

## Reflection of Human Conflicts in Helen Dunmore's *Mourning Ruby*

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**ABSTRACT:** "Play is the best thing that human beings do" says Helen Dunmore, one of the most prolific writers of later twentieth century. She is specially known as the creator of dream world. Her novels are the record of various aspects of life such as pleasure and pain, victory and defeat, triumph and tragedy etc. The present paper is an attempt made to examine the human conflicts depicted in her novel, *Mourning Ruby* (2003).

**KEY WORDS:** Human Conflicts, Helen Dunmore, *Mourning Ruby*

**INTRODUCTION:** 'The orchestra of someone's life is made up of so much different instrumentation, isn't it?' says Helen Dunmore. 'My own view is that life is quite testing. When I talk to people, I always uncover the most extraordinary depths of experience...'

The multi-faceted Helen Dunmore touches every aspect of human life and explores its several dimensions with great skill. She is specially known as the creator of dream world who dreams herself and makes others dream about their lives. The Washington Post Book World observes that Helen Dunmore takes a tale that could drive a thriller and weaves her linguistic spell around it. The result is brilliant and terrifying, an unbeatable combination.

### REFLECTION OF HUMAN CONFLICTS IN *MOURNING RUBY*:

*Mourning Ruby* is about the many permutations of loss, and it is also equally about creativity- artistic as well as biological. Rebecca's loss is even greater because she is herself a lost child, a foundling who was abandoned in a shoebox outside an Italian restaurant. Abandoned as a baby in a shoebox, Rebecca has a shaky sense of identity. Redemption comes in the form of relationships with two men - Joe (the platonic brother substitute) and Adam (the sexual lover). And it is through Joe that she meets Adam, a neonatologist who becomes her husband and the father of their daughter, Ruby. Rebecca says:

"I had shared the flat with Joe for three years. It was the kind of love that keeps you safe, and sex never entered it. We knew too well what other things would have flown out of the box then. Fear, disappointment, rage. Just friends, as people say, lingering stickily on what they touch. But in my view friendship can be

rarer and tenderer than love."(P.34)

Here was Ruby, washed up on the shore of her body. It was only eight hours since Rebecca had turned into a mother. Joe touched her hand. They were two separate people, touching. They were not a family any more. But Rebecca wanted more, "I was greedy and selfish, wanting him to feel for me what it wasn't good for him to feel. I was a glutton for intimacy."(P.61)

In the deepest of circles of bliss, Rebecca felt Ruby's touch she is very possessive about Ruby:

"My girl, my daughter. I hadn't thieved this love, though I was still fearful that someone would come in and denounce me for taking a baby that didn't belong to me. The midwives called her my daughter straight away and I wondered how they dared, how they could be so certain."(P.62)

Ruby must have her own life, right from the beginning. It was Rebecca's job to look after Ruby- her hearing test, her vaccinations, her difficulty in moving on to solids, her weight-gain. With the other mothers, she clucked and deprecated baby life. But when, six years into her marriage to Adam, the couple faces every parents' worst nightmare - the death of their five-year-old daughter. Rebecca's life comes apart at the seams. *Mourning Ruby* is full of the sensual minutiae of family life that is jagged with grief. And no one does loss better than Dunmore, from the fading scent of a child's pyjamas to the terrible, familiar dreams where one appears to be reunited with the dead.

Dunmore presents a picture of a couple deeply in love; a marriage shaken to the foundations by the death of their daughter, that ultimately survives. Yet she provides no basis for

this relationship other than sexual attraction, with the real love affair continuing to be between Joe and Rebecca. At last, Joe has abandoned his historical endeavours and instead is writing a work of fiction, which he sends to Rebecca, with commentary. The story he writes is clearly an attempt to analyze their complex relationship. Dunmore interweaves it with Rebecca and Adam's reunion. There is an epilogue:

“So often I'd thought that our bed was a ship and we were voyaging in it together. I would roll over in the bed and imagine the waves leaping around us, and the fathomless water. Everything that was in us made up the voyage. Our body heat, our dreams, the taste of Adam's sweat, the juice of sex, the pang of Ruby's conception. We would go on and on, pushed where the waves took us. We would die in that bed, I believed” (111)

She is living together with Joe, but in a platonic way, as if they were brother and sister. Joe is writing a book about Stalin's first wife, and her unpleasant mysterious death.

Dunmore lets Ruby reach age five, to become a person on her own (“*She had her life, and it was her own life.*”), before she is struck down by a speeding car. Questions of guilt and responsibility haunt Rebecca and Adam's relationship, and both must try to rebuild their lives. Joe and Adam are charming ciphers, while Mr Domanio, a European hotel magnate who befriends Rebecca and recounts his own early life as a circus artist. Rebecca's husband Adam appears only to function in order to provide the sexual satisfaction never accessible with Joe, and as the father of her child.

Grief and anger drive a wedge between Rebecca and Adam for three years, even though there is hope that, by coming together to mourn their dead daughter, they will have a future

together. The small joys of having a child, the total immersion of the self in love, are sensitively described. Overwhelming love brings with it a fear of harm so intense that parents often fantasize about their child's death as a release. The novel focuses only on the beauty and charm of a young child, and the devastation of the bereaved parents. At the end Rebecca and Adam both reach a point where they can mourn their daughter together without it destroying them. They can remember her life without the overhanging regret of what she lost.

Ruby's death is no surprise and Dunmore plumbs the consequences of loss: How does one mourn, and then accept, the unacceptable? Numbed by Ruby's death, Rebecca drifts away from Adam. She finds a diversion in a job as an assistant to a hotelier, Mr. Damiano. Adam buries himself in his work with premature babies. Ambitiously, Dunmore complements this tragic narrative with two other stories, one autobiographical, told by Mr. Damiano, about growing up in a circus where his parents were trapeze artists, and one told by Joe, a work of fiction set during WWI about a man and a woman who could be his and Rebecca's ancestors.

#### CONCLUSIONS:

*Mourning Ruby* is a drama of loss and regeneration pieces together shattered lives through alternate dramas of war, death and, most important, survival. Moving fluidly between past and present, Dunmore weaves a picture of Rebecca's background, from her abandonment as a baby, through an unhappy childhood with adoptive parents, to the intellectual and emotional escape provided by Joe, flat mate and friend, but never lover.

The novel's elaborate and confusing construction, with many flashbacks, stories within stories, shifting genres (letter, poem, dream, history, journal), and self-reflexive comments about writers and readers, distracts the reader from the emotional impact of the central story of maternal grief, instead of connecting individual tragedy to universal loss.

#### REFERENCES:

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