

Initiation Motives in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*.

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Atwood addressed the mobilising role of bad fairy-tale females already in the playful short fiction 'Unpopular Gals' (*Good Bones*, 1993), in which the stepsister, the witch and the stepmother (for once) get their turns to speak. The stepmother claims: 'I stir things up, I get things moving' (29), and what is possibly the evil female characters' collective voice concludes:

You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can't get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it. (30)

This message is certainly the driving force in *The Robber Bride* (1994): at the level of the novel, there would be no story without Zenia; at the level of the characters, the lives of Tony, Charis and Roz, the three central female characters would be ordinary—pointless from the story-telling perspective—without Zenia.¹ In her, the general theme of the mobilising function of the evil female character acquires a concrete shape. She carries a number of the traditional attributes of a witch, an evil stepmother, an evil godmother, or an evil stepsister, with a modern varnish of dark sexual desirability. She appears and disappears as she wishes, including making herself dead and resurrecting, and nobody knows her motives, her story. There is no record of her ever being born, she changes the story of her life and even her appearance as it suits her immediate interests. Once, she is a Romanian Gypsy, next, an illegitimate child of a White Russian woman, or a Jewish child miraculously saved from the Nazis. She has the power of spell-binding on whoever she focuses her attention to the extent that even if the person knows from past experience what Zenia is like, he or she forgets almost immediately and is willing to believe whatever Zenia wants him or her to believe. This is the case of both, West, Tony's husband and Zenia's ex-boyfriend, and of Roz. At the same time, each of the three female characters wavers in her judgement about the real nature of Zenia even after the calamity she brought on them. Zenia left West when it suited her and took off with the content of their joint bank account. Yet, next time she comes and West is happily married to Tony, he does not remember any of the suffering and dishonest treatment to which she subjected him, and he follows her like a faithful puppy, until she is finished with him again. As for Roz, she herself told heartbroken Tony what kind of a woman Zenia was after Zenia lured West away, yet only several years later she falls for one of Zenia's stories, gives her a job, befriends her, and keeps promoting her until Mitch, Roz's husband, falls in love with Zenia and runs away with her. Despite all this and the fact that, in the end, Zenia forges Mitch's signature and embezzles a large sum of money, Roz is still surprised when, at the end of the novel, she learns from Zenia that it was not love on her side, but that she was merely using Mitch for his money.

The fairy-tale aspect of the story is suggested already in the title: Tony invented *The Robber Bride* as the gender reversal of the story of *The Robber Bridegroom* at the request of Roz's twins.² The Bridegroom was 'the rich and handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and then chops them up and eats them' (*RB* 294). Roz reflects in her memories that this description fits Zenia, but dismisses it immediately as 'too melodramatic for Zenia' (295). I would like to follow this strand and suggest that not only Zenia, but the whole novel goes beyond a mere variation on a fairy tale, but that it resembles by its structure, character types and symbolism another traditional narrative form: the novel of initiation.

The term was proposed by the Czech literary theorist Daniela Hodrová in her work *The Novel of Initiation (Román zasvěcení, 1993)*, whose first version was finished in 1973, but had to wait for publication (of an updated version) for twenty years. Hodrová herself notes that her book was being written parallel with the first studies about the genre in France, where the terms *roman initiatique* or *roman d'initiation* were used. The closest English phrase would perhaps be the *quest novel*, which is sometimes used to refer to certain types of narratives. Hodrová sees as the theme of the initiation novel

initiation, which maintains both its original meanings: the aspect of physical maturity (the transformation of a youth to an adult man, the upbringing of a page to a knight) and the aspect of spiritual maturity (the hero becomes the initiate). (*NI* 1993: 33; *my translation*)

Although the initiation novel appears in a number of mutations from the Middle Ages to the present and each agent can have a number of often opposing attributes, Hodrová outlines a basic structure of initiation:

There are three main figures in a pagan initiation ritual: the priest, the mourner (the mourning choir) and the healer. The subject-being of the centre is the dead deity which is resurrected through the ritual. The figures of the ritual and also of the initiation novel usually form a triangle similar to the symbol of the delta of light, with the Eye of God in its centre. The candidate, the healer from the ritual, is the one who undergoes a mythical journey, he is the saviour of the world and of his own soul. The initiator, the priest from the ritual, explains to the candidate the meaning of the journey. The virgin, the mourner and the medium from the ritual, is a mediator between the candidate and the being of the centre. The journey of the candidate through the labyrinth of knowledge, through the forest to the castle, the symbolic passage from the earthly realm to the underworld and to the Godly light is a pilgrimage from the outer space of the world to the inner space of the soul-God, from the sphere of passing humanity to Godly timelessness. (Hodrová 35)

Given the variety of initiation narratives Hodrová discusses and, particularly, their transformation through time from mystic, to lapsed and unfulfilled initiation novels, we cannot say that *The Robber Bride* follows one particular pattern. However, we can discern some rough features of the novel of initiation in it, its secular adaptation, while the attributes of the particular figures recruit from different historical phases of the genre. I say secular, although Hodrová distinguishes between secular (empirical) and idealist novels, and argues that initiation is a means by which mysticism, if it is epic, can become the content of a novel (Hodrová 33). In other words, a novel, whose 'meaning is based primarily on acquiring knowledge about earthly life, society and the order of the world' (32) does not belong to the

initiation genre. Nevertheless, we will see below that the structure and symbolism in *The Robber Bride* implies that even the secular knowledge can be elevated to the object of initiation, if it is unreachable to the characters through diligent study and normal human communication. Moreover, at least one of the characters, Charis, views her situation as having a higher meaning and she strives to reach it through mystic means.

Thus we can conceive of Tony, Charis and Roz as candidates—the multiplicity of one figure is a feature of a Romantic initiation narrative (*NI* 143)—and Zenia plays the role of the initiator. The three candidates in succession undergo a journey full of pain and trials, with the aim of achieving a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationships to their loved ones. At the beginning of the novel, the three women—Tony, Roz and Charis—bear attributes of naive ignorance: they all think they can live their lives alone in detachment from the outside world. They are also attempting to be detached from themselves, from their real selves, but this is something they do not know or do not want to admit. Tony, an academic, hides behind her theoretical interest in wars, while she avoids all direct confrontation, whether with her colleagues at the university or with West about Zenia. She conceives of West as ‘subject to breakage’ (*RB* 9), but feels that he is ‘safe from harm’ in her house, which is ‘a fort, a bastion, a keep’ (*RB* 19). Then Tony sees the ‘resurrected’ Zenia in a restaurant and when she arrives home, she discovers that Zenia had already phoned her house. She does not mention anything to West because she does not trust him, she thinks that he would succumb to Zenia’s snares again. Charis isolated herself in her house on an island and in pursuing non-violence and goodness through being vegetarian, forgiving, environment friendly and embracing various New-Age ideas. She lives in an illusion about Billy—a draft-dodger, incendiary and the father of her daughter Augusta. Billy was virtually parasiting on her while hiding away from the police, but Charis’s illusion is that Zenia dragged her innocent Billy away from her by force and reported him to the police. Charis lives in fearful respect before her daughter who complains about Charis’ disorganised way of life. Charis ‘gives Augusta small presents, sachets stuffed with rose petals, sunflower-seed cookies to take back to school with her. But they never seem to be the right things, they never seem to be enough’ (*RB* 41). And finally, Roz cannot get over her husband Mitch’s desertion and his death—possibly suicide—following Zenia’s staged killing in a terrorist attack in Lebanon and her funeral. She mourns him, while trying to mortify herself with work. In the meantime, she is losing contact with her son Larry, he ‘has become opaque to her. *How are things going?* she’ll say, and he’ll say *Fine*, and it could mean anything. She doesn’t even know what *things* are, any more, those things that are supposed to be going fine’ (*RB* 81).

The characteristics of the candidate of the initiation narratives are numerous in these three women, although not at all consistent for all of them. A departure from the initiation structure is the female sex—the candidate of all the initiation narratives from the Middle Ages to the present times, to which Hodrová refers, is always male. Other attributes, nevertheless, follow the traditional patterns. The father of the candidate is usually dead (*NI* 144): also the parents of all three women are dead at the time of the initiation. The candidate can have two bodies, a physical and a spiritual one (*NI* 145): this is true for Charis who banished her former self, Karen, but is haunted by her from time to time, and of Tony, who constructs her other, warrior self, whose name is Tony’s name backwards (Ynot Tnomerf). The candidate is marked somehow—either physically, or has the mark inside him—and also possesses some unusual ability: in case of Charis, the mark is her rich inner life which gives the impression of her as odd or ‘not being there’ all the time to others, her special ability is to see auras and into the future. Tony is marked by her academic brilliance, her unusual ability is to write and speak backwards thanks to her left-handedness, and Roz is distinguished from others by her wealth and excellent business abilities as a woman in the world of men.

We could continue with the list of the attributes of the candidate borne by the three women, but this short account should suffice as an illustration of the patterns. What is more important is the journey of Tony, Charis and Roz through the initiation to merging with the being of the centre, which is the ultimate goal of initiation (NI 144). They first go through the stage of marred initiation which results in getting lost and having to wander (NI 151). This is the stage when Zenia enters their lives for the first time, but they do not learn their lessons from it. They sense Zenia present even after her supposed death and expect some kind of a climax, or rather, a completion of the story. At Zenia's funeral, Tony feels that something was left out, 'an appeasement' (RB 13) for the dead, a bloody sacrifice. Charis does not feel clean inside, 'shreds of Zenia cling to her still, like dirty spangled muslin. She sees the name *Zenia* in her head, glowing like scratch, like lava' (RB 44). For Roz, 'Zenia is still there, in this building, in this room; tiny fragments of her burnt and broken soul infest the old woodwork like termites, gnawing away from within' (RB 95). A change for all them comes only after Zenia suddenly enters the restaurant in which they are having lunch together, looks right through them, while they know that she recognised them, and they all start preparing themselves feverishly for a battle. They know that Zenia appeared for a reason, that she is after something. They proceed their separate ways, never sharing a single thought about Zenia with one another or anybody else. (Loneliness is, of course, another typical attribute of a candidate; NI 149). In the last part of the novel, they enter the symbolic 'initiation chamber' (NI 152) one by one—in the concrete terms, Zenia's hotel room—and they are 'initiated', although they may not immediately recognise it as such. After the encounter, Charis still feels that 'Zenia was sent into her life—was *chosen* by her—to teach her something. Charis doesn't know what it was yet, but in time she will uncover it' (RB 451).

Hodrová allows that the triangle formed by the candidate, the initiator and the virgin, may not always be complete. It is often the figure of the virgin who may not be entirely developed or can merge with the initiator. This figure underwent a number of transformations from the mourner over the dead deity, through the innocent virgin mediating between the candidate and the being of the centre, to a demonic virgin (NI 160-162). The structure of *The Robber Bride* either does not have this figure developed or it is Zenia as the initiator who bears the features of the demonic virgin (although, in the physical sense, not a virgin at all). Unlike the candidate, the initiator can change forms and appearance and be either male or female (NI 157) and his or her age, unlike the age of the candidate, does not change (NI 153). From its static medieval concept, the figure transforms into a mad or almost demonic one in Romanticism, when incessant movement and change of place is his or her damnation (NI 159-160). The initiator is always endowed with unusual abilities (NI 156), and sometimes merges with the being of the centre, in which case his or her name is often symbolic (NI 166) and 'to learn the essence of this highest being of the centre-initiator is the actual initiation' (NI 157).

I already noted in the introduction the ability of Zenia to change her identity and her appearance. In the extreme form this transformation happens through a nose surgery and breast implants, adding to her powers—particularly sexual powers—over men. She is also perceived by the other women as ageless. They study her face for give-aways of ageing when she comes back from the dead and must be around fifty, but they notice some minor signs only after detailed scrutiny. Zenia still radiates the same energy, sex appeal and evil, 'a dark aura swirls around her, like the corona of the sun in eclipse, only negative; a corona of darkness rather than of light' (RB 66). She is a perpetual wanderer, without a stable residence, powerful, but without any sense of an accomplishment, a beginning or an end. She has the attributes of the being of the centre not only that her name is symbolic, running backwards from Z to A, from end to the beginning, as noted by Arnold Davidson (cited by Comiskey 1997: 329), but also in that she possesses the knowledge the other women do not have. Zenia knows exactly what relationships are established between her and other people, and also

among the people she targets, and she can manipulate all of these to her advantage. In a way she possess the knowledge of life, of the values that matter. This comes through in her final confrontation with Tony, Charis and Roz. During this last 'battle' the (incomplete) triangle of the figures closes tightly to determine the outer and the inner space and the three 'candidates' are admitted to the inner, spiritual space. This happens in a way similar to the parable about the thirty birds summarised by Hodrová:

[T]he birds in the manuscript of the Persian mystic Faridú'd-dín Attár are seeking their king Símurgh, (otherwise God), whose name means 'thirty birds'. When the thirty pilgrims have flown over the seven seas, of which the penultimate is called Vertigo, and the last Destruction, and been purified by hardship, they arrive at Símurgh's mountains and see the king of birds. Then they understand that they are all Símurgh, each of them is and all of them together are Símurgh. Similarly, the candidate finds the Philosophers' Stone in himself, sees his double in the mirroring surface of the lagoon, reveals the face of God in himself. (*NI* 173)

In the hotel scene, Zenia tells each of the women in turn who they are and how false their perceptions about themselves and people around them are:

To Tony:

You always were the most awful two-faced hypocrite, Tony. A smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions. You think you have some kind of an adventurous mind, but spare me! At heart you're a coward, you hole yourself up in that bourgeois playpen of yours with your warped little battle-scars collection, you sit on poor West as if he's your very own fresh-laid fucking egg! (*RB* 414)

To Charis:

[Billy] thought you were a cow, if you must know. He thought you were so stupid you'd give birth to an idiot. He thought you were a stunned cunt, to be exact. ... I know you, and I can guess how you've been spending your time. Dressing up in hair shirts. Playing hermits. Mooning around after Billy. He's just an excuse for you; he lets you avoid your life. Give him up. Forget about him. (*RB* 427)

And to Roz who thinks that Zenia has an affair with Larry:

I might forget and tell a little too much of the truth. About what a twisted jerk poor Larry's father really was. ... You should give me a medal for getting him off your back. Mitch was a sick lech. What he wanted out of me was sexual twist—he wanted to be tied up, he wanted me to dress up in leather underwear, and other stuff, stuff he would never ask you to do because he thought you were his angel wife. (*RB* 439)

As it could be expected, the effect of this flood of truth—or just effective lies, as the case might have been, since we never know, what is true in what Zenia says—has transforming effects on the addressees. Tony feels disoriented but acknowledges to herself that Zenia may have a point, Charis feels that 'something breaks' (*RB* 429) inside her and she is attacked by

Karen, her former self, and Roz has a strong urge to kill Zenia. Later that day, however, after the real death of Zenia of heroin overdose and fall from the hotel balcony, which Charis sees in a candle, the three 'candidates' come home and their relationship to West, Augusta and Larry, respectively, changes, they cross the border which separated them. It is as if each of the three characters related to our female candidates had been waiting all this while for the initiates to be ready for the breakthrough. The passivity is, in initiation narratives, another typical feature of all other figures except the candidate, who is in a constant movement (*NI* 153). West tells Tony that Zenia has 'always been bad news' (*RB* 449) and he did not mention her phone call to Tony, because he would have preferred if Zenia stayed dead. Saying this, he communicates to her that he is not so fragile and does not need the protection Tony thought he needed, and that the only relationship that matters to him is the one with Tony. Augusta tells Charis in response to the offer that she would bake cookies for her, that she does not need to flatter her by doing things for her, because she, Augusta, loves her anyway (*RB* 450). Larry confesses to Roz that he is gay, his lover being Roz's assistant Boyce and they both ask her to decorate their apartment for them. Boyce suggests that she is not losing a son, but gaining one (*RB* 454).

Hodrová identifies two 'golden ages' of the novel of initiation: the Middle Ages (when the 'novel' was in the form of a poem) and Romanticism, and she proposes that the twentieth century is likely to become the third such epoch:

This fact is perhaps connected with the gradual re-evaluation of the rationalist model of the world and the concurrent 'spiritualisation' of technology. The initiation model of the world with its concept of a human being as a cosmic creature appears to be a way of overcoming the concept of a human being as a machine, and offers humankind a hope of transcendence through consciousness, of which the rationalist model deprived the human community and declared it doomed. (*NI* 122)

At the end of *The Robber Bride* the spiritual wins over the rationalist when Tony, the most rational character in the novel, the rigorous academic requiring a proof and a rational explanation for everything, finds this approach to the role of Zenia in her life inadequate. She is the one of the three women to suggest a ritual burial and a wake for Zenia a year after her death, she even requests all three of them to wear black before they scatter Zenia's ashes into the lake halfway between the mainland and the island, where Charis has her house:

She wants to do Zenia justice; ... She craves some idea of ceremony, of decorum; ... What she herself would like is a little gunfire. A ritual cannon shot, the flag lowering to half-mast, a single bugle note quivering in the silvery air. Other fighters get that, so why not Zenia? (*RB* 466, 468)

Tony, the war specialist, finally sees Zenia as a warrior, involved in 'an unofficial war, a guerrilla war, a war she may not have known she was waging, but a war nevertheless' (*RB* 469). However, she is unable to provide rational explanations for what she is doing and how she is feeling. The ritual is meaningful in itself, explanations do not matter. The outcome is what rituals traditionally aim for: cleansing, purification. In this case it means that the three women can gather for the first time since 'the catastrophe that brought them together' (*RB* 29), that is, since Zenia's disruption of their lives, and talk about her.

Endnotes

¹ *RB* and *NI* are used in citations for Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and Hodrová's *The Novel of Initiation* [Román zasvěcení], respectively.

² The title is borrowed from the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and possibly also from Eudora Welty's re-make of the theme in her novel *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942).

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