

THE GROTESQUE FEMALE BODY IN *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE* AND *THE BIGGEST  
MODERN WOMAN OF THE WORLD*

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**ABSTRACT:** The female body has been the focus of many literary works, especially in recent times, in which new roles for women have been broadly discussed. In an attempt to free the female body from its cultural constraints, many authors have resorted to the grotesque with its excesses and fluid boundaries with society, as originally defined by Bakhtin. Two contemporary novels by female authors are especially relevant in this respect: *The Passion of New Eve*, published in 1977, by Angela Carter, and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, published in 1983, by Susan Swan. After presenting some theoretical aspects related to the grotesque, mainly from Mikhail Bakhtin (1999) and Mary Russo (1994), this article will discuss how Carter's and Swan's novels deal with "freak" characters and with larger than life female protagonists who represent womanhood beyond the limits of conventional femininity.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, grotesque, body, women

**RESUMO:** O corpo feminino tem sido o foco de muitas obras literárias, especialmente nos dias de hoje, em que novos papéis para as mulheres vêm sendo amplamente discutidos. Numa tentativa de libertar o corpo da mulher de suas limitações culturais, muitas autoras têm recorrido ao grotesco com seus excessos e limites fluidos com a sociedade, conforme originalmente definido por Bakhtin. Dois romances contemporâneos de autoras femininas são particularmente relevantes neste contexto: *The Passion of New Eve*, publicado em 1977, por Angela Carter, e *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, publicado em 1983, por Susan Swan. Após apresentar alguns aspectos teóricos relacionados ao grotesco, principalmente a partir de Mikhail Bakhtin (1999) e Mary Russo (1994), este artigo discute como os romances de Carter e Swan lidam com figuras estranhas e com protagonistas femininas excepcionais que representam mulheres para além dos limites da feminilidade convencional.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gênero, grotesco, corpo, mulher

## 1. Introduction

The grotesque has been present in several works of art throughout history. According to Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>1</sup>, the main characteristics of the grotesque style are "the exaggeration, the hyperbolic, the profusion, the excess"<sup>2</sup> (BAKHTIN, 1999, p. 265). These features were at first

1 As I was not able to find Mikhail Bakhtin's book in English, I will translate the quotations from the Portuguese translation, and I will offer in footnotes the original in Portuguese.

2 "O exagero, o hiperbolismo, a profusão, o excesso são, segundo opinião geral, os sinais característicos mais marcantes do *estilo grotesco*."

approached by male authors because, as historically known, women did not have much space in the arts. However, from the nineteenth century on, as women started to conquer their place in literature, female writers have been experimenting with different genres and styles, being the grotesque one of them. In her interesting study of the female grotesque, Mary Russo points out that “the word itself [. . .] evokes the cave [. . .]. [T]he grotesque cave tends to look like [. . .] the cavernous anatomical female body” (RUSSO, 1994, p. 1), that is, the womb. In other words, according to her, the grotesque has a close relation to the female body.

Besides, in breaking social norms and adopting a carnivalesque posture, the grotesque allows for transgressive bodies and behaviors, a narrative stance which frees writers from traditional modes of characterization, especially in what concerns female protagonists and their relations to what is commonly known as “femininity”.

In this context, two novels by female authors deserve to be discussed in order to explore the issue of the grotesque in relation to the female body. The novels are *The Passion of New Eve*, published in 1977, by Angela Carter, and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, published in 1983, by Susan Swan. Though very different in purpose and style, both novels include figures of big women: the Mother goddess, in *The Passion of New Eve*, and Anna, the giantess, in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. Moreover, still dealing with the grotesque, Carter presents hermaphrodite and transformed bodies, and Swan portrays different kinds of grotesque, such as midgets, Siamese twins and giants, popular figures in Freak Shows, an important setting in the novel.

Besides the fact that the novels explore the grotesque, it is important to mention that they can be seen as examples of postmodern texts, characterized by Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, as narratives which refuse authorial distance and emphasize self-reflexivity, fragmentation and a concern with the rewriting of personal and/or social history

(HUTCHEON, 1998).

Addressing the novels, Carter's story is innovative especially in relation to the environment in which the story takes place. As Nicoletta Vallorani points out, "The underlying structure of *PNE* [*The Passion of New Eve*] is deeply postmodernist in that it exploits the basic procedure of adding up heterogeneous structural and functional elements without pretending to synthesize them" (VALLORANI, 1994, p. 4). In other words, Carter explores in detail the elements presented throughout the story and develops a deep reflection about them on the part of the reader. One of her main concerns are gender norms, which are also one of the major concerns of postmodernism, which seeks to deconstruct the idea of gender as a natural, biological characteristic. By playing with technology, Carter is able to discuss gender issues and deconstruct traditionally held beliefs and conventions. In addition, she highlights the fact that in the beginning of the story the characters are "living in New York, the postmodern metropolis" (CARTER, 1977, p. 4).

In a similar way, Swan's narrative is postmodern in what concerns the deconstruction of gender. As Smaro Kamboureli points out, "[m]odernity as a concept in this novel exceeds the aesthetic norms we traditionally associate with modernism and postmodernism in order to include sexual and national politics" (KAMBOURELI, 1991). That is, Swan plays with concepts such as identity and gender in order to discuss issues of postmodernity. In addition, by portraying a freak, Swan deals with political and social interests, as "[t]he grotesque body was exuberantly and democratically open and inclusive of all possibilities. Boundaries between individuals and society, between genders, between species, and between classes were blurred" (RUSSO, 1994, p. 78). By attempting to deconstruct the concepts and boundaries which characterize her protagonist's "modern" world, Swan's narrative acquires a postmodern tone.

Taking into account the two novels and feminist theories regarding the grotesque female body, the aim of this article is to discuss and analyze how both novels depict the grotesque through

the aforementioned characters, and to what extent they can be considered similar or different, as well as what the grotesque might represent ideologically in literature by women. In order to do that, we will analyze a few passages of the novels in which the grotesque is present, applying some of the theoretical concepts of the grotesque.

## **2. Angela Carter's technological grotesque**

Carter's novel deals with technology, being considered a sci-fi novel. She created a fictional city, Beulah, in which all inhabitants are women. However, they were not necessarily born female, that is, they also became women through many procedures that Carter explains in the novel. The main character, Eve, born Evelyn, was a man that flees from a post-apocalyptic dystopian New York City and goes to the desert, seeking a change. There, he is kidnapped by Leilah, a woman from Beulah. In this city, Evelyn goes through his transformation from Evelyn, man, to Eve, women, as described to him by Sophia, one of Beulah's women: "She's [Mother] going to castrate you, Evelyn, and then excavate what we call the 'fructifying female space' inside you and make you a perfect specimen of womanhood" (CARTER, 1977, p. 68).

The novel also has many symbols related to the grotesque that account for the Rabelaisian grotesque proposed by Bakhtin. According to Heather Johnson, the "use of the grotesque also intersects and informs the parody of gender norms in the novel" (JOHNSON, 1994, p. 1), as Carter plays with the notions of gender and biology. Mother, also known as "the Great Parricide" and "Grand Emasculator" is a mythic creature, a goddess, who "has made herself into an incarnated deity; she has quite transformed her flesh, she has undergone a painful metamorphosis of the entire body and become the abstraction of a natural principle" (CARTER, 1977, p. 49). Through this description, the reader learns that Mother has transformed herself into a large creature, who exceeds the limits of a "normal" body, becoming one of the grotesque bodies presented in the novel.

As a product of technology, Mother's character can also be read in relation to the myth of

the cyborg, proposed by Donna Haraway in her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1991). For her, “[a] cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 152). Mother is a hybrid, a creature that evokes change in what concerns the rules of the natural, especially in what is related to gender. By constructing Mother as “a complicated mix of mythology and technology” (CARTER, 1977, p. 48), Carter challenges the binary between natural and artificial, human and machine. By giving Mother a large body, Carter challenges patriarchal society, in which women need to be delicate and reserved. The novel also subverts female roles, since Mother can be considered the matriarch, the provider, a position that is often occupied by man. All these characteristics turn Mother into “an excess of grotesque femaleness” (EFTIMESCU, n/d, p. 4).

In addition, Mother has the power to change bodies, as she transforms Evelyn, a man, into Eve, a woman. Mother, then, is a subverted God, who instead of doing good things destroys what nature created and recreates new life. By doing so, she makes it clear that biological gender norms do not exist in her world, Beulah. The grotesque, then, functions as a subversion of these norms. Furthermore, considering the myth of the cyborg in this gender play, Haraway’s assertion that “[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 152) provides ground for seeing Mother as a cyborg, since in her world gender has another meaning. The subversion of gender norms can be verified in the passage in which Evelyn is told that “[Mother] is going to castrate you [. . .] and make you a perfect specimen of womanhood” (CARTER, 1977, p. 68). In other words, by turning Evelyn into a “perfect” woman, Mother is going to give her femininity in excess. As Carter plays with the idea of gender in the novel, the excess, one of the most important characteristics of the grotesque, can be read as a critique of gender norms.

Another character in Carter’s novel that has a grotesque body is Tristessa, an actress, “[t]he

most beautiful woman in the world”, who is the object of Evelyn’s desire, to whom he paid “a little tribute of spermatozoa” (CARTER, 1977, p. 5), a clear reference to masturbation. In the very beginning of the novel, Tristessa’s femaleness is put into question, as Evelyn ponders: “Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion. Woman? Ah!” (CARTER, 1977, p. 6). Tristessa’s grotesque body lies in the fact that she is transgender, a fact that is discovered almost in the end of the novel. As Zero, a man that keeps women under oppression, being Eve one of them, beats Tristessa, her true nature is revealed, as her *négligé* is ripped off: “Out of the vestigial garment sprang the rude, red-purple insignia of maleness, the secret core of Tristessa’s sorrow, the source of her enigma, her shame” (CARTER, 1977, p. 128).

As discussed by Heather Johnson,

The reclusive film star's glamour is world renowned and based on the construction of her femininity. So when it is discovered that under her gowns and fragile appearance she is actually a man, the very basis of the constitution of femininity is brought into question. (JOHNSON, 1994, p. 2)

Through Tristessa, Carter also plays with notions of gender. Tristessa did not identify herself as a man, although she was born with male genitalia. Gender, as broadly discussed nowadays, does not relate to the genitalia, but with more complicated psychological aspects. This play with gender also happens with Eve. Because she was transformed into a woman, one could also question her femininity, as it was learned through a progressive and painful performance after her male body was surgically changed into that of a woman. In other words, Eve had to learn how to be a woman, literally going through the process pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir: she was not born a woman, she became one (BEAUVOIR, 1976, n/p).

### 3. Susan Swan's "real" grotesque

Susan Swan's novel deals with the grotesque in a different way. The protagonist, Anna Swan, is a giantess from Nova Scotia, a character based on a real person who lived in the late nineteenth century, the same period in which the novel takes place. At that time, people who were considered different were taken to Freak Shows, to perform as artists. The novel, then, tells Anna's story, from birth to death. The narrative is constructed by the inclusion of several genres. There are letters, Anna's diary entries, and other people's narratives, which are supposed to grant the story a more reliable tone. This mixture of genres has an important role in the story. According to Teresa Heffernan, "[t]he grotesque body as it confuses common dichotomies and disrupts the "normal" also challenges the boundaries of conventional narratives" (HEFFERNAN, 1992, p. 34), a disruption that contributes to Anna's character construction. The fragmentation of the narrative gives the feeling of a fragmented life story. By reading different points of view of the same events, the reader gets a measure of Anna's own confusion in relation to her own size and her place in society. In other words, the mixture of genres contributes to creating an environment where Anna feels displaced.

According to Bakhtin, "the figures of giants and their legends are closely linked to the grotesque conception of the body"<sup>3</sup> (BAKHTIN, 1999, p. 287). Everything about Anna is different. At the age of thirteen she was seven feet (SWAN, 1983, p. 27), taller than anybody else. In narrating Anna's story, Swan describes with details intimate moments, such as Anna's loss of virginity, her sexual encounters, and the moments she is giving birth, which translate Bakhtin's concern with the lower parts of the body. Such facts are not ordinary for Anna; they have something unusual, even grotesque. For instance, she loses her virginity to a midget named Hubert, who inserts an icicle into her birth canal. For Anna, losing her virginity made her realize that she "was human and vulnerable – a female who, like every other female, could be penetrated in a way that no man could" (SWAN,

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<sup>3</sup> "As figuras dos gigantes e as suas lendas são estreitamente ligadas à concepção grotesca do corpo."

1983, p. 35). Thus, she realizes that in spite of her abnormal size she was equal to other women, including being a victim of male domination (FEITOSA, 2011, p. 112).

Anna's body is also target of male desire, but not just sexual, as the men who are present in her life show different interests in her. For instance, P. T. Barnum, the Freak Show owner, wants her to perform in his circus, so his interest in her is economic. Angus McAskill, a giant, loves her, but does not want her to be "a show-biz personality" (SWAN, 1983, p. 58). Martin Bates, a giant who becomes her husband, wants to have children with her in order to create a race of giants. And Apollo, an Australian manager, has sexual desire for her, as he mentions that "[s]he has quite strong powers of sexual attraction, for a freak" (SWAN, 1983, p. 219) which confirms Russo's statement that "[f]reaks are the object of intense, sexual speculation" (RUSSO, 1994, p. 102). In Apollo's testimony, there is a suggestion that he raped Anna while she was sleeping:

Opportunity only knocks once. So I pulled up those skirts of hers until they covered her face and crawled inside her crinoline hoop which looked to be the size of a bear trap. [. . .] The skirts fell off her face during. After, I just lay exhausted on her stomach, looking up at her chin about two feet above me. (SWAN, 1983, p. 220)

Later on in the novel the reader learns that Anna is pregnant. As she reveals to Apollo that she knows he raped her, she and Apollo establish a relationship, for he gives her the pleasure her husband could not. Anna's sexual relationship with men can be considered grotesque, or at least unexpected, once she lost her virginity to a midget and her most successful sexual encounters were not with giants. In addition, ironically, Anna's excessive body could not bear children, as her first daughter was stillborn and her second baby "has genetic difficulties" (SWAN, 1983, p. 327) and died. She is both more and less of a woman, if we consider maternity as something which has been historically expected from women.



Anna can also be considered a cyborg, as

[t]he cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (HARAWAY, 1994, p. 1)

Because of her big size and her carnivalesque attitudes, Anna could be seen as a person that exceeds the norm. Throughout her eventful though difficult life, she manages to use what society sees as her limitations in her favor. She does not want to be considered non-human because of her size and does not want to be just a woman; she wants to be part of show business, embracing her position as a giant and using her grotesque body to empower herself, though her success both as a performer and as a woman is constantly challenged and curtailed by the men in her life, who turn her into an object of their own desires. As critic Teresa Heffernan remarks,

Anna is cast as a marketable commodity in Apollo and Barnum's story, as the fecund, fertile female by her father, as domestic mate by Angus, as an interesting scientific experiment by the numerous Victorian doctors, and as a Cinderella figure who married for love in the fairy tale narrated by the curator of the Sunrise Trail Museum in Tatamagouche. (HEFFERNAN, 1992, p. 29)

Furthermore, although she ends up her life in domesticity, Anna remains an unusual and larger than life figure for the readers. In her Rabelaisian concern with the lower bodily strata and her emphasis on the material bodily principle, Swan turns her protagonist into a truly grotesque character. As Mary Russo, drawing from Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body, argues, "[t]he grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world; 'it is blended with the world, with

animals, with objects” (RUSSO, 1994, p. 8). Accordingly, “when Anna menstruates, all the women of the small town of Seville, Ohio, get their menses. When her waters of pregnancy break, Londoners experience a spring shower on a perfectly cloudless day” (FUNCK, 1994, p. 146). Her body, besides, can be associated with the figure of the cyborg, for the grotesque body is a mixture, “a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (HARAWAY, 1994, p. 16).

In spite of all the constraints that work against her, Anna refuses to be contained.

Her final act of resistance in a world which proves much too small for her consists in assuming the narrative voice of her own story and thus shifting the terms of its viewing—an important non-hegemonic strategy. But even this narrative stance is problematized by the fact that she leaves her manuscript to be edited by Bates [her husband] after her death. (FUNCK, 1994, p. 147)

It is important to remark, in the context of the grotesque, that by creating a complex network of power relations and thus problematizing the possibility of an autonomous identity, Susan Swan works both within and against the principles of realistic narrative and of essentialist representations of womanhood. Her novel illustrates many of the theoretical formulations of gender and feminist studies in the contemporary context.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As discussed throughout this paper, both *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* deal with the grotesque body. In the former, Mother has grotesque characteristics, which were gained by scientific procedures. She was a self-proclaimed goddess and creator, or at least a modifier of life. Tristessa, a transgender, suffers the consequences of being born in the “wrong body”. She recognizes herself as a woman, but the fact that she has a penis prevents

her from living her female identity completely. In the latter novel, Anna was born a giantess, who did not fit the world with her enormous body. She was an outcast, relegated to a world where she could belong, the Freak Show, in which she finds many other grotesque bodies. Anna's grotesque character also appears in her sexual relations, as mentioned above.

Furthermore, both novels are similar in relation to what concerns the excess. Bakhtin, analyzing the Rabelaisian images, points out that "the exaggeration [. . .] is actually one of the characteristic signs of the grotesque"<sup>4</sup> (BAKHTIN, 1999, p. 268). Thus, both novels are examples of the grotesque for portraying excess mainly through Mother and Anna, though they experience it in different ways. Mother is a goddess, holding the power to create new lives, by changing bodies and teaching behavior. In contrast, Anna is an outcast, that is, she does not fit in. Despite this difference, both women, as cyborgs, defy gender roles and question their position in the world. However, at the end, Mother seems to be a failed cyborg, as she is depicted as "a lone, mad old lady" (CARTER, 1977, p. 176), dismissed from her position as goddess. In contrast, Anna keeps her position as a giant. Although she goes to the countryside, becoming a "normal" person and not a show business star as she hoped, she is aware that she "should never have tried to be an Ohio housewife: [she] belong[s] on stage" (SWAN, 1983, p. 278), reaffirming her ideals.

In relation to literature by women, the grotesque could be said to challenge patriarchal thinking and generalized notions of womanhood. In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter parodies the binarism that exists in the notion of gender, that is, between male and female. By changing Evelyn's gender, Mother becomes the ultimate transgressive woman, who challenges preexisting gender norms. In *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, Swan plays with the idea of womanhood. Anna, an excessive woman with an excessive femaleness, was not able to fulfill her role as a woman at that time, which was being a mother and a delicate feminine woman. By questioning the

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4 "O exagero (hiperbolização) é efetivamente um dos sinais característicos do grotesco (sobretudo no sistema rabelaisiano das imagens)."

female role as a mother, Swan also challenges the patriarchal thinking that relegates women to the domestic sphere. In addition, by portraying Anna as a public figure, she challenges the idea of public and private spheres, for “[o]utside the ‘show business’, the role of the freak converged with the social roles available to the racially marked and underclasses” (RUSSO, 1994, p. 83).

Finally, both novels deal with the grotesque in different ways. Carter’s novel develops in a dystopian universe, where she parodies notions of gender and explores the scientific world. Swan’s story, loosely based on historical facts, depicts the grotesque in a realistic way, approaching themes considered taboo, such as sex and labor. In spite of their differences, both stories share a feeling, which Bakhtin called “the living sensation that each human being has, to make part of the immortal people, creator of history” (BAKHTIN, 1999, p. 322)<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, both Carter and Swan make use of the grotesque as a device to challenge the norms, especially the ones related to gender. Ideologically, therefore, their protagonists illustrate alternative female bodies and behaviors, contributing to newer and more equalitarian ways of becoming a woman.

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5 “Pode-se dizer, para concluir, que na concepção grotesca do corpo nasceu e tomou forma um novo sentimento histórico, concreto e realista, que não é a ideia abstrata dos tempos futuros, mas a sensação viva que cada ser humano tem, de fazer parte do povo imortal, criador da história.”

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