

Disruptive Narratives of Gender and Genre: Re-writing Female Victimhood in 21st Century Short Fiction

Cuestiones de Género(s) en Narrativas Disruptivas: Reescribiendo la Victimización Femenina en los Relatos del Siglo XXI

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Abstract

This paper considers the theme of seduction from a poetics of transgression, whose disruptive narrative strategies deploy a re-writing the topic of female victimhood and encourage an ethical reading of its forms. The texts selected are the short story *Poison* (2016), by Irish-born writer Lucy Caldwell, and *An Unlucky Man* (2018), a tale written by the Argentine author, Samantha Schweblin. The analysis develops the relation between genre and gender in the tales, in order to expose how nuanced forms of female oppression and subjugation have been subsumed and aestheticized by the master narratives of patriarchal discourse. The study will examine the way the genres reflect the social and cultural anxieties related to the naturalization and inscription of gender roles and codes as regards sexual politics. At the same time, I shall demonstrate how the analysis and interpretation of these texts within the framework of postmodernist theories and discourses, reveals the authors 'aesthetic and political project in the way it entails a re-signification of genre conventions, through a subversive poetics that throws light into the double-coded nature of institutionalized discourses within heteronormative contexts.

Keywords: transgression, patriarchal, romance, genre, narrative

Resumen

*El siguiente artículo considera la temática de la seducción desde una poética transgresora, cuyas narrativas disruptivas despliegan una reescritura de la victimización femenina y simultáneamente invitan a una lectura ética de sus formas. Los textos seleccionados son *Poison* (2016), un relato corto escrito por la autora irlandesa Lucy Caldwell, y *Un Hombre Sin Suerte* (2018), un cuento de la escritora argentina, Samantha Schweblin. El análisis de los cuentos desarrolla la relación entre el género femenino y el género narrativo del cuento, con el fin de demostrar la existencia de matices variados en la representación de la opresión y subyugación femenina, producto de su incorporación y posterior estetización discursiva propias de las narrativas del patriarcado. El estudio examina la forma por la cual el género narrativo del relato refleja la ansiedades sociales y culturales relacionadas con la naturalización e internalización tanto de los códigos, como de los*

roles de género, inscriptos en las políticas sexuales contemporáneas. Asimismo, el artículo se enfoca en el análisis e interpretación de dichos textos desde el marco del estudio de la postmodernidad, cuyas teorías y discursos contribuyen a elucidar la manera por la cual, el proyecto estético y político de ambas autoras, conlleva a una resignificación de las convenciones del género narrativo de la mano de una poética subversiva, que funciona desenmascarando la doble codificación típica de los discursos institucionalizados, propios de contextos heteronormativos.

Palabras clave: Transgresión, patriarcal, romance, género, narrativa

Introduction

Lucy Caldwell's short story *Poison*, and Samantha Schweblin tale called *An Unlucky Man* are examples of the way in which female authors appropriate the conventions of the short story in order to foreground the way patriarchal ideology operates sublimely through canonical male epistemologies. A literary history of the short story shows that the genre flourished in America in the 19th century, in the hands of male writers, and by end of the century and the first half of the 20th century it became popular amongst women writers, although it was still considered a low marginal literary form compared to the novel. Nevertheless, towards the middle of the 20th century, the short story earned its prestige, especially as postcolonial authors started using it as a weapon against political and cultural subordination (Pes, 2015). For this reason, one can infer that the relation between genre and gender, invites us to draw an analogy between cultural products and women, as both categories have historically been subjected to politics of subjugation and marginalization, respectively in terms of the phallogocentric and eurocentric politics of the literary canon, and as regards heteronormative gender codes and norms proper of patriarchal systems. Indeed, the authors' appropriation and intervention of gender conventions simultaneously reflects and reproduces the struggle of women against all forms of male hegemony. In fact, in reference to the genre's marginal position, Mary Eagleton states that [its] non- hegemonic, contradictory nature [...] stand[s] as a reflection of woman under patriarchy" (1989, p. 3).

Given these issues, through the method of close reading, I shall examine how the authors expose the ethical and ideological base of all narratives underlying all genre conventions. In this sense, by applying a stylistic analysis, I will examine the way the stories are framed within the metanarratives of patriarchal ideology, with their implicit,

duplicious and ambivalent discourse. Additionally, I will show the way the study presents a cross-cultural approach, as it incorporates concepts from a postmodernist critical framework, such as feminist criticism, and from social and psychological theories that contribute to contextualise the relevance of gender roles and practices within the stories. To this purpose, I shall demonstrate how in both stories, the authors parody the narratives of male epistemology, such as the tradition of seduction narratives, and Freud's theory of Family romances, so as illustrate the operations of patriarchal ideology within fiction.

Poison (2016): A Postmodern Mystery

One of the elements that features postmodernist fiction is the manner in which its revisionary capacity challenges the ideology underlying the conventions of realist fiction in order to reveal the constructed nature of all discourses embedded in generic categories. In this sense, my selection of these short story resides in the texts' resistance to taxonomic constrains, as in both stories, the authors alternate the conventions of the romance genre and other sub-genres, such as the gothic and the mystery genre, revealing the way its fragmented and hybrid nature blends in romance and suspense in a plot with heterosexual categories.

As regards the story's semantic dimension, the focus is placed on the narratives of seduction as the theme of seduction -being central in both stories- invites us to explore its function within the tale and re-signify it within a feminist poetics which examines the underlying ideology.

For this purpose, it is important to reflect upon the way seduction has been conceived both as concept and as practice. Jean Baudrillard (2001) defines seduction as "a strategy of displacement [that] never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice – never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals. That is why the great systems

of production and interpretation have not ceased to exclude seduction [---] form their conceptual field" (p.5).

On the other hand, as regards its implication in the structure of the plot, seduction implies action, and thus it refers to events and their outcome. According to the *Oxford Dictionaries Lexico*, the verb to seduce means: "to entice (someone) into sexual activity"; "to entice (someone) to do or believe something inadvisable or foolhardy" and "to attract powerfully" ("Seduce", 2019).

In *Poison*, Caldwell challenges the realist conventions proper of the seduction tales, through disruptive strategies, such as narrative embedding and parodic stylization, in order to foreground how the narrative economy subsumes the subtleties and nuances of heteronormative gender practices. In other words, by embedding the story's central romance within a noir narrative frame, the author imbues the tale with stylistic devices, such as a dark prevailing mood, a mimetic prose that describes characters afflicted by moral and ethical questions, and anchored in a specific setting and situation.

Thus, in the story's opening the author plunges the reader in *Medias Res*, and describes how, an unnamed female narrator, situated at the pub of the Merchant Hotel in Northern Ireland, is suddenly disturbed by an event involving a teenage girl and a sixty-year-old man, who looks familiar to her. The author rightaway engages the reader in a voyeuristic game, inviting us to experience the teller's unsettling discovery: "It was him. [...] I scrambled to work out the numbers in my head, sixteen, seventeen, almost eighteen. All those years later and there he was, entwined with a girl a fraction of his age. He must be nearly sixty now. (Caldwell, 2016).

Thus, the introduction positions the narrator in the role of an amateur sleuth who, shocked by the girl's appearance and her flirtations, and alarmed by the man's acquiescence, attempts to decode the mystery surrounding their relationship. However, notwithstanding the narrator's alarm at the way "she wriggled into him and kissed him on the cheek [...] as their heads bent confidentially together", she concludes, "that she was not her lover, but her own daughter" (Caldwell, 2016).

In this manner, the inscription of the enigma about their relationship temporally shifts the events towards the protagonist's past; configuring thus an embedded narrative,

whose plot develops the tropes of the traditional seduction narrative, in order to expose them as vehicles of hegemonic masculinities within the institutions. In this respect, Jewkes and Morrell (2015), define the concept and practice of hegemonic masculinities as:

a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways, [and characterised] by several features such as: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy. (Hegemonic masculinity: a theoretical overview, section, para.1)

In this way, by temporally shifting the action sixteen years back, the narrative presents the quest of the fourteen-year-old narrator and her female friends, that seeks to reconstruct the story of the affair between Mr Knox, the Spanish and French teacher, and his sixth-year student, Davina Calvert. The narrative point of view shifts between the first-person teller, and the first-person plural we, in an attempt to incorporate her friends' perceptions about the past affair, and thus render the tale's verisimilitude and credibility through the collective voice, whose multivocal dimension deploys the power of feminist epistemology. In the light of the previous statement, it is important to take into consideration Spacks' (1993) reflection on the importance of gossip as "the foundation and the means of written narrative" in that, at this stage in the story, it fuels the text with its disruptive and liberating power of the female perspective (p.13). For one thing, Davina and Mr Knox story epitomized the perfect romance that culminated in marriage, given that Davina represented the feminist ideal, due to her popularity and academic performance: "[She] was her year's star pupil she got the top mark in Spanish A level in the whole of northern Ireland and came third in French." (Caldwell, 2016). On the other hand, far from embodying the villain of the seduction tale, Mr Knox represents the masculine icon, whereby social and cultural factors like his consumer habits and the ideology of male hegemony, constructed his identity and his role in the community:

He was so different from the other teachers, he had dark hair and smoked camel cigarettes, even though teachers couldn't smoke anyway. He drove an Alfa Romeo, and

unlike the other male teachers who were rumpled in browns and greys, he'd wear tapered jeans and polo necks and Chelsea boots [...] and mirrored aviator sunglasses. And a large part of his charge came from the fact that he had had an affair with a former pupil. (Caldwell, 2016)

In this way, the above quotation illustrates the way gossip functions both as a resistant and an emergent discourse in that while it respectively strives to challenge the school's patriarchal ideology, it elicits the perpetuation of those traits typical of consumer culture, whose social and economic forces regulate and determine gender identity and roles, thus foregrounding women's double exposure to gender and social asymmetries that facilitate the internalisation of sexual practices and codes.

Nevertheless, as the gossip unfolds, the gaps of indeterminacy and the inconsistencies that emerge in the characters' recollection of events, attest the illicit nature of the relationship, infecting the discourse with gothic undertones that delay the narrator's attempt to give closure and resolution to the romance tale: "they could not dismiss him; he had done nothing strictly legally wrong. It happened before we joined the school, but we knew all the details, everyone did". (Caldwell, 2016)

So far, the seduction tale of Davina and Mr Knox fails as a cautionary tale, in that, the story rejects the female binary category of the passive victim vs. fallen woman, and replaces the male stereotype of vicious trickster, by a commodified version of maleness, which glorifies aspects such as sexual transgressions, exoticism and power. In turn, the narrator's own repressed fantasies disrupt the plot development with libidinal energy, deployed in a narrative excess that threatens its economy.

Deconstructing romance: The construction of the female seduction narrative

The narrative's formal and thematic strategies convey how -propelled by their romantic fantasies- the characters' intrepid visit to the Knox's result in the deconstruction of the seduction tale, into a narrative that alternates the disruptive tropes of the female gothic plot, with those of the female grotesque. In fact, as a result of the assimilation and experience of the Knox's space, the collective voice elicits

its dark testimony, thus disrupting the friends' romantic expectations as regards their idyllic life:

We found the house where the Peugeot was parked: right at the bottom of the street [...] it had an unkempt hedge and a stunted palm-tree in the middle of the little front lawn. You somehow didn't picture Mr Knox with a miniature palm-tree in his garden. (Caldwell, 2016).

Moreover, as the description unfolds, the narrative tone oscillates from disappointment to fear and finally to utter despair, product of their gradual awareness of some disturbing facts about Mr Knox and Davina's life:

[...] but this Davina had messy hair in a ponytail and bruises under her eyes, and she was wearing baggy jeans and a raincoat. And she was crying: her face was puffy and she was crying, openly, tears just running down her face.

I felt Lisa take my hand and squeeze it.

'Oh my God,' she breathed.

We watched Davina walk around to the other side of the car and unstrap a toddler from the back seat. [...] We had forgotten [...] that Mr Knox had babies. He never mentioned them, or had photos on his desk like some of the other teachers

'Oh my God,' Lisa said again. (Caldwell, 2016)

Indeed, it is the characters' perception of Davina's physical and emotional distress that transforms the experience at the Knox's home into a gothic nightmare, and positions Davina as the helpless heroine, subjugated by the tyrant husband. In turn, the narrator's own voyeuristic experience at their home, spurs off her sexual fantasies with Mr Knox, which materialize in her transgression of the private domestic space, when in their bathroom, she steals Davina's perfume and Mr Knox's condoms. What is more, the execution of her seduction strategies fails dramatically, not only in class when, she unsuccessfully tries to seduce Mr Knox with her wife's perfume, but later, when he refuses to take her for a drive in his Alfa Romeo, thus casting her into the gendered and social other, and abruptly thwarting her oedipal fantasy. As a result, her outrageous behaviour at the Knox's home inscribes her as the female grotesque character, who driven by the need for social recognition and inclusion, performatises the role of the female ex-centric. Indeed, the narrator epitomizes her final subversive act, in the way

she weaves in a lie when she tells her friends about the sexual transgressions that took place in her encounter with the teacher. As a result, the tale's explosive sexual content and its lustful overtones dislocate her friends, who in turn, spread the rumours of the illicit affair into their homes, and finally into the institution itself.

As a result of the scandal, the pressure of narrative economy into the plot precipitates events towards closure, formally illustrating the way institutionalised politics are geared towards the control and repression of disruptive practices. In short, social and cultural anxieties are thus dissipated as our narrator is sent to a counsellor, the institution fires Mr Knox and Davina leaves him.

Thus, the end of the embedded romance tale reveals the duplicity and complicity in the metanarrative of the patriarchal institution, which while seemingly operating to restore social order, it fails to apply the full force of the law on Mr. Knox and condemn him for statutory rape. However, in a rhetorical twist aimed at challenging the narrative's arbitrary closure, the narrator's apocryphal seduction tale emerges as a narrative strategy "in abyme", whose formal and thematic strength propels the deconstruction and thus de-legitimation of the original romance between Davina and Mr. Knox, and transforms it into a female cautionary tale for men (McHale, 1987, p 124).

The return of the repressed and the dynamics of repetition

The narrative temporal shift situates the reader back into the diegetic narrative present of the noir plot, whereby the narrator, retells how she playfully decides to pay for the couple's drinks, a symbolic gesture that conceals her revenge plans aimed at unmasking Mr. Knox's identity and his past crime. However, the gothic narrative unleashes its uncanny force into the end in the way the description of the couple's overheated argument, marked by the girls' hysterical outbursts and their overt physical contact, destabilise her convictions about the girl's role and identity. In fact, her perception of the couples' outrageous and flagrant behaviour, dissipates the narrator's certainty about the girl being his daughter and heightens her alarm:

Melissa, with her blonde hair and pouting glossy lips and blue eyes, didn't look very much like him. She didn't

look much like Davina either, come to that. They were mock-arguing about something now. She flicked her hair and cocked her head and put her hands on her waist, a pantomime of indignation, and he took her bare upper arms and squeezed them, shaking her lightly, and she squealed then threw her head back in laughter as he leant in to murmur something in her ear.

She had to be his daughter. She had to be. (Caldwell, 2016)

In this way the narrator's thoughts express her denial of certain facts that are overwhelming, those that suggest how the past comes to haunt the present, as the unpenalized crimes plague the text with paradox and ambiguity, and the (silenced) female repressed subtext of the tale, hovers in the end, threatening to infect the story's closure with the taboo of incest and abuse.

An Unlucky Man (2018): Deconstructing Freud's Family Romances

In *An Unlucky Man*, Schwebel incorporates the conventions of the romance and the gothic genres in order to rework new models of horror in contemporary society. Through a feminist approach to Freud's theory of Family Romances, I will explore the way gendered roles and practices within the family, both establish the starting point of the analysis, and inform the author's deconstruction of the family romance plot into a gothic tale of female victimhood and abuse. In this way, the analysis of the author's appropriation of the gothic tropes and modes will show how they disrupt the narrative economy of the romance, in order to establish a critique of its ideology.

In his theory of Family Romances, Freud (1909) explains how a child's intellectual and emotional development is determined by the way he/she negotiates the tension between the oppositional forces of desire and prohibition by parental authority (p. 237). The story's opening frames the narrative within the gothic plot, whereby the author interrogates the validity and legitimacy of the traditional family romance and its institutionalisation of male hegemony through heteronormative roles and practices, as conveyed through the genre's (character) tropes such as, the subjugated mother, the children hostages and the tyrant father.

In the story's opening, the first-person female narrator and protagonist evokes the disturbing and unsettling

circumstances on the day of her eight birthday, when her three-year-old sister's accidental drinking of leach, not only spoils the celebrations, but leads to undesired discoveries and disturbing feelings regarding her family.

The events that chronologically unfold after the accident, vividly describe the way the father subordinates his family to his rash decisions and unbridled behaviour, in an effort to save Abi's life. Alternately, the protagonist explains how her growing disappointment with her mother's passivity and her father's unrelentless attitude, increase her resentment against them, thus triggering off what Freud claims, is the child's feeling of being "slighted" (p.232). Such is the case when she recalls that "[T]here was more horn honking and [her] Mum started to cry. Dad had to shout [at her] twice before [she] understood that [she] was the one that was supposed to close the house" (Schweblin, 2018). Furthermore, the unfolding of visual, kinetic and auditory imagery imprints her fast-paced narrative with anticipatory tension in the way the description of the father's surreptitious and frenzied driving, culminates into a nightmarish experience of unprecedented and unexpected proportions. As a result, trapped by her father's reckless behaviour and arbitrary demands, the narrative evokes the disruption of the girl's psychic and physical response to his demands: "[Dad] braked in the traffic. He stopped honking the horn and pounded his head against the steering wheel. He sat up and looked at [her] in the rear-view mirror [...] and said [to her]: Take off your underpants" (Schweblin, 2018). In turn, while trying to make sense of the appalling demand made by her father, the protagonist realises to her despair, that her mother has joined in the father's plea and urges her to "take off the dammed underparts" (Schweblin, 2018). In this way, the narrative unmasks her as an accomplice of her husband's sinister plan to wave her white panties out of the window as an emergency sign, consequently deeming her responsible for the reproduction of oppression within the family.

At this point, the strength of the gothic tale resides not only in the narrative's darker and sinister force, but in the narrowing of narrative distance, which conflates the perspective of the adult narrator and the experiencing child, thus conveying the latter's vicissitudes and shame as she strives to come into terms with the reality: "In the consulting room I pressed my knees together tightly ...[and] when I sat up straight, my

jumper stretched and my bare button touched part of the plastic seat" (Schweblin, 2018). In this way, the parents' act of transgression at this point in the story, inscribes itself in the child's body as a subliminal form of incest or abuse that configures her as a victim, potentially vulnerable and liable to predation.

The seduction script and the aesthetics of abuse.

The development of the conflict initially articulated in the romance tale, gradually deconstructs itself into narrative of abuse, due to the fact that the story delves on how the girls' unexpected behaviour at the hospital is the result of having been lured into a trap, consequently signalling her out as a (potential) object of predation at the hands of a stranger. In effect, the disruptive events that unfold within the hospital, ironically foreground the way the public health institution seems to be functional to the ideology of male hegemony. In addition, the narrator's telling recreates the enacting of the seduction script by the perpetrator, whose strategies are aimed at blurring of the binarism of victim/abuser, through the distortions of seduction strategies, foregrounded in the conflation of voices of both narrator and character, and in the dramatism of the verbal exchange between the adult and the child. In this sense, Landgraf and Treskrow's (2017) study on the codes and strategies within the seduction script -a term which can be applied to cultural products such as novels and stories- explain how they reinforce the gender and social asymmetries, which fulfil specific psychological and cultural functions. One of the most central aspects of the performance of the seduction script is the need to reinforce the phase of uncertainty, in order to avoid unpleasant or awkward or even dangerous situations (p.6). In this sense, the narrator's remark on the man's ambivalent behaviour right at the beginning of the interaction between victim and victimiser, illustrates the perpetrator's performance of the seduction strategies in the story.

In this way, the narrative traces a series of events that show how the protagonist's sudden engagement and overt acquiescence with a stranger at the hospital's waiting room, can be explained in terms of her response to parental neglect or abandonment, aggravated further by the issue of sibling rivalry. In this manner, the narrative that alternates the girl's feelings and thoughts with the verbal exchange

between victim and victimiser, legitimizes the telling with verisimilitude and vividness, and also fuels it with situational and dramatic irony in that it foregrounds the stark contrast between the perpetrator's mechanisms of abuse and the girl's innocence. For this reason, it is interesting to recollect at this point in the plot Binhammer's (2009) analysis of the intricacies of the seduction tales and her stress on the need to move beyond its ideology as cautionary tale that emphasised the inscription of binaries, such as the passive victim vs. female agency, and to concentrate instead on the complexities inherent in the contextualisation of the seduction plot (pp. 15-16). In this sense, in the story, the seduction script unfolds when the girl describes in detail the perpetrator's actions. In fact, when she recalls that how, he opened the door and winked at [her], [then] [she]knew [she] could trust him" (Schweblin, 2018), lays bare the manner in which his actions and strategies foreground the intricacies of seduction that had worked out to win her confidence

On the other hand, as regards the effectiveness of the seduction script, the rhetoric of ambivalence present in the verbal exchange between victim and abuser, constructs the roles in the story, and generically works to show how the seduction strategies camouflage the aesthetics of abuse, typical of the gothic narrative. A case in point illustrates how, immediately after a display of indifference, the man's empathetic commentary once more reasserts her confidence and dissipates her doubts: "It's not fair, a person can't just go around without her underpants when it's their birthday (Schweblin, 2018). Notwithstanding the fact that her mother's warnings about the danger of talking to strangers disrupt her thoughts, the girl's ambivalent response gradually dissolves as her initial fears of him, are swiftly replaced by her attitude of compliance and a desire to please him. Indeed, the seduction script, hinged on ambivalence and on a pervasive and persuasive rhetoric, expose the aesthetics of abuse, in that by obliterating the mother's warning voice, he manages to execute his second strategy: to get her out of the hospital and into a convenience store in search of a pair of black underpants to alleviate her suffering. Hence, the narrative reveals how the dynamics of ambivalence operates through strategies of manipulation that conceal his abuse, as when alone in the store's dressing room, her fears at the thought of being abandoned by him are erased by the

her reasoning: "It was logical because, unless its someone you know very well, it's not good for people to see you in your underpants" (Schweblin, 2018).

However, towards the end, the female postmodern gothic tale deploys its disruptive narrative strategies of character and plot, in that it subverts gender stereotypes and roles, and resists the narrative's drive towards closure. In the first place, Schweblin parodies the narrative of family romances, by endowing the mother with female agency and authority, in the way she rescues her daughter from the traps of the abuser, and publicly shames him when -after a thorough inspection of her body- she discovers her daughter's new panties. In this way, her actions reveal how the author subverts the passivity typical of female victims and liberates the subtext of abuse from the narratives of male hegemony. However, the girl's refusal to reveal the identity of the perpetrator, together with her disquieting complicity in the end, show how the text epitomises the scope of transgression in the way the girl's omissions and silences can be read as a reconfiguration of female victimhood through a display of female agency, whereby the radical acts represent an indictment and critique of covert forms of oppression and subjugation within the institutions..

Conclusions

In both stories, postmodern strategies of appropriation and parody, function as thematic and formal devices in that they help to dismantle the genre's conventional roles of the seduction narratives and subvert their didactics, through the narratives of female epistemologies or (female) cautionary tales for men. In addition, in their exploitation of the stories' generic hybridity, the authors show how transgression and seduction, as complementary functions and themes in both the romance and gothic narratives, configure themselves as templates for abuse strategies and practices.

At the same time, Schweblin and Caldwell show how her female protagonists' radical actions tend to unmask the complicit and duplicitous ideology underlying the traditional narratives of male hegemony that foster the naturalisation and internalisation of heteronormative practices and roles, and consequently facilitate the contextualization and perpetration of systems of oppression and subjugation.

Finally, in both stories, the rhetorics of place, illustrated in the

dynamics of the school and the family, foreground the way institutional practices are responsible for the construction of women's identities as liable commodities to be reproduced and abused.

man/

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