentleman, and when he reunites with the Baroness he weeps and falls to his knees. Their relationship deteriorates when she invites their friends over for an orgy. In the end, the Baron is left again by his wife, and it is suggested that he will soon return to his feral state.

Klara

Klara is the object of Lucy's affections, the daughter of the thief Memel, and the half-sister of Mewe. As her name suggests, she is often associated with light. Klara is often placed in the role of damsel in distress. When Adolphus returns from war, he chases Lucy away and seems to force an engagement with Klara, who seems to have no say in the matter and is often seen wandering about town in tears.

Although she is primarily a romantic object in the story, Klara does have a spunky personality and the ability to banter back and forth with her father, her brother, and Lucy. At one point, she tells Lucy a story about losing her virginity to a stranger from the East, and Lucy is disturbed "by the pride with which Klara told this story; she was pleased with herself for having an adventuresome spirit" (152). The book ends with Lucy setting off to search for Klara, who has become a lady-in-waiting for the Baroness.

The Baroness

Absent for most of the novel, the Baroness returns when she hears that her husband is eating rats. She is depicted as a dark lady with cruel, twisted impulses.

The Stranger

The stranger appears in Lucy's room and sucks the pneumonia out of his ear and places it inside his father. At the end of the novel, Lucy spots the stranger in the train station, and Father Raymond explains that he is Frederick, a simpleton and a beggar who sweeps the church for bread.

Father Raymond

Father Raymond is the priest in Lucy's village. He reads Lucy his last rites, and then, when Lucy survives, secures our hero a position in the Castle Von Aux.

Mewe

Mewe is the bastard son of Memel and Klara's half-brother. Mewe was raised by Memel, and has taken after him in thievery.

Alida

Alida is Klara and Mewe's mother, wife of Memel, and lover of Tomas. Alida died while giving birth to her son.

Tomas

Memel's best friend, Tomas had an affair with Alida and was subsequently pushed into The Very Big Hole by Memel. Lucy meets Tomas in the hole.

Mr. Broom

The undermajordomo prior to Lucy, Mr. Broom had an affair with the Baroness and subsequently jumped into The Very Big Hole. Lucy also meets Mr. Broom in the hole.

Adolphus

Adolphus is a very handsome soldier. Previously engaged to Klara, he returns to steal her away from Lucy. Before he can marry her, he dies in combat.

Mr. Olderglough

The majordomo of the Castle Von Aux, Mr. Olderglough acts as Lucy's boss and as his guide. Fiercely loyal to the Baron, Mr. Olderglough refuses to leave the castle, despite the Baron's madness.

Agnes

Agnes was once a scullery maid, but she is now the chef in the Castle Von Aux. The only remaining employee, aside from Mr. Olderglough.

The Count & Countess

The Count and Countess are the worse of the two couples who come to the Castle Von Aux at the Baroness's request. They engage in an orgy with the Duke and Duchess, as well as the Baron and Baroness.

The Duke & Duchess

The Duke and Duchess are one of the couples who come to the Castle Von Aux at the Baroness's request. They engage in an orgy with the Count and Countess, as well as the Baron and Baroness.

Eirik

Eirik is a train engineer who is jealous of his coworker and ends up cutting off several of his coworker's fingers.

Alexander

Alexander is a train engineer who gets promoted ahead of his superior and subsequently gets his fingers cut off by a jealous coworker.

Marina

Marina is Lucy's first love. However, she spurns him and chooses another man. At the beginning of the book Lucy tells her lies to try and make her regret breaking up with him, but she ultimately does not believe him, exposes his lies, and makes fun of Lucy alongside her fiance.

Tor

Tor is Marina’s fiancé.

Lucy’s Mother

Lucy's mother resents her son for inadvertently causing the death of her husband. Lucy’s mother is not upset about his leaving home, and does not wait long to rent out his room.

Lucy’s Father

A godless man, Lucy’s father kicks Father Raymond out of the house and then dies from pneumonia.

Peter the Bird

Mr. Olderglough’s pet bird is named Peter the Bird. Mr. Olderglough got the bird in hopes of brightening up his room with its songs, but the bird stopped speaking when it was brought to the castle. Lucy eventually figures out that it is because the bird is lonely, so he brings a mirror to Mr. Oldeglough's room. When the bird sees it's own reflection, it becomes excited and thinks there is another bird - company - with it, so it starts singing again.

Rose the Dog

Lucy gets the dog from Memel and keeps her with him at the castle. Klara names her Rose. It is when Rose bursts out of the belly of a fish that Lucy is motivated enough to find his way out of the Very Big Hole toward the end of the novel.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Very Big Hole

The Very Big Hole is a symbol of desire. A gaping chasm on the outskirts of the village, the only people to ever fall inside the hole are those corrupted by a burning, ceaseless desire for various women.

The Hare

The hare acts as a symbol for women. Women are continually fought over in this novel. The hare is caught in a trap by either Memel or Mewe, neither can agree on this. The father and son get into a verbal argument over the dead animal, and things soon turn violent.

The War

The war is a symbol for senseless violence. The war is a backdrop for everything that takes place in the novel, including the picaresque, romantic, and fairytale inspired sections. While no details are ever given about the war, it is a symbol of the underlying violence that taints all the romance in this novel.

The Rats

The first time Lucy steps into the scullery, he spots a couple of rats fighting in the pantry -- yet another symbol of violence. When the Baron is first seen, he is eating a live rat. It serves to follow that the Baron has been consumed and poisoned by his insatiable desire for his missing wife, and by the violent rage that her absence has created within him.

The Spider

The spider is a symbol for Klara. Klara catches men with her good looks and clever plans, just as the spider catches the wasp. And, just as Klara is penetrated by the Eastern stranger, so too is the spider stabbed by the wasp.

The Wasp

The wasp is a symbol for the Eastern stranger. Caught by Klara’s charms, the Eastern stranger takes her to the meadow and deflowers her, just as the wasp is caught in the

spider's web. The wasp acts as a stand-in for the stranger when Lucy smashes it between his boots in an obvious show of rage.

The Cloak

The blue cloak is a symbol of Lucy's possession of Klara. When Adolphus returns to break apart the couple, it is the cloak he is most upset with. He takes the cloak from Klara and gives it back to Lucy. And, when Lucy decides to disobey Adolphus and profess his love for Klara, he brings her the cloak.

Lucy's Suit

Lucy's suit is a symbol of his coming of age. While he is fitted for the suit early in the novel, he does not get to wear it until much later.

Fish

The Very Big Hole is full of Fish. At first these fish represent a means of survival for the men who have been trapped in the cavern. But, when Lucy bites into one and roe explodes into his mouth and face, the fish become a symbol of female fertility. One fish, in particular, offers the only way out of the hole. This fish is a symbol of female love as salvation.

The Tart & The Salami

The tart is a symbol of complete and total gluttony and debasement, as is the salami. The scene in the ballroom begins with the Count smashing the tart, and ends with the Count beating the duchess with the salami as he couples with her as the other nobles watch.

Settings

Bury

This is the village where Lucy grew up. After his father dies and his girlfriend chooses another man, Lucy does not have much affection for the village. When he leaves, he reflects that he never quite belonged in the place.

The Castle Von Aux

The castle is in ruins when Lucy first arrives. Dark and cold and abandoned, the whole building is infected by the Baron's madness. Later, when the Baroness announces her return, the castle undergoes a magical transformation and becomes a place of warmth and joy.

The Village

The village is a bucolic hamlet of sorts. Directly opposed to the dark and gloomy castle, it is a place of light and joy. Children are constantly frolicking about, and it is the place where Lucy and Klara fall in love. Although Klara is said to live in a shanty, her shack is homey, and it is a place of solace and comfort for Lucy.

The Very Big Hole

The Very Big Hole houses a cavern-like pit in its depths. Dark and damp, the Hole is more desolate than the castle ever was. There is nothing but a river full of barely edible fish and a sandy shore that is always damp and cold. The river flows down into the pit. There is only one way out -- a labyrinthine maze of tunnels that goes on for miles and miles.

The Train

The train is the only means of transportation in the novel. Lucy uses it to travel from place to place on it. The two times he travels, he has important encounters. The first is with Memel, and the second is with Father Raymond.

Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Through the character of Lucy, the author comments on how one cannot be truly happy until they become comfortable with themselves and learn to love themselves for who they are. Lucy starts out as a rather pathetic character. He is prone to brooding, and must tell himself lies in order to cope with the tedious nature of his monotonous life. But the novel is, in part, shaped like a Bildungsroman, and, true to form, Lucy's character undergoes a drastic transformation from start to finish.

In the beginning of the novel, Lucy is a coward. When Memel and Mewe appear in the night and proceed to rob the passengers of the train, Lucy pretends to sleep so as to avoid a confrontation. But, by the time the novel ends, Memel's influence has turned Lucy into a man who is capable of murder. Not only is he capable, though, he is willing to set out a plan and venture to murder a man in cold blood.

In the beginning of the novel, Lucy was unable to tell a lie. He is repeatedly taunted and made a fool of whenever he tries to stretch the truth. But, by the end of the novel, he is as proficient a liar as could ever be. He convinces Klara of an almost completely falsified past. Also, he tricks a shopkeeper into giving him the cape that he uses to win Klara's love.

Perhaps the biggest transformation, however, is his ability to be alone and complete with himself. In the beginning of the novel, Lucy is constantly putting on a performance for his own sake. By the end, he is able to endure days alone in the dark blackness of the Hole. When he escapes, he puts the pipe, which is a symbol of his desire to perform, in Memel's pocket. He no longer needs it. After he leaves town, he finds himself alone on the train. Instead of ruminating on how he looks sitting on the train, as he once might have done, he asks the conductor for a pen and paper and writes his epithet. There is nothing false or put-on about this. Lucy has learned how to be a genuine person, rather than a performer in a play.

Love as Salvation

Throughout the novel, love is often seen as a means of salvation for various characters. The Baron is a complete wreck without his wife. Feral, covered in filth, subsisting on rats—the Baron is in need of salvation.

And, for a short time, he is saved. Mr. Olderglough and Lucy detain and restore the man. And perhaps the love of the loyal servant helps to get the Baron back into normality. But the real magic happens when the Baron learns that his wife is set to return.

The baron is groomed and bathed and dressed. His personality undergoes a transformation as drastic as the one happening in the castle around him, and he soon emerges from his madness like a butterfly from a cocoon. Lucy is in awe of the man: his manners, his voice, his movements. Everything about him is charismatic and noble. Alas, when the Baroness returns, he falls to his knees before her and weeps. She helps him up, and they walk to the castle together, but he never regains the special salvation the promise of her return and love ignited within him. For the reality of the Baroness is not love, but something darker, and so for the Baron there is no salvation.

When Lucy is in the midst of his romance with Klara, he is struck with the idea to bring a mirror for the bird Peter. When he gives the bird the mirror, the mute bird lets out a croak and begins to sing. The implication is that Peter was in need of a companion to save him from loneliness and ignite a song in his heart. For a short time, Mr. Olderglough's room is full of music and joy, just like the rest of the castle. But in the end Peter resumes his vow of silence. A mirror is not a companion, just a reflection. Love cannot exist without a real object, and so the bird is unable to attain salvation.

Mr. Broom, Tomas, and Lucy all venture to escape the Hole by pinning their hopes on a fish. The fish is a female, pregnant and instinctually driven to swim upriver. The fish is the only way out of the Hole. Mr. Broom and Tomas are lost along the way, but Lucy is saved by the fish, which represents fertility and love and Klara. He is led out of the Hole and into the light.

Desire as a Destructive Force

While love often seems to promise salvation for the characters in Undermajordomo Minor, it rarely delivers. Instead, what one imagines to be love is often desire, and desire is shown to be ultimately destructive, particularly to men.

The Baron is the first victim. While he professes to love his wife, and, indeed, writes her beautiful and poetic letters, there is some question as to whether it is possible to love someone one does not know. And, despite the Baron's lofty professions, he does not give any indication of understanding any of the Baroness's impulses or moods. He goes along with her whims, but in this he is more like a small child or animal than a companion. There is no true connection between the husband and wife, and so we can assume that much, if not all, of his obsession is fueled by desire. And this desire wrecks him. The first time she leaves, he becomes feral and starts eating rats. When she comes back, he turns again into an animal and engages in the orgy and is persuaded to hit the Duchess with tart smeared on his hand. When the Baroness leaves for the final time, he begins to devolve into his feral state.

Mr. Broom is another victim of desire and the Baroness. So consumed did he become with the woman that, when she broke off their affair, he threw himself into the hole, hoping to kill himself, because he could not abide the thought of not having her. It is his desire for her, which is reignited when Lucy tells him that she has reunited with the

Baron, that propels Mr. Broom to take another shot at escape. He dies trying, destroyed by his desire for a woman who only wanted him as a plaything.

Violent Competition

Almost all of the men in Undermajordomo engage in violent competition at one point or another. The first time we see this is in the interlude, “Eirik and Alexander.” The two engineers are not fighting over a woman. Eirik chops off Alexander’s fingers because the junior engineer was promoted ahead of Eirik.

After this, we see rats fighting over food, and father and son (Memel and Mewe) fighting over a dead hare. Soon after this, we see another sort of animal-themed violence. Right after Klara tells Lucy the story of losing her virginity. Unable to get his hands on the strange Eastern stranger, Lucy takes his rage out on the wasp, which is a stand-in for the “Godless corrupter.” The use of animals to foreshadow the violence that later takes place between men as they fight over women serves to underline the bestial nature of Violent Competition.

Memel is the first character who is violent in honor of a woman. When his best friend betrays Memel and sleeps with his wife, Memel is unable to staunch his desire to murder Tomas, so Memel pushes him into the Very Big Hole.

Soon after this, Lucy sets off to the Very Big Hole in the hopes of pushing Adolphus in. Alas, Adolphus dodges and Lucy falls instead. When Lucy emerges, he goes to find Adolphus, equipped with a rock in his hand.

It is no accident that the two actual attempted murders are almost wholly without violence. The real violence is to be found in the foreshadowing scenes, with animals and with the engineers. Lucy and Memel intend to push their victims, who fall soundlessly, without a scream, to a death far below the surface of the earth.

When Lucy emerges, he brings a rock with him to kill Adolphus. This conjures images more violent than anything yet seen in the novel, but Lucy’s plan is foiled when he learns that Adolphus has died in the war.

The soldier dies when an explosion goes off, which is a far more gruesome death than a plummet into a dark hole. The message seems to be that there are bigger, more important things in life than love and lust and competition. The war going on in the story is pushed to the background because all of the main characters are consumed by the state of their own sexual relationships.

Religion and God

While Undermajordomo is not a religious book, religion is not wholly absent from the text, either. The first chapter, in fact, features spiritual matters in a most prominent

manner. Lucy wonders if the stranger who saved his life (and murdered his father) was God.

The village priest, Father Raymond, rejects this idea, and suggests that maybe the stranger was a marauder. While Father Raymond is kind and helpful when it comes to practical matters, like employment, he does little to guide Lucy spiritually.

But, soon after this, Lucy does meet a marauder, and this thief turns out to be instrumental in shaping his outlook on life and God and morality. The thief, of course, is Memel. Mr. Olderglough warns Lucy about the thief, stating that villagers can be dangerous because they do not have a God, and men without God have no reason to treat their fellow men well.

This turns out to be part true. Memel, although he is friendly with Lucy, continually steals his pipe. Of course, the pipe is a tool uses to pretend to be someone other than who he is, so one might argue that Memel was only trying to do Lucy a favor by taking the pipe.

But Mr. Olderglough was wrong when he claimed that the villagers, and Memel in particular, have no God. For Memel does have a God, and he confesses to being quite close with this God, who, he claims, is the God who rewards the bold.

Lucy takes this religious philosophy to heart, and becomes bold himself. He knocks out the teeth of the Count and attempts, twice, to murder Adolphus. After Memel is dead, Lucy embarks on a journey to find Klara.

He meets Father Raymond on the train. The priest still has no valuable advice to give, but when the train pulls into Bury, Lucy sees the stranger who saved his life. Father Raymond tells him that the man is just a simpleton who cleans the church floors.

This suggests that any hope of the sort of religion prescribed by Father Raymond is gone. The man that Lucy once thought might be God is nothing but a simpleton. Lucy is right in heeding Memel’s words and endeavoring to be bold. Thief though he might have been, Memel was not ever anything as a simpleton mopping floors in an empty church.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The narrator only uses his powers of omniscience on special occasions. For most of the novel, he stays quite close to the protagonist. And, while the narrator is not unreliable in the traditional sense, his close connection with Lucy makes many of his statements and observations biased to the point where the reader is unsure what to believe and what to disregard as nonsense.

Language and Meaning

There is nothing modern about the language of Undermajordomo Minor. The unnamed, omniscient narrator delights in old-fashioned phrases and outdated vocabulary. Characters live in “shanties” rather than houses, “villages” instead of cities, and “castles” instead of mansions. This sort of language is essential to the atmosphere of the novel, which is meant to be timeless and have the overall feel of a fairytale.

DeWitt also uses language to build character. Countless pages are dedicated to witty banter between characters. This is particularly important for the characters who are painted into a specific (and false) role by Lucy, whose opinions and perspectives shape those of the narrator. Klara, the Baroness, and Adolphus are rarely given any consideration by this narrator, but they are often allowed dialogue. The dialogue is unfiltered by Lucy, and, often as not, we are able to see different angles of their personality when they speak than those that Lucy, who is rather single-minded, focuses in on. “Our desires got away from us” Adolphus says just before Lucy attempts to murder him, “and there’s nothing to be done about that. I can’t say I blame you, anyway. Her behavior is all the more baffling to me, but then Klara was never one to do the expected thing” (266). Here, we learn that Adolphus is reasonable and forgiving, and that he knows Klara well, all traits that Lucy has never granted the man he hopes to murder.

Wordplay is often used to comic effect. Mr. Olderglough gives Lucy the title of undermajordomo, and Lucy’s last name is Minor so that the title can be Undermajordomo Minor (DeWitt’s first book is called the Sisters Brothers, and is about a group of brothers with the last name Sisters). Lucy jokes with Mr. Olderglough about whether or not a one-sided corresponded is not a grammatical absurdity.

Structure

The novel is made up of 12 chapters, but there are also seven interludes nestled within the 12 chapters. One of these interludes, “Eirik and Alexander,” marks a dramatic

departure from the main plot and tells a short story about two characters who never make another appearance. The rest of the interludes are extensions of the main plot.

“The Inveigling of Klara by the Strange Eastern Stranger, Godless Corrupter,” “Memel’s Lessons to the Children,” and “How it Came to Pass that Memel Murdered His Bosom-Confident, Tomas” are all three stories told by either Memel or Klara. These stories warrant their own section for different reasons. Klara’s story is given its own section because it is the only time she gets to speak for herself about herself, without the influence of Lucy. Memel’s stories are given a place of importance because they are both monumentally influential on Lucy. One inspires him to step out of his role as servant and hit a member of the nobility, and the other inspires him to set out to murder Adolphus.

The other three interludes, “The Very Large Hole,” “The Strange and Terrible Ballroom Goings-On,” and “The Specifics of the Departure out of the Very Large Hole,” are given their own sections for a very different reason. All three of these mark a drastic departure from the overall tone and atmosphere of the rest of the novel. In “The Very Large Hole” and “The Specifics of Departure out of the Very Large Hole” we are introduced to a netherworld completely at odds with the surface world. And in “The Strange and Terrible Ballroom Goings-On” the castle is turned into a place of depravity that would be more at place in a pornography than a work of literature. DeWitt uses theses interludes because he is interested in weaving together a very large number of genres into one cohesive novel. This task is not without its obstacles, but the interludes allow a cohesive continuation of plot and character despite drastic tone and atmospheric changes.

Quotes

It is a very painful thing, having to part company with what torments you! And how mute the world is!
-- Robert Walser (Epigraph paragraph N/A)

Importance: The epigraph to Undermajordomo, this quote works for the text in a number of ways. Lucy parts company with his boring life and goes on to endure frequently painful adventures at the castle. And many male characters, the Baron in particular, are in pain because they have been separated from the women who torment them.

Walking away on the springy legs of a foal, he thought, How remarkable a thing a lie is. He wondered if it wasn't man's finest achievement, and after some consideration, decided that it was.
-- Lucy ("Lucy The Liar")

Importance: Lucy declares this lofty thought to himself as he leaves Marina's house. But the quote is not just the product of a bored boy. It is a comment on the remarkable nature of the fantasy genre which Undermajordomo is a part of.

The villagers are like children, and children can be dangerous in that they have no God.
-- Mr. Olderglough (Mr. Olderglough)

Importance: Mr. Olderglough professes this to Lucy when the two first meet. He is speaking with Memel in mind, but it later turns out that Memel is dangerous because he does have a God—a very different sort of God.

When their eyes met, and held, he felt the instance of import, only more powerfully than before. There was in him an actual reverberation, and his blood hurried every which way.
-- Narrator (Klara The Beguiler)

Importance: This, moment where Lucy falls in love with Klara, happens on the first night of their meeting. Whether this is puppy love or the real thing is up for debate, but Lucy certainly believes that he has met his soul mate.

It occurred to him that, much in the way one experiences a brightening when walking beneath a cherry tree in bloom, so too did Klara generate and throw light.
-- Narrator (The Castle Von Aux)

Importance: The first of many comparisons that are made between Klara and light. She is contrasted with the Baroness, who is usually compared to the darkness.

All through my apprenticeship and my eventual mastery of the art of thieving, you may be interested to learn I never for a moment misplaced my religion. In actuality, I became

more devout all the while, though my God was not the God of my elders. For it has always been unattractive to me that He should reward His servants for drudge work—indeed, that He should desire servants in the first place. Being dissatisfied with their God, then, I created a God of my own, and mine was not one to honor labor, but one who repaid the bold.
-- Memel (The Baroness Von Aux)

Importance: This is Memel's philosophy on life. He shares this idea with a group of village children while he is sick in bed, but it is Lucy who takes the wisdom to heart and models himself after the thief.

Cupid is well armed, and so must we be, isn't that so?
-- Memel (A Blue Boy)

Importance: Memel says this to Lucy, right after he has told the boy about how he murdered his friend Tomas for sleeping with his wife. Lucy takes these words seriously, and heads off to murder Adolphus in the same manner that Memel murdered Tomas: by pushing him into a hole.

What a violent thing love is.
-- Lucy (Lucy & Klara in Love)

Importance: Lucy thinks this thought to himself after he learns that Klara has been weeping for the wounded Adolphus. The thought sums of overarching philosophy of the novel.

The Baroness shook her head. Leaning in, she kissed Lucy's cheek, then stood and resumed walking, alone now, adrift in her strange and terrible beauty.
-- Narrator (The Baroness Von Aux)

Importance: This occurs right after the Baroness has taken Lucy to see the Very Large Hole. Her beauty is described as strange and terrible, just as the "Ballroom Goings-On" are dubbed "Strange and Beautiful" in the title of the interlude in which they occur.

Would you agree that the most appealing thing about a mystery is the fact of its mysteriousness?
-- The Baroness (The Baroness Von Aux)

Importance: The Baroness asks this question of Lucy on the occasion of their first meeting. Her character has been a mystery to Lucy, and the reader, from the start. Once we all learn a bit more about her, we must agree that the most appealing thing about her is her mysteriousness.

He wandered here and there over rolling hills./ He never saw the ocean but/ he dreamed of it often enough.
-- Memel (A Blue Boy)

Importance: This is the epithet that Memel writes for himself.

His heart was a church of his own choosing./ and the lights came through/ the colorful windows.
-- Lucy (Lucy, Liberated)

Importance: This is the epithet that Lucy writes for himself. Lucy is able to “choose” his church because Memel has given him the tools to reject his servitude and pick his God. The lights that come into the church of Lucy’s heart are most definitely symbolic of Klara.