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A Monster Made by Society: Dehumanization and Family Betrayal in Lusus Naturae

A freak of nature, a thing, an item, not exactly a girl, a demon, a monster, lusus naturae, a special girl, an apparition. These are all terms that the narrator of the story “Lusus Naturae” by Margaret Atwood gets called. Imagine being called even just one of these terms. It does not feel great and once it is said hundreds of times, one will start to believe it. This is what happened to the narrator in this short story. The article “Dehumanization and Infrahumanization” by Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan gives substantial examples and research of why humans dehumanize and how simple acts of dehumanization can cause people to be seen as a monster instead of a human being. Another article, “Gothic Overtones: The Female Monster in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Lusus Naturae’” by Manuela Lopez Ramirez highlights the gothic concepts that this “victim fantasy” contains and shows that female fear and familial protectiveness can lead to people thinking that stripping others of their humanity is acceptable (Ramirez, 2). With use of these two articles and analysis based on looking through the eyes of the sister, mother, family, and society, this story can tell a lot about humans and how they believe it is acceptable to cause dehumanization to a member of their family or society. Through vivid language and style, “Lusus Naturae” interrogates the intricate complexities of human nature, revealing how selfishness, narcissism, fear, and strong emotions shape our interactions with and perceptions of others.

To start out, it is essential to recognize the narrator's humanity, despite her gradual transformation into something perceived as nonhuman. Phrases such as "she's a human being," said by her father, and "I am a human being," said by the narrator, show that she is in fact a human being, or at least feels like one (Atwood, 2, 5). She often questions things such as "in what way is a thing not a person?" when she gets called a thing instead of a human (Atwood, 3). This reveals how she still sees herself as a human, despite being called terms like this. She hardly ever doubts her humanity, which is impressive considering how people treat her. Her father is the only one who really sees her as a human, but, of course, he is the first to die. However, his presence in her life helps her with recognizing the human she is instead of the monster that the rest of the world and the rest of her family sees her as. Even though it can be claimed that at some point in the narrator's life she is not fully human anymore when she transforms, she still deserves and craves the same type of love and affection. As Ramirez says, the narrator still desires "social conviviality and affection" and "craves love and companionship" (6, 5). This is completely normal for anyone, especially since the narrator is and feels like a human being with human emotions and desires. When she gets dehumanized by her family and society, this causes tremendous damage to her well-being and socialization. It is hard to fathom why anyone would do this or how anyone could believe it is acceptable.

The sister is one of the main catalysts for the dehumanization of the narrator. Dehumanization is "perceiving a person or group as lacking humanness" and this causes people to deprive a human of all of their human qualities (Haslam and Loughnan, 3). This is depicted very well in "Lusus Naturae." The selfishness of the narrator's sister causes the first acts of dehumanization in the story. "Curse or disease, it does not matter. Either way, no one will marry me if they find out" is said by the sister in the story (Atwood, 2). The sister has no sympathy for

the narrator at all. Since she only cares about her public appearance, the fact that the narrator will get in the way of her getting married and therefore conforming to normal societal behavior makes the sister not have a care in the world for what happens to the narrator. This is even acknowledged by the narrator later in the story when she has faked her death. The narrator says, “My coffin was a rung on her ladder,” meaning that her death has helped her sister achieve what she cares about the most; climbing the social ladder (Atwood, 3). The paper by Haslam and Loughnan tries to tackle the psychology behind why people think it is justifiable to dehumanize others. They state that it can be “driven by hate, lust, or indifference; collectively organized or intensely personal” (Haslam and Loughnan, 3). The sister has grown a hatred for the narrator because she believes that she stands in the way of getting what she wants, which displays her selfishness in a harsh light. Any kind of love she could have felt for her sister gets overshadowed by her need to fit in with society and by “subtle denial of the out-group’s humanity” (Haslam and Loughnan, 4). The out-group is the narrator in this case and because the sister does not see her as human anymore, she feels that she is allowed to treat her this way. Knowing that by the end of the story, the sister is one of the people that hunts down the narrator in order to kill her, it is clear that the sister does not see her as a human or her sister anymore. This shows how complexities of human’s brains and selfishness can help people, in this case the sister, convince themselves that degrading others is suitable as long as they see the other as less human than themselves.

The narrator’s mother has another standpoint than the sister, yet seems to portray the same behaviors and causes the same amount of damage due to her narcissism and resentment. Even though the narrator seems to think that her mother “has the best of intentions, at heart,” it is clear that she also puts herself first and has less care for the narrator as she increasingly transforms (Atwood, 2). When the mother finds out about her illness, she says, “Why did God do

this to us?" (Atwood, 2). This indicates that the mother sees it as a burden and a curse that is cast upon them. She seems to have more acknowledgement about what this illness means for her and her other family members, than the narrator, who is actually the one that will suffer the most. When the doctor tells them that she is a "freak of nature" and "like a monster" the mother starts to believe it and starts dehumanizing the narrator (Atwood, 2). Haslam and Loughnan explain that "more narcissistic individuals were especially likely to see others as less human than themselves" (12). This conveys that the mother is a narcissist. The mother's narcissism gets proven when "she came and went as quickly as possible" (Atwood, 3). The mother used to take care of the narrator when she looked like a human, but now that she is transforming, she does not care as much about her because her brain has dehumanized her. Now all that the mother cares about is herself and maintaining her appearance in society. After the narrator's full transformation and taking care of her for years, the mother starts to blame the narrator for doing this to her, making her "resent" the narrator (Atwood, 3). She eventually leaves the narrator behind, underbuilding the argument that the mother no longer sees her daughter as a human since she never would have left her behind if she had never transformed. The mother starts out by loving the narrator, but she becomes less human in her brain when she starts to take up too much of her time, thought, and energy and therefore thinks it is okay to dehumanize her.

The family's fear and judgment towards the narrator also plays such a large role in dehumanizing and alienating the narrator in this story. Ramirez mentions that "people cannot look beyond monstrosity, hideous appearances, and find inner beauty" (6). Even though these are her family members, and they loved her when "she was such a lovely baby," the moment she transforms and does not look or act like them, she becomes a monster to them (Atwood, 1). As described by Ramirez, her entire family "see the girl as evil, by reason of their religious and

superstitious beliefs” (7). Not only do the mother and sister think this, but also the grandmother seems to think that “it’s a curse” (Atwood, 1). The grandmother’s religious beliefs are clearly in the way of loving the narrator in the way she did before she found out about her illness since she performs exorcists on her. Exorcists are known to expel an evil spirit from a person, so the fact that she felt the need to do this to the narrator shows that she has already lost any humanly visions she previously had about her. She is now a monster and has a demon in her, according to the grandmother. This story truly “tests the limits of familial love and affection” and unfortunately it becomes obvious that it does not pass any test (Ramirez, 8). All of their love for the narrator washes away when she starts to look different. Ramirez says, “Being of almost high society, they are terrified of what her appearance could mean to their status” (9). The narrator’s family seem to think that her disease is a form of punishment to them, indicating that the family only cares about their selfish endeavors and their social status instead of the narrator. This is seen when they make her fake her death so that they can carry on with their lives normally. They do not even take a moment to think about what this could do to the narrator’s well-being. As stated by Haslam and Loughnan, the narrator’s family may have done this to her as a “group-protective motive outside of the moral domain” (15). Out of protectiveness for most family members, they decide to abandon the narrator so that only one family member would suffer, and the rest could prosper. Making this decision shows that they neglect to think of the narrator’s feelings because they have completely lost any conception of her humanness, and it is unfortunate that they even have to make this decision due to societal expectations.

Families are supposed to be there for any family member no matter what. The fact that even a strong familial bond can be broken over changing of appearance and behavior by one member reveals that something is wrong with humanity. However, these instincts to make

someone who is different feel ridiculed is human nature and it happens not only within families. Ramirez states that “communities need someone or something to blame for the evil and misfortunes in their lives” (7). This shows that it is just a way for people to cope with their own troubles and strong emotions. Nobody’s lives are perfect and making others feel bad tends to calm people or make them feel better about themselves because they at least have it better than someone else. The fact that she is a woman also does not make things any easier. “Female imprisonment, very common in fairy tales, indicates fear of women’s power” (Ramirez, 2). Fear is a common motive for dehumanizing anyone. Fear of the unknown is the main contributor to this. People are inclined to not know what to do with something that is unknown to them and their instinct is to discard it so that it does not exist in their world. This convinces people that there will be no chance of this unknown thing causing damage to their lives, which brings a sense of calm back to them. However, this causes damage to a lot of people who never even meant any harm and unfortunately women often get placed in this role because they are seen as “powerful” (Ramirez, 2). The narrator’s family is clearly afraid of the narrator and what she could do to them and therefore dehumanize her. She is transforming into something their doctor told them was a freak or a demon. This would frighten anyone. Not only the family but also society, who comes after her “marching towards this house, in the dusk, with long stakes, with torches,” does this to her (Atwood, 5). They have created an evil connotation of her or anyone that looks or acts differently in their brains causing them to believe that killing the narrator is the right thing to do. However, they neglect the fact that she is human and that anything she does to prove their points is ultimately caused by them because they dehumanize and alienate her from society.

Throughout “Lusus Naturae,” Atwood masterfully illustrates how society’s and family’s narrow views and prejudices can strip a person of their humanity. This isolates individuals into a realm of monstrosity. Every human has prejudices about others which leads to them causing damage towards these people either with slight actions or in the extreme by fully dehumanizing them. Nobody deserves this and it is seen by the narrator in this story that it truly affects any person. The narrator’s transformation reveals a disturbing truth about human nature and families; our selfishness, fears, and societal expectations can turn those we should protect into outcasts. The self-interest and pressures of social status of the sister, narcissism and resentment of the mother, and fear and prejudices of society, cause her family and society to treat her not as a human with needs and feelings but as a burden and a threat. Although all of these are never valid reasons to dehumanize someone else, it is understandable, especially because almost every human does this. The narrator of this story is a great example of thousands of humans on earth that deal with dehumanization everyday and it is a good message to give to anybody to think twice about one's actions or words towards others.

Works Cited

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