

THE GROTESQUE MOTIF OF THE MASK IN ANGELA CARTER'S *SHADOW DANCE*.

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According to Mikhail Bakhtin [1984:39-40], the grotesque theme of the mask is 'the most complex theme of folk [carnival] culture. The mask is connected with the joy and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself'. These positive functions of the mask are lost when the grotesque motif appears in its Romantic version: 'The Romantic mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it' [*ibid.*: 40].

The motif of the mask in both its forms, carnivalesque and Romantic, represents one of the central grotesque elements appearing in the novels by Angela Carter. As I discuss elsewhere [Čajková 2009], in some of her later works, the mask motif takes the form of the masquerade of femininity playing an important role in Carter's contribution to the postmodern discussions about the problem of identity. At this place I would like to focus on her employment of this grotesque element in her first novel *Shadow Dance*, in which Carter uses a combination of the narrative methods of realism with the conventions of the Gothic genre to present a 1960s story about violence, murder and madness. As I intend to show below, images of the mask are central to Carter's construction of the novel's villain Honeybuzzard as a dark figure that falls in the tradition of Hoffmannesque demonic characters.

At the beginning, the mask motif takes the form of the character's playful interest in the wearing of false noses, false ears and vampire teeth, which opens the possibility for some to believe that 'Honeybuzzard, at one level, appears as a comic version of the Gothic villain' [Peach 1998:30]. The carnivalesque colouring of the motif, however, acquires a gloomier shade when the mask images start to function as symbols of Honeybuzzard's terrifying character. A significant passage in this respect is the one where Honeybuzzard's face turns into 'a mask of nothing' in response to his friend's urge to talk about mutilated Ghislaine [Carter 1995:59]. Linden Peach [1998:39] reads this image as Carter's association of indifference with an inner void, which is one of the things in her novel that suggest the influence of the American Gothic tradition. Nevertheless, the image of the face as the mask of nothing that certainly may be seen as a communication of 'a blank void, a moral nothingness' [*ibid.*:41], which one finds in Honeybuzzard's reaction, can also be read as an indication of the fact that Honeybuzzard '[i]n his very being . . . represents Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque mask of romanticism, which "hides something, keeps something a secret, deceives"' [Gamble 1997:52]. The Romantic grotesque, which represents a reduced version of the carnivalesque grotesque [Bakhtin 1984:47], found its best expression not only in the genre of the Gothic novel, but, as Bakhtin stresses, also in the works of German authors, such as Hippel, Jean Paul and especially E.T.A. Hoffmann. The influence of the last author on Carter's work is visible in more than one of her novels,

and the mask motif in *Shadow Dance* reveals that Honeybuzzard is the first of her Hoffmannesque figures.

When appearing on the scene of the novel for the first time, Honeybuzzard is introduced to the reader through the eyes of his friend Morris who ‘had never fully accustomed himself to the shock that Honey’s flamboyant and ambiguous beauty gave him each time he saw him again after an absence’ [Carter 1995:55]. The main source of the ambiguity lies in Honeybuzzard’s face that is a mixture of the angelic – his golden locks are combined with the ‘full-lipped face one associates with angels blowing glad, delirious trumpets in early Florentine pictures of the Nativity’ – and of the sinister, expressed in ‘a pair of perfectly pointed ears, such as fauns have’ and ‘an inexpressibly carnivorous (sic) mouth’ with the ‘hints of feline, tearing teeth’ [*ibid.*:56]. The incongruity of his appearance formed by a typical grotesque combination of the high (the angelic) and the low (the animal), the innocent and the sinister, seems to suggest that it is Satan in all his major forms - as the fallen angel, the sexual power and the predator - that is imprinted in the face. The grotesque mixture has a disturbing effect of inhumanity, turning what is on the surface a beautiful human face into a disguise of deadly forces. In this sense, it achieves the effect of the Romantic mask that ‘instead of covering a living breathing face, had taken over the role of the face itself. If one were to tear the mask off, the grinning image of the bare skull would come to light’ [Kayser 1981:184]. In *Shadow Dance* such tearing off of the mask appears at the moment when Honeybuzzard, after murdering Ghislaine, loses his ambiguous beauty to reveal his more monstrous look:

His hair trailed like mad Ophelia’s and his eyes were too large for his head.

The angles and planes of the skull were showing through the flesh. What was familiar about him seemed pared away, the daytime flesh carved off his bones so that he appeared to them, finally, naked and elementary and unknowable in the integrity of his own skeleton, in the night. [Carter 1995:179]

Here Honeybuzzard reminds of the Hoffmannesque characters whose ‘appearance and behaviour are grotesque’ [Kayser 1981:106]. Sometimes these characters function as ‘disguises of the devil’, but even when such a connection is not clear, their grotesque nature resides in the fact that ‘their mere presence usually spells death and destruction’ [Kayser 1981:184].

Carter’s Honeybuzzard clearly does not function as a simple disguise of the devil but the satanic features of his face-mask suggest that he represents the forces that in Christian culture have been often embodied in the figure of Satan. The evil nature of the character is emphasized by his diabolic influence over the fate of other characters in the novel. First of all, his violent attack of mutilation has a powerful effect on Ghislaine, who consequently turns into a soulless ‘doll’, willing to accept death at the hands of her ‘master’. Later, this act also proves destructive in relation to others, even those who are

in no direct contact with Honeybuzzard himself. The most extreme case is that of the wife of one of Ghislaine's former lovers, who commits suicide, killing her unborn child, because she believes that it was her husband who scarred the girl.

It is in the depiction of Honeybuzzard's reaction to this tragedy where, once again, the motif of the mask is used to show the inhuman nature of the villain figure: 'More deadpan than Buster Keaton, Honeybuzzard put his hand slyly to his mouth; then smiled, revealing a full set of great vampire stunt-fangs. It was a cruel and audacious gesture. It was his comment' [Carter 1995:83]. The image of the mask of nothing, created here through the allusion to Buster Keaton's famous empty expression, signifies Honeybuzzard's moral and emotional indifference to the consequences of his own deed, while the 'vampire stunt-fangs' endow him with the predatory look of the terrifying creature that feeds on its prey. Thus Honeybuzzard's delight in wearing false teeth, which Linden Peach [1998:30] reads as representing the comic aspect of the character, functions as an element of the macabre humour of the 'satanic humorist' whose laughter, according to Bakhtin [1984:51], bears the 'traits of mockery and cynicism'.

The following passage also indicates the association of the traditional carnivalesque element of funny disguises with the negative laughter of the Romantic grotesque:

False noses, false boils, ulcers and pimples, false beards, plastic reproductions of dog excrement . . . exploding cigarettes . . . There was no end to the joke-bag, nor to Honey's relish of them. He arranged the world in terms of brutal slapstick, whoopee cushions, rubber fried eggs and blackface soap. 'I should like an exploding contraceptive,' he said once; even sex was a joke, a savage one. Morris wondered if Honey had been laughing, when, knife in pretty hand, he had approached – but, no he did not want to think of that. [Carter 1995:75-76]

Honeybuzzard arranges the world in terms of what Bakhtin calls the Romantic carnival in which the regenerative joyful spirit of the folk festivity gives way to the cruel humour that implicates destruction and death. (Morris's imagining of Honeybuzzard as laughing in the moment when he scarred Ghislaine illustrates the fact.) In the context of the Romantic carnival, produced by Honeybuzzard's behaviour, the carnivalesque disguises that he enjoys putting on lack any positive meaning and instead have the character of the terrifying grotesque.

To conclude, mask images function as a central element in Carter's construction of Honeybuzzard. His character is not defined only by the moral void suggested by the mask of nothing his face turns into each time he avoids responsibility for the suffering of his victims. An important role is also played by the 'funny' masks traditionally associated with the comic world of carnival. The false noses, beards or teeth may evoke the gay relativity of identity that Bakhtin [1984:39-40] connects with the carnival mask, but in

the case of Honeybuzzard they contribute to the mysterious nature of this Hoffmannesque figure, whose identity is elusive and whose motives remain unclear.

Literature

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Summary

The paper deals with the grotesque motif of the mask in Angela Carter's first novel *Shadow Dance*. Using Bakhtin's important theoretical distinction between carnivalesque and Romantic mask, the author argues that Romantic mask images are central to Carter's construction of the novel's villain Honeybuzzard as a dark figure that falls in the tradition of Hoffmannesque demonic characters.