

TIME, MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA IN GERARD DE Nerval'S SYLVIE

K. Subramanyam
Research Scholar
Department of English
Pondicherry University,
Pondicherry

ABSTRACT

Time, Memory and Nostalgia in Gerard de Nerval's *Sylvie* explores Time' and 'Memory' as the binding principle at work in the novella. 'Sylvie' (1853), considered as Nerval's prose masterpiece, examines the twin conflicts between time and memory as well as the fundamental conflict between the 'Ideal' and the 'Real'. The study analyses how time and memory plays a significant role in the narrative act of the novella. The novella shows Nerval's ability and craftsmanship in reconstructing past through memory resulting in nostalgia. However he emphasizes that escaping into the past will never completely soothe one's suffering in the present.

Keywords: Time, Memory, Ideal, Reality

Sylvie (1853) is a novella by French romantic poet Gerard de Nerval which was published in a periodical named 'Revue des deux mondes' (*Review of two worlds*) and later the novella was published in '**Les Filles du feu**' (*The Daughters of Fire*), a collection of short stories and poetry in 1854. *Sylvie* when published was admired by many literary circles in and around France for its poetic vision and lyrical prose. The novella has undercurrents of semi-autobiographical elements of the author. It has been hailed as Nerval's prose masterpiece.

Sylvie is a kind of idyll written in the form of memoirs and reminiscence, where the story surrounds around the narrator who loves three different women, all of whom he loses in the quest for ideal love. The plot and incidences are loosely drawn from Nerval's own personal life. The novella is a token and hymn to the unattainable and unrequited love, which the protagonist yearns forever. Various eminent and scholarly critics have praised this novella for its lucid and transparent lyrical style oozing with profuse poetic sensibility.

'Time' and 'Memory' has played a significant role in constructing the narrative act of the novella often leading the way to the reader being nostalgic as if he is in the centre of events surrounding the plot. Nerval's able craftsmanship in sewing up the narration by frequently delving into the past and again returning to the present events through journey to the past and present has given the prose piece its distinctive measure in terms of narration. Throughout the main action of the plot, Nerval employs the technique of flashback and then suddenly reverting

to present events and its relevance and significance to the action underplay. Thus the whole perspective seems wholly misleading and baffling for the reader at first because of its regular consistency in shifting back and forth between past and present.

The novella ‘*Sylvie*’ begins with the narrator reading a paragraph in the newspaper which drowns him into an abyss of past memories of his days of youth. The story commences with the narrator enjoying the plays at a theatre. He is completely enchanted by an actress of the theatre named Aurelie. Suddenly the narrator gets reminded of an image from a distant memory from his childhood and experiences a flashback.

“I sought my bed, but not to sleep, and, lost in a half-conscious reverie, all my youth passed before me. How often, in the border-land of dreams, while yet the mind repels their encroaching fancies, we are enabled to review in a few moments, the important events of a lifetime!” (Nerval 11).

He gets reminded of a very familiar memory of a festival where he danced with a peasant girl named Sylvie who is endowed with classic features, an ‘Athenian smile’, brunette hair, a ‘timeless Ideal’. There the narrator also sees another girl Adrienne, who was of noble status, tall and blonde and eventually falls in love with her.

“I was the only boy in the circle where I had led my young companion, Sylvie, a little maid from the neighboring hamlet, so fresh and animated, with her black eyes, regular features and slightly sun-burned skin. I loved but her, I had eyes but for her—till then! I had scarcely noticed in our round, a tall, beautiful blonde, called Adrienne, when suddenly, in following the figures of the dance, she was left alone with me, in the centre of the ring; we were of the same height, and they bade me kiss her, while the dance and song went whirling on, more merrily than before..” (Nerval 11).

Adrienne was the ‘Ideal beauty’ for the narrator. He was completely enchanted by her subtle but distinctive beauty. During the course of the action, the narrator comes to know of the fatal fact that Adrienne has ultimately become a nun. Heart-broken, the narrator knowing that Adrienne is unattainable goes back to Paris to continue his studies, but his heart still pines for Adrienne- His unrequited love.

“Adrienne's face alone haunted me, a vision of glory and beauty, sweetening and sharing the hours of arduous study. In the vacation of the following year, I learned that this lovely girl, who had but flitted past me, was destined by her family to a religious life...” (Nerval 12)

Nerval’s ability to bind past and present time evolving out from the narrator’s distant but fresh memory provides a kind of synthesizing effect on whole narration. Nerval conceived the story where dream and reality merge into one another. It is the conglomeration of metaphysical dimensions of conflict between reality and ideal. The narrator throughout the novella is in the eternal quest for Ideal love and he struggles with his love for mythical female personae respectively Aurelie-Adrienne and a reality in the form of peasant girl Sylvie. In Nerval’s imagination Aurelie and Adrienne are extravagant and capricious images of ideal women who eventually merge into one. The narrator ponders in his mind-

“To fall in love with a nun in the guise of an actress!... suppose they were one and the same! —it is enough to drive one mad, a fatal mystery,

drawing me on like a will o' the wisp flitting over the rushes of a stagnant pool. Let us keep a firm foothold on reality.” (Nerval 12).

Suddenly the narrative act takes a different turn by clinging to the realities far away from the whimsical lands of dreaming into the improbable confines of the past. His fluctuating and inconsistent mind races back again to the real love in the form of Sylvie and gets entwined in her thoughts.

“Sylvie, too, whom I loved so dearly, why had I forgotten her for three long years? She was a charming girl, the prettiest maiden in Loisy; surely she still lives, pure and good. I can see her window, with the creeper twining around the rose-bush, and the cage of linnets hanging on the left; I can hear the click of her bobbins and her favourite song: *La belle était assise Près du ruisseau coulant....* (The maiden was sitting Beside the swift stream.) (Nerval 12)

The narrator returns to Sylvie after many years and spends a considerable amount of time with her under the possible expectation of attracting her love for him. As they pass by a monastery, the narrator happens to mention the name of Adrienne much to the utter dismay of Sylvie.

“Having reached the walls of Saint S ——— we had to look well to our steps, on account of the numerous stream-lets winding through the damp marshes."What has become of the nun?" I asked suddenly. "You give me no peace with your nun! Ah, well! it is a sad story!" Not a word more would Sylvie say.” (Nerval 25).

The narrator again goes to Paris and in due course returns to Sylvie and spends a day socializing at a village elderly household. However nothing positive comes out of it for the narrator in terms of his love with Sylvie. Dejected, he again returns to Paris. Suddenly the whole narrative and time frame shifts focus from Sylvie to the actress Aurelie.

“To Paris, a journey of five hours! I was impatient for evening, and eight o'clock found me in my accustomed seat Aurélie infused her own spirit and grace into the lines of the play, the work of a contemporary author evidently inspired by Schiller. In the garden scene she was sublime...” (Nerval 27).

The narrator, ultimately realizing that Sylvie has also eluded him in the prospect of being his love, he passionately pursues Aurelie with more aggressive vigor.

“I had lost Sylvie through my own fault, but to see her for a day, sufficed to restore my soul. A glance from her had arrested me on the verge of the abyss, and henceforth I enshrined her as a smiling goddess in the Temple of Wisdom. I felt more than ever reluctant to present myself before Aurélie among the throng of vulgar suitors who shone in the light of her favour for an instant only to fall blinded.” (Nerval 28)

The narrator now becomes close to Aurelie and he asks her if she ever spent her time in a convent, associating her with Adrienne. The narrator sees her as an ideal illusion soon waning in the realms of stark reality. Ultimately Aurelie ends her brief relationship with the narrator specifying the cause as her lost faith in his unpredictable love.

“Then I told her all; I revealed the hidden spring of that love which haunted my dreams by night and was realized in her. She listened with

attention and said: "You do not love me! You expect me to say 'the actress and the nun are the same'; you are merely arranging a drama and the issue of the plot is lacking. Go! I no longer believe in you." (Nerval 29).

The narrator dejected again returns to Sylvie. Upon his arrival he hears about her marriage and who is now a mother of two. He asks her about Adrienne to which Sylvie with a sigh of self-reproach reveals that Adrienne is dead for many years- a fatal revelation.

The whole novella surrounds around the narrator's illusory search for the 'Ideal' love which in turn ruins his possible chances of a stable and constant relationship with 'Real' Sylvie. Kari Lokke summarized the message in *Sylvie*: "Paradoxically ... the wistful, delicate beauty of *Sylvie*, Nerval's stylistic and tonal masterpiece, is created by Nerval's combination of this mythic and esthetic vision of the Valois and its women with the melancholy realization that such a sublimated mode of interaction leads away from the present and the love of a real human being to an ideal past or a Utopian future."

Nerval weaved out the conflict between the 'Ideal' and 'Real' through the narration which is self -evidently identified with time and memory. The Ideal is here identified with the mind, memory, the human spirit, permanence and life, while 'Reality' is the world of matter, time, change and death. (Chambers 502). It can be easily understood by the narrator's excitement at the mere thought that the Adrienne of the past and the Aurelie of the present may be one and the same person, which recalls one of a familiar lines of Faulkner," The past is never dead. It's not even past."(Faulkner Act 1, Scene 3).

The novella emphasizes on Nerval's ability to reconstruct past through memory. However on the hindsight he also warns by implying that transcending to the past will never sooth one's suffering in the present. If probed deeper into the novella, one may find Nerval's discontentment with scattering the evocations of a distant past throughout the novella: many of them in turn consist of allusions to a past yet further detached. There were a plethora of references by the narrator which allude to the distant memories comprising historical significance: the Renaissance watch in the narrator's room is decorated with a bas-relief of Diana (13)., the monument of Ermononville commemorates the great names of French philosophy (22). It is as if beneath the core of present, there lays never ending tales of layers of time. Each one of those is dependent on the events preceding them that have a formidable effect on the aftermath. The most appalling and appealing feature conspicuous in *Sylvie* is the mastery of narrative structure which has impressed even Marcel Proust who remarked;" 'real' time is so difficult to construe in *Sylvie*". (Proust 240). The narrator seems to reconstruct a moment of time, experienced as a memory but unable to rediscover it in future resulting in long lost nostalgia. The attempt to recapture the past with Sylvie proved futile though it is elaborate on the part of the narrator, as when his return to Loisy reveals that all is changed. (Riatt 848). Timelessness can also be observed with the narrator's momentary mention of his watch. This indicates that the time has come to a stop: he has no watch and his renaissance watch does not work.

"I had no watch.

Amongst a profusion of ornaments, which it was then the fashion to collect, in order to restore the local colour of an old-time interior, there gleamed with freshly polished lustre, one of those tortoise-shell clocks of the Renaissance, whose gilded dome, surmounted by a figure of Time, was supported by caryatides in the style of the Medici, resting in their turn upon rearing steeds. The historic Diana, leaning upon her stag, was in bas-

relief under the face, where, upon an inlaid background, enameled figures marked the hours. The works, no doubt excellent, had not been put in motion for two centuries. It was not to tell the hour that I bought this time-piece in Touraine.” (Nerval 13).

The world of *Sylvie*, in all its vague appearances, is a world in which nothing is what one expects. At the end of the novella the reader is in constant perplexity as to what might have happened to the narrator. Such is Nerval’s subtle artistry. *Sylvie* can be analyzed from the point that it has several of Nerval’s personal experiences of his childhood days at Valois. *Sylvie* is an intricate framework where nature of nostalgia is examined and where past and present, Ideal and Reality and Time and Timelessness meets and are reconciled.

Works Cited:

- Chambers, Ross. “Water in Sylvie”. The Modern Language Review, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Oct., 1963), pp. 500-506. Web.
- Faulkner, William. “Requiem for a Nun”. Knopf Doubleday Publishing group. 2012. Print.
- Lokke, Kari. “Gerard de Nerval: The Poet as Social Visionary”. French Forum Monographs 66. Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1987. Pp. 166.
- Nerval, Gerard De. *Sylvie: Souvenirs Du Valois*. Trans. Lucie Page. Portland. 13th August 2012. Web. (www.projectgutenberg.org eBook of Sylvie: Souvenirs Du Valois)
- Proust, Marcel. “Contre Saint-Beave”. Edited by P.Clarac and Y. Sandre. Paris, 1971. P. 240. Print.
- Riatt.A.W. “Time and Instability in Nerval’s Sylvie”. The Modern Language review, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1988), pp. 843-851. Web.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Sylvie (novel)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 31 Aug. 2013. Web. 5 Nov. 2013