

IMAGES OF GROTESQUE DEGRADATION IN A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY

Šnircová S.

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Slovakia

The principle of degradation represents an essential feature of grotesque imagery, realised through ‘the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract’ to ‘the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity’ (Bakhtin 1984: 19-20). While in its carnivalesque forms this principle played an important function in ancient rituals of revival of the high with its contact with the low, in later development of the grotesque (Romantic and post-Romantic) it becomes a part of bleaker visions of the world.

This paper examines the function of the grotesque principle of degradation in Angela Carter’s novel *Shadow Dance* (SD) (1966) in which she produces an image of desecration of the crucifix by its association with human, especially female, sexuality. The purpose of the following analysis is to explore how this image producing the terror effect typical of Romantic grotesque also points to the role of Christian ideology in the production of demeaning perceptions of women in patriarchal culture.

Although the desecration of the crucifix is presented to the reader only in the form of a fantasy, as the narrative indicates, this fantasy is later played out, leading to the murder of one of the main characters (Ghislaine) and bringing tragic consequences to the other two (Honeybuzzard, Morris). The fantasy appears when searching through deserted houses for the junk that they trade, Honeybuzzard and Morris come across a big plaster crucifix lying on the floor. The finding prompts Honeybuzzard to envisage having sex with Ghislaine, the promiscuous heroine of the novel: “We would take it in turns to lay her on that chap there.” He indicated the inoffensive Christ. “She would like that. And we could take pictures and sell them to the colour supplements” (SD: 132). The mixture of the sacred and the bodily that underlies Honeybuzzard’s fantasy about sexual intercourse performed on the symbol of Christian spirituality reveals important similarities between Carter’s image and some grotesque images described by Bakhtin.

Bakhtin points out that such acts as ‘gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing’ were used during medieval carnivalesque feasts (especially the feasts of fools) as a means of ‘a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols’ (1984: 74-5). This treatment of church rituals and symbols, however, did not reflect a ‘purely negative mockery’ of the Church and its ideology: ‘The negative derisive element was deeply immersed in the triumphant theme of bodily regeneration and renewal. It was “man’s second nature” that was laughing, the lower bodily stratum which could not express itself in official cult and ideology’ (Bakhtin 1984: 75). Thus in these grotesque images the profanation of the sacred was always connected with the celebration of the body that triumphed over the ascetic ideal of the dominant ideology.

Such a triumph of the body also appears in Honeybuzzard's image of the 'orgy' since the performance of sexual acts on the crucifix suggests the character's derisive attitude towards the Christian ideal of asceticism as well as demonstrates the ideal of bodily hedonism based on the idea of sexual freedom celebrated during the 1960's sexual revolution. The fact that Ghislaine 'would like that' indicates that her attitude to the Christian ideal is the same as Honeybuzzard's. When Honeybuzzard, alluding to her free sexual behaviour, later says that '[s]he could only be a clergyman's daughter' (SD: 132) he draws attention to the fact that Ghislaine's enjoying sex on the crucifix would be a reflection of her rejection of the ideology that advocates the suppression of the body as well as her revolt against the authority of her father who represents the ideology. This image of the triumph of the body over the church ideal that also includes the female character's liberation from Christian patriarchy is, however, destroyed as soon as Honeybuzzard changes his mind presenting to Morris a different fantasy: 'But chaining her to that symbol of her father over there and raping her - now, that would really be something' (SD: 132). What, at first, seems to be a celebration of the freedom of both male and female bodies is transformed into an image in which the crucifix functions as an instrument of torture of the woman turned into a helpless sexual object used for the satisfaction of male desire.

Consequently, Carter's image of the desecration of the cross acquires the effect of the terrifying grotesque of Romanticism in which the sacred is degraded by its association with the abuse and murder of helpless women. The derelict house containing a big crucifix (probably a former 'religious hostel' (SD: 131) can be seen as a modern version of a 'decayed abbey', a typical Gothic novel setting, and the act itself can recall the perversity of a Gothic villain. At the same time, the image is reminiscent of the even greater perversity of the Sadeian libertine who deliberately turns symbols of Christian faith into the means of sexual violence. In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter, for example, gives an account of de Sade's representation of a monastery whose function is subverted. The place, whose original function was to create space for the utmost spirituality and the body's chastity, is turned by monks into the 'place of rape', where sexual function of women means a 'thorough negation of their existence as human beings' (Carter 1979: 43). Although this Sadeian grotesque is related, in its essence, to grotesque imagery of the profanation of the sacred, its actual effect and function is different. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais' image of a monastery that presents a monastic belfry as a giant phallus functions not as a sign of 'the monks' depravity' but as 'uncrown[ing] the entire monastery, the very ground on which it stands, its false ascetic ideal, its abstract and sterile eternity' (1984: 312). However, unlike the carnivalesque grotesque profanation of the monastery that can be read as challenging the values of the world ruled by Christian ideology, the Sadeian profanation of the sacred invites readers to perceive the monastery in which women are abused as 'a model of the world' in which women and men do not reside 'upon equal terms' (Carter 1979: 42-43). An important similarity between de Sade's degradation of the sacred place and Carter's desecration of the crucifix arises from the fact that Carter's image can also be seen as creating a 'model of the world' since it functions as a symbolic expression of

the role that Christian religion has played in the creation of the oppression of women in patriarchal culture.

What is important in this respect is that Carter's presentation of the crucifix as the instrument of abuse and later (when Honeybuzzard's plays out the fantasy) also murder of the girl emphasises its desecration by the creation of a parallel between the crucified body of Christ and the female body. While the former functions in Christian culture as the ultimate bodily symbol of the 'high' spiritual, the latter often signifies, as Carter's text highlights, the 'low' sexual. The unsettling parallel between the body of Christ and Ghislaine's body is supported by an image that appears earlier in the novel when Morris drinking a beer in the company of the former beauty, is overwhelmed by an unpleasant feeling that he, in fact, tastes her body: 'He sipped cautiously at his beer. And was suddenly gripped with the nauseating conviction that it tasted of her. He was drinking her down sacramentally; the taste of her metallic deodorant sweat and the foundation cream she smeared over her lips to make them pale and a chemical smell of contraceptives and her own sexual sweat'(SD: 5). Producing a grotesque parody of the Holy Communion where sacramental eating of Christ's body is replaced by metaphorical 'drinking down' of the female body, Carter evokes various 'parodies of the scriptures and of religious rites' that were 'permitted on feast days, as was the *risus paschalis* [Easter laughter], meat and sexual intercourse' (SD: 83). These 'gay parodies of the sacred' (SD: 83) often took form of banquet images that combined Biblical elements with eating and drinking. For example, Bakhtin mentions a travesty of the sacred, appearing in Rabelais, where 'Christ's last words on the cross, *sitio* ("I thirst") and *consumatum est* ("it is consummated") are travestied in terms of eating and overindulgence', which degraded the sacred meaning of the words through putting them on the level of the body (SD: 86). However, despite the fact that Carter's image echoes these gay parodies, the mixture of the 'sacramental' drinking with the elements of Ghislaine's body works to a different effect. The idea of the exalted, ascetic body of Christ, which is automatically associated with the Eucharist, functions here to show that Morris, whose perception of Ghislaine is soaked with Christian ideology, sees the sexually charged female body as base and disgusting.

The orthodox Christian ideology does not see the negative nature of the female body only in its 'greater proneness to sin and corruption', but also in the 'fact' that it is a sign of women being 'secondary and inferior members of the human species' (Ruether 1993: 245). The Thomistic belief that 'maleness of Christ is not a historical accident, but a necessity' because 'in order to represent humanity Christ must be incarnated into normative humanity, the male' (Ruether 1993: 245) indicates that for anyone who adopts the perspective of this ideology the association of the crucifix with the female body must appear particularly grotesque. Carter's image draws attention to the fact that what causes the grotesque effect of this association are religious constructs that put women into subordinate position in relation to men. The image of the degradation of the cross points to the cross's own function in the creation of degrading perceptions of women. In this respect, it is possible to agree with Aidan Day's belief that Honeybuzzard's 'act of apparent profanation does not, in fact, contradict the religious

meaning of the crucifix' since in Carter's novel 'a part of religious meaning of the crucifix is precisely the demeaning of women that Honeybuzzard indulges in (Day 1998: 16). Honeybuzzard's need to treat Ghislaine as a sexual object over which he can exercise full control is a result of the existence of the patriarchal culture's need to have control over women's bodies. What Honeybuzzard and religious patriarchy have in common here is the negative attitude towards female sexual freedom, which is equalled with whorishness, and the urge to punish 'whorish' women for using their bodies for their own pleasure. It is this urge that finally leads Honeybuzzard to the murdering of Ghislaine at the same cross and thus destroying her sexual 'hunger' (SD: 178).

To draw a conclusion, the conflict between the sexual 'hunger' of the body and the ideology that suppresses the freedom of the body to satisfy this hunger, which is central to carnivalesque grotesque imagery, also creates the basis of Carter's image of degradation in *Shadow Dance*. The major difference between the carnivalesque images described by Bakhtin and Carter's image, however, lies in the main object of debasement. While in the carnivalesque images what is clearly debased is Christian ideology whose sacred symbols and ideals are the target of profanation, in Carter's grotesque image the profanation of a sacred symbol of Christianity serves to underline the function that this ideology itself has in patriarchal degradations of women.

Literature

1. Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
2. Botting, F. *Gothic*. London: Routledge, 1996.
3. Carter, A. *Shadow Dance*. London: Virago Press, 1995.
4. *The Sadeian Woman. An Exercise in Cultural History*. London: Virago Press, 1979.
5. Clayborough, A. *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1967.
6. Černý, M. The Value of Gothic for English Language Teaching. In *Proceedings of the 3rd Malaysia International Conference on Academic Strategies in English Language Teaching*. Shah Alam: Universiti Teknologi Mara, 2010, pp. 1–13.
7. Day, A. *Angela Carter. The Rational Glass*. Manchester: MUP, 1998.
8. Krajčovičová S. Neverbálne výrazové prostriedky v diskurze literárneho diela (George Orwell – Nineteen Eighty-Four). In: *Slovenský jazyk a literatúra v škole*, 42, 7-8, 1995/96, Bratislava: SPN, s. 201-207. ISDS 0231-6870.
9. McElroy, B. *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
10. Ruether, R. R. The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies. In: Kourany J., Sterba, J., P., Tong, R., eds. *Feminist Philosophies* Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 244-253.

Summary

The paper examines the function of the grotesque principle of degradation in Angela Carter's novel *Shadow Dance* in which she produces an image of desecration of the crucifix by its association with human, especially female, sexuality. The analysis explores how this image producing the terror effect typical of Romantic grotesque also points to the role of Christian ideology in the production of demeaning perceptions of women in patriarchal culture.