



## Symbol of 'Hope Chest' in Kate Bernheimer's The Complete Tales of Lucy Gold.

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### Abstract

Kate Bernheimer is a widely known name in the realm of exquisite fairy tales, as she, through her unique style of writings has set a position in the literary world of fairy tales, which is unparalleled. Kate Bernheimer through her innumerable works in English literature is deemed as a living master, who has taken many different approaches in her *style* to form wonderful works through novels, short stories, and children's books. The American author, Kate Bernheimer has composed several novels that have been widely praised by the readers and critics, and there is a certain sense of distinctiveness in her writings, especially the novels which makes the works out of the box to the assessors. On adhering the critical analysis of her novels, Kate has gifted the literary realm with the three novels at the early stage of her writing *The complete tales of Ketzia Gold*, *The Complete Tales of Merry Gold* and *The Complete Tales of Lucy Gold* and three of them were gleaned from Yiddish, German and Russian fairy tales. And these three novels bore a distinctive trait of the writing pattern and linguistics style of Kate Bernheimer (Bernheimer, 2017). The novels were found to be exuberant with a *magical* touch of *fairy tales* in all of them. According to the author, after the emergence of such fairy-tale stories, society increased its likings for fairy tales (Peterson, 2021). The author Kate Bernheimer's three novels that she composed beforehand were portrayed in the essence of the fairy tales.

*The complete tales of Ketzia Gold*, *The Complete Tales of Merry Gold* and *The Complete Tales of Lucy Gold*. The novel trilogy written by the author was largely acknowledged as a best seller and award-winning literary works as the novels bore the abstract theme which tends to amaze her readers. On undergoing a critical evaluation of Kate Bernheimer's fantastic novels, a significant quote made by *Vladimir Nabokov* several years ago comes into mind, that stated, "All great novels are great fairy tales" and this quote made by the latter person truly symbolizes the linguistic style of the novels that Kate Bernheimer follows in her pathway towards exquisite literary works.

**Key Words-** Symbol, Hope Chest, fairy tales, novel trilogy.



## Introduction

The hope chest is a boisterous image for the evolution from childhood into adulthood, one of the main themes of Kate Bernheimer's trilogy. The cultural background of the hope chest is suggestive for the study of girlhood, mainly in terms of what this tradition unveils about young American women historically, and how their morals and ideological beliefs are instilled, and their future fantasies directed. Before going further Kate Bernheimer's literary uses of the hope chest, it is worth to know first its position and meaning as a delighted piece of equipment and social shrine to maturation beyond girlhood. One of the finest drawings occurs in Miranda July's film *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), when Sylvie, critically on the verge of adolescence, explains that her "hope chest or trousseau in French" represents her "dowry" to her future husband and daughter, of whose social and biological certainty she has no doubt. Sylvie's hope chest covers local gadgets and towel-sets, commodities that she has brought from her local mall with her own money. Lon Schleining expands on this peculiar social tradition. "Since in ancient times at least, it has been normal in many Western countries for a woman to gather her trousseau-clothing, linens, plates, and other household goods-in anticipation of marriage" (2001: 43), and explicates that the chest was often wood-worked and handcrafted by a important male presence in the bride's life, usually her father or husband-to-be, adding that its true

significance was to hold "her hopes and dreams for the future" (45). Gaston Bachelard a French philosopher rightly puts his comments about the heirloom-like qualities of the hope chest:

The casket contains the things that are unforgettable, unforgettable for us, but also unforgettable for those to whom we are going to give our treasures. Here the past, the present and a future are condensed. Thus, the casket is memory of what is immemorial. (The Poetics of Space, 84).

*The Complete Tales of Lucy Gold* is a study of bliss. In this episodic series of non-chronological short chapters, typical of the rest of the trilogy, in the beginning we come to know about Lucy's happy childhood days, and the sudden loss of her boyfriend, her career as a high-flying animator then solitary doll-maker, and many ecstatic deaths. In some ways she serves as a synthesis or conceptual foil to the two older sisters who represent thesis and antithesis. The number three is significant in the fairy tale genre, particularly in terms of the choice between three sisters. Drawing on Shakespeare's symbolism of the box in *The Merchant of Venice* (1605), Freud reminds us that the successful suitor must select the most virtuous of the three boxes in order to marry fair Portia: one box is made of gold (sun), one is of silver (moon), and one is of



lead (stars). The lead box is the unlikely winner, poorest in material wealth yet richest in poetic association. This allegory reminds us that the best choice may not necessarily be the most attractive or obvious. In his subsequent examples, Freud switches the sex of the selector. The theme is revealed to be mythological, reminiscent of Paris's choice between the three beautiful goddesses. Freud cites Charles Perrault's "*Cinderella*" (1697), another example of a tale in which the main character is the youngest and ultimately the most successful compared to her ugly stepsisters. He puzzles over the meaning of the recurrent selection of the third sister, deducing that it must be on account of her "concealment and dumbness". Although Lucy can speak, she is put in the classroom for slow children at school and is described as "airy-fairy" (Lucy Gold, 6), which some might consider dumb in the colloquial sense of the word. Moreover, her eccentric behavior and delirious contentment with the mundanity of life reinforces the third sister predicament. She is believed unanimously to be the favored child. The suggestion that each sister can also be represented by her hope chest as a metaphorical, analytical trope, is also worthy of further consideration: meanness, gold, sun, Merry, sadness, silver, moon, Ketzia, and happiness, lead, stars, Lucy.

The most orderly of the three sisters, Lucy's character is predisposed towards an everlasting *mise-en-abyme*. Her tale begins with a rewriting of Grimm's "*The Golden*

*Key*" (1819). In Bernheimer's version of the tale, the protagonist discovers the titular object in the snow and then imagines a chain of events in which "a locked iron box" full of "glittering treasures" (Lucy Gold, 1) is excavated. However, the protagonist has no desire to look in the box and leaves the reader's curiosity unrequited. This time a boy digs up the box, but the story ends before he turns the lock, once again failing to satisfy the reader's curiosity. Both tales put the question, the notion of possession and suggest that the treasure chest is far from the goal of a character's narrative drive. Like the psychoanalytic layering of the mind, the archaeological process of searching is given more emphasis than any prize in this fairy tale. Bernheimer mines Brooks's reading of narrative desire which "comes into being as a perpetual want for of a satisfaction that cannot be offered in reality" (1984: 55). Desire itself is queried recurrently throughout the trilogy, with curiosity or "epistemophilia" or "the desire to know" (Mulvey 1996: 96) often substituting for sexual desire.

Lucy's need to cherish things borders on obsessive compulsion. "From a young age, Lucy liked to keep things tidy in boxes or shoes or in nutshells or pockets--like many children, she found it pleasant for things to fit into this or that place" (Lucy Gold, 26). Bernheimer explores Lucy's psychology further, revealing that Lucy's favorite toy is also a container, a fake book housing a doll, known as *A Dolls Book*: "a doll in a book that wasn't even a book! Tiny



things inside tiny things, so very appealing!" (27). Infatuated with the miniature, Lucy approximates Bernheimer's own coveting of surrealist box-maker Joseph Cornell's Pink Palace (1950) another representation of a hope chest as a soothing fantasy device and physical fairy tale. Susan Stewart designates Cornell's miniature as "uncontaminated" (Pink Place, 68) mirroring Lucy's domestic habits and career. Lucy grows up to become first an animator, then a doll-maker. Despite her admission that "a love of dolls is neurotic" (Lucy Gold, 30), Lucy becomes the doll inside her own text. She must carve doll faces, a violent activity that the author advises "children should never see" (Lucy Gold, 31). Indeed, in Bernheimer's literary imagination, boxes and dolls always exhibit malicious leanings and are imbued with ominous intent. The unpacking of Lucy's ascetic tendencies directly implicates the imaginative grounds of the hope chest.

In a metal trunk at the foot of her bed--the very same trunk Mrs Gold had taken to camp when she was young, which either was or was not a camp where you might have been killed--Lucy kept her favorite belongings. This trunk that resembled the treasure chest of a pirate, and also evoked danger: Lucy did not want to add to its collection...

Among the items in there: a sewing kit, a plastic doll, a knitted shirt. (Lucy Gold, 11-12)

Here the evocation of concentration camps and pirates endows the box with peril. The limited contents include specific objects that epitomize Lucy's two disturbed sisters, both of whom self-harm. Moreover, when Lucy believes, she is becoming engaged to her high school sweetheart, she kicks the chest playfully.

'Oh treasure chest, hope chest, my dearest friend, 'I said. 'Sam Han

loves me.' Oddly, the chest sounded hollow. I opened the trunk and

brightness shot at me. For a moment I had no sight. When I'd regained

my vision, I discovered all of my treasures were gone. The next morning

I learned that Sam Han had died, taken by his own hand (Lucy Gold, 23).

Here the hope chest is closely associated with the momentary blindness of the young woman. As her vision returns, the chest is revealed to be an empty vessel or coffin, offering a condensed metaphor for a false promise. The dumbness of symbolic lead returns. The extinguishing of her



treasures and future hopes correlates symbolically with her fiance's suicide. It is a cruel life lesson for a material girl who commits suicide on many occasions, whether choking on a beloved stone or vanishing like her treasures.

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