

The Encounter with the Nocturnal Side of the Psyche : Truman Capote's " A Tree of Night "

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I

Some of Truman Capote's short stories share the motif of the encounter of the protagonist with a mysterious stranger. For the protagonist, the encounter is a shocking and disruptive experience which shakes the foundation of his/her familiar reality. And there is a suggestion that the mysterious stranger is closely associated with something that the protagonist harbors deep within him/herself. In *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*, Capote's first collection of short fiction, for example, such stories as " Miriam ," " The Headless Hawk ," and " A Tree of Night " have this motif in common.

This study is concerned with " A Tree of Night ," the final work and the title story in the collection, which portrays the eerie journey of the protagonist. The action takes place on the night train that a young woman named Kay takes on her way back from her uncle's funeral to college. What is most striking about this story is that it is pervaded with the imagery of death. This imagery is repeatedly inspired by coldness, the atmosphere of decay, funerals, coffins, and the metaphors of being devoured. And Kay goes through a symbolic death, an experience which suggests her journey as a metaphoric initiatory transition. On the train, she encounters a freakish couple, both of whom have no name and are referred to, respectively, as " the man " and " the woman ." Interestingly, the freaks are presented as beings who are simultaneously alien and familiar to Kay. In the course of the night journey, the grotesque couple throw her into a state of psychic collapse. In this way, " A Tree of Night " describes the gradual disintegration of the protagonist through the encounter with a strangely familiar " other ."

II

The first scene of " A Tree of Night " depicts the cold, windy, and deserted platform on which Kay waits for her train in a winter evening : " It was winter. A string of naked

light bulbs, from which it seemed all warmth had been drained, illuminated the little depot's cold, windy platform (206). The images of coldness, symbolic of death (Vries 107), set the prevailing mood for the rest of the story. That Kay is on her way back to college after having attended the funeral of an uncle intensifies the macabre atmosphere; it also suggests that she is under the dominant influence of death. And she carries a green Western guitar, the only thing the uncle has left her. The color green is at times linked with death in Capote's works. In "The Headless Hawk," for example, that color serves to highlight the paralysis of the protagonist's identity in association with the image of being below the sea (175). Thus, the green guitar carried by Kay may be seen as the shadow of death that has haunted her since the funeral of the uncle.

The first scene also creates the atmosphere of ominousness through monster imagery. Icicles hung along the station-house eaves are described as being "like some crystal monster's vicious teeth (206). And the train, which emerges from the darkness, "spouting steam and glaring with light (206), also suggests an image of a monster. Thus, Kay's entry into the train can be likened to the swallowing up of her in the belly of a monster and hence takes on the quality of symbolic death.

The last coach Kay enters is described as follows :

The coach was a relic with a decaying interior of ancient red-plush seats, bald in spots, and peeling iodine-colored woodwork. An old-time copper lamp, attached to the ceiling, looked romantic and out of place. Gloomy dead smoke sailed the air; and the car's heated closeness accentuated the stale odor of discarded sandwiches, apple cores, and orange hulls: this garbage, including Lily cups, soda-pop bottles, and mangled newspapers, littered the long aisle. From a water cooler, embedded in the wall, a steady stream trickled to the floor. The passengers, who glanced up wearily when Kay entered, were not, it seemed, at all conscious of any discomfort. (206-7)

The images of decay and rot help to stress the atmosphere of lifelessness. Kay takes the only vacant seat of the coach in "an isolated alcove (207) where an uncanny couple has settled in the opposite seat. The location of her seat in the isolated area suggests that she becomes further separated from reality and enters an unfamiliar realm. That the seat is the only vacant one in the coach induces a sense of inescapable doom. When the

train starts , " a ghost of steam hissed against the window (207) In this way, the opening of the story produces a macabre and ominous atmosphere.

The freakish couple themselves are freighted with the imagery of death. The woman tells Kay that she and her male companion perform a burial show in which they reenact the biblical story of Lazarus. The man, who plays the role of Lazarus, is buried alive. That is, he is associated with the corpse. Indeed, through his eyes " like a pair of clouded milky-blue marbles " and his face which " had no real expression " (208-9) , he takes on the appearance of the corpse. And Kay " thought she recognized an odd parallel " between the man's face and her uncle's : " there was about the man's face the same kind of shocking, embalmed, secret stillness " (213) .

Kay's weird night journey, which is pervaded with such a nightmarish, deathlike atmosphere, seems to take on the quality of initiation. Her entry into the train represents the detachment from her familiar reality, a state which corresponds to the phase of separation. She then finds herself in the dark realm of death, an experience reminiscent of the descent into the underworld. This horrible experience on the train marks the phase of margin, which is frequently likened to death (Turner 95) Indeed, Kay undergoes a terrible inner alteration, which takes on the quality of symbolic death. She gradually loses contact with reality and her sense of herself as autonomous and coherent. When the woman asks her where she is from , " Kay was unable to provide an answer. The names of several cities came to her all at once " (210) In addition, she fails to ask the conductor to find her a different seat because " the request stuttered on her lips incoherently (212) . Finally, she is thrown into a state where " she needed the reassurance of her own voice " and says : " We're in Alabama now, I think, and tomorrow we 'll be in Atlanta and I'm nineteen and I'll be twenty in August and I'm a sophomore " (215) Here, she desperately tries to assure herself of her identity because it is breaking down.

III

It is the weird couple who function as the agents of disintegration for her. Like Capote's other mysterious-stranger figures such as D.J. in " The Headless Hawk " and the little girl in " Miriam , " each of the couple is a freakish character. Kay first looks at the woman and becomes aware of her unusual appearance :

She was short ; her feet barely scraped the floor. And like many undersized people

she had a freak of structure, in her case an enormous, really huge head. Rouge so brightened her sagging, flesh-featured face it was difficult even to guess at her age : perhaps fifty, fifty-five. Her big sheep eyes squinted, as if distrustful of what they saw. Her hair was an obviously dyed red, and twisted into parched, fat corkscrew curls. A once-elegant lavender hat of impressive size flopped crazily on the side of her head, and she was kept busy brushing back a drooping cluster of celluloid cherries sewed to the brim .(208)

Kay then turns her attention to the man. According to the woman ,“ He’s afflicted : deaf and dumb ”(208). Further, he appears to be mentally disabled. And he is described as follows :

The man slumped in the seat, swung his head sideways, and studied Kay intently from the corners of his eyes. These eyes, like a pair of clouded milky-blue marbles, were thickly lashed and oddly beautiful. Now, except for a certain remoteness, his wide, hairless face had no real expression. It was as if he were incapable of experiencing or reflecting the slightest emotion. His gray hair was clipped close and combed forward into uneven bangs. He looked like a child aged abruptly by some uncanny method (208-9)

For Kay, the woman and particularly the man are ambiguous beings. As I have already mentioned, the man is simultaneously alien and vaguely familiar. He is, for Kay, a bizarre and outlandish being, but at the same time there is a quality about him that reminds her of something unnameable and indefinable:“ something about him, an elusive quality she could not quite put a finger on, reminds her of of what ? (209) In the course of the journey with the couple, Kay has the strange sensation that “ [a]lthough she had never made this trip before, the train was traveling through an area strangely familiar (214-15) Towards the end of the story, the man reminds Kay of “ what she was afraid ”:

it was a memory, a childish memory of terrors that once, long ago, had hovered above her like haunted limbs on a tree of night. Aunts, cooks, strangers each eager to spin a tale or teach a rhyme of spooks and death, omens, spirits, demons.

And always there had been the unfailing threat of the wizard man : stay close to the house, child, else a wizard man'll snatch you and eat you alive! He lived everywhere, the wizard man, and everywhere was danger. At night, in bed, hear him tapping at the window? Listen !(215-16)

All this suggests that the man is subtly linked with something dormant inside Kay ; that he embodies her buried, hidden self. Considered thus, the woman's following words are telling : " a train's the place for putting your cards on the table (208)

The ambiguity of the man expresses itself also as the quality of being at once disgusting and fascinating. He " made her[Kay] squeamish, but she could not take her eyes off him " (209) Kay also " felt for him a keen sense of pity ; but also, and this she could not suppress, an overpowering disgust, an absolute loathing (209) In cultural terms, freaks are often considered beings who take on this ambiguous quality :

The freak is an object of simultaneous horror and fascination because, in addition to whatever infirmities or abilities he or she exhibits, the freak is an *ambiguous* being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life. Freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition.... Freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications, outside of or beyond the human. They imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, identities, and sexes our most fundamental categories of self-definition and boundaries dividing self from otherness. (Grosz 57)

In short, freaks represent beings who confound cultural categories. Indeed, the same is true of the freakish couple : they look simultaneously old and young ; they put on an occult show, thereby blurring the distinction between reality and illusion ; the man resides on the boundary that separates life from death. And, for Kay, the couple represent the subversive inner otherness that threatens the unity and identity of the subject. They embody what must be expelled or repressed to construct and secure Kay as a conscious, unified, rational subject. The man's irrational attributes, in particular, are thrown into relief. As we have seen, he is inextricably linked with Kay's unconscious ;

his deafness and muteness may suggest that he is outside language and meaning. He is a repulsive being for Kay in that as her alienated, other self that irrupts from within her, he threatens to rupture her outward, socially acceptable self. The imagery of being devoured can also be seen in the description of the “ wizard man ” as a being who will “ snatch you and eat you alive .” This image suggests the dissolution of the self through its engulfment in disruptive otherness.

What is interesting about the man is that he is also strangely enticing to Kay. The protagonist’s inexplicable fascination with his/her other self can also be seen in “ Miriam ” and “ The Headless Hawk .” While Kay feels a strong repulsion for the man, she finds herself entrapped into obeying him by some irresistible force. Towards the end of the story, she manages to escape from the couple to the observation platform, but “ [t]he intense cold made her head ache, and she longed to go back inside the warm coach and fall asleep (215) . This observation platform, it may seem, symbolizes her separate, bounded self, in which she feels distressed and helpless. She returns to the alcove as if she were under the spell of the man. Then she agrees to buy a “ love charm ” from him, namely to surrender herself to the overwhelming force of the inner other. Finally, she falls into a calm, hypnotic trance and has the strange sensation that “ the man’s face seemed to change form and recede before her like a moon-shaped rock sliding downward under a surface of water (216) . This state points to the dissolution of Kay as a conscious, knowing subject. The woman takes away Kay’s purse and “ gently pulled the raincoat like a shroud above her head (216) . This act of taking the purse brings to mind “ moral theft ” (105) as described in “ Master Misery ,” which signifies the act of stealing a person’s self and identity. And the image of a “ shroud ” suggests that Kay is doomed to be buried alive as the bride of the man, who, in the burial show , “ wears a gorgeous made-to-order bridegroom suit (212) . This final episode reveals that the imagery of sexuality, which we see earlier in the story in such things as the peach seed and the love charm, is closely connected with death. Helen S. Garson interprets Kay’s purse as a symbol of vagina and remarks that the final episode, with sex and death intimately intertwined, suggests a rape, through which the “ wizard man ” has gained Kay as his bride(7-8) . In my view, the imagery of death fuses with that of sexuality in that both signify continuity, non-differentiation, the annihilation of separate, individual self and identity. Kay’s experience on the train represents that of the disintegration of the self and identity through their immersion in the inner otherness and the resulting dissolution of the boundaries which

secure the normal subject in its identity.

IV

The motif of double personality is one of Capote's major preoccupations. He repeatedly dramatizes the conflict between the warring selves. In " A Tree of Night ," the protagonist is repelled by the erosion of her conscious, rational self through the encounter with her threatening other self. But at the same time, she is attracted to the weird double who can break and redefine the limits of her subjectivity. In other words, this story revolves around her oscillation between the horror of dissolution by the " other " and the pleasure of incorporation in the " other ." This ambivalence suggests Capote's insights into human subjectivity : that the conscious, unified, rational subject is constructed through the exclusion and repression of the other ; that the other can be liberating and integrative .

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