

THE CLOSED ROOM AS METAPHOR IN  
"A ROSE FOR EMILY" AND O QUARTO FECHADO

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You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time -  
. . .  
If I've killed one man, I've killed two -  
The vampire who said he was you  
. . .  
They always knew it was you  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Sylvia Plath, "Daddy"

These words, among others written by Sylvia Plath a few months before her suicide, have led critics to focus on biographical/historical accounts of the young poet's work. Undoubtedly Plath's unresolved relationship with her father and her failed marriage provided ample inspiration for the above words; however, my purpose is not to trace autobiographical elements but rather to use Plath's words as a textual map for

the present study.

Contemporary theoreticians have suggested a political, ideological, and personal turmoil illustrated textually and contextually within twentieth-century literature. Such turmoil, as Terry Eagleton has stated, "is never only a matter of wars, economic slumps and revolutions: it is also experienced by those caught up in it in the most intimately personal ways. It is a crisis of human relationships, and of human personality, as well as a social convulsion."<sup>1</sup> Post-Freudian studies of literary texts have shown a tendency to view a text as a mediator between an author-function<sup>2</sup> and a (co)responding reader.<sup>3</sup> This continuum involves contextual assumptions from the moment an author is introduced into the model through the development of the text to the appearance of a reader. When studying texts which are themselves post-Freudian, it is valid to assume that psychoanalytic theory will permeate throughout the continuum.

In his later works, Freud describes the human condition "as languishing in the grip of a terrifying death drive, a primary masochism which the ego unleashes on itself. The final goal of life is death, a return to that blissful inanimate state where the ego cannot be injured."<sup>4</sup> Eros, the life energy and the force which surpasses and manipulates time, must face Thanatos, the death drive. This constant struggle is manifested through anxiety and fragmentation of the self.

In an attempt to reinterpret Freud in light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of discourse, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Lacan sees the appearance of the unconscious when the child, who has sought unity and mirror identification with the mother, is suddenly faced with the father who disrupts the "dyadic" structure

creating a "triadic" one. The father signifies what Lacan calls the Law which brings to the child the meaning of a social taboo (incest), the existence of others (family), and the first realization of a fragmentation within a perfect bond. It is at this point that the unconscious begins to store information repressed by the child's desire to fill the gap opened by the intruder.<sup>6</sup>

Lacan suggests that the child relegates to the unconscious, through language, those signs which presuppose the absence of the object which they signify. Since all desire comes necessarily from a Lack, Eros, the life/sexual energy, is also the constant struggle to overcome this lack. "Human language works by such lacks: the absence of the real objects which signs designate, the fact that words have meaning only by virtue of the absence and exclusion of others. To enter language, then, is to become a prey to desire ..." (Eagleton, 167). Thus, Lacan refers to the Other in terms of language, symbolic order and cultural codes. The Self and the Other are in constant juxtaposition in the unconscious.

My purpose in this essay is to suggest that in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"<sup>7</sup> and in Lya Luft's O Quarto Fechado,<sup>8</sup> the closed room may be seen metaphorically as the unconscious and that the two narratives illustrate the Freudian/Lacanian model within different cultural referents. The two narratives, furthermore, illustrate the unconscious manifesting itself through the Other's realization of the presence of a closed room, and the knowledge – albeit superficial – of its contents. Both narratives begin with a death which will trigger the opening of the "closed room." The "opening" death is merely the (pre)text for the uncovering of other deaths – real and symbolic within the two texts. Through the progressive unfolding of the different levels of

reality within each text, the reader – compelled to enter into the symbolic closed room by a first person plural narrator in "A Rose for Emily" and absolutely no narrator in O Quarto Fechado – enters the unconscious and is tricked by the decodification of the construct.

Through a series of time shifts back and forth from past to present, "A Rose for Emily" presents three narrative levels – 1) The narrator "we" and the exploring of the house; 2) the story of the Griersons and their influence on the town; 3) the Homer Barron episode. Each of these levels is accompanied by sensory elements respectively: 1) the visual screening of the closed room; 2) the smells of decay emanating from the house; 3) the sounds of laughter and boisterous speech. Moreover, the juxtaposition of opposites – two parts of a whole – is apparent throughout the text. Thus we find the house vs. the town, Miss Emily vs. the community, Homer vs. Miss Emily, Tobe (or "to be") vs. Miss Emily, Miss Emily vs. her absent but ever-present father. Each of these opposite pairs seems overseen by Miss Emily's father – the Lacanian law – who remains nameless throughout the text. Nameless though he is, it is he who punctuates the text. First, the mayor invents a story involving the father – the Law – and his money – the Power, which "only a woman could have believed" (Faulkner, 1564). Second, his ever-present crayon portrait remains prominently displayed "on a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace" (Faulkner, 1565), as if providing a Lacanian mirror image for the action – or lack thereof – inside the house. Third, the father's body remains in the house for three days because of Miss Emily's refusal to admit that he was dead though "we did not say she was crazy then ... We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will"

(Faulkner, 1566). After Homer Barron is "safely" dead and buried in the closed room and "safely" buried in the community's collective unconscious, Miss Emily remained closed up for six months. However, "we knew that this was to be expected, too, as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die" (Faulkner, 1567). Finally, she becomes her father in appearance and personality. Personifying a living death, she becomes Thanatos fascinating "us"/narrator. She was "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse" (Faulkner, 1568).

When the closed room is finally opened, we are faced once again with juxtaposed opposites – the "thin, acrid pall as of the tomb" in a room "furnished as for a bridal;" the images of love, conquering, cuckolding and sleep are mixed in the reverie. The final victory of the unconscious (closed room) is the appearance of "a long strand of iron-gray hair" – Emily's missing "phallus" and symbolizing Desire – which had earlier been described as "vigorous" like that "of an active man." Thus, the community through "us"/narrator becomes aware of its unconscious anxiety about incest and death itself by entering the closed room in the narrative – a textual voyage through time during a real-time period of a few hours. Miss Emily, in her quest for the fulfillment of her lack, shatters the cultural code and represses the taboo behaviors and thoughts into the collective unconscious of the community by burrying her actions in a closed room.

Lya Luft's narrative is, by its very structure, closed. No narrator guides the reader through the text, but rather the narrative shifts from the thoughts of one character to the other. Thus, the narrative develops with little dialogue, a veritable lack of communication which, by its presence, further

symbolizes each individual's isolation and Desire. Like Faulkner's narrative, Luft's text presents a complex mixture of levels of reality. As one character after another explores the past, always with the question of how Camilo came to kill himself, the different points of view illustrate, on one level the character's individual struggle to overcome the gap between him/herself and the Other. On another level, the multiple points of view re-create through a hermeneutic circle, Camilo's own struggle and ambivalent self-concept. The action framed spatially by the living room walls and temporally by the period of the wake, takes place before a framed painting – Böcklin's The Island of the Dead which mirrors pictorially the development of the narrative.

Divided into three parts – the Island, the Waters, and Thanatos – the narrative's symbolic structure and thematic plot illustrates the struggle of the self (an Island) surrounded by a void of motion (the water) being compelled by the death drive (Thanatos). The painting is an exact mirror image of this symbolic structure – a figure in a boat going toward an island. The figure, Renata realizes "era uma mulher. O vulto da proa era ela, a Amada de Camilo. Thanatos" (Luft, 130). With Renata's realization, the circle becomes complete – the reversal of the linearity of the narrative [Thanatos/Water/Island].

Each character experiences what Freud calls "the grip of a terrifying death drive" feeling sucked by Desire and fascination. Death is forever pulling each individual down in a metonymic progression of falls. Clara has nightmares about falling; Carolina feels death pulling at her womb at the moment of sexual orgasm; Mamãe believes a force is tugging at her feet. A succession of falls juxtaposes the level of the Imaginary – Ella falls off the fence; the Anjo Rafael falls down the steps;

Camilo falls off the horse.

Throughout the narrative, an overwhelming feeling of loss and unfulfilled desire provides the unifying link from one point of view to the other. As one death after another is revealed, as one unconscious after another begins to manifest itself, the collective fragmentation is illustrated by what is hidden in the closed room — Ella. Ironically, Ella — the character without a point of view — is the structural center though virtually nameless: “Quem teria escolhido para a menina sem pai o nome ambíguo, profético, de meia humanidade, meia ausência?” (Luft, 53). Ella as structural center, provides — in the closed room — an echo of each one’s fragmentation.

Renata struggles fruitlessly to recover her completeness, through her music, “talvez fosse isso mesmo, a arte: compulsão de abismo, para manter a alma inteira” (Luft, 20); through her relationships, “Eu me atirei nos braços dele para fugir da solidão, e foi tudo uma fraude ... fugi de mim mesma” (Luft, 28); through her children, who further mirrored her fragmentation — “era um eco; eu sou um eco ... uma palavra, que palavra?” (Luft, 33). She comes to grips with her unconscious desire for self-punishment, “eu precisava me punir, sempre me punir porque alguma coisa, em mim, de alguma forma, não conseguiu se organizar jamais” (Luft, 130). Her fragmentation began, she realizes, when she adhered to cultural codes and went against her own Desire:

Eu traí a mim mesma, quando abandonei a música para ser infeliz no amor. Mas o que é traição. Não estou sempre trocando uma coisa por outra porque meu coração decide que essa outra é melhor, e a ela é preciso ser leal?

Não existia traição: tudo era um constante pulsar

desordenado, busca de um sentido de vida, porque esta se precipitava para o fim. (Luft, 131-2)

As she "falls into consciousness," Renata experiences a physical rebirth, "Estou tendo que renascer mais uma vez. Mais uma tormenta, um parto: A dor, o medo, o que virá agora? Talvez enfim pudesse descansar no vazio" (Luft, 132).

Echoing Renata's fragmentation is that of the twins Camilo and Carolina each providing an echo for the other, each completing the other. The two, thus, form a Lacanian Möbius strip where Imaginary and Symbolic ambiguously meet. As Elizabeth Wright has clarified,

The strip is like the Real; the ambiguity of the side(s) represent(s) the conflict between Imaginary and Symbolic. This is the place where illusions occur, for example, where the ego-ideal (the mirror-image) interacts with the Father's definition of the subject, as compared with the way the subject envisions itself in its relation to the mother. (Wright, 110).

Thus, the blissful completeness formed by the two opposite, yet ambiguous beings, is disturbed by the appearance of the Father – the Law, social codes, and social expectations. This figure changes constantly. First, we find Camilo's young friend who dies but is forever present as an alluring element of Thanatos, "Sem pensar muito nele, Camilo sabia: é meu para sempre, agora ... Tudo fora transferido para aquele espaço maior de atração: na Morte estão as coisas mais belas, que um dia possuirei" (Luft, 24). Second, the Anjo Rafael invaded their space. This completeness provided, for them an image of



intrusion juxtaposed with perfection. Third came the Intruso or Convidado who so disturbs the bond and increases their ambiguity and sexual ambivalence that they begin to fabricate an illusion of wholeness and a search for identity. "Pelos caminhos do Outro, da sua loucura e prazer, poderiam finalmente entregar-se em definitivo, ou viria, afinal, alguma libertação? (Luft, 115). Fourth, the intrusion of Martin, the real Father, himself as the one who defines what is correct – Camilo will cut his hair; he will ride the pony; he will have the appearance of being a man.

With Camilo's death, Carolina apparently the weaker of the two rather than losing her ambiguity and assuming her sexuality "becomes" Camilo by cutting her own hair. The action, a mirror-image of an earlier scene when she cuts Camilo's hair, is also a mirror image of the Samson story. Carolina's hair-cut has given her strength, she too found completeness – like Miss Emily – by becoming her male counterpart. "Era como o roçar voluptuoso de duas almas libertadas da angústia e violência da carne. O gozo, uma delícia perfumada: depois do sofrimento da separação talvez serem também uma alma só. Lábios, fenda, boca, palavra (Luft, 128).

Thus, the Lacanian orders and their relationships are illustrated. The Imaginary – Carolina's physical experience of cutting her hair – is literally being severed from the Symbolic – Camilo's words and thoughts – producing not an illusion, but a delusion of a part-object – lábios, fenda, boca – in the Real, reaching for sensory experience – palavra. Elizabeth Wright has used this same scheme with Beckett's play, Not I, to illustrate the relationship of the Lacanian order: "language both reveals and conceals the fracture. For Lacan, narrative is the attempt to catch up retrospectively on this traumatic separation, to tell this happening again and again, to re-count

it: the narrative of the subject caught in the net of signifiers ... the story of the repetition compulsion" (Wright, 113).

On a secondary – perhaps deeper into the unconscious – level are the fragmented selves of Martim, who feels libidinal forces at the presence of his dead son's body; Mãe, who was no one's mother; Clara, who struggles to fill the void with the memory of a brief encounter with a robed priest – O Padre – himself the personification of a fragmented father figure.

As each layer of the unconscious is uncovered, both in O Quarto Fechado and "A Rose for Emily," the patterns seem repeated, echoed, and mirrored. As the net of signifiers becomes more fluid, the pattern of a collective consciousness of the unconscious becomes apparent. The closed room in both narratives is viewed, and thus changes signifiers, depending on the cultural codes prevailing. Such kaleidoscopic vision is both an element of and an explanation of the manifestation of the unconscious. In "A Rose for Emily," the closed room contained all the symbols of a beginning of life – a wedding night. In the cultural code, such a wedding was prohibited, thus relegated to the status of taboo. Therefore, the body – the object of Desire – was also buried in the unconscious rotting beneath what was left of a nightshirt. In O Quarto Fechado, Renata's rebirth is disturbed by the manifestation from "the closed room:"

O coração doente da casa explodia como um animal que reuniu em sua cova excrementos, folhas podres, vermes, a dor acumulada, a consciência repugnada de si mesma e a repulsa dos outros começavam a rebentar. (Luft, 132-3).

Returning to Sylvia Plath's words, we see yet another echo for the two narratives – substitute "black shoe" for "closed room," "Daddy" for the Law and socio-cultural codes, and the textual map completes the voyage of the two narratives. Faulkner and Luft employ the closed room as symbolic structure, center, and guiding force for a textual illustration of Freudian/Lacanian models for describing the unconscious as manifested through collective consciousness.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Literary Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in The Foucault Reader, edited by Paul Rainbow (New York: Random House, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Jane P. Tompkins, ed. Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Wright, Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 107-156.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," in Cleanth Brooks, et al. Eds., American Literature: The Makers and the Making (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), pp. 1564-68.

<sup>8</sup> Lya Luft, O Quarto Fechado (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1984).