PARODY AND POSTMODERN STRATEGIES OF SUBVERSION: AN INVESTIGATION

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RESUMO: Identidades estão em constante processo de fragmentação e transformação. É possível afirmar que perspectivas de realidade mudam de acordo com a experiência, a subjetividade e a memória de um indivíduo. Levando em consideração o aspecto subjetivo da memória, na segunda metade do século vinte, mulheres escritoras começaram a redefinir seus espaços literários colocando em questão discursos dominantes que representavam o sujeito feminino de acordo com estereótipos patriarcais. Tais escritoras começaram a se apropriar de gêneros literários canônicos originalmente criados por escritores homens para subvertê-los e reescrevê-los em forma de paródia. É importante evidenciar que a paródia é uma maneira de ajustar as contas com o peso histórico do passado e transformá-lo em algo significativo para o momento presente. Portanto, o objetivo desse artigo é discutir porque a paródia tem sido escolhida por mulheres escritoras como uma estratégia pós-moderna para desafiar discursos totalitários em obras literárias canônicas.

Palavras-chave: paródia, memória, identidade

All literary texts have some theory and ideology in their discourse. Readers who are aware of such argument question the text, its context and semantics to eventually start working on its interpretation. It is a matter of fact that readers might limit their critique by trying to have the nearest approximation to the original intention suggested by the author. Such investigation would try to understand the historical and sociological circumstances in which the literary text was produced as well as its contemporary readers' response. On the

other hand, readers might also try to understand the sense of a text by having an interpretation that would be more related to their ontological experience and cultural identity. As a result, they would investigate the literary work in a broader context, one that would offer more possibilities of sense and meaning given that it would always come under the scrutiny of a more flexible theory which would not be limited to discuss the text according to its original meaning, better saying, according to the author's original intention.

Furthermore, the very meaning of a text is not only related to its author's intention, but it is also linked to the reader's reading experience, consequently his/her personal reading. It is important to point out that the relation between a literary text and its readers described in the above lines, does not claim that readers are hierarchically placed above the author of a text. Actually, what may be inferred is that the author with his/her text leads readers to ponder upon the text they have been reading. Thus, an author not only stimulates readers to carefully consider a text, but he/she also motivates them to produce some sense of what has been read. Such sense may be closely related to the author's intention or not. In other words, the author's intention does not only determine the sense of his/her work given that the text is offered to the reader's appreciation and such fact does not mean that the author will be forgotten either. On the contrary, the author is still important, he/she remains.

Therefore, literature plays a fundamental role in the construction of the identity of the one who writes and the one who reads. Besides, the identity of an individual can never be fixed because it is always subject to change. In addition, an individual cannot be dissociated from ontological questions which may be raised in order to destabilize his/her notion of reality and detach him/her from what was once accepted as true. Accordingly, identities are in a constant process of fragmentation and transformation. Moreover, ontological questions always add another dimension to an individual's certainties making him/her recreate his/her own experience of identity. According to Jonathan Culler, one idea that may be called into

question concerns the word subject. Is the subject a result of his/her choices or is the subject a result of someone else's choices? The very word subject implies a certain ambivalence given that the subject is the agent as well as the one who is subjugated, that is to say, an individual has his/her identity fragmented due to the fact that he/she will always be related to his/her subjectivity as well as the other's in historical and sociological dimensions (CULLER, 1999, p. 107-112).

The philosopher Michel Foucault stated in an interview: "do not ask me who I am and do not tell me to remain the same" (POL-DROIT, 2006, p. 21).[1] Foucault's statement shows that there cannot be any fixed paradigms of identity because identity implies identification and distinctiveness, better saying, an individual needs some extent of identification with his/her community to share a sense of belonging, but he/she also needs some distinctiveness in order to realize a feeling of being authentically different. Besides, the feeling of belonging is directly related to place, community and history, but places and communities change as history unfolds in the continuity of time, which is something that suggests that one's identity is flexible and it paradoxically involves ideas of sameness and difference. Besides, there is the I who sees and the I who is seen and this interrelation is always changing the ways an individual experiences his/her identity.

Therefore, it might be said that perspectives change according to one's subjectivity due to the fact that they are interpreted by different individuals. This is the influence of the postmodern condition on the politics of representation. As a result, postmodernism triggers off debates on how meaning and representation are transformed into culture. Likewise, postmodern texts question what reality means and how it is understood, whether it is understood as meaningful and coherent or simply unverifiable. Thus, postmodern texts tend to show some tension between what can be real and what can be fiction as well as their interrelations. In *The Politics of Postmodernism,* Linda Hutcheon, PhD in English and

professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, argues that postmodernism has challenged traditional representational forms because they cannot only be a privatized experience of the author or simply a mimetic mirroring of one's subjectivity:

> At this conjuncture, a study of representation becomes, not a studying of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past. (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 7).

Thus, one of the roles of postmodern theories is to discuss the idea of the fluidity of identity and how it is represented in postmodern fiction. Bearing such idea in mind and having Hutcheon as a reference, the aim of this paper is to discuss why the subversive potential of parody has been chosen by women writers as a postmodern strategy to challenge totalizing discourses in canonic literary works. Firstly, it is important to highlight a few characteristics attributed to postmodernism which are paramount to understand how postmodern discourses work. Linda Hutcheon explains in *The Politics of Postmodernism* that according to some descriptive accounts, (…) postmodernism works to de-doxify our cultural representations and their undeniable political import (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 3). Accordingly, the postmodern politics of representation show certain incredulity toward totalizing narratives questioning the validity of imperialist or patriarchal discourses which have just one version in their literary representation, essentially the version that agrees with Eurocentric perceptions and values. If postmodernism is pluralistic in its essence allowing oppositional perceptions and discourses the possibility of inclusion, it is imperative that distinct forms of representation be required. As a result, dominant discourses that represent the ones who do not share European cultural values are challenged and subverted.

Nevertheless, in order to defy totalizing discourses on history, science and culture, postmodernism signals its dependence on such discourses given that it uses the canon to show rebellion against it. So, it is necessary to appropriate in order to reformulate, to install in order

to subvert. It is important to highlight that canonic literature was originally framed by the white dominant male culture which considered as for instance, women, inferior beings. Therefore, women writers realized that one of the strategic ways to subvert imposed conventions was to appropriate traditional male genres, mostly the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman,* and to rewrite them   in texts that represented the female subject. Because the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* were developed by male authors establishing a tradition that excluded women, it seemed perfectly reasonable for women writers to borrow these genres from the canon and renegotiate their prescriptions.

Consequently, in order to reformulate canonical classics, it is important to understand their development and concept. Thus, a brief explanation of the origins of the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* is necessary to understand how they were originally created and eventually subverted by women writers. The *Bildungsroman* was firstly developed as a literary genre in eighteenth-century Germany and it narrated a young man's life as well as his journey of self-discovery. Thus, the *Bildungsroman* was traditionally a novel of male development. Although the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* describe the life of a charater until he achieves adulthood, there is a slight difference in the development of the genres. According to *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, the *Bildungsroman* is a novel in which the protagonist, after some wrong starts, makes the right choices that will lead him to grow into a mature man. The genre was developed in 1765, by Wieland and his *Agathon* (GARLAND, 1997, p. 87). The *Künstlerroman* is defined as a novel that shows the development of a male protagonist into an artist (GARLAND, 1997, p. 495). Thus, the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* were traditionally developed by male authors.

Because of the intricate relations between history, ideology and power, everything that is historical is susceptible to judgment and change. Therefore, women writers started to realize that male writers had always framed the female subject within traditional patriarchal

stereotypes which limited their perspectives and intellectualism. Therefore, female characters were framed in narratives whose settings and context curtailed their chances of becoming independent individuals. Female characters had their happy ends within the institution of marriage so that their role of housewives was fulfilled. Thus, in traditional patriarchal discourses women were conceived to get enough education to find a husband and raise a family. Although some nineteenth-century women writers and their novels of female *Bildungsroman* challenged patriarchal stereotyped versions of women by showing different perspectives of the female subject, their female protagonists either succumbed to the demands of a patriarchal society or committed suicide, as for instance in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Thus, nineteenth-century novels of female artistic development were riddled with obstacles that led to the heroine's abnegation and sacrifice.

Despite the fact that some early-twentieth-century women novelists portrayed their female protagonists struggling to succeed as artists, their heroines' life was limited by Victorian conventions which demanded that a woman should be docile, self-sacrificing, polite acquiescent, pious and domestic. In sum, what Virginia Woolf explained in her paper *Professions for Women* as the angel in the house.[2] Virginia Woolf is an example of a writer who was concerned about how women were regarded in Victorian society and how they regarded themselves (ABRAMS M. H., 1979, p. 2045-2046). In *To the Lighthouse,* 1927, for example, Virginia Woolf depicts a female protagonist, Lily Briscoe, who is an artist that believes her painting is not worthy because she feels threatened by men's opinions of women as artists. Although the Victorian culture had already seen the decline of its social values when *To The Lighthouse* was published, some obsolete cultural conventions prevailed and women were still regarded as outsiders. For this reason, the best examples of the female *Bildungsroman* in literary works originally written in English language began to abound after

the first half of the twentieth century when women writers managed to portray new perspectives of the female self which had been hidden in patriarchal versions of femininity.

Therefore, in the second half of the twentieth century, women writers saw in postmodern period an opportunity to emancipate themselves from a patriarchal discourse that had long limited their possibilities. In Canadian literature, for instance, the 60's witnessed the Canadian lit boom, which opened new literary spaces to the ones who had always been placed on the margins of the dominant culture, that is to say, the western male culture. As a result, women writers started to redefine the politics of representation by playing a rather cunning language game. They began to speak the language of the dominant, which allowed them to be heard, and then subverted the same language using postmodern strategies in order to redefine literary representations of the female self. According to Linda Hutcheon in an interview with Katleen O'Grady, the blurring of boundaries that distinguishes fact from fiction, the use of irony and exaggeration, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and parody are some of the postmodern strategies used by women writers in order to deconstruct the one-version dominant male discourse. The following paragraphs will focus on the subversive potential of parody as a strategy to call into question totalizing narratives that were accepted as the only truth.

In the *Cambridge Encyclopedia,* parody is defined as "an imitation of a literary work, or form, usually for comical and satirical purposes. Good parody requires both skill and sympathy with the target" (CRYSTAL, 1990, p. 910). Nevertheless, this is not the only definition of the term given that so much has been said about parody that its connotations and meanings have had controversial and complicated accounts. For this reason, it seems impossible to frame the term parody in just one single explanation without taking into consideration the wide range of postmodern cultural forms of parody that defy any attempts of precise definitions. Thus, postmodern parody should be understood in its broadest sense. It

presents intertextuality since a hypertext changes a hypotext, that is to say, the hypotext or original one is the source upon which the hypertext produces its parody. Moreover, because of the relation between a hypotext and a hypertext, parody requires a lot of skill given that it involves the imitation and transformation of someone else's words.

Besides, parody can be conservative because it may reinforce what has been originally said in the hypotext, but it can also be subversive because it may contradict what has been previously stated. Accordingly, either might parody make honorable allusions to previous texts showing some sympathy toward them, or it might subvert precursor texts showing a more controversial attitude toward them. Another important aspect is the fact that parody writing does not necessarily have to be solely comic because writing is serious in its intention, so parody can also be serious to a certain extent. In addition, there are various ways through which parody can sound more comic and less serious, or exactly the opposite, less comic and more serious. That will depend on the choices of discourse elements, which may include a touch of irony, exaggeration, bitter irony, made by the writer to approach the hypotext. As a result, parody may be thought of as a serious criticism of the hypotext, but it may also be thought of as a playful mockery of forms that requires careful decoding. Thus, parody is not only a ridiculing imitation of a work of art. Parody goes beyond the generalizations in definitions found in standard dictionaries and encyclopedias.

It is important to point out that parody is a way of coming to terms with the historical weight of the past and change it into something meaningful and less intimidating. In this sense, some emphasis is put on what was left behind as legacy so that it can be changed and reorganized. Hence, parody implies imitation and transformation, which is something that suggests its double-coded complexity because it appropriates previous discourses, installs and subverts them. It expands the past into the present showing that difference comes from continuity, so parody is repetition with critical investigation. Moreover, what was left behind

as historical and ideological discourses, for example, is legacy that an individual cannot get rid of so easily because the past is always echoing its influence in present time, for this reason, one of the best forms to deal with that legacy is to evaluate what should be appropriated and written upon. In this sense, parody also reminds its readers, whether they like it or not, that they have a past which they should respectfully consider investigating and recycling to the better understanding of present time.

It must be highlighted that a text should be investigated with critical distance. Thus, if readers do not share any ideological values which they have been reading in a literary work, they will either give up reading it or they will keep on reading it with critical distance. One of the resources that might help readers establish critical distance from a text is to read it with some irony, better saying, is to read the text and to respond ironically. Similarly, when readers feel that there is something in a text that needs to be recontextualized in postmodern time, they might do their reading of the text by writing their interpretation in an ironic way. Thus, irony is one of the rhetorical elements that writers use to subvert the original idea intended by the author. For this reason, it takes a careful and learned decoder to manage to decode and transform primary forms of literary works. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of parody* states that (…) the experience of literature involves a text, a reader, and his and her reactions, which take the form of systems of words that are grouped associatively in the reader's mind (HUTCHEON, 1986, p. 23).

Furthermore, the interplay of controversial ideas that a writer of parody intentionally shows in his/her hypertext is subtly arranged in the narrative showing that parody does not only consist of a work of imitation, otherwise it would be regarded as plagiarism, but parody consists of imitation with difference. Such critical difference is remarkably conveyed with the use of irony, which is a rhetorical element that can be esthetically sophisticated when cleverly applied. Consequently, parody requires cultural sophistication because it evokes a

previous literary work. In addition, parody also pays some tribute to its source of imitation even though the source of imitation and its set of conventions are ironically debated by the parodist. Accordingly, the dynamics of parody demands the reader's awareness of distinct fields of knowledge. This is the subtlety of parody which makes a naïve decoder miss the whole point. Thus, as Linda Hutcheon wisely puts:

> When we speak of parody, we do not just mean two texts that interrelate in a certain way. We also imply an intention to parody another work (or set of conventions) and both a recognition of that intent and an ability to find and interpret the backgrounded text in its relation to parody." (HUTCHEON, 1986, p. 22).

Although irony is a rhethorical tool that characterizes parody, the genre may feature other elements of rhetoric as for example, self-reference. Therefore, any narrators who address their readers by making references to their writing as well as to their attempt at verisimilitude, are in fact deploying self-reference to remind readers of the importance to question the several possible discourses of representation that are either selected or declined by the teller. Self-reference stresses that literary representation is to choose appropriate words to portray an object according to one's experience. Thus, representation is alteration. Needless to say, parody is self-reflexive due to the fact that it not only writes upon previous works but it also shows that it is dialogic to other texts. Therefore, intertextuality is a characteristic of parody texts because it puts emphasis on controversial forms of representations, oppositional ideas and dialectical ones. The complexity of these strategies of language representation is discussed by Linda Hutcheon in *The politics of Postmodernism:*

> Parody can be used as a self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past. Its ironic reprise also offers an internalized sign of a certain self-consciousness about our culture's means of ideological legitimation. How do some representations get legitimized and authorized? And at the expense of which others? Parody can offer a way of investigating the history of that process. (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 101)

Hence, parody obviously asks why some forms of representation are validated whereas other forms are excluded. Accordingly, learned readers are aware that it is relevant to consider how literary representations must have been legitimized and why writers must have chosen to exclude some particular facts before they started their recording. It is important to highlight that memory is fundamental in acts of representation. Had it not been for memory, humankind would not have had any legacy to investigate and restore. However, it should be emphasized that memory is selective, so it chooses to remember but it also chooses to forget. Depending on the one who remembers, memory chances favorable circumstances to register its recollections. Thus, recollections might be conveniently fortuitous to the ones who remember. Taking this into account, it might be said that parody is the one genre that scrutinizes cultural dominants in backgrounded texts and confronts them with contemporary social conflicts. For obvious reasons, it is not by chance that postmodern women writers have chosen parody as a means to change representational discourses.

Although parody has been chosen by women writers as a powerful strategy of subversion, it is relevant to mention that to parody a text does not mean that the entire work should be labeled as parody. Likewise, many postmodern women writers have chosen to repeat the genres *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* as a framing structure to write about their female subject according to their point of view. As a result, from the second half of the twentieth century on, women writers have found other happy ends to their characters which have not been necessarily sealed in marriage and family. If in eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, female characters got enough education to be able to make sense of their talking, in the second half of the twentieth century, women writers decided that their female characters should get enough education to be able to make sense of their writing. Consequently, something has been repeated and something has been changed as the genres have been imitated and the context and contents have been differently represented. Similarly,

Linda Hutcheon explains in *A Theory of parody* that The ideological status of parody is paradoxical, for parody presupposes both authority and its transgression, or, as we have just seen, repetition and difference (HUTCHEON, 1986, p. 106-107).

Furthermore, by challenging the status of representational forms, parody brings new possibilities to represent reality. One of the postmodern narrative characteristics which is also present in works of parody is the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. It is a strategy mostly used in fictional autobiographies as well as non-fictional ones. The blurring of boundaries helps writers to change their readers' focus on reality by shifting their attention to the tricks of literary representation. Even in non-fictional narratives, a writer may use meta-language to lead his/her readers to be suspicious of what they have been reading since memory fails because of its loops as well as its voluntary or careless forgetfulness. Moreover, by blurring the boundaries between genres, writers manage to throw some doubt on what their readers acknowledge as factual truth. Consequently, cultural dominants may also be subtly deconstructed when fictional accounts of reality and non-fictional ones swap places and make history and fiction merge in representation. Concerning this blurring of boundaries, Linda Hutcheon explains:

> In challenging the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join implied by realist narrative, postmodern fiction does not, however, disconnect itself from history or the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent ourselves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we make sense of and construct order out of experience in our particular culture. (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 53-54)

In spite of everything that has already been discussed in order to show that parody is really acknowledged as a successful form of transgression, it is important to emphasize that readers should be willing to investigate their historical legacy and its archives in order to enjoy reading so sophisticated a text. According to Hutcheon, (…) we are all part of the postmodern, whether we like it or not" (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 17). Therefore, sensible

readers should become aware of the fact that present time can be a better experience when it is acknowledged as a result of past events. On the one hand, it might seem rather difficult to look back into past and try to find answers that would explain how present time ended up being a particular present. On the other hand, postmodern readers might realize that the solution to better understand their present cultural dominants does not consist of scoring the right answers, but it surely consists of making the right questions.

In a nutshell, it may be said that parody, used as a postmodern technique of subversion, does not offer precise answers to the understanding of postmodernism. Nevertheless, its ambivalent ironic language, its intertextuality and self-reference as well as its epistemological relativism allow fixed paradigms to be changed. For this reason, late-twentieth-century women writers have written their fictional and non-fictional autobiographies using parody as a strategy of subversion. By writing in the form of parody, they have shown that women can and should speak for themselves. In addition, they have also pointed out that identities cannot be fixed in gender stereotypes because identities are fluid, idiosyncratic and susceptible to change. Besides, the very process of growing mature described in *Bildungsroman* novels somehow implies that identities are shaped by fragmentation and change. Thus, for all the reasons described in previous paragraphs, parody has featured postmodern literary works. Therefore, to repeat with difference is exactly what women writers have been doing since they decided to subvert fixed paradigms and gender stereotypes. They have also led their readers to read with critical awareness and to question whatever information they have found in dusty archives. For this reason, perhaps, readers might start reading parody with some questions in mind. Presumably, such questions might be: Does the act of repeating with difference make a difference? What difference does it make?

ABSTRACT: Identities are in a constant process of fragmentation and transformation. It is possible to affirm that reality perspectives change according to an individual's experience, subjectivity and memory. Taking into consideration the subjective aspect of memory, in the second half of the twentieth century, women writers started to redefine their literary spaces calling into question dominant discourses that represented the female subject according to patriarchal stereotypes. Such writers began to appropriate canonic literary genres originally created by male writers to subvert and rewrite them in the form of parody. It is important to point out that parody is a way of coming to terms with the historical weight of the past and change it into something meaningful to the present moment. Thus, the aim of this paper is to discuss why parody has been chosen by women writers as a postmodern strategy to challenge totalizing discourses in canonic literary works.

Keywords: parody, memory, identity

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1 My translation
2 A reference to *The Angel in the House*, by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896)