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Think Piece: How to Make a Nun

Throughout the novel, Mother Reverend (or Helen) builds up to the moment in her life that was so horrifying to her that she decided to join the Order. She had something terrible happen in her teenage years, and that “the blow had been agonising pain” (22). As the novel continues, she explains that what happened had to do with her father, citing him as the cause of her leaving the world to be a nun.

As I was reading the novel, I was trying to predict what could possibly have caused Helen to give up her life so drastically. Since she kept pointing to her father as the cause, I thought that her father had maybe abused her. As the story went on, I began to think that Helen realized she had feelings for her father and that scared her. Helen sounds very much in love with her father, especially seeing how “she found in her father an accidental delight which had no necessary spring in filial feeling, but rose from the privilege of intimacy with someone whom she found pleasing and satisfactory far beyond what was necessary in a father, or in any fellow-creature” (148). It surprised me to see that what horrified Helen was walking in on her father “in the embrace of love” with a man, since it appeared more likely that the realization of her sexual love for her father and jealousy were the cause of her horror (165). In their article *The Land of Spices, the Enigmatic Signifier, and the Stylistic Invention of Lesbian (in)Visibility*, Margot and Joseph Valente write that “At first blush, it seems as if her sexual initiation supervenes in a brutal flash, in her vision of her father committing a most reprehended sexual act. But in fact she has long been implicated, unconsciously, in a likewise illicit, if still heteronormative sexual crush on her father” (4). I didn’t think that simple homophobia had been the cause of Helen’s drastic life change, which made me believe that Helen had sexual feelings for her father as Margot and Valente point out.

Margot and Joseph Valente write that “Young Helen does not so energetically recoil from homosexuality because the ‘sight’ of it has stained her innocence (as she imagines), but because that sight at once shatters and threatens to expose her unconscious oedipal fantasy” (4). I think part of the shock and horror that arose when Helen came upon this sight was jealousy due to this “unconscious oedipal fantasy,” and that she finally realized her feelings for her father. Another part was that she felt betrayed. Her father had kept something from her, and she believed that they were very close and they would not lie to each other.

As the novel nears the end, it becomes more apparent that Helen’s horror arose out of jealousy. The narrator says that “she had not chosen this life of service of God, that she had not thought, weighed and given up in the desire for perfection - but merely had fled in outrage and blind hurt from one collapsed house of her spirit to another standing by, intact” (289). It is apparent that, though it may seem at first homophobia was the cause, Helen was horrified by her feelings for her father and the ensuing feelings of jealousy and betrayal.