

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN DORIS BETTS'S FEMALE CHARACTERS: FOUR STORIES

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In the last year, Nancy's wish to be free of doing the thinking for all her family had grown desperate. Some days their dependence ate her alive. No longer as choosy as she had been at twenty, she had stopped wishing for Prince Charming or miracles. She had prayed to be free of them on any terms.

Heading West.

One of the aspects which probably most attracts us when reading fiction by women is the way female characters undergo difficulties in order to rebel against those things that do not define them as a person. Most of the times we, scholars belonging to the tradition of Shakespeare's sisters, expect to read about outrageous or brave heroines who fight against their inner lives to find a "room of their own" in a modern world lacking significance. Even though the presence of the anti-hero is very common in Contemporary Literature, this aspect is not so well considered if the main character happens to be a woman, an anti-heroine. Moreover, modern feminist literary theory is often concerned about the way women might or should write in future so that they do not resign themselves to silence. On the other hand, it is significant the fact that feminist critics are particularly hard on those characters who fail to rebelling against the standard role of women. Let these notions raise the following questions: Must a modern heroine always have to act as a brave woman? What does a female protagonist look for? Which are the facts that prevent them from rebellion?...In this sense, as Rachel Brownstein asserts in her book *Becoming a Heroine: [...] in a novel, a "realistic" rewriting of romance, a conscious female protagonist takes the quester's place. It is a she who is the representative of searching humanity: and she also continues to represent the obscure and vulnerable beautiful idea. In the woman-centered novel she represents specifically the ideal of the integrant self. What the female protagonist of a traditional novel seeks-what the plot moves her toward- is an achieved, finish identity, realized in conclusive union with herself-as-heroine. Her marriage or death at the end of the narrative signifies this union [...] The aim of the female protagonist of a novel is not a husband but a realized identity.* (1982:xxi)

Such quest for "the ideal of the integrant self", in some way, represents the conflict between the heroine's view of herself as individual and her awareness of the ways in which she is viewed by others. Her role-playing is not just a means of getting by in the world, but is rather a means of getting what she wants from the world. Considering, for example, the way characters are presented in the novel, what we are interested in, as readers, is the process of change and not in "moments of being". Precisely, the different debates focus on whether the short story constitutes a separate genre at all, or whether it is the same as the novel, only shorter, made that the "shorter" narration- despite of the commercial and popular success- had been ignored by literary theory.

The term "short story", as Pratt points out, suggests "a relation to some other longer narrative form". It is obvious that Pratt refers to the novel adding that "much critical thinking about the short story begins by looking at the novel and goes on to define the short story by contrast..." (1981:175-191). It is true that certain forms or techniques attract male writers and others female writers; similarly, the creation of a pattern of repetition and variation that exists within a single story can also occur within a series of stories. In this sense, Doris Betts's short story collections explore the plurality of life, its contrasts and contradictions, without trying to resolve them into a coherent whole.

D. Betts was born in Iredell County, North Carolina, in 1932. She is the author of six novels and three short-story collections including *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (1973), *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994) and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (1997). Even though early in her career she was described as a Southern writer who portrayed women characters struggling for independence and identity, neither Betts's fiction is always woman-centered nor her female characters always acquire happiness. Apart from that, although she defines herself as "not one of these MS people", the author rejects the conception that women writers conclude their stories "with such tiny private victories or self-esteem for their heroines that plots diminish to trivial pursuits" (1997:29-31). On the contrary, Betts depicts women who do not always break out the daily restrictions of their lives but women whose moral choices and their consequences are the focus of the plot. Thus, the characters' rebellion in the short stories I am going to analyze are deeply concerned about their rejected struggle for self-identity.

Written when Betts was still a college sophomore, *The Gentle Insurrection and Other Stories* (1954) was a remarkable debut which anticipated themes coming later in other stories and novels. Indeed, the twelve stories in this collection deal with the mysteries of love and death, race relations, family disintegration and the inability to achieve real communication between people. Here, the oxymoronic title precludes the

characters' search for identity and the desire of a better life by means of breaking out their characteristic lifestyle. Even though many of them do not succeed in causing an insurrection, nevertheless they still cope with life as they learn much about themselves and the others.

Lettie, the central character in "The Gentle Insurrection", is a young woman who lives with her mother and brother, Theo, in a worn-out little farm. Pa has abandoned them and they are poor. So, for Lettie is tired of their sharecropping life she decides to desert her family and escape with her lover. The story opens with Lettie's clear determination to leave the place: "This is the last time, she thought, looking down into the crumbling old well. This is the last time I do this as long as I live [...] And when she thought about it and about what tomorrow would be like, she smiled" (Betts 1954:167). At this stage, and although the action is developed in the course of a single day, throughout the story we perceive the various changes that take place in Lettie's mind. But her determination to change her life turns later to repentance and pity for her family until she finally decides not to rebel against her situation. In this sense, Lettie's resolution to leave the place deeply contrasts, on the one hand, with the monotony that prevails in their lives and on the other hand, with her brother's conformism as he appears impassible and does not want anything to disturb his quietness: "I'm kind of tired. I reckon I'm too goddam tired to do anything about it" (1954:177). Furthermore, the infected house stands as the real body of the disintegrated family she rejects: "No matter what you did to that house, nothing ever changed. Nothing stayed fix and the heat and flies just kept coming in" (1954: 172). In fact, the family's breakdown is implicit in the scene of the dinner in which Lettie's mother pretends her husband is dead instead of accepting the truth. This aspect, as well as her brother's conformism act in the story to reflect the differences between the old South, based on strong traditions such as family, land and religion, and the new South which represents the perfect democracy, a compact social system, the changes brought by the Industrialization and, above all, a better life full of new opportunities for the young. Thus, Lettie is portrayed in a direct relationship of rivalry with her mother for she represents the past she has chosen to leave behind.

Another one of the numerous examples of women's rebellion in Betts's work is that of Isabel in "Burning the Bed", a short story included in Betts's third collection, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (1973), that reveals a much more complex character which shows the author's development in her literary career.

After a long absence in which she has lived her own life, Isabel, thirty-nine years old, goes back home in order to care for her dying father and there she experiments the contrasts between her traditional past and her present

lesbian lifestyle. As she expresses in a letter to her lover Brenda she feels "like in some other planet in that cold and empty house" without knowing how to behave until at lunch time when she realizes that she has forgotten "what Papa liked and disliked in the years she had been gone" (1973:81-78).

In "Burning the Bed", as well as in "The Gentle Insurrection", we observe once more the image of the house as a symbol of a disintegrated family as it is expressed in one of her letters: "Even the parts of the house I thought I liked aren't there anymore. Four of us lived here and two are dead and one is dying, and it makes me nervous. The people who used this furniture don't use it anymore" (1973:78).

Therefore, from the very beginning of the story Isabel is resolute to burn the mammoth bed where she and her brother were conceived and Papa lies now since it symbolizes her past. In addition to that and in order to reflect the differences between the two worlds Betts introduces several religious characters in the story such as the old preacher and the church women whose names she does not even know. In this sense, a sign of Isabel's reaction to this traditionalism is her perseverance to wear wool slacks because "the preacher [doesn't] probably like slacks" (1974: 90). Apart from that, and although when she arrives at her father's house she thinks herself to be an independent woman, as the story progresses she adopts a more traditional role accepting the pears and preserves made by the church women and letting the preacher read from the Bible.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning the fact that neither Lettie nor Isabel have a real room of their own in their parents' houses; the former has to sleep in the loft and the latter prefers her brother's bedroom as "the most comfortable place in the old farmhouse" which ironically is the most significant reason that Isabel has to sleep there (1973:88). Precisely, it is here where she confronts with her past, realizes how lonely she is and how much she really misses her dead brother.

Although the story is narrated in the third person the author introduces here the account of Isabel's dream in the bedroom using the present simple tense as well as the italic typography in order to differentiate it from the events in the story, as well as to show the reader the protagonist's real self: "...Jasper moves swiftly ahead of me through the thick forest. Sometimes he swings from vines; at others, he is simply thrown lightly from one great tree to another [...] I am happy, but I wish he would wait for me. We are going to a cleared space he knows, to build our house" (1973:90).

It is also significant that when she sees a line of natives marching she chooses a girl for her brother and afterwards she decides to have her twin too in order to help them in the clearing where Jasper is waiting for her. As we perceive in this passage Betts employs here the clear/obscure image standing as a symbol of death which represents, on the one side, the fusion with her

brother and her lost childhood and on the other, the acceptance of her sexual desires which had been subdued in the past.

In addition to this, being fire the purifying element that appears in the text as the translation of a past trauma, Isabel's action, burning the bed, is the culmination of her search of knowledge and self identity, but when at the end of the story she calls home just to find out that she has been substituted by another woman she realizes that she depends on Brenda to face her past and to burn the bed. Finally, our heroine discovers that she has cannot get rid of her roots and she is more traditional and vulnerable than she previously thought. Moreover, as she refuses to look at her image after the phone call, here, the mirror acts as an element which dramatizes an alternative identity reflecting Isabel's real personality. Self-scruting, in general terms, is quite improperly regarded as a form of narcissism as "the individual may experience his/her own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his/her identity and autonomy are never in question" (Laing 1990:41). Although the person whom Isabel could see in the mirror is neither her own self nor another person but only a reflection of her own person in the mirror she herself disappeared, possibly in the way she felt that she disappeared when she could no longer feel that she was under scrutiny of others. Of course, the mirror through its repeated occurrence in the writings has symbolic significance showing how intricate human motivation and desire, social customs and the need for change always are.

From this perspective, we can explain Isabel and Lettie's attitude as an attempt to find their authentic identity by refusing the roles offered by an intrinsically male and religious society in which women have to act as perfect wives or daughters. Both of them fight to resist the system and cannot bear the fact that Southern family and society are founded on the body of women. To put just an example, Isabel writes to her lover Brenda telling her how happy her father feels having her there: "daughters will always come home when you need them. You know what a lie is" (1974: 82).

Therefore, while they struggle with the love for their family, they simultaneously contend with their human identity- their needs and desires- and realize that they must escape from the constrictions of family and tradition in order to try to change their lives. In this sense, and according to Gary Davenport, Southerners live "at the intersection of two deeply rooted traditions: on the one hand stand family piety, Southern Protestantism, regional loyalty, and attachment to the land; and on the other hand stands ornery rebelliousness" (440).

In fact, the duality which emerges from the conflicts between past and present is one of the main features that characterize Betts's female protagonists. As Betts herself writes in her essay "Whispering Hope": "I

work mostly with characters who gradually, sometimes reluctantly, become alert to the possibility that human life is more than meets the eye" (Betts 1994:2). Through this passage, the author confronts the reader with rebel women grappling with change, fate, and their need for love. Moreover, this duality often leads the female character to develop another set of alternative identities in order to defend themselves from the outer world and, therefore to be able to survive. In fact, the protagonists of "Miss Parker Possessed" and "Beasts of the Southern Wild", the two last stories which take up my essay, split spiritually causing a conflict between the sensual and moral Ego and finally changing their lives forever.

In "Miss Parker Possessed", included in *The Gentle Insurrection and Other Stories*, the writer tells the story of a middle aged woman who one day feels possessed by what she calls a "devil", "the other self" a "terrible neurosis" that changes her spinster's life and eradicates the control she had upon her life as well as it turns her into two foreign creatures: "On the surface, she reminded the usual self – tidy Miss Parker, quiet respectable librarian Agnes Parker; but underneath there moved some startling stranger, a much younger woman who was given to poking fun at things and wearing scarlet lipstick and thinking the unexpected" (1973:200).

The causes of her change are constructed upon the intersection of a series of factors. In the first place, there is a tension between the individual and the society. Consequently, although she has behaved as a perfect maid for eighteen years, she amazes the Committee of Councilmen Supervising Library when she demands a competent textbook on sex for the library shelves and suddenly rejects any connection with her friends at The Ladies' Bi-Monthly Book Club, created in 1938, as it represents a symbol of the past. Moreover, there is also a conflict between her old convictions and values and her present real self which breaks out in an attempt to seize the day and try to be happy. From now on, she feels sexually predisposed and since she experiences the necessity of being touched and loved, she begins to cast lustful eyes at Mr Harvey, a wifeless bank teller who seems to be interested in her.

After this sensation, she experiments several hallucinations. In the first one, while Mr Harvey accepts her weekly deposit she imagines herself with a smoking revolver in one hand saying: "OK, Harvey old boy [...] let's have the boodle" (207). And in the second one, which takes place on her way home, once she has told the man she is seriously thinking of robbing the bank, she sees herself in a courtroom listening to her own verdict: "Not guilty by reason of insanity" (209). The story finally closes with the committee meeting's decision to offer her an assistant during that year and then an out-and-out pension as the only kind thing they can do for her mental illness.

The narrative situation in "Miss Parker Possessed" presents three levels. In the first place, the story is narrated in the third person; in the second place, the author introduces the free indirect discourse to narrate the protagonist's imaginary adventures, and although the story is also narrated in the third person there exists some ambiguity as, in some way, Betts's "hand" is not clearly marked out from the voice of the character. Nevertheless, the narration is differentiated from the rest of the story by means of a smaller type of letter. Finally, the third narrative level conveys an account of her past life marked by the bold typography in order to offer the reader an explanation of the present facts.

In "Beasts of the Southern Wild" the author tells the story of Carol Walsh, a married woman who teaches twelfth-grade English and Girl's Hygiene in a public high school and whose husband, Rob, mocks her college education and her love for poetry. To escape daily routine Carol imagines she is the slave of a wealthy black man named Sam Porter. Like many other Betts's heroines she represents two roles at the same time: the perfect wife-mother and working woman who prepares breakfast, cares for the children and corrects essays on Romantic Poetry; and the still-young and sensual woman who constantly demands attention from her husband. Since "There [is] nothing television to compare with the pictures she [can] make herself" (1974:63), Carol uses her imagination to invent a better world in which she can play a completely different role. As Alice E. Sink asserts: "In her position at the crossroads, her fantasy world produces the free woman she cannot become in reality" (1992:113). Nevertheless, it is important to remark that in contrast to "Miss Parker Possessed", in this story the dichotomy is no longer considered an illness, something that escapes her control, but it seems to belong to Carol's real identity.

The narrative style of "Beasts of the Southern Wild" also deserves close attention. The short-story is divided in two parts, clearly differentiated by the different typographical uses intermingled in the text. First of all, there is an account of Carol's fantasies which describe her experiences both in prison and in the black man's house; and secondly, the narration of a normal day in her life. The first one, marked by the bold type writing, is a kind of interior monologue, told in the present tense by means of the first person narration that resembles the structure of the Slaves Narratives: "I have been in this prison a long time, years, since the Revolution. They have made an animal. They drive us in and out our cells like cattle to stalls. Our elbows and knees are jagged and our legs and armpits swarm with hair" (1974:57). Then, the narrator tells how she is chosen among the other women in prison to become Sam Porter's slave who offers her a comfortable room in his own house and behaves as a real gentleman: "I have been here for two weeks and Sam has never laid a hand on me. Yet I am treated like a favorite concubine. I dine at

his table, he dresses me as though the sight of me gave him pleasure" (1974:69). Sam has chosen her not for her beauty or youth—she has none of both qualities— but just because her file indicates she is a former English teacher and he needs a qualified person to read for him and his friends. Consequently, once she realizes she will not be raped or beaten, Carol feels rejected and immediately tries to call the man's attention through the selection of poetry she chooses: "I can love both faire and browne/ Her whom abundance melts and her whom want betraies"¹ (1974:70).

The second part of the story, told in the past tense and third person narration serves as an explanation of Carol's fantasies as it describes the dissatisfaction that presides her life. Since her husband's interests lay on the new house they are going to move to, her pupils insist on writing a record of Coleridge's biography instead of understanding his poetry, and as the children are always quarrelling Carol tries to balance her life and feelings when she returns home with her family: *They drove in silence while she set up in her mind two columns: His thoughts and Hers. He was thinking how tired he was of a know-it-all wife, who'd have been an old maid if Rob Walsh hadn't come along, a prize, a real catch. [...] He was two years younger. He was better-looking. He didn't have to keep on with this Snow Queen here, with Miss Icebox. Old Frosty Brain, Frozen Ass. Who needed it?. And her thoughts, accusing. Who do I think I am? What options did I ever have? Was I beautiful, popular, a genius?* (1974:68).

Because she is tired of her situation and due to the fact that she cannot resolve her own conflicts in the real world, Carol pretends she has been raped by a white man named Walsh and, Sam Porter promises that he will kill him. With the husband's imaginary death she manages to escape her past and prejudices to become the black man's lover: "But I am here, my hands busy, and I can devour him; he will yield to me. The room is dark and he is so dark, and all I can see is the running back and forth of my busy hands, like pale spiders who have lived underground too long" (1974:75).

Therefore, our female characters are characterized by an exaggerated imagination that substitutes articulate speech. I have already alluded to the duality that emerges from the conflicts between past and present. This duality, clearly representative of Betts's fiction, is generated in the stories by the presence of a strong determinism that stops the protagonists' actions cold and prevents them from acquiring happiness. The conception of human duality is also conciliable with the Christian Belief that states that there are two souls in human kind: a good one and a bad one. Furthermore, it is also worth remembering the psychological duplicity traditionally conferred to

¹ The excerpt belongs to John Donne.

women in Literature as they were considered both the angel and the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman. In this sense, the other personality represents an image of the character's nonlingual and darkest double, the ferocious secret self she tries to repress as well as the undeveloped possibilities of becoming different. Consequently, this conflict creates a confusion between the real and the imaginary world so that in some cases the death of the double is the only way to get rid of it.

Apart from that, the fixation with the past is strongly related to the conception of original sin. In this sense, it is interesting to note that although the arrival of Industrialization brought many changes, religion was still a major force in Southern communities. Thus, these would-be rebels are so determined by environment and heredity that their real selves remain hidden provoking both a frustration and a rebellion that derive from the characters' realization of what they would like to be but cannot possibly put it into effect.

Certainly, these four stories can be interpreted as the women's struggles to survive, as an image of an independent female in a conservative patriarchal culture. So, what all the stories have in common is their roles as representative of the author's assumptions about gender; that is, the stories demonstrate Betts's awareness of gender dynamics in fiction and life.

But what is more striking about the narrative technique is the particular viewpoint which we, as readers, are encouraged to adopt. We identify with a narrator/character who is female, alone in the world, a descendant of impoverished gentry. Although the fictional form does not allow a sustained story line, Bett's extraordinary use of formal elements manipulates identification and sympathy capturing and holding the reader's attention. Without any doubt her short stories fire our imagination by offering insight into the class and gender divisions and by showing up the continuing inequalities of society. We also learn about the values of past eras from, for instance, a poem such as *Donne's* or *the Old South*; however, sometimes the relations between the different narrators and characters might seem not so close which makes that our reading becomes more formal and distanced.

Therefore, we can observe two kinds of characters throughout Betts's stories. On the one hand, those who provoke the course of the events but finally seem unable to carry out their intentions. In these cases the action is more internal than external and it occurs only in the imaginary world; one of the many examples that appear in the text is Carol's love affair with the black man. On the other, those characters who do not even provoke the course of the events- as in *Lettie's* frustrated get away with her boyfriend- and for this reason the narration is based only on the account of facts that would take place if the real action occurred. In fact, they are passive characters, receivers of circumstances that usually live overwhelmed by their moral dilemmas and that will never be their own masters. In this way, and since she uses ordinary

people in an ordinary world in order to reflect the changing social system, the author confronts the two different worlds- Old South/New South- by means of representing the two realities in the microcosm of Southern communities which makes her stories extensible to the whole mankind.

Thus, from the characters assembled by Doris Betts we cannot expect to find modern heroes or heroines but people who discover that life is always full of new opportunities and also deceptions.

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