

Vows Made In Wine

by Jolie Henschen

Lydia Millet's novel *A Children's Bible* hits on several different heavy topics throughout its two-hundred and twenty-four pages. One of the most notable elements of the novel is the trauma the children have gone through growing up. These many characters are shown as very critical and outwardly ashamed of their parents. The children seem to be written as more mature, or at least more aware than the adults around them. They seem to look after one another, even if there is a bit of hostility there. The very idea of the parent game the characters decide to play directly plays into the contempt they have for said parents. Lydia Millet makes no attempt to hide the fact that the parents have failed to properly raise their children in her novel. She does not shy away from the fact that the parents spend absolutely no time with their children, mentally and physically. They are described as severely neglectful and spend almost the entire book impaired by alcohol and eternally absent. The ramifications of the traumatic experiences the young characters went through as they developed seemed to have somewhat negative results. The psychoanalytic critical reading theory will be a helpful tool in dissecting these characters.

The character readers meet first is Eve. Eve is the main character as well as the narrator of the novel. Eve is the easiest to analyze as the story is told from her perspective. Eve is a teenager who is hyper critical of her parents and those around her. She seems to guard herself so as to not become hurt. According to the novel's first chapter, "The great house had been built by robber barons in the nineteenth century, a palatial retreat for the green months. Our parents, those so-called figures of authority, roamed its rooms in vague circuits beneath the broad beams, their objectives murky. And of no general interest" (Millet 3). Eve's description of the parents is mild,

but still has a memorable quality to it. She says they are “so-called figures of authority,” something that can be commonly heard of from an adolescent; however, within the parameters of the novel, it is a very notable comment to take into account. Eve goes on to say, “They liked to drink: it was their hobby, or--said one of us--maybe a form of worship. They drank wine and beer and whiskey and gin. Also tequila, rum, and vodka. At midday they called it the hair of the dog, It seemed to keep them contented. Or going, at least. In the evenings they assembled to eat food and drink more” (Millet 4). Eve’s characterization of the parents seems to consist only of what she has witnessed. This passage is where readers can really see just how far gone the parents are. She also seems to shield her younger brother, Jack from the evils she has experienced in the real world. Eve makes sure to never lie to her brother; she tells the truth, but with a softer delivery. Unlike her attitude towards the other children and the group of parents.

Perhaps Eve takes on the role of the protector as a defense mechanism. She seems to have taken on the responsibility of her younger brother. One could pose the question of whether Eve does this in order to protect Jack, or to distract herself from the sad reality that is her life. The book states, “I wasn’t sure how to break it to Jack. He was a sensitive little guy, sweet-natured. Brimming with hope and fear. He often had nightmares, and I would comfort him when he woke up from them--dreams of hurt bunnies or friends being mean” (Millet 27). From this short excerpt, readers can see that Eve takes on the role of a parent. Throughout the novel, Eve is constantly worrying about her brother; she is a frantic mother at certain points. She comforts her brother, and knows just about everything about him, down to his dreams. She has taken on quite a responsibility at such a young age. She was denied any type of intimate parental relationship through her childhood, and makes sure Jack has that relationship. Eve goes on to say, “It was a Santa Claus situation. One day he’d find out the truth. And if it didn’t come from me, I’d end up

looking like a politician” (Millet 27). Innocence. Eve believes her job as an older sister is to protect her brother’s innocence. She does not wish on Jack the neglect she faced, she does not want her sweet little brother to think Santa is made-up. She wants him to believe in magic and the unknown...because she never got the chance. She was forced to grow up, when her only job should have been wondering what Santa was bringing for Christmas. She never got to believe in magic.

Eve is the narrator, so there is the question of the unreliable narrator, because of this, readers do have to take everything at face value. Eve portrays the group of children in the book almost as adults. It is safe to say that, for the most part, they do not act like normal children. One could say Eve is sort of the mother figure of the group, as she seems to have all the answers, and is generally in-charge. Not a role a child usually takes on unless they have to. The children in the novel all seem to be used to this form of neglect by now. The parents’ odd behavior does not surprise any of them. The big question here is how have these years of neglect affected Eve and the children around her? According to Peter O. Peretti’s article, “Chronic and Acute Neglected Children: Psychological Variables,” “Neglected children are often found on the street attempting to develop non neglecting relationships. However, due to their relative lack of social communication, they are frequently unable to develop socially acceptable relationships. Vandalism, drinking, drugs, or stealing are common occurrences among youth. Some people call them troublemakers, but the neglected child is not a trouble maker he was socialized for trouble” (Peretti 176). The children in the novel are shown having a difficult time trusting one another. They are critical of each other, and just outright mean. Insults are in abundance with this crew; they range from being personal to about one’s parents. Perhaps their abrasive personalities are a direct result of the neglect parenting they received throughout their lives. When Peretti says,

“...he is socialized for trouble,” he is referring to the lack of supervision in neglected childrens’ lives. The group in the novel are rude, unruly, and even uncivilized at some points. They did not arrive here on their own. Children spend their first few years learning and soon copying those around them, so it really is not a surprise that the children act in this way. In his article titled, “The Importance of Cognitive Development in Middle Childhood for Adulthood Socioeconomic Status, Mental Health, and Problem Behavior,” Leon Feinstein states, “Theory and research show that the early years of life provide important foundations for outcomes during childhood and adulthood...cognitive stimulation and supportive environments are needed to support a series of developmental steps in early infancy. The absence of such environments can lead to later cognitive impairment” (Feinstein 1329). They spent most of their adolescent years with parents who are even more uncivilized than they appear to be. Trashing the house by leaving empty bottles of liquor, leaving for alone time, and even the total disregard for the whereabouts of their children directly play into this. In her report titled, “Childhood Maltreatment and Poor Functional Outcomes at the Transition to Adulthood: A Comparison of Prospective Informant- and Retrospective Self-Reports of Maltreatment,” Rachel Latham agrees that children gain the basis of their adult personality directly from their parents (Latham 1161). Parents sign up for certain responsibilities and promises when they decide to procreate. These responsibilities seem to have been completely ignored, and the promises drowned at the bottom of the whiskey bottle. The parents have only set their children up to fail as adults, based on what they experienced as adolescents. Only bad will come of these poor parenting (and life) decisions.

The group of children are all portrayed as angry and disapproving of each other. They hardly have anything nice to say or care about much other than themselves. Although, the one thing they could respect was the vacation house. According to the book, “In some arenas we had

profound respect. We respected the house, for instance: a grand old fortress, our castle and our keep. Not its furnishings, though. Several of those we opted to destroy” (Millet 11). Readers may wonder why the children developed such respect for the house. The parents do not seem to care, so why should they? Maybe the children do this out of spite. Their parents show no respect for the house, so they love it. The lack of parental guidance might have shaped the group into teenagers without an ounce of respect for one another, but when it comes to their parents, they choose solidarity. These individuals developed with little to no guidance. In some ways they are more parental than the actual parents. The book states, “We were strict with the parents: punitive measures were taken. Thievery, mockery, contamination of food and drink. They didn’t notice. And we believed the punishments fit the crimes. Although the worst of those crimes was hard to pin down and therefore hard to punish correctly--the very quality of their being. The essence of their personalities” (Millet 11). Children acting like parents and treating their parents as children is not usually seen in the real world. It is actually quite strange to see children discussing how to punish their parents. These characters seem to have grown up exceptionally fast in their short years. This was easily seen within Eve and Jack’s dynamic, but the other children who have siblings do not share that connection. So, the only way they can cope is to direct these feelings towards the parents. Eve has Jack to distract her and keep most of her resentful feelings at bay, but the others do not. All that anger has to go somewhere.

The psychoanalytic critical reading theory would be a helpful tool to utilize here. The author, Lois Tyson states, “For psychoanalytic theory, our adult personality is the result of the emotional experiences we had growing up. And the family is the most important source of our early emotional experiences--both those that affirm our being and those that harm us psychologically--because it is in the family that our sense of self and our way of relating to

others are first established” (Tyson 85). The group of kids’ hyper-critical personalities directly stems from their upbringing. These kids have developed what Tyson calls “defenses,” finding ways to protect themselves emotionally and to repress their anger. This anger then gets released onto their peers and parents. They are specifically displaying the displacement defense. By punishing the parents, they are projecting their own feelings and maybe even hoping the parents will then punish them. Attention is what the children crave, attention and at the very least, empathy from those that created them.

The thing the children seem to all agree on is that their parents are something to hide and be ashamed of. They create a game where they hide who their parents are, and try to guess who belongs to whom. This brings about some highly offensive name calling and shaming towards the parents. They are almost described as monsters at some points. During a fight between Rafe and Sukey, insults towards the mothers of each party were delivered. Rafe and Sukey argue over whose mother has a “clubfoot,” and whose has a “big ass.” Some strong language is traded between the two. (Millet 3). While the insults are not too damaging, they are insults nonetheless. The children insult their own parents, while simultaneously defending them. Although this could be the case as to protect their own reputation within the group, who wants to be the offspring of the monster with a clubfoot? The children take their game seriously; it is almost as if it is life or death. The game seems to require strategy and for one to always be on their toes. Millet writes, “Hiding our parentage was a leisure pursuit, but one we took seriously. Sometimes a parent would edge near, threatening to expose us... We had to hide the running, though, in case our haste betrayed us, so truer to say we slipped out quietly. When one of *my* parents appeared, my technique was: pretend to catch sight of someone in the next room” (Millet 6). The children do seem a bit cruel towards their parents at times, like their shying away from any attempt at

affection. Although, children who are victims of emotional abuse tend to put up barriers between the world and their feelings.

The huge cumulonimbus looming over the heads of the children is climate change, and the hell that starts to unfold in their lives because of it. Climate Change is not usually a topic children discuss, or even know much about. But, as discussed before, these children are not exactly the cookie-cutter definition of the word. They may see things through rose-colored lenses, in the sense that their perception of adults is awfully small. But who is to say adults do not know what they have done, and drown their sorrows *because* of it. The children blame their parents, other adults, and all that came before them for the horror of the outside world. Millet states, “At that time in my personal life, I was coming to grips with the end of the world. Scientists said it was ending now, philosophers said it had always been ending... Politicians claimed everything would be fine... That is how we could tell it was serious. Because they were obviously lying” (Millet 27). This passage is very grown-up. Eve is mourning her world; she is mourning the hope she used to have, that now came crashing down around her. So what? Why should she or any of the children care about climate change? Simple answer: there is only one Earth. Humans only get one, and they have a responsibility to protect it.

Eve and the other children, all of whom she grew to trust, have to navigate a ruined world without any type of guidance. This is a heavy weight to carry, even for someone as tough as Eve, or at least as tough as she makes everyone believe. The children are alone in their mission, perhaps Millet is on to something. Maybe if the new generation were to take a moment to really see what is happening, they would see the mistakes made by generations past. Maybe Eve and her new friends will become the messiah their generation needs to survive and rebuild a better future. It is not going to be easy, but the best things never are.

Works Cited

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