

**‘(B)ut How Grow Flowers [...] if One Kept Hens?’:
The Transgressing Role of Bird Imagery
in Virginia Woolf’s *The Years***

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Abstract

In the atmosphere of growing oppression in the 1930s Britain, where the rapid raise of Fascism threatens to impose its hegemony over the whole of socio-political structures, the imminence of a new outburst of international combat comes to aggravate the forlorn landscape of post-Victorian society. This hopeless panorama of tyrannical dominance over the individual is completed with the oppression from patriarchal dictatorship which, supported by the inheritance of Victorian precepts, emerges as an accurate replica of its political referent. Profoundly contempt with this scenario, wherein mass manipulation has become the vehicle for central leaders, in their attempt to create an easily controllable monolithic block, Virginia Woolf envisions the principles and aesthetics of the grotesque as the most effective vehicle to accomplish the destruction of the corrupt pillars of this ideological and socio-cultural edifice. Hence, as this paper aims to demonstrate, it is through the subversion and decentralization inherent to the politics of carnival and the grotesque parameters upon which it rests that the final demolition of the rotten scaffolding of this system can be effected. Indeed, through a reality of dualities and hybrid identities in *The Years*, the narrator vindicates for the transgression of the constraints and monadism imposed by hegemonic forces, at the same time as she clamours for an unrestrained order. Accordingly, by focusing on Woolf’s resort to the fowl-like hybridisation of some of her characters in the novel, this analysis will attempt to shed light on the potential of these carnivalesque and grotesque principles ruling over the narrative as a powerful weapon for definitely shaking the socio-political foundations of her time, now exposed in their purest degradation and ridiculous truth. On the verge of an international conflict, it

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is precisely by means of pacific combat that the narrator in *The Years* perpetrates her twofold purpose of transgressing the conventions of the established order. On the other hand, along with the destruction of those corrupt pillars of post-Victorian society, Woolf proposes a new conception of reality where, in keeping with the grotesque parameters in her narrative, the relativization of sides and points of view, as well as the free flow of human existence – unhampered from conventional constraints and impositions– represent its essential notes.

Gross, obese, shapeless, they looked like
[...] a parody, a travesty, an excrescence
that had overgrown the form within, the
fire within.

Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, 278

Even though the final version of *The Years* left the blunt didacticism of the manuscript for the later *Three Guineas*, a powerful attack against the present corruption and banality of post-Victorian patriarchal society is still vigorously latent beneath the subsidiary passing of the years in the Pargiters' story. Indeed, a categorical debasement of the existing order confers the pre-*bellum* scenario which constitutes the context of the novel-writing –as well as the setting of the “Present Day” chapter– the upside-down quality typical of a carnivalesque world, where the norms and traditions, along with the conventionally accepted order, come to be subverted by means of a thorough inversion of its constitutive terms.

In particular, the narrator was concerned with destroying the Fascist apparatus of tyrannical impositions as one of the most harmful weapons against the creation of a free egalitarian society. In this sense, Fascist leaders endeavoured to implement a strict, artificially rigid homogeneity upon society, so as to transform this into a lifeless though easily manipulated monolithic compact. Offering thereby a certain form of mass identity, Fascist politics, in fact, created a force in the service of war through the production of an indissoluble composite of individuals who become thus deprived of an autonomous sense of will. Profoundly aware of this reality of a world pervaded by the growing rise of fascism and the threat of a looming conflict, Woolf was determined to present a patently subversive panorama in *The Years*.

Thus, concerned with surpassing the limitations imposed upon the society of her time, and especially upon women in a post-Victorian scenario, Woolf presents in *The Years* a world of two-folded identities, through which the Pargiters, as well as those who come in contact with them, partake of the universe of double-sidedness and ambiguity by undergoing a process of animal hybridization consistent with grotesque imagery. These forms defy the conventional order through a reversal of its ontological and conceptual organizing principles by validating a new reality which destabilizes the previous solidity of officialdom. Hereby, the characters are frequently viewed through a masquerade optics that reveals them as a kind of hybrids between humans and ridiculous fowls.

At the manner of classical fabulists, who employed birds in their long narratives to satirize “the vices of contemporary society” (Wright, 1976: 77), Woolf resorts to bird images with a similar purpose of unmasking the foolery of a system self-enclosed by its own conventionalisms: “I want to give the whole of the present society – nothing less: facts as well as the vision” (Woolf, 1985: 192). Fowl imagery provides a fruitful source to ridicule and parody the society portrayed in *The Years*. Accordingly, from the opening scenes, Abel Pargiter is characterized by a “right hand resembl[ing] the claw of some aged bird” –particularly a grotesque feature reminiscent of old Miss Parry looking like a frozen bird in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 1992b: 68). At the same time, this form of animalization tallies with the exposure of the moral corruptness inherent to Mr. Pargiter, the obscure and perverse Colonel.

Furthermore, the aging condition in Abel –as in the case of Miss Parry– becomes symptomatic of the alluded atrophy of a post-Victorian society, in which people have developed the claws and paws of prehistoric animals in their zeal for protecting at any cost the roots of the institutional apparatus. In this sense, Gillian Beer has examined the implicational meaning of prehistory in Woolf’s novel, where the narrator uses the primitive as a warning against the fallacy of development and the danger of the collapse of civilization on the verge of an international conflict (Woolf, 1996: 26). Thus, through the eyes of North –the returned combatant in *The Years*– the family is revealed as “defending traditional structures” with “the unsheathed claws of the primeval swamp” (Woolf, 1998: 227).

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Indeed, Woolf was already familiar with the satirization of the vice and corruption in contemporary society through the grotesque transformation of characters into absurd birds. Among Woolf's reading notebooks, Brenda Silver (1983: 107, XIX, B. 32) includes *Volpone*, the Elizabethan comedy in which Ben Jonson, who had defined his play as "a study of human depravity" (cf. Fox, 1990: 88) effected his harsh critique through characters such as Corvino or Volpone –the Latin equivalents for *raven* and *vulture*, respectively.

Chiming in with this, the party guests at Kitty Lasswade's, in the "1914" chapter, undergo a similar bird transformation, thus becoming "like gulls settling on fish" moving around in a "rising" and "fluttering" (Woolf, 1998: 189) movement. This form of mockery epitomizes the profound insipidity of their chattering: "Yet animated as it sounded, to Kitty's ear the talk lacked substance. It was battledore and shuttlecock talk, to be kept going until the door opened and the gentlemen came in [...] 'Damn these women!' [Kitty] said to herself" (Woolf, 1998: 189). Likewise, also North whose reflections had transformed Maggie, one of the guests, into a primeval bird struggling for the survival of traditional Victorian family, is thus derided. Hereby, North gets in return immersed into the same swamp he had criticized, simultaneously metamorphosing into a kind of bird. Thus, his way of asking "'(w)hy – why – why –' he said at last" is accompanied by "a gesture as if he were plucking tufts of grass from the carpet" (Woolf, 1998: 277).

One of the most evident examples in Woolf's novel is represented by Miss Craddock, Kitty Malone's "owl-like" (Woolf, 1998: 47) teacher, whom Jane Marcus identifies with Janet Case, Woolf's admired Greek teacher (1987: 48). Hence, from her earliest appearance, Lucy Craddock –whose umbrella "was not like other umbrellas; it had a parrot's head for a handle" (Woolf, 1998: 46)– reveals to the reader her bird-like qualities: "there was something owl-like about the eyes, round which there was a shallow, hollow depression" (Woolf, 1998: 47). Simultaneously, her "holding her pen suspended" (Woolf, 1998: 47) reinforces the image of a bird holding a branch. Also from the beginning, Lucy Craddock is introduced as an outsider from a masculine-oriented society. Despite her excellent qualities, Lucy's dismissal from the Oxbridge world –"(s)o many of the Dons sneered at her" (Woolf, 1998: 47)– endow her with a kind of scapegoat quality.

Thus, marked with the red nose which is typical of carnivalesque personages, resulting from her essay-marking with red ink (Woolf, 1998: 47), Miss Craddock lives as well outside the boundaries defined for her sex, sharing with Kitty, her pupil, a homoerotic mutual feeling:

(A)s it was in one of these cheap red villas that Miss Craddock lived, Kitty saw them haloed with romance. Her heart beat faster as she turned the corner by the new chapel and saw the steps of the house where Miss Craddock lived. Lucy...

‘She’s coming!’ thought Miss Craddock, holding her pen suspended [...]. ‘She’s coming!’ she thought with a little catch of her breath, laying down the pen [...]. (Woolf, 1998: 46)

Certainly, while Kitty romanticizes about the encounter with Miss Craddock, the teacher’s holding up and down of her pen while she catches her breath suggest a form or orgasmic reaction, corroborated by Kitty’s repeated “blushing bright red with pleasure” (Woolf, 1998: 47). Even when integrated within the carnivalistic parameter of hybridity, Miss Craddock’s dyadic nature involves a form of transgressing the boundaries of gender imposed by a patriarchal oligarchy in a twofold manner. Thus, by demonstrating her attraction for Kitty, the teacher subverts the role associated with traditional female sexuality, especially as concerns the strict Victorian precepts. Thereby, Lucy voices the determination –common to many contemporary women’s collectivities– to refuse the kind submission that may derive from masculine fondness.

At the same time, even when her scapegoat nature is evident, the narrator’s choice of Lucy’s characterization as an owl –the bird that symbolizes Athena, the wise goddess– constitutes a vehicle for the exaltation of a woman for whom, as well as for Janet Case, Woolf felt profound sympathy and admiration. As expressed in an anonymous review in *The Times* the year of the novel’s publication, Lucy Craddock becomes, “in this regard, a noble Athena” who broke down “the tradition that only men acted in the Greek play” (*The Times*, 1937: 16). Indeed, the author had often expressed her admiration for such bright-

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minded women who, like Jane Harrison, had been publicly excluded from a male-centred educational system:

(A)nd then on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden, came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby dress – could it be the famous scholar, could it be J – H – herself? (Woolf, 1996: 16)

In contrast, the dons that typically victimize these women appear in *The Years* as gross and repulsive. In keeping with those bird metamorphoses, the also owl-like Mr. Robson merely emerges as the absurd picture of a grown-up schoolboy, though risibly downsized to dwarf-like dimensions. Accordingly, in his Eton-like jacket and his “very thick watch-chain [...], like a schoolboy’s” (Woolf, 1998: 50), Mr. Robson becomes the genuine example of those educated boys who – spoiling their sister’s possibilities of graduating as well – remain yet alien to progress and incapable of exploiting any further the formation received. As Woolf would later illustrate it in *A Room of One’s Own*:

Let us then ask someone else – it is Mary Kingsley – to speak for us. ‘I don’t know if I ever revealed to you the fact that being allowed to learn German was all the paid-for education I ever had. Two thousand pounds was spent on my brother’s, I still hope not in vain.’ Mary Kingsley is not speaking for herself alone; she speaking, still, for many of the daughters of educated men [...]. From the Pastons to the Pendennises, all educated families from the thirteenth century to the present moment have paid money into that account [...]. All this came out of Arthur’s Education Fund. And to this, your sisters, as Mary Kingsley indicates, made their contribution. It was a voracious receptacle, [...] a fact so solid indeed that it cast a shadow over the entire landscape. And the result is that though we look at the same things, we see them differently [...]. To you

it is your old school; Eton of Harrow; your old university, Oxford or Cambridge; the source of memories and of traditions innumerable. But to us, who see it through the shadow of Arthur's Education Fund, it is a schoolroom table; an omnibus going to a class; a little woman with a red nose¹ who is not well educated herself but has an invalid mother to support; an allowance of £50 a year with which to buy clothes, give presents and take journeys on coming to maturity [...]. (Woolf, 1996: 68)

In this regard, if in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf would denounce the lack of opportunities provided for the daughter of the educated men, it is precisely by contrast with Lucy Craddock, one of those red-nosed women, that Sam Robson's preposterousness becomes dazzlingly evident:

Next moment in trotted a little man, who was so short that he looked as if his jacket should have been an Eton jacket, and his collar a round the collar. He wore, too, a very thick watch-chain, made of silver, like a schoolboy's. But his eyes were keen and fierce, his moustache bristly, and he spoke with a curious accent. (Woolf, 1998: 50)

Certainly, Mr. Robson –in his grotesque depiction as the reunion of both childhood and mature age– seems the frozen-throughout-time version of one of those schoolboys, if only directly transferred into a present life which reveals no less meaningless and banal. It is precisely Mr. Robson, one of those dons that tend to scorn women out from Oxford and Cambridge, who becomes here the target of the derision addressed by both Kitty Lasswade and the narrative voice. Hence, noticing Sam Robson's Yorkshire accent, Kitty imitates his speech when she wonders: "What sort of wur-r-rk had Mrs. Robson done?" (Woolf, 1998: 51). A carnivalesque tone pervades the entire episode as the mockery becomes extensive to the whole of the Robson family.

¹ Emphasis added.

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These become grotesquely downsized to the extent of causing Kitty to need to re-focus her eyes in order “to suit the smallness of the Robson(s)” (Woolf, 1998: 51). Nevertheless, this dwindling of the characters as a means of invalidating their attempted grandeur, exempts Jo Robson. Despite his markedly coarse and rustic features –he brushes as wood shaving off his hair in front of her, as he has been busy repairing the hen-coops– the Robson’s son appears to Kitty as “a handsome young man” (Woolf, 1998: 51), especially as he remains uncorrupted by the pomposity of his family (Woolf, 1998: 52).

His position as an outsider from that society enables Jo Robson to voice a perspective unlikely different from the narrator’s. Hence, like Woolf herself, Jo feels he has been banished from the Oxbridge society to which his father belongs. In this regard, his vision of the hens as a bunch of “imbecile fowls” (Woolf, 1998: 49), susceptible of reduction to a pure “huddle of feathers,” becomes symptomatic of the view of the whole of the social upper classes as unsubstantial beings mechanically loitering about without a purpose. As a consequence of this existential meaninglessness, only such a futile by-product as the “little curls of feather here and there” is to be expected (Woolf, 1998: 49). Moreover, in view of the inherent paralysis of these members of the upper classes, who obstruct the way to progress by means of their parasitic existence, Jo’s final reflection comes as the ultimate unmasking of the incongruous foundations nurturing that society: “but nothing grew there. How grow flowers [...] if one kept hens?” (Woolf, 1998: 49)

A poignant satirist of the reality of her time, Woolf presents in *The Years* the preposterousness of a waste society, obtusely enclosed within the narrow precincts of anachronous conventions. In this panorama plagued by a flock of ineffective and absurd representatives, the blossoming of new values is therefore discarded. Consequently, only by means of a profound reversal of the social and cultural values ruling over that system, once focused through the lenses of the grotesque, will regeneration and hope be enabled.

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