

Absurdist Witchcraft in Truman Capote's "Children on their Birthdays"

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Abstract: "Children on their Birthdays" was published at the end of the 1940's, at a time that was seeing the rise of the theater of the absurd. The short story is about the unexpected arrival of an extraordinary young girl, Miss Bobbit, in a small place in Alabama. Her strange ways quickly cause quite a stir in the whole community. This paper aims to show that Miss Bobbit's witch-like characteristics make her an absurdist character capable of revealing fundamental American truths that carry universal significance. Her witchcraft echoes the author's in his creation of a theatrical approach to social delusions in a context of metaphysical and cosmic absurdity.

Keywords: theater of the absurd; American literature; tragedy; absurdist

1 Introduction

"Children on their Birthdays" was published at the end of the 1940's, at a time that was seeing the rise of the theater of the absurd. The short story is about the unexpected arrival of an extraordinary young girl, Miss Bobbit, and of her mother, a mysterious woman, in a small place in Alabama. Miss Bobbit's strange ways quickly cause quite a stir in the whole community. Told by a young unobtrusive homodiegetic narrator, the story is firmly anchored in the Southern gothic. Its cyclical structure covers a full year and the opening sentence gives away its fatal outcome: "Yesterday afternoon the six-o'clock bus ran over Miss Bobbit." (p. 400) From the outset, the girl is shown to belong to a tragic scheme, for "in almost every tragedy the atmosphere is one of doom from the beginning." (Leech, p. 39)

This paper aims to show that Miss Bobbit's witch-like characteristics make her an absurdist character capable of revealing fundamental American truths that carry

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universal significance. Her witchcraft echoes the author's in his creation of a theatrical approach to social delusions in a context of metaphysical and cosmic absurdity.

2 The Absurdist Witch

Zacharias alludes to the gothic atmosphere of "Children on their Birthdays" and to the absence of sympathy the reader is made to feel for its heroine: "Miss Bobbit is seen at some distance. We never understand her at a human level, never identify with her, and never cry for her. The narrator has no special relationship with her; he simply observes her" (Zacharias, p. 58). Such a feature is common in the theater of the absurd, where the audience attends a performance without ever fully feeling close to the essentially empty characters.

Miss Bobbit and her mother make quite a theatrical entrance as they enter an atmosphere of total stillness: "We were sprawled off the front porch having tutti-frutti and devil cake when the bus stormed around Deadman's Curve. It was the summer that never rained; rusted dryness coated everything" (p. 400). They emerge out of the all red environment in the thundery noise of the bus, in a strikingly anti-climactic, disturbingly comical, way: Miss Bobbit is a tiny character with "her hair [...] like a costume wig" (p. 401) wearing a very conspicuous "starched, lemon-colored party dress" and behaving like an actress: "she sassed along with a grown-up mince, one hand on her hip, the other supporting a spinsterish umbrella." (p. 400) As for her mother, she was "lugging two cardboard valises and a wind-up victrola." (p. 400) They immediately bring to mind Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), arriving from a long journey out of nowhere, definitely out of place, wearing and carrying what look like surrealistic stage props—chief among them a suitcase. The *incipit* of the story composes a mirror image of *Waiting for Godot* because as women the two characters are exact opposites but perform the same actions: one follows and obeys the other while carrying suitcases and other surrealistic props (the victrola) that are too heavy for her, out of a foggy background reminiscent of stage craft.

Unlike Beckett's masterpiece, however, "Children on their Birthdays" is obviously deeply rooted in popular narratives, notably because Miss Bobbit shares many characteristics with the witches of fairy tales. Drawing up an exhaustive list would be tedious; let us just bear in mind that, following her dramatic arrival, she has moved and changed dress in a matter of seconds without anybody noticing—as if

by magic—before setting about dancing a ritual-looking waltz round and round to the sound of a record turning on the wound up victrola set up on a sundial, so much so that it makes Aunt El, the only adult present, feel dizzy. All the spectators, including the already jealous girls, are literally fascinated,¹ to the point of losing all natural reflexes when threatened by a swarm of wasps. The inattention to danger seems ominous as it occurs in the presence of the mother, who looks like a ghost or a devil: “gaunt shaggy [...] with silent eyes and a hungry smile.” (p. 400) The newcomers are to live in “a tall, dark place” (p. 401) and Miss Bobbit, for whom “The odors of a church are so offensive,” (p. 408) adopts as her inseparable “sister” a colored girl whose name is Rosalba Cat—thus perfecting her image of the witch perpetually accompanied by her notorious black pet. She sets the whole white community at loggerheads not only by befriending a black child but also by arousing the budding libido of two boys, Billy Bob and Preacher, whose complex friendship will suffer from the competition to win over her heart.

Her talents, then, are not entirely devoted to black magic. Her negative powers seem to be mostly related to the sexual awareness she passively instills in the young boys but, as is the case with the Greek *pharmakon*, the destructive consequences (self-torture and jealousy, notably) are counterbalanced with her curative powers. René Girard notes that “the word *pharmakon* in classical Greek means both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short, any substance capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage.” (Girard, p. 95) Her straightforward approach to sex, then, is much more akin to white magic, which is made plain when she turns out to be the only one able to treat Billy Bob for a self-induced stomach ache out of frustrated love for her. The weird concoction that caused the sickness is reminiscent of a magic potion and Miss Bobbit “stripped the covers off Billy Bob and rubbed him down from head to toe.” (p. 410) The love she has unwittingly infused in Billy Bob is transforming him into a man. His stomach ache is a physical crisis that, he thinks, may kill him; if he survives he will emerge closer to adulthood. By knowledgeably treating the boy she has contributed to making sick, Miss Bobbit demonstrates she possesses outstanding skills that clearly set her apart from the crowd: “The *pharmakon* is thus a magic drug or volatile elixir, whose administration had best be left by ordinary men in the hands of those who enjoy special knowledge and exceptional powers—priests, magicians, shamans, doctors,

¹ Dictionaries substantiate the possibility of a supernatural intervention by supplying “bewitch” as an archaic meaning (“fascinate,” Random House Webster’s Unabridged).

and so on.” (Girard, p. 95) Of course, such talents may be misunderstood by the non-initiated, and Miss Bobbit’s unorthodox treatment proves shocking to right-thinking adults: “Aunt El told her she did not think that was a nice thing for a little girl to do” (p. 410). What worries Aunt El is that a “little girl” should possess the expertise that she, as the boy’s mother, does not, and that Miss Bobbit should symbolically emancipate Billy Bob from his mother’s inadequate upbringing: “She and Sister Rosalba treated him like a man” (p. 412).

Miss Bobbit’s greatest achievement, though, is her stunningly victorious campaign over Manny Fox, the crook who swindled the savings of the community and whose role comes under scrutiny in the following part of this paper.

3 The Elusive Nature of Evil

Before analyzing Manny Fox’s significant role, it is essential to get a clear picture of the atmosphere that pervades the story and makes up an interpretative key to its peculiar notion of evil. The relaxed mood that characterizes Billy Bob’s birthday party at the very beginning unexpectedly carries underlying threats: the kids are eating “Devil cake,” which is quite common in the United States, but which combines with the dangerous proximity of “Deadman’s Curve” and the storming traffic to usher in a disquieting touch, further enhanced by the fact that the area is plagued with extraordinarily hot weather which verges on the supernatural: the dust stays in the air much too long and ends up covering everything with a uniform reddish color. The melting tutti-frutti ice-cream, an apt symbol for childish innocence, is getting wasted in the reddened plates of the bored, idle kids, whose initial reaction at the sight of the two newcomers is to behave “like a huddle of witches” (p. 400) and to utter rude words (except Billy Bob and Preacher). This small rural Alabama place peopled with not so innocent children makes up a grotesque Garden of Eden: “Aunt El said if they didn’t pave the highway soon she was going to move down to the sea-coast; but she’d said that for such a long time.” (p. 400) Contemporary American literature often resorts to “El” of El-related names in order to evoke the presence of the divine: “he told himself that El was the ancient Hebrew for God” (Auster, p. 47).¹ As the only adult among the children, Aunt El perfectly exemplifies Eliade’s notion of the “remote, inactive gods (*dei*

¹ Nelson Algren’s contemporary Chicago is literally placed under (the influence of) the “El,” standing both for the famed “Elevated Train” and a blind divine entity (notably in *Never Come Morning* [1942], *The Neon Wilderness* [1947], and *The Man with the Golden Arm* [1949]).

otiosi)” (p. 122); she is utterly inadequate, for she keeps repeating threats without ever carrying them out. Her lack of initiative concerning the road improvement may even be seen as partly responsible for Miss Bobbit’s eventual death, confirming the tragic aptness of the proverb, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” At the symbolic level, the storming bus stands for the irruption of evil in an already corrupted environment where the word of God has no value: not only do the girls behave as witches in the twinkle of an eye, but Aunt El hits her son while Preacher bullies a black girl under the indifferent eye of a blatantly racist society.

Evil lies dormant in that closely-knit community; when put in perspective, Miss Bobbit is not that mean—just too full of herself. Her greatest flaw is to have fallen to typically American delusions, linked to business and movies. Her dream is to go to Hollywood and become a star; in the meantime she turns into a businesswoman in her own right by becoming “sole subscription agent in this county for an impressive list of magazines” (p. 409), which for such a young girl is a remarkable achievement. She bewitches even the toughest kids into working for her until they become exhausted. As such, however, business is not to be viewed in radically negative fashion, for “Miss Bobbit was very honest about money. She paid Billy Bob and Preacher their exact commission and she never let them treat her, as they often tried to do, at the drugstore or to the picture show.” (p. 410) She even becomes a positive mother figure providing sound advice: “‘You’d better save your money,’ she told them. ‘That is, if you want to go to college. Because neither of you has got the brains to win a scholarship, not even a football scholarship.’” (p. 410)

The dark side of business is embodied in Manny Fox, businessman and con *artist*. His fairy tale name is the type of which one may find in cartoons; he composes the stereotypical image of the greedy wildcat capitalist in a striking synecdoche: “he was a fat cigar of a man.” (p. 413) Yet he is a dangerous crook who claims to be both a Hollywood producer and a job provider in fruit shipping. He combines the deceptive attraction of show business and business as a whole not by only robbing Miss Bobbit of her Hollywood screen test after her victory in the contest he organizes, but also by ruining several poor families who were gulled into confiding their savings and possessions to him. His greatest evil is to have taken the money while destroying everybody’s dream of a brilliant future. Ironically, “it was Miss Bobbit who broke the spell” (p. 416) by setting up an impressive search for the swindler and making sure that everyone recovered their losses. The irony, though,

lies in the sudden disclosure of her own business plan, which consists in asking all the avenged boys to finance her upcoming Hollywood career—an idea that looks a lot like another swindle.

In itself, the merry conclusion to the Manny Fox episode makes up a literary equivalent of a Hollywood movie happy ending and a patriotic celebration of capitalism with a human face, for the United Fruit Company ends up offering jobs to the victims. “Children on their Birthdays,” however, is the tragic story of the nonsensical death of a young girl and, as such, articulates such typically American notions as the pursuit of (material) happiness and some intuition of an immanent logic to the absurdity. The financial swindle provides the climactic moment in the story and it is worth noting that it is of a theatrical nature. The musical, singing and dancing contest attracts a great audience as well as several local people as performers, denoting the general interest in the area. Miss Bobbit’s performance is of a remarkable bad taste; her costume, her choreography and her repertoire are in total disharmony with her age: “she had a rowdy sand-paper voice. ‘... if you don’t like my peaches, stay away from my can, o-ho oho!’ [...] Miss Bobbit, with a bump, up-ended her skirt to display blue-lace underwear.” (p. 415) Her number rises to the highest degree of bawdiness as “in the midst of a full split [...] as the Roman candle burst into fiery balls of red, white and blue, [...] we all had to stand up because she was singing ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ at the top of her lungs.” (p. 415) Patriotism is used merely as a clever device to capture the audience, who are led to approve of the obscenity lest they be accused of anti-Americanism. Since Miss Bobbit is too young and inexperienced in stage performance to conceive of such Machiavellian tactics, it appears, then, that the latter stem naturally from the cultural context. Hollywood and show business in general make up the most visible part of mass culture, in which everybody plays both an active and a passive role, as exemplified in Miss Bobbit’s position as the magazine agent. These are very popular magazines mainly geared to mass consumption: *Reader’s Digest* offers real but simplified books, eradicating any possible complexity and giving the reading public a rewritten version of otherwise potentially subversive works, just as *Popular Mechanics* makes mechanics simplified for the masses and pulp fiction *Dime Detective* presents crime with a moralistic approach. As a businesswoman, Miss Bobbit is at the same time responsible for and a victim of the national myths she spreads and believes in. The American Dream of social success spawns small time pater/maternalistic entrepreneurs like Miss Bobbit, whose wild fantasies do

not prevent her from paying her employees decent wages; it also renders possible the advent of evil crooks such as Manny Fox.

Inhuman as it might be, business is not responsible for the girl's demise. The forces at work in this tragedy partake of an absurdity whose contours may be grasped—if only because they are part of a narrative master plan.

4 A Cyclical Absurdity

The story is tightly structured around the unity of place and time: all the action takes place in the small southern place within a year span. Combined with the opening revelation of the heretofore unknown heroine's death, this pattern obviously borrows from tragedy: "The overall procedure is to show from the beginning that things will not be well. [...] Logically we could assume only that what is willed by the characters is itself part of a larger will, of something 'already written.'" (Leech, p. 40) The first and the last sentences unmistakably echo each other, thus emphasizing the sensation of imposed order: "Yesterday afternoon the six-o'clock bus ran over Miss Bobbit" (p. 400); "That is when the six-o'clock bus ran over her." (p. 418) Such an arrangement is of an oppressive nature, for it encases the whole diegesis within a repetitive cycle that shows no sign of a possible interruption.

All the action is presented as moving towards the final accident, thereby relativizing the importance of the peripeteia and rather drawing attention to the mechanics of the unfolding tragedy. The action progresses from stasis to disruption, reaches a climax, simulates a happy ending, then a coming to terms with reality, before ending on the unexpected noncommittal allusion to the little girl's death. As a literary term, stasis means "stagnation"; it proves all the more appropriate here in its medical context: "a slowing or stoppage of the normal flow of a bodily fluid or semifluid: as [...] slowing of the current of circulating blood [...]."¹ The state of stasis is akin to death, which perfectly fits the situation in the beginning: the birthday party is at a standstill and instead of making a lively display of energy as is customary on such an occasion, the children are merely "sprawled," (p. 400), the food getting wasted due to the heat and the polluting dust—the community is symbolically dying. Miss Bobbit appears as a *deus ex machina*: both an artificial dramatic device to trigger the plot and an avatar of the

¹ "stasis": Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary.

children's subconscious: "suddenly, just as we were wishing that something would happen, something did; for out of the red road dust appeared Miss Bobbit." (p. 400) The complete turmoil she immediately creates (the boys are fascinated and the girls mad with jealousy) identifies her as the disruptive element that breathes new life into the previously drowsy atmosphere.

The dramatic pattern of the plot clearly reveals the presence of a structuring influence, if only that of the implied author following some conventional pattern supposed to reflect some ideal social or psychological order. Yet by focusing on the useless death of a friendly heroine, the echoing sentences of the beginning and the end seem to point to the absurdity of the whole story. In that case, its tight structure might turn out to highlight the inescapable pointlessness of hope in contemporary America as well as the obsolescence of the literary medium supposed to convey its essence.

That type of despair, characteristic of the theater of the absurd, is present in "Children on their Birthdays." The story, however, also hints at the possibility of a glimmer of hope within the cyclical pattern. Just before the accident, for instance, the rain has succeeded the heat, enabling life to go on under more favorable auspices, as Aunt El's beautiful roses show; her decision to give them out is at once a favor to the girl and to her son (whom she had beaten a year earlier for cutting the Lady Annes): peace is now back in the community and in the family. The cyclical order is not—only—an absurd(ist) vicious circle. The whole community finds itself reunited over the sad event of Miss Bobbit's departure: Billy Bob and Preacher renew their friendship in their love for the girl and look perfectly alike ("two boys whose flower-masked faces were like yellow moons" [p. 418]); the romanticism of the image is even further enhanced by the fact that it occurs at the fateful hour of 6 o'clock, *i.e.*, when the two hands draw a perfect line right in the middle of a round clock. In the same way as those two hands, at that precise, fleeting moment, the two boys are two perfectly identical beings making up a perfect whole; just like the dial they symbolize, their union provides a pattern suitable for ordaining temporal life. This unified world makes up a disquieting cosmos, though since the roses (flowers usually associated with love and happiness) originally composed one bouquet, which Billy Bob split up; they now make up two moons, running contrary to the natural order of things and heralding in the coming of death.

As the most popular symbolic flower in the Western world, the rose stands not only for love but "even more so, [for] the gift of pure love"; (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1969, 1982) it is often associated with the image of the wheel and all its symbolic

associations—most notably, of cyclical time; life endures forever and lovers are forever united. It is up to the reader to decide whether Capote's story remains in harmony with this romantic interpretation or discourages it by having Miss Bobbit's death announced matter-of-factly, like a cold press release.

5 Conclusion

Under the guise of simplicity, "Children on Their Birthdays" is a profound absurdist tale of growing up through the painful destruction of dreams: just as social success may be crushed by crooks out of sheer bad luck, so may innocent love be shattered in a banal bus crash. This ruthless tale of disillusion remains in tune with the hopelessness of the theater of the absurd while it instills entertaining elements of the fairy tale and the pleasant uncanny of the gothic novel. Its appeal is rendered at once universal and American mostly thanks to the successful blending of the tragic pattern and of romance. Capote's story is an absurdist tale which acknowledges metaphysical angst, but whose distinct American quality rules out the possibility of total despair.

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