

THE STORY OF A PERFECT REVENGE: THE LIFE AND LOVES OF A SHE-DEVIL**Adela Cornelia Iancu (Matei), PhD Student, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați**

Abstract: Fay Weldon's female protagonists see men as central to their existence and repositories to any happiness they might obtain. The women's way towards independence started. Fay Weldon's "Life and Loves of a She-Devil" was quite a shock in the eighties and it even has the power to shock today. Ruth, the narrator, is everything but pretty. Her husband, Bobbo, has an almost princess like mistress. She wants him back, but at the same time, she wants to destroy Mary Fisher and her perfect world. In this paper I will present her complicated and perfect plan, and all the obstacles she has to overcome in order to achieve it. Even though it is difficult to judge whether Ruth is a good or a bad person, she is in the end a winner. In my opinion, she won her painful and demanding evolution, and at the same time, the reader's full attention and sympathy.

Keywords: Feminism, Ruth, femininity, gender equality.

This novel is remarkable in the context of Fay Weldon's fiction, and in the context of other feminist literary works. It was quite a shock in the eighties, when it appeared, and even today it has the power to shock. Fay Weldon created a brand new world for a desperate, yet dangerously determined woman, Ruth Patchett, not being scared of unexpected and extreme actions.

Ruth, the narrator, who is everything, but not pretty, lives in the suburbs along with her husband Bobbo and their two children. Bobbo is presented at the beginning of the novel, as having a mistress: Mary Fisher - a beautiful and charming woman, a writer of romantic fiction, an almost princess-like creature (as she seems to Ruth). Her husband tried to justify his cheating by telling her about each and every one of his infidelities. Ruth feels that she cannot endure her situation anymore, a situation in which all she has left is "her ugliness, unrewarding domesticity, a suburban home, ungrateful children and unfaithful husband"¹.

Ruth Patchett, in the most obvious contrast with Mary Fisher, wants her husband back, but at the same time, she wants to destroy her rival and the perfect world she lives in. She makes a perfect and complicated plan in order to reach these goals. All her actions are successful, but purchased by a lot of pain. She becomes a member of several social communities, and by manipulating people, she fulfils her journey and rebirth.

Ruth and Mary Fisher are the perfect opposites – there is an obvious difference between them: "I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws which tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy, and the muscles in my legs are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my body. My nature and my looks do not agree."²

¹ Dowling, 1998, p.105

² LLS 1983, p. 9

Ruth, a six feet two inches tall, dark, clumsy and manlike woman, who is unable to make anyone truly love her, describes her husband's mistress as a personification of her own heroines.

"Mary Fisher is forty-three, and accustomed to love. There has always been a man around to love her, sometimes quite desperately, and she has on occasion returned this love, but never, I think, with desperation"³ She thinks that nothing can disturb her perfect world which involves champagne, silk dresses, dinners, smoked salmon, affectionate lovers and parties. She is in the company of important people and possesses the freedom from the difficulties of the average women.

Unfortunately, she soon discovers how weak her perfect world is, when she has to face the responsibility of taking care of Ruth and Bobbo's thoroughly unattractive children. Little did she know that it was the beginning of her misfortune.

The opposition between Ruth and Mary is not only physical, but at the same time, spiritual. When her husband calls Ruth a she-devil, she assumes this role and in the name of the she-devil, she begins her incredible journey. She takes her spiritual power from envy, hate and lack of love, whereas Mary, presented as an angelic creature, takes it from love and tenderness.

Ruth's aims are quite clear, as she herself explains: "But what do I want? That of course could be a difficulty [...] I want revenge. I want power. I want money. I want to be loved and not love in return"⁴

She is aware of the fact that she has to get ready for a new life, to leave everything behind, but unlike many other desperate housewives, she decides to act. She does not create her new life in a common, conventional way, but she plans every step and move carefully. She has only one goal in mind: to destroy and discredit Mary Fisher. This at least seems to be her goal, but her real plan is revealed by the end of the novel – to become a new Mary Fisher, surrounded by men's admiration, love and respect, everything she always wanted to have.

With every new identity she chooses, Ruth reaches to a better understanding of her inner self. All her emotions and hatred for her rival forced and helped her achieve everything she resolved. She found out how strong and devil-like a hurt woman really is.

Ruth tries several identities and professions throughout the story, and achieves material and social success in all of them. She also learns the fact that people can actually like her. These actions represent social steps which play a minor role in the whole process she plans to undergo.

She steals her husband's money, knowing that he has never been careful enough about his finances. Bobbo is accused of speculation, put into custody, thus deepening his mistress's misery. Ruth starts her physical transformation and evolution using his money, with the help of three plastic surgeons. She goes through an incredible amount of interventions to "be like other women.[...] 'If you have been extraordinary all your life,' reflected Mr. Ghengis, 'just to be ordinary must be wonderful' "⁵

During the convalescence of Ruth's surgeries, Mary Fisher dies of cancer, giving the former the opportunity of coming to High Tower and living with Bobbo, happily ever after, at last.

"Now I live in the High Tower, and the sea surges beneath as the moon circles and the earth turns, but not quite as it did. [...] Bobbo loves me, poor confused creature that he has

³ LLSLD 1983, p. 5

⁴ LLSLD 1983, p.43

⁵ LLSLD 1983, p. 219

become, pouring my tea, mixing my drinks, fetching my bag. [...] Sometimes I let Bobbo sleep with me. Or I take my lovers in front of him. What agreeable turmoil that causes in the household! Even the dogs sulk. I cause Bobbo as much misery as he ever caused to me, and more”⁶

By the end of the novel, Ruth presents herself as a winner, having received everything she planned to have: the love of her husband, money, power and even to live in the High Tower. But does this mean that she is finally happy? Her journey made her see hate, envy and weakness in the people around her, making her unable to love again.

Nevertheless, her revenge is exemplary in its complexity and extend, her goal is quite trivial, similar to many other women’s goals. She now knows that she can do anything she wants to, being able to achieve much more significant and attractive purposes, but in a strange parody of her rival, she is happy in her tower. She knows she only performs a role.

The unexpected ending is seen as rather controversial by many reviewers. Rhoda Koenig from the New York Magazine wrote: “Women who love men lose their identities; women who vanquish them lose their souls.” Ruth truly becomes a defeated soul when trying to rule her own version of the world. In contrast with her bad decisions – the abandonment of her children, the burning of their house down, stealing her husband’s money – the reader tends to be on Ruth’s side : “It is more to the point to note and to applaud Weldon’s triumphant achievement in managing, against often considerable odds, to keep the reader in Ruth’s side even as her acts become increasingly vengeful and destructive [...]”⁷

In my opinion, Ruth Patchett is indeed a winner, but it is quite difficult to judge whether she is a good or a bad person. She took action and control over her life, having a demanding, painful and complicated evolution. But in the end, the most important fact is that she managed to win the reader’s sympathy and full attention. This sympathy is connected to the novel’s aggressive feminism, both with our initial feelings for Ruth’s situation, and, as the book goes on, with the involvement in its rhetoric of deserted wives. We should applaud Weldon’s achievement in managing, against important odds, to keep the reader on her protagonist’s side, even when her acts became vengeful or destructive. What Ruth seeks is to be freed from “natural affection”⁸ and “the pain of memory”⁹

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⁶ LLS 1983, p. 239-240

⁷ Wilde 2009, p. 404

⁸ LLS 1983, p.162

⁹ LLS 1983, p.163