

Killing the Beast at Home: Destroying Maternal Bonds in Moira Crone's "The Ice Garden"

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to offer a symbolic interpretation of "The Ice Garden" the story that opens up the short story cycle *What Gets Into Us* (2006) by Moira Crone. Firstly, the story is set in the theoretical framework of the short story cycle as devised by Forrest Ingram. Secondly, the text analyzes the role the narrator, Claire McKenzie, victimized by the repressive attitude of her mother, a chaotic woman obsessed by the destructive power of physical beauty. Special attention will be paid to the use of mythological images and war metaphors throughout the story, as well as the shifting from an Oedipus complex to an Electra complex attitude as displayed by the young Claire which may enable us to understand why she failed to help her mother in the final tragic moments of her existence.

Keywords: Short story cycle, Southern short story, mythological imagery, Oedipus complex

In her most recent volume of short stories entitled *What Gets Into Us* (2006), Moira Crone (1952) diverts her attention from what had become common place in her previous volume of stories, *Dream State* (1998), focusing instead on the short story cycle of a village, following a mode of short story writing deeply rooted in the American literary tradition. If *Dream State*, a volume of eight stories clustered around the motif of the locale, Louisiana, the state where Crone resides and works, *What Gets Into Us* resorts to the microcosm in the small fictional village of Fayton, North Carolina. What is also new in her fiction is the conception of these stories. Planned from the outset as a novel and rewritten as a short story cycle, *What Gets Into Us* delves into the lives of four families across over four decades, all stories being narrated by five different characters at various moments in their lives.

The aim of this paper is to offer a symbolic interpretation of "The Ice Garden" the opening story in Moira Crone's *What Gets Into Us* (2006). Firstly, the story is set in the theoretical framework of the short story cycle as devised by Forrest Ingram. Secondly, the text analyzes the role the narrator, Claire McKenzie, victimized by the repressive attitude of her mother, a chaotic lady obsessed by physical beauty and its destructive powers. Special attention is paid to the use of mythological images and war metaphors throughout the story, as well as the shifting from an Oedipus complex to an Electra complex attitude as displayed by the young Claire which may enable us to understand why she failed to help her mother in the final tragic moments of her existence.

Devised by Forrest Ingram, the short story cycle –also known as "short story sequence" (Luscher 1989) or "composite novel" (Dunn and Morris 1995)– is defined as "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's

successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (Ingram 1971: 19). The applicability of this definition thoroughly coincides with Crone’s initial idea of designing a set of stories in North Carolina, the state where she was born and spent her childhood. However, a map of the locale, in the case of Fayton, may not be a plausible reason for considering this collection as a short story cycle. Robert Luscher articulates his conception of ‘short story sequence’ bearing in mind “a combination of signals,” some of which “discovered only after proceeding into the volume” may “provide clues to its sequential nature” (1989: 158). This critic acknowledges a series of motifs which may help determine whether a short story collection can be described as a ‘short story sequence.’ According to Luscher, such motifs can be a fictive prologue and/or epilogue which may enable to frame the stories;¹ related characters –in the case of Crone’s volume, family members across generations; common or complementary narrators –Claire McKenzie and Lily Stark recalling past events at different moments in their lives; repeated themes –isolation, family’s secret lives, life in a constraining rural village– and recurrent images, for example, Beauty as a measuring rod or wealth as symbol of personal success.

“The Ice Garden,” recipient of the Faulkner/Wisdom Prize, is the opening and longest story in Crone’s latest volume of short fiction. Told by Claire McKenzie, an adult woman looking back at the family story when she was eleven, this story becomes a thrilling narration of a girl’s struggles to accommodate her profound devotion to her mother with a severe maternal mental disorder, which ends up becoming a serious menace to the family well-being. In the course of the story, Claire’s attitude is thrown off-balanced by her overt affection to her mother and the acceptance of her manic behaviour. The narration begins with Diana McKenzie just returning from hospital where she had apparently been admitted after one of her episodes. In the story, Mrs McKenzie epitomizes the 1950s white middle-class wife, to some extent racist, who leads a comfortable existence, secluded by her own attitude towards life and people and victimized by her insanity.

The mythological imagery begins with the name of Claire’s mother, Diana, evocative of the Roman goddess of the hunt, characterized by her beauty, authority, impassibility and aversion to matrimony, after having witnessed her mother’s labor pains at her brother Apollo’s birth. These motifs are repeated throughout the story. In this regard, Mrs McKenzie seems to be unfit for matrimony and child care as Claire suggests, when Aunt C, a widow with no children of her own, had to come to stay with the family “after Sweetie was born, because Sweetie was too much trouble, my mother said” (2006: 18). Domestic chores, no matter how easy they could be, became a heavy load for Diana, as it occurred the day she requested her daughter’s help to prepare iced tea: “...when she actually tasted the tea, she grimaced and stuck out her tongue and bit it. The sweetness hurt her teeth. She said

¹ In *What Gets Into Us*, the sense of closure is fulfilled by the last story, “Where What Gets Into Us Comes from,” a narration spanning forty years and a suitable wrap-up of the collection. The long short story

that in Fayton they drank tea sweeter than they did in Charleston where she grew up" (2006: 10). Sweetness does not only hurt her teeth, but her inner self, as it will be seen throughout the story. Affected by tricotillomania, Diana tears her hair out when she loses her temper, though her daughter Claire hides the locks away from her father's sight. Diana has become an embittered, resentful and querulous woman with an inclination to destruction: in the case of the Roman goddess, of crops and people confronting her and, in her own case, the members of her own family, including the black maid. Thus, seeing the great affection of her daughter towards Aunt C, Mrs McKenzie tries to convince her husband and daughter that Aunt C is stealing their love. Mr McKenzie, a spineless father dominated throughout a great deal of the story by his whimsical wife whom he sometimes addresses as "Mother" (39), will decide to believe whatever his wife says. Eventually, Aunt C will end up in hospital after stumbling on the stairs on one of Sweetie's shoes. The explanation given by Diana is questioned by Claire, eager to know her aunt's version: "Is that what they told you downstairs? That I fell?" (19). Unhappy with having Aunt C out of the way, Mrs. McKenzie becomes obsessed with the presence of Sidney, the young black maid who helps her in the domestic chores, accused by Diana of secretly planning to date her husband. The fact that Sidney is regarded with suspicion will be the final cause of her dismissal from the McKenzie's.

Throughout the story, beauty becomes Diana's most remarkable obsession and satisfaction. Mrs McKenzie, as the Irish writer Nuala Ní Chonchúir remarks in her review of *What Gets Into Us*, "has been praised and pampered all of her life for being beautiful" (Ní Chonchúir). She is fettered by her physical perfection and her idealistic way of life and thus she raises her daughter Claire to be constantly conscious of her external appearance. Mrs McKenzie has indeed fabricated an image of herself and a romantic past. She continuously pines for her halcyon days back in Charleston, during the war, when numerous officers flocked to her, although, as Claire says, they might have not been more than two or three suitors (Crone 2006: 16). Her ego increased as she was made to believe that she was a special creature in her family, an anomaly, a stranger among her family members, "a platinum swam among crows" and, as such, everybody adored her: "she was their precious, their gorgeous one" (2006: 27). Being beautiful was her unique goal in life and insisting on the sovereignty of good looks in all things became a ritual approved by Mr McKenzie and that Mrs McKenzie strives to teach her daughter.

In a sense, Diana sees that love cannot be understood without beauty and an unattractive woman is suspicious of cheating a man if he falls in love with her: "To my mother, love that didn't follow from beauty was somehow flawed, awry. If she saw a couple on the street and the woman wasn't beautiful, she asked my father what was the man doing with her? Did the woman have money?" (35). A good way of increasing opportunities for success in life is by taking care of oneself; and Claire admits that "...my whole life would be decided by how pretty I turned out to be" (14). Unwilling to admit the pernicious effects of beauty on her mother and herself,

Claire still considers that her mother can only be roused by the perfection of art – Chopin and his piano pieces– and a remedy for her illness might inevitably rest on the idea that only the beautiful could cure her.

The destructive influence of Diana on her daughter may be understood as a result of the absence of the paternal figure in her education. Connor McKenzie is dominated by his arrogant wife and victimized by her beauty. It was beauty what made him succumb to his wife, whom he adores, as if she were a goddess. Thus, Aunt C, Claire's father's sister accuses her brother of marrying Diana for this reason: "I don't want to hear it, Connor. I've heard it. It was a war, and she was beautiful. And you had to have her. Well, now you have her. So what are we going to do? Don't lie to me. Don't lie to yourself. The children deserve more" (18). Young Claire becomes absorbed by her mother's promise that she might one day be a pretty girl, the way her friend Cheryl Ann is, officially declared a beauty by Mrs McKenzie. However, despite her father's absence in her upbringing, Claire still considers that he is the one who keeps the family's boat afloat: "There was some sort of family boat that could always sink, but he would save us, wouldn't he? My baby sister and I were the cargo, the ones who could fall out, but he would never let that happen" (16).²

The changing process in Claire's personality becomes more evident as the story unfolds. When her mother is admitted to a mental hospital after the incident with Aunt C, Claire develops guilty feelings. The day she visits her mother, Claire will long to lie down next to her, in the belief that her presence would cure her. However, when she is sent into the hall, Claire manifests a sort of Oedipus attitude as she will not admit her father kissing her mother, the two of them being locked in the hospital room: "inside there, he was kissing her over and over and I didn't want them kissing in that white blank room with that cold metal bed, I didn't, I wanted them to stop" (22). At the same time, Claire develops a more mature and motherly instinct towards her younger sister, Sweetie, as she comes to realize that her mother scorns her.³

The winter's early arrival will also bring forth a changing attitude in Claire and Mr McKenzie to Diana's violent spells. A sudden weather change will force the family to move to the grandmother's country house due to a power failure; this episode also marks the beginning of Mr McKenzie's rebellion and his resolution of not abiding by his wife's whims anymore. The couple's discussion is usually accompanied by means of war metaphors recalling Cheever's use of war vocabulary in his celebrated story "A Country Husband".⁴ Thus, Mr McKenzie, before the

² The boat metaphor is later repeated by Claire when she wants to convince herself at the country house "that we were fine, afloat" (2006: 41).

³ In her review of *What Gets Into Us*, Nuala Ní Chonchúir determines that Mrs McKenzie hates to be a mother. However, there are instances along the story proving that she does care about her elder daughter, though she despises little Sweetie as she does not have Claire's beauty potential.

⁴ The use of war imagery was studied by Robert Hipkiss in "The Country Husband' – A Model Cheever Achievement".

couple's quarrel, "was rebelling against her, finding his little outlet" (40) while the branches breaking were making a noise "loud as a war in a movie" (41). Once Claire is in bed, she does not want to hear the tones of her parents' discussion as she "felt invaded." Finally, when Mr. McKenzie manages to get his daughter in the car against her wife's consent, they go grocery shopping "clanking along like escaped prisoners" (47). Being away from her mother will give Claire a newly found sensation of freedom: when she is in the supermarket with her father, she will grab a Babe Ruth candy and start eating without the worry of being yelled at (48).

The dramatic end of the story seems to be brought about by Diana's destructive urges. In one of the couple's discussions, Mrs McKenzie tells her husband that she'd rather die than go back to their house in the city. One night, Claire is woken up by the smell of smoke: the house is burning. Immediately, she will cover Sweetie's nose and crawl on the floor looking for the doorway. She manages to run outside the house and save her own life and Sweetie's; and so does her father. Claire refuses to answer when her mother calls for help. Who did provoke the fire? The day they returned from grocery shopping, we observe Diana holding a match up to their faces, saying nothing, as young Claire admits: "She was a wreck...She frightened me. She was so mad she could spit" (53). With the passage of time, an adult Claire recalls why her mother did not manage to escape: "She is so proud, I remember thinking. I did think all those things, those normal things. *She won't crawl, and she should*" (57). Did Mr McKenzie and his daughter deny help? Without any sense of remorse, Claire McKenzie looks back to that particular moment and the feeling father and daughter experienced:

There was a kind of inevitability to things after: how my father came up to me later, wretched with all his sorrow, and fell on his knees, declared me for all intents and purposes his new queen. How I saw he had to have one, and even pitied him. How we were in some ways happier, after, in our grief, than we had ever been with her. How that became our terrible secret. (58)

If we decipher Claire's words, we may conclude that denying Diana help was a sort of mutual decision of father and daughter and a way of escaping from Mrs McKenzie's insanity. It may also be interpreted as the changing attitude in Claire, from the above mentioned Oedipus complex attitude to an acceptance of the Electra complex which enables Claire to secure her father's love. The end of the story inevitably casts doubt on Mr McKenzie and his implication in his wife's disappearance. However, his attitude towards his daughter may give rise to a final questions: will Claire reproduce her mother's tendencies if she is pampered the way she was, if she ends up becoming her father's "new queen"?

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