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20th Century Literature: Nabokov

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Extra Credit Passage

Passage 2 is taken from Nabokov's short story "A Nursery Tale", in which a shy boy Erwin makes a deal with the devil in the incarnation of a woman, Frau Monde, that she will gather a harem for him of any girl he desires, as long as the number of girls is an odd number. He has only from noon until midnight to gather an odd number of women, but mistakenly chooses the same woman twice and therefore fails the terms of the bargain, leaving him with no harem. This passage includes the specific exchange of dialogue where Erwin makes the deal with Frau Monde, and contains conflicting imagery and diction concerning the role of women, beauty, lust, and misogyny.

On one hand, the passage seems to fall into the typical trite textbook role of women as objectified things that are desired, gathered, and consumed by men, with no form of agency on their own; Frau Monde promises to Erwin "all the girls you fancy...I shall have them gathered and placed at your complete disposal", like pretty toys to be used and discarded. If they have a role in the story, this role is only to provide and cater to men; in one such instance, the woman's role is to directly produce the man: Frau Monde claims the "Siberian slut" she has chosen will be the "mother of a marvelous, monstrous man", who will be Monde's new incarnation. However, Frau Monde's role as a female incarnation of the devil contrasts the objectification of women in the story, and the overall purpose of female representation— despite being a woman, she occupies an active role in driving the plot forward and determining whether Erwin's fantasy is achieved,

demonstrating how women at once lack power in terms of how they are viewed and desired by men, but at the same time can extract power from this desirability. In contrast to the women Erwin lusts after being pretty, and attractive, Frau Monde is described to act in unattractive, unfeminine ways: Erwin watches her “demolishing her second piece of pastry”. Frau Monde also has a way of making Erwin feel ashamed of his actions as a man lusting after women. She is aware of Erwin’s habit of sucking his lip when he finds a woman attractive, and mocks him: “with heavy humor, Frau Monde sucked in her lower lip with a succulent hiss”. At the end of the story, when Erwin accidentally follows the same woman he has already chosen and therefore does not get to an odd number, the woman tells him he should be ashamed of himself as well. So although “A Nursery Tale” is a story about lust and objectification of women, there is a self-referential, self-awareness to it in which through the presence of female characters like Frau Monde, and the woman Erwin follows, the story critiques its own misogyny.

Additionally, the use of a female incarnation of the devil mimics the role women play in objectifying themselves and each other, or more accurately stated, how the male gaze manifests itself in the way women treat other women. Frau Monde’s humorous awareness of Erwin’s desires, and the way she says “Your feeling, your desire, are a command in themselves” emphasizes how the man’s lust and desire for the woman is enough of a “command”, holding enough power to be recognized and acknowledged as a reason to include a girl in the harem, while the girl has no choice or opinion in the matter. It is a “woman” that is subjecting other girls to the male gaze and to being part of Erwin’s harem.

A key component of the male gaze, and lust, is the delusion: the delusion that a woman wants to be with you or is secretly giving you some nonexistent sign, or that as a man one holds some kind of power over all women, and it is this delusion that the text itself seems centered

around. At the end of the story, Erwin never gets any harem, and it is somewhat clear that the events of the story have occurred entirely in his head. For example, when asking Frau Monde how she will let him know that a girl he chose has been added to the harem, Frau Monde responds, “I shall have a sign given you every time– a smile, not necessarily addressed to you, a chance word in the crowd, a sudden patch of color– that sort of thing”, which sounds suspiciously like the aforementioned delusion that other women just going about their day are giving Erwin secret “signs”. The sign that Frau Monde will give him is precisely the lack of an actual sign, but random instances that Erwin can perceive as directed towards him.

Overall, women occupy contrasting roles in “A Nursery Tale” which serve to highlight different themes in the story; the passive women of the harem provide Erwin with a sense of power, legitimizing his misogynistic habit of ogling women, while Frau Monde shames and mocks him for his delusion and lust through their failed bargain.