

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN JOANNE HARRIS'S NOVEL "GENTLEMEN AND PLAYERS"

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Summary

The paper zeroes in on the peculiarities of representing the main female character in a British novel "Gentlemen and Players" published in 2005. The crucial point that the research encompasses is a challenge to the status quo of gender imbalance which is portrayed, inter alia, through showing a certain playfulness of the main character. Notably, playfulness must be read here as a form of (social/cultural/political) subversion, which enables one to look beyond and deconstruct "arbitrary ranks/truths". The carnivalesque nature of the female protagonist is manifested in connection with the changing status of women in contemporary societies. The image of a submissive woman fabricated by men still lingers in many cultures. This gives rise to a mutant woman, mirrored with the help of a subversive fictional female character who is a trickster. It is evinced that the fossilized patterns of perceiving a woman, and attitudes towards her in the male-dominated environment are likely to pose an impending threat, not only to men's lives but also to the lives of children and other women. Affected by a number of factors, the female protagonist reveals her eclectic identity and we witness how she turns into a monstrous creature with overwhelming destructive power inside. Consequently, the authenticity of the woman suffers and we may talk about her symbolic death.

Keywords: metamodernism, gender imbalance, alienation, mutant woman, trickster, carnivalesque, grotesque.

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Introduction

"Gentlemen and Players" by Joanne Harris is a novel written in the epoch featuring the aesthetics of metamodernism also referred to as post-postmodernism. The English author Luke Turner associates the emergence of a new concept with a number of crises and changes since the early 1990s (climate change, financial meltdown, the escalation of global conflicts), as well as the proclamation of the so-called end of history (Turner, 2015). The third and fourth waves of feminism should not be excluded. Metamodernism suggests that we are on the way to inner and outer liberation, enabling us to discover our true identities. This would be especially important for women who have been multidimensionally oppressed, implicitly and explicitly, in patriarchal societies. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker elaborated on the essay exploring metamodernism, which, as they state, comes after postmodernism. Most discussions on metamodernism have been rooted simply in the notion that oscillation between the qualities of modernism and postmodernism is what defines a metamodern sensibility. According to these scholars, the new artistic sensibility (an emergent sensibility) was one that: "[...] oscillates [...] between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen & Van den

Akker, 2010). Greg Dember observes that metamodernism is conceived as being about oscillation, in general, i.e., involving any pair of opposites (Dember, 2018). In other words, the generation of metamodern is a kind of conceptual oxymoron, in which seemingly opposing things can be combined. In his article “Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction” Turner refers to Vermeulen and van den Akker who emphasize that metamodernism’s oscillation should not be thought of as a balance but rather a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles (Turner, 2015). My view is that oscillation resembles the idea of a carnival which expresses the process of alteration or transition from one state to another.

Yet it is in the 21st century that women commenced to manifest themselves in society more than ever before, which might be connected with the emergent sensibility (the feeling of being more liberated). As a political term “emergent” might mean “liberated”. Admittedly, sensibility is immediately related to a woman and it characterizes the female protagonist. Another issue is to what extent this liberation is full and how it is demonstrated.

Seth Abramson highlights that the purpose of metamodernism is merely radical transparency (radical openness). Indeed, the point is to capture both the sincere and the cynical components of transparency, as transparency means revealing everything in a given “field” – not just what we’re comfortable sharing (Abramson, 2018). Michael Holquist underscores that Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Rabelais and His World” is about the subversive openness (Bakhtin, 1984: xvi). In this context Nicoline Timmer states that there is an apparent need to refer to aspects of subjectivity, aspects of the experience of being human [...] that have been repressed (Timmer, 2010: 20). She evidently tries to say that any human combines an angel and a demon, and the latter is restricted and hidden.

The analysis of the interaction of the female protagonist with the other characters in the novel features alienation which is especially typical of the humanity in the 21st century because of a number of challenges. Due to this “the carnival sense of the world” has been increasing. Bakhtin was the first to produce and describe the concept of a carnival and the carnival sense of the world in literature. There has been identified the carnivalesque nature of the main female character in the novel. In this respect Krystyna Pomorska writes as follows:

The inherent features of carnival that Bakhtin underscores are its emphatic and purposeful “heteroglossia”. [...] Since the novel represents the very essence of life, it includes the carnivalesque in its properly transformed shape. [...] “In carnival [...] the new mode of man’s relation to man is elaborated”. One of the essential aspects of this relation is the “unmasking” and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks (Bakhtin, 1984: x).

From my perspective, heteroglossia is not only about different points of view of different characters but also about voices within one character. Since life is a process, changes occur, opposites are ubiquitous, the acceptable and unacceptable co-exist, unlikely people may get together, and participation in life shows that structure and order are not absolute. It is observable that the carnivalesque mode subverts and liberates the female protagonist’s dark part. Her image is dualistic and ambivalent.

M. Holquist, prologue to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* points out that the very concept, coined by Bakhtin, is quite “productive” and denotes “revolution”, and carnival as such “must not be confused with [...] self-serving festivals” (Bakhtin, 1984: xviii) because they are the force that does not come from anyone but everyone defers to it. M. Bakhtin’s faith in carnival is almost the mystical faith in the common man (Carlson, 1996: 89). The main woman character is of humble origins.

The theoretical framework used for conducting this research embraces works by M. Bakhtin, S. Cajkova, H. G. Carlson, G. Dember, C. Jung, M. Holquist, J. Kristeva, K. Pomorska,

M. Russo, S. Abramson, N. Timmer, Z. Toth, L. Turner, T. Vermeulen and R. van den Akker, K. Barinova, N. Dorfman, T. Strizhevskaya.

My scholarly curiosity has fallen on the novel “Gentlemen and Players” for it might initially seem that the focus of attention are mainly events taking place in St. Oswald’s Grammar School. However, in the course of my investigation it becomes vivid – behind them there stands the confrontation between the world of men and the world of the woman who is presented as the main female character. It must also be underlined that it is for the first time that the image of the female protagonist in “Gentlemen and Players” is scrutinized.

1. The game component in the novel

Harris’s narrative strategy is based predominantly on the use of carnivalesque elements. Tatyana Strizhevskaya stresses that the carnivalesque is the principal characteristic of the writer’s poetics and the artistic dominant of her novels (*Strizhevskaya, 2015*). Harris’s novels feature a ludic atmosphere and “Gentlemen and Players” is no exception.

A game component is typical of a carnival. Game performs the plot-forming function. Indeed, the topos of game is actualized in the novel in the title itself, which is an allusion to English cricket. Besides this, the novel starts with two epigraphs, the first one being about an old cricketer, taken from Roy Harper’s song “When an Old Cricketer Leaves the Crease”:

When an old cricketer leaves the crease you never know whether he’s gone”

If sometimes you’re catching a fleeting glimpse of a twelfth man at silly mid-on

And it could be Geoff, and it could be John, with a new-ball sting in his tail

And it could be me and it could be thee – (*Harris, 2006: 9*).

In cricket, “gentlemen” cricketers were amateurs (right up until the early 1960s), whereas “players” were professionals who earned money through sport (as is true nowadays). In the novel the teachers of St. Oswald’s, an elite grammar school for boys, are “gentlemen” and the main character becomes the “player” who changes names and appearance (*Strizhevskaya, 2015*). The talk is about Julia Snyder who being a child disguises herself as Julian Pinchbeck and masquerades as a St Oswald’s pupil. Interpreting the lines of the above song in the context of the novel, it should be said that being aware of the danger to be caught and trying to hide her traces, J. Snyder disappears but not forever. Turning up later again, she is already better “equipped”. As an adult she pretends to be a teacher of French by the name of Dianne Dare with the fake documents who is hired by St Oswald’s without being thoroughly checked in terms of identity and professionalism. The image of J. Snyder is associated with playfulness which is detected in the course of development of the plot.

2. Explicating the titles of the novel chapters

Chess terms are used by Harris as the titles of the chapters of the novel and Strizhevskaya writes about their metaphorical meaning. In the chapter titled “Pawn” the Player, i. e. the female protagonist is formed and her goal is set, which lies in destroying the enemy. In “King” Roy Straitley, the other main character – the antagonist, is described. The protagonist Diane Dare deals with other personages of the novel in the chapters entitled “Bishop” and “Knight”. In fact, these titles are the names of two people who she disposes of in “En Passant”. The chapter “Queen” shows that D. Dare manages to implement her evil plan quite successfully. Giving check by the protagonist is observed in “Check” and she is able to mate in “Mate”. Roy Straitley is the chess king, the culture hero but this king loses. The main female character is initially

a pawn but she becomes a professional player who dictates her rules and eventually wins. Certainly, this victory is possible because D. Dare neglects the principles of honesty and decency which are required by sports ethics and life itself. Interestingly, chess is a male game – not many women play chess. When women enter into chess contests with men, they are likely to lose, however, in this novel the woman is a winner. All the titles of the chapters reflect the characteristics of the personages, actions, behaviours and events.

3. Delineating the issue of gender imbalance

The novel under consideration tackles gender imbalance, however, not in terms of a number disparity between males and females but we are to deal here with gender inequality of a different nature.

On the surface, it might seem that we witness confrontation between the culture hero and his antipode – the trickster – but the theme is much deeper. St. Oswald's is not simply a school; it symbolizes a patriarchal society. The sons of well-to-do parents study here and it is mostly men who teach in it. It is a closed circle where no outsiders are allowed in. Julia Snyder is a daughter of the guard who works at St. Oswald's. Her only wish was to be one of those who belonged to that school, but, firstly, she was not a boy and, secondly, her financial situation would not allow it at all. Besides, initially, she had thoughts she was not perfect enough for the world that the school presented.

It can therefore be stated that the novel depicts not only the conflict between the culture hero and the trickster but between men's and women's worlds. The "victory" of the female character might symbolize the victory of women over men, although not in a social-ecological way. At the end of the novel Diane Dare confesses that Paris is too small to embrace her ambition which might, on a global level, mean extending women's boundaries; she is determined to dare, strive for her goals and win, no matter what.

3.1. The female protagonist versus the culture hero

Events in the book are told from the point of view of two main characters: a female, Julia Snyder, and a male, Roy Straitley. The old school, St. Oswald's, means all to Roy, it is his whole life whereas Julia, striving for justice, is ready to put an end, once and for all, to the existence of this educational institution. As can be seen, the surnames Snyder (foul, dishonest), Pinchbeck (fake, pretending), Dare (daring, bold) and Straitley (honest, direct) demonstrate the inner essence of the characters and help us to comprehend them in a more profound way.

In contrast to Diane Dare – the trickster, Roy Straitley – the culture hero, metaphorically speaking, is weak and "dissolves" in the novel. The conflict between them is developed and resolved according to a certain scheme. Roy does not notice Diane's destructive activities, which are directed against him as well as against others. He attempts to seek compromise or avoid a clash with the trickster. Finally, he takes on a challenge and engages with the enemy, which is the culmination of the novel. Being only a teacher Roy Straitley acts, to some extent, as a detective, trying to save the school. The notable thing is that it is not he who is in the spotlight but a criminal, Diane Dare. Reading and speculating on the novel, one might have an impression that neither the school authorities, nor Roy Straitley was genuinely interested in solving the mysterious incidents that had taken place in the school. However, they were disturbed by the possible loss of reputation and, consequently, pupils as clients. No other noble aim was pursued.

3.2. Discussing the grotesque through the prism of a woman

The main female character in the novel is a murderer. Mary Russo stresses that a female murderer is grotesque because female existence makes her grotesque. Russo re-examines the

grotesque in the light of gender. The term derives from the cave – the grotto-esque – which is something low, hidden, earthly, dark, material. As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave can be identified with the cavernous anatomical female body (*Russo, 1995: 1*). The term was viewed as “a repository of unnatural, frivolous, and irrational connections between things which nature and classical art kept scrupulously apart”. It refers to something transgressive that deviates from the norms — something quite risky. According to Russo, the expression “female grotesque” is tautologic because the female is always defined against the frame of reference of the male norm (*Russo, 1995: 3 – 11*). The female nature of the grotesque is equal to the Other. When a female Other dares to exceed her limits the situation is already dangerous, but when her only possible roles (mother, daughter, wife), integrating her into society, are replaced, it is even more outrageous. These are part of the parenthood structure (*Kristeva, 1982: 169*).

Julia Snyder is a female murderer who is a master of disguise. According to Zsófia Tóth, a female murderer is a lethal, deadly woman. Generally, a woman is associated with overwhelming joy but it is only a mask which conceals the truth. The mask is connected to masquerade, and masquerade to carnival and the carnivalesque, which in turn relates to the grotesque (*Toth, 2010: 5*).

Murders are committed as revenge. Julia Snyder and her father are presented as opposites: a father and daughter, a man and a woman, notwithstanding the fact that they are one family. She has been constantly humiliated by her father, who was left by his wife, her mother. He embarrasses Julia because she is a girl, not the boy he wanted which gives hints of gender discrimination. There is also a moment when he claims that she is not his child. He beats her for disobedience, according to his perception of it, and her mother is not there to protect her daughter. Later, Julia’s mother enters her life again, attempting to redeem herself. However, it is too late since Julia’s identity has been severely infected by a distorted picture of the world. She transgresses social, sexual and moral conventions. She thinks of her mother as a betrayer. Julia sleeps with her stepfather. Having no conscience, she burns her mother and her mother’s second child, her half-sister. This mutant woman has crossed the line. Externally she is a normal woman; internally, she is far from being one. In her book “The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity” Russo mentions Ulrike Ottinger and David Cronenberg who use the term “mutant woman” as their name for the category “female grotesque” (*Russo, 1995: 6*). Female murderers signal disturbance; they point to the fissures and gaps in the system. Kristeva stresses that the crimes such women carry out remind us of the fallibility of the law, its weaknesses and how it can be tricked, twisted and abused. Any crime is abject and we cannot protect ourselves from it. The socialized appearance of it is corruption (*Kristeva, 1982: 4*).

Diane Dare manages to obtain fake documents and provides the administration of St. Oswald’s with them. The carelessness on the part of the school causes tragic consequences. Thus, the school system is grotesque. The grotesque is connected with the concept of alienation. The grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world without falsifying it. The grotesque is the exaggerated, the deformed, the monstrous. In her study of the subject, Toth refers to Wolfgang Kayser who explains that the grotesque is the estranged world; it is a game with the absurd and an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world (*Toth, 2010: 6*). The double life is typical of the grotesque. Contrast is the main sign of the grotesque (*Barinova, 2012*). Julia Snyder leads a double life (Julia Snyder / Julian Pinchbeck; Julia Snyder / Diane Dare). Bakhtin asserts that the carnivalesque-grotesque form serves as the aesthetic concept of being. It helps one to escape from the dominant vision of the world, to feel the relativity of the existing state of affairs and the possibility of a completely different world order (*Barinova, 2012*). Julia Snyder refuses to adhere to the accepted order; she claims she “wanted misrule”. Her abnormally, even pathologically high self-esteem contributes to the creation of her grotesque reality.

3.3. The carnivalesque nature of the main female character

Julia Snyder succeeds in tricking everybody around her. The trickster's sophisticated mask favours her game. A mask is an indispensable part of a carnival. The carnival is part of folk culture. The carnival is believed to be a real form of life and life itself is seen as a play. Carnivalization is typical of each sphere of life, since we play different social roles. Western researchers tend to view a carnival as a force confronting official culture.

Julia Snyder is a representative of folk culture. Her masking allowed her to "enter" another world. While masquerading she is accepted by the official culture. She establishes relations within the new environment. Interestingly, it is demonstrated that the truth within this different world is embellished in the same way as is Julia Snyder's making a pretence of being somebody she is not. She subverts the artificial norms of society, ethics.

In addition to ruining existing hierarchies and to confrontation with official culture, a carnival is an ambivalent phenomenon – it erases borders between binary oppositions, mixing (in terms of time) death with birth, heaven with earth, top with bottom, beginning with end, and so on (*Dorfman, 2012*).

Carnival is a collective phenomenon. Bakhtin states that during a carnival the individual feels that he/she is a part of a collective (*Bakhtin, 2010: 273*). It also leads to liberation from authorities. A carnival, as such, does not bring about negativity and it has an ending. According to Bakhtin, carnivalization should adhere to two requirements: time and space limitation. The existing order of things should remain the same at the peak of carnival activities. There are limits to everything. A never-ending carnival leads to the ruination of all aspects of life. People stop controlling themselves and are unaware of what they are doing. A carnival should not turn into a devil-worshipping ceremony. God cannot be mocked (*Dorfman, 2012*). It is not in line with God's law to kill but Diane Dare engages in a personal vendetta against St Oswald's by resorting to murders. Having become part of official culture her alternative voice dethroned the authority of official culture.

Provided that Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque-grotesque body is seen through the prism of the category of gender, "it is revealed that from the position of female individuals the liberatory effect of carnival is problematic" (*Cajkova, 2004: 191*). It is connected with the stereotypical division of the mind presented by men and the body presented by women, deeply rooted in social consciousness; woman was perceived in medieval society as signifying disorder, transgression and danger to authority... She was a constant presence of a carnivalesque element in the non-carnivalesque world and since her "everyday identity" and "carnivalesque identity" greatly overlapped she could not experience liberation from her social role as men easily did (*Cajkova, 2004: 192*). This is what happens in case with J. Snyder: her both identities almost merged and her actions indeed ingenerated destruction within herself and the environment.

3.4. Trickster: crossing the boundaries

When a carnival is viewed as a form of liberation from dogmas or norms it is necessary to refer to its shadow archetype. According to Jung, "shadow" is the unknown dark side of the personality that is uncontrolled. The shadow appears there when control is lost, norms vanish and any kind of system is destroyed (*Jung, 1994: 106*). A carnival is associated with disobedience. In Diane Dare's case she lets the dark side of her personality win; her conscience is lost. This event might be related to the collective unconscious that displays itself during carnival hysterias through personal unconscious. The carnivalesque irrationality contradicts the rational, official world, and carnivalesque emotionality becomes the opponent of official logic and order.

The shadow archetype is closely related to the trickster archetype, since, in Carl Jung's opinion, the image of trickster illustrates dark sides of society. A trickster is a person who is in

the state characterized by the absence of the deterrent influence of mind as the regulated function and, in accordance with this, lacks the hyperactive capability to feel and exercise intuition. The trickster's most important characteristics in Harris's novel are theatricality and transformation of knavery: pretending, deceiving, murdering, organizing arson.

In her article on this subject, Dorfman refers to researcher Ruslan Kuleshov, who insists on the idea that the trickster's pranks are frequently caused by the pursuit of an insatiable desire (Dorfman, 2012). There might occur a thought that the main distinctive feature of the trickster female image in "Gentlemen and Players" is her unstoppable passion for playing games and her readiness to enter into a contest with any adversary, but, in fact, Diane Dare is guided by her inner pain which is born out of the fact that her fundamental human needs have not been met. As a result, her silent rebellious protest pushed her to act the way she did.

3.5. The uncovering: when the invisible becomes visible

Julia Snyder wants to be "recognized" as she has been ignored by those close to her, including her father and mother and her peers. For Julia, crossing the boundary is probably the way to become noticed.

She speculates on the Order ("By whose order?") that prohibited outsiders from entering the grounds of St. Oswald's school:

St. Oswald's was another world (Harris 2006, 18) [...] they were a different race to myself [...] that first forbidden glimpse of St. Oswald's seemed like unattainable glory [...] Within its grounds young gods lounged and cavorted (Harris, 2006: 22).

Later we observe a transition. She sees the school "as it was. The genteel decay behind the graceful lines. The rot" (Harris, 2006: 22). This was the world of men and she was an intruder. She describes strong opposition in terms of social layers. However, there is also a hint of discrimination based on gender. The men's world she entered was far from being perfect. When she thought of her appearance she felt conscious of being different; she "had become something low; common; ..." (Harris, 2006: 22). Julia Snyder is also inclined to think:

Invisible or not, that was how they would always see me... That was St Oswald's; that's what it does to people. Rage flared in me like an ulcer. Rage, and the beginnings of revolt... I was an outsider (Harris, 2006: 22).

A little further on she says:

That was the moment I declared war against St. Oswald's. It wouldn't have me? Then I would have it. I would take it, and no one, nothing – not even my father – would stop me. The line had been drawn' (Harris, 2006: 23).

This is the declaration of war of a woman battling for her space. The house where she lived with her father was the place where she was oppressed by him. In the flat where she stayed with the mother it was unbearable for her to see the mother's happiness; at a certain point this made her – Julia – dispose of her mother. Her anger extends to society, particularly, to St. Oswald's, where she once wanted to belong but which she finds herself willing to destroy.

Her mind becomes uncontrollable, making her prone to extremes. Cruelty, anger, and the irrationality she exhibits eradicate her authenticity as a woman and, indeed, her human nature. She is alive and dead simultaneously due to being alienated because of her traumatic experiences. The carnivalesque nature of the main female character in the novel "Gentlemen and Players" is manifested in her obsession with violating all possible boundaries. And it all started with a man, her father, whose presence in her life was symbolic. From the point of view of psychoanalytic theory, the father represents the symbolic order; without the father the child will never progress from the infantile state of being fully enmeshed in the imaginary order (Boswell, 2003: 128 – 156). Her father who might have provided her at least with a safer environment, instead urges his daughter to act on her vicious intentions.

The school as well as the family are traditionally considered the places where one can receive love, support, understanding, but what becomes clear while exploring the image of the female protagonist, these institutions are currently related to the rise of gender imbalance and alienation.

Conclusions

The interpretations put forth by metamodernism and those linked to Bakhtin's and other scholars' ideas intertwine enabling a thorough analysis of the female protagonist. In view of metamodern oscillation which is claimed to be the natural order of the world, J. Snyder resembles a pendulum, mentioned earlier, but it is broken and instead of swinging smoothly between the dark and bright sides of her personality, she either moves chaotically or pauses.

Based on the conducted research it can be concluded that the gender imbalance in the novel is vaguely shown through the female protagonist and her interaction with the patriarchal world embodied generally in St. Oswald's Grammar School and in particular, Roy Straightly, the schoolboys, her father and stepfather. Julia Snyder, as a woman, is courageous enough to go beyond the "no trespass" signs. If the world is a stage and people are players, Julia Snyder is not ready to accept the minor role still given to her as a woman of the 21st century.

The voices of the school staff, the pupils, and even the parents blend into a chorus of anger, suspicion, confusion, and despair. In this heteroglossia the female protagonist's voice stands out from the rest. When the interaction of folk culture (Julia Snyder) and official culture (St. Oswald's) is occurring, the participants unmask their real faces. However, J. Snyder does not vindicate M. Bakhtin's faith in the common people as her "liberation" let the monster out and did not bring her ease.

As has been revealed, the immediate surrounding is of utmost importance because this is where we have our first experience of tactile and communicative interaction. J. Snyder's experience with her family is far from being favourable, her father (a man) fails to hear her voice. There is barely any communication between them and even if there is some, it is violent communication which makes her traumatized and this dictates the manifestation of her worst version. Obviously, it is precisely the issue of the characters' communication in the novel that is worth studying further.

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