

Gerda Von Rinnlingen – Seductive and “Femme Fatal”?! (According to “Little Herr Friedemann” by Thomas Mann)

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Abstract

The present work aims at finding out whether Gerda Von Rinnlingen – the main protagonist woman of “Little Herr Friedemann” written by Thomas Mann, is or not a seductive and “femme fatale.” By describing the Amazon Gerda’s internal and external features or expressing her cold attitude towards her husband and by discussing this mysterious woman’s role in miserable Friedemann’s life we can conclude that, Gerda Von Rinnlingen, in fact, is not only a seductive woman for Friedemann but she is still a “femme fatale.”

Keywords: amazon, dangerous temptress, “femme fatale,” failure, relationship of passions, tyrant.

Introduction

The main issue of the present research is to assert that Thomas Mann developed the subject of Caucasus in his works and his female protagonists are usually the amazons. Several nominations of Caucasus, Dagestan, Asia, Scythians and Parthians, Georgia and Prometheus in the text of Mann’s well-known novel “Magic Mountain” justify the argument that we can speak about the subject of Caucasus here. We think that the precondition of Mann’s interest in the subject of Caucasus is the fact that his woman protagonists are warrior amazons, since, as it has been scientifically confirmed, the traces of amazons in Caucasus were found many years ago. Mann’s female protagonists - Madame Chauchat (“Magic Mountain”) with Asian motive, Gerda Buddenbrook (“Buddenbrooks”) with rose motive, Madame Houplé, (“Confessions of Felix Krull”) with her unwomanly features and with the pseudonym of Diana – enable us to draw parallels between them and the amazons. But among Mann’s female protagonists the biggest resemblance with the warrior women has been shown by the beautiful and dangerous at the same time, attractive and mysterious, tyrant and strange, the charioteer sitting in a yellow chariot, the whip holder Gerda Von Rinnlingen (“Little Herr Friedemann”). Therefore, the research object is to elucidate two issues:

1. Whether Gerda Von Rinnlingen is a temptress or not.
2. Whether Gerda Von Rinnlingen is a “femme fatale” or not.

Findings and Discussion

When Gerda Von Rinnlingen is described as a cold, dangerous and sadistic woman, it is hard to imagine her normal relationship with men. Gerda is always indifferent and ice-cold towards men. Despite the fact that she appears as a married woman in the novel, there are not any places in the text where she expresses her interest or takes care about her family. It should particularly be noted that her relationship towards her husband does not reflect any love connections between them. Their cohabitation does not seem to be based on a happy marriage. This fact is clearly confirmed by Fred Müller: “the lawyer Mrs. Haggstorm describes and explains that Gerda does not have any feminine charm; her look, her laughter, her movements lack all that are valued by men. She does not have the strength of natural, charming attraction; she is not vulgar, and, by the way, she is ice-cold towards her husband” (Müller 1972:18).

Her relationship with her husband affirms that not everything is in order Gerda’s life. Her husband is completely healthy, cheerful and common man. But Gerda’s treatment with him differs from the requirements of public convention. T. Reed expands the topic: “Mrs. Gerda is not vulgar: all the seductive female qualities are attributed to her by the public criticism of the city. She is also natural, healthy and sensitive woman: but her strange relationship with her healthy and natural husband is against her personality” (Reed 2004: 58-59).

Mrs. Haggstorm also refers to Gerda’s relationship with her husband: “*Wie aber benimmt sie sich gegen ihren eigenen Mann? Sie hat eine Art, ihn eiskalt anzusehen und mit einer mitleidigen Betonung ‘Lieber Freund’ zu ihm zu sagen*”. “But how does she behave against her own husband? She has a kind of a cold look at him telling with a compassionate emphasis: dear friend...” (Mann 2011:18).

Gerda’s husband is not the only person who is treated strangely and without affection or warmth by his wife. She has the same relationship with other men as well. In this case, Johannes Friedemann - the male protagonist of the novel is not an exception either. It was clear from the very beginning that the relationship between Gerda and Friedemann would be broken off. It is the conflict of two completely different people: “in the beginning of the action Gerda and Friedemann meet each other as a man and a woman. The described moments indicate at their love story, that is to say, the tragic story of love of a beautiful woman by a marginalized person.

The main protagonists of the novel are sharply different partners. Gerda is “beautiful”, at least for Friedemann. She seems to be cold and distant; Friedemann is “ugly, terrible; he is powerless towards Gerda” (Müller 1972:21).

Gerda and Friedemann are radically different from each other. They have different interests, qualities and lifestyles. The only thing that decreases the existed distance between them is the relationship of their common feelings. During her conversation with Friedemann Gerda admits that she is an emotional woman and often feels sick due to this fact. In spite of her courage and bravery, Gerda suddenly admits: “*Auch ich bin viel krank, fuhr sie fort, aber niemand merkt es. Ich bin nervos und kenne die merkwürdigsten Zusatnde*” (Mann 1963: 96). “I’m often sick as well, she continued, but nobody notices it. I’m nervous and I often behave very strangely” (Mann 2011:28). But at the last moment she denies this admission and she does not want to have any relationship with Friedemann. It is clear for Friedemann that he is playing with fire when making decision to be close to Gerda. But he did not have the power to fight against the amazon.

But here arises a question: is Friedemann admired by Gerda or by what is symbolized by Gerda? As we have mentioned above, Gerda is absolutely different figure from Friedemann. Friedemann is unlucky in love; he is always in nostalgia and in search of something. He tries to be active and dynamic. In contrast to that, Gerda symbolizes a self-conscious life. She is beautiful and attractive even when she seems to be motionless and strange. This is the fact that plays an important role in Friedemann’s life. He saw in Gerda what he had omitted to see; he felt in her what he had denied before. He entered the new universe where there had not been any room for himself. He wished to feel the moments he had not thought about before. This view is reinforced by Fred Müller’s comment: “Friedemann loves what he misses and does not have. It is “life”. Meeting with Gerda makes it clear for him how nonsense, unimportant was all by what he covered his nostalgia, universe of art. Therefore, Gerda and Friedemann are in contrast not only as a loved person and a love object, but as two human beings as well; one of them is oriented to the universe of art and loses this orientation when the second one stands steadily and confidently in life and personifies it (Müller 1972:23).

While working on this topic, Fred Müller remains at his position and make the following conclusions: “first of all, Gerda-Friedemann’s meeting should not be perceived as a confrontation of two absolutely different people. Here we mean, mostly, the collision of insufficiently perceivable “ego” to the powerful, cold, though attractive and mysterious but destructive surrounds or environment” (Müller 1972:24).

From the abovementioned factors, we can conclude that Gerda is not permanently seductive woman. She has not attempted to destroy the calm life of the protagonist, to change his esthetic lifestyle, to destroy the poor protagonist with her brutality and finally to bring him to death. Friedemann wanted all these; at least, he caused all these with his inefficient self-confidence. His artificial life is collapsed like a house of cards. In order to get rid of his closed and grey universe and to feel his denied happiness and love, he becomes very attached to Gerda. The latter has not caused Friedemann’s failure on purpose. The events happen in a spontaneous way and in the final moments Gerda neglects Friedemann.

Friedemann is the man who does his best to destroy himself. He is man who corseted his feelings during years that makes him feel awkward when looking at Gerda. His obstinate character takes steps back. We can assume here that Friedemann himself leads himself to the failure. Hans Rudolf Vaget states: “Friedemann’s failure – here Thomas Mann applies the techniques of already extraordinarily developed motive – doubtlessly motivated by him; Friedemann worries about his failure not because of Gerda but because of himself. After the first meeting with Gerda Friedemann has “calm and frightened face”, locked in himself, in a mysterious noise” (Vaget 1984:110).

Hans Vaget believes that Friedemann’s suicide was a failure and he considers not the suffering caused by his unrequited love as a reason of that, but “*vielmehr von der, Zuchthausarbeit des Wollens’, seines fünfzehnjährigen Willens zum kleinen Glück*” (Vaget 1984:111) “his fifteen-year-long desire for experiencing his small happiness”.

The fact that Friedemann’s failure and death were not caused by Gerda can be confirmed by other works as well. Koopmann asks a question and answers himself: “what is the reason of Friedemann’s failure? What causes the collapse of “the construction” of his problematic existence? It is clear that we do not mean the external impact; Gerda von Rinnlingen is only a reason and not a motive of his failure” (Koopmann 2001:551).

The same attitude was shared by H. Rudloff. As he states, Friedemann should not be regarded as Gerda’s victim, since Friedemann had been the victim of his ownself-torment and self-discipline chosen by him before. Friedemann cannot forget Gerda and he is afraid of her at the same time. He has been ready for sacrificing his life for a long time but he wants to have a co-player like Gerda. This opinion has been affirmed by H. Rudloff’s following quotation: “the woman wants neither to seduce her male opponent nor to bring him to death on purpose. Gerda makes her decision quite suddenly. Friedemann’s whole life story indicates to substantive wish of subordination. He requires a punitive artist. But Gerda does not belong to such role. Finally, Gerda denies the relationship of passions between them. The determined variant of the “femme fatale” can be observed only in the end of the novel; Gerda Von Rinlinngen turns into a tyrant” (Rudloff 1994:73-74).

This place is not only a good confirmation that Gerda Von Rinnlingen is not a seductive woman, but here we can find the answer of the question whether is Gerda Von Rinnlingen a “femme fatale” or not. The starting point for H. Rudloff is the last scene from the novel. He draws the reader’s attention to Gerda’s relationship to Friedemann and concludes that Gerda Von Rinnlingen is a “femme fatale”: “when Friedemann kneels in front of her, Gerda’s consent disappears. Gerda rejects him. After such a push she turns into a terrible woman, a “femme fatale”. Somehow, at the last minute she does not want to confess everything. Gerda does not understand him and turns away from him. It is what makes her a cruel woman. She acts ruthlessly. According to her character she turns into a tyrant. The final is the only thing that makes her a “femme fatale” with the figure of the angel of death (Rudloff 1994:72-73).

This kind of opinion was expressed by Peter Mennicken: “Gerda Von Rinnlingen is not a conscience-smitten woman; furthermore, she enjoys the humiliation and final destruction of poor Friedemann”(Mennicken 2001:68).

Conclusion

Thus, many factors prove that Gerda Von Rinnlingen is not a seductive woman, but due to some certain circumstances she is a “femme fatale”. Though, this fact should be properly understood and we should not forget that she is an amazon – the woman warrior. And when we find a page in the book on amazons where Herodotus describes them as “Männer tötend” - “Men Killers” (Koch 2010:10), it should not be surprising that the amazon Gerda Von Rinnlingen might be a “femme fatale” as well.

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