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psychiatry in literature

Something nasty in the woodshed

Richard Leonard Symonds

Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* written in 1932 is a comic classic. Sensible, modern Flora visits her distant reclusive relatives on a farm in deepest rural Sussex, and resolves to bring some light and rationality to these appalling relics. She encounters the matriarch of the farm, Aunt Ada Doom.

“How d’ye do, Aunt Ada?” said Flora, pleasantly, putting out her hand. But Aunt Ada made no effort to take it . . . and observed in a low toneless voice: “I saw something nasty in the woodshed” “Mother . . . it’s Judith. I have brought Flora Poste to see you . . .” “Nay – I saw something nasty in the woodshed”, said Aunt Ada Doom, fretfully moving her great head from side to side. ‘Twas a burning noonday, sixty-nine years ago. And me no bigger than a titty-wren. And I saw something . . .” (p. 171)

The psychiatrist immediately recognises this situation, and I have been relying on Aunt Ada Doom for many years for an example of traumatic fallacy. Spread by post-war Hollywood, owing something to battle neurosis and more to psychoanalysis in the USA, the notion that all long-standing psychiatric symptoms must have been initiated by a traumatic incident in early childhood is so embedded in our culture that most patients, at least those with anxiety symptoms, take it for granted. Behind their distress, their language reveals the plea to find the ‘real’ cause, after which everything will magically improve. It may also relate to the depressive nature of some symptoms, that the sufferer is in some way bad in their essence, with their own original sin, and throws an emphasis on the past. It also reveals the passive and pessimistic nature of these patients, since the past cannot be changed.

By contrast, which is often illuminating, I have used the construction as follows: it is less important to know how you got into this situation – your illness – than how you can get out of it. Rather than concentrating on a distant origin, which could never be proved, you need to think where you are now and how you can move forward. This simple view has often come as a revelation to those who have ruminated about what they did or what had happened to them.

But Aunt Ada Doom carries another message, that of secondary gain and another familiar picture of a ‘black hole’, a family member who traps their relatives in a tight circle from which they can never escape. Gibbons has it exactly:

“You told them you were mad. You had been mad since you saw something nasty in the woodshed, years and years and years ago. If any of them went away, to any other part of the country, you would go much madder. Any attempt by any of them to get away from the farm made one of your attacks of madness come on. It was unfortunate in some ways but useful in others . . . The woodshed incident had twisted something in your child-brain seventy years ago. And seeing that it was because of that incident that you sat here ruling the roost and having five meals a day brought up to you as regularly as clockwork, it hadn’t been such a bad break for you, that day you saw something nasty in the woodshed.” (p. 115)

The author used the 2011 Penguin edition for the quotes.

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