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Education

THE SILENCE OF THEODORE AND BRINA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TERRI-ANN WHITE'S FINDING THEODORE AND BRINA

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

Finding Theodore and Brina (2001) by Terri-ann White is an attempt to rewrite the narrator's personal history. Although historical events serve as the background, they still tend to challenge readers to look beyond the boundaries of personal to the social circumstances in their own environment. What was not spoken of are the main themes of the novel, hence called silences. The silences the narrator discovers in her personal history are madness, crime, illegitimate births, loss of faith and miscegenation forces. The narrator combines a variety of styles (from reporting, journalistic, the matter-of-fact style to more subjective, personal one) in the fugal system. The types of narrator change, the omniscient one being prevalent.

Introduction

Finding Theodore and Brina is Terri-ann White's novel first published in 2001 in Fremantle, Western Australia.

Finding Theodore and Brina is an attempt to rewrite the narrator's personal history, with historical events as the background and individual stories to the fore. The writing of this social and family history is written in the form of intertwining autobiography, memoirs, history and fiction. It took a lot of interpretation skills to retell the stories of her ancestors and the history of Perth alongside theirs, because the memories, documents and archives were scarce. The most important themes of the novel are not what has been said, but "what has been forgotten, what cannot be spoken of and what gets inherited through the silences" (2004). And "these people kept silent about many taboos, but her discovery of madness, crime, illegitimate births, loss of faith and miscegenation forces the narrator not only have to confront the truth about her family and herself, but, looking outward, to Australia itself" (Brian, 2001).

The silences

The narrator does not make it easy for the reader; the reader must himself "build" a complete family tree and individuals' destinies from the fragments given in different sections of the novel. Although the novel is non-chronologically written, the narrator of the story begins with a pair of Jewish relatives (her great-great-grandfather Theodore and her great-great-grandmother Brina) who travelled from London to Australia in the mid-19th century. The first chapter, devoted to the two of them, is interestingly enough entitled "presently" and set in 1851, when Theodore Krakouer arrived in Perth as a convict. Brina Israel arrived in 1853 by her own choice. That is practically all that we learn about the narrator's oldest ancestors until the sixth chapter, where the reader learns about Brina's destiny from a few days before she left England. Her journey to Australia is recorded in the form of journal memoirs, written by Brina herself. Briefly, Brina becomes the narrator. The account of her marriage follows. "But the records are scant and the narrator has to make sense of [...] silences," (Brian, 2001), which she does by using fiction. At the beginning of the novel the narrator is worried about not making-up characters to fit what she wants of her great-great-grandparents, so obviously the personalities of Theodore and Brina are the subject of fiction. Speaking directly to Brina, the narrator says: "Brina. You are my construction now [...]" (140). Judging from the letters Brina wrote to the authorities, the narrator imagines Brina as a smart, well-literate, obstinate, persistent woman, who is determined to fight for her rights. Theodore's destiny is the subject of the following chapter, which opens a question of another great silence; he spends a good portion of his life in a Lunatic asylum, which is – as the main narrator discovers – a consequence of syphilis. His days in the institution are written in the form of his personal memoirs, from which his personality can be deduced: he is obviously a womanizer, a drinker and a weakling, but a good, penetrating observer and a thinker.

Another important silence the narrator comes across while tracing her roots is her Aboriginal ancestry, which used to be a great

shame. Here, the narrator follows the position of the Aborigines, the native Australians, from the times when they needed "Pass Cards, [which] were issued to Aboriginal people with employment who wanted to be admitted into the city centre" (76) to when people actually started looking for traces of Aboriginal ancestry, which points to undeniable "common" past of the natives and immigrants, to their inseparability, connectedness, and mutual need for each other. Mr. Keating's apology speech to Aborigines is included, as a reminder not only of all injustices, but of all the work that is still left to be done and of due respect.

There are two other important silences in her family: the loss of Jewish faith, which is confessed by the narrator herself in her scant autobiographical memoirs and thoughts, and crime - murder, committed by Abraham, Brina and Theodore's son. Not much is said about either, but it is obvious that these two silences are especially deep ones and have been nightmarish for the whole family for decades. Likewise, the narrator makes it clear that Australia still "suffers" from its convict past (not only the convict newcomers, but also their descendants); there have been more or less successful attempts to minimize this shame, but is still a long way to go.

Another of such silences is the biographical account of Julie's. Julie is one out of three single mothers in the novel; the other two are Brina's sister Esther and the narrator's grandmother Ena. While Esther and Ena are strong and successful, Julie is shown as the weakest female character in the family being the only one who does not have strength to cope with her motherhood. Although her story is exceptionally tragic, it opens the women question, i. e. the position of Australian women, single mothers and nevertheless, the question of moral values. Personal destinies of single mothers or women, who rather died concealing their pregnancies or killed their babies not being able to cope with the shame and humiliation, are intertwined with the account of feminist struggles to better the position of women and to give them more rights. The feminist movement in Australia becomes strong in the 1960s and achieves the legalization of abortion, foundation of women hospitals, voting rights etc.

The novel is clearly a feminist declaration: women have the central role in the novel. The only man that we know relatively a lot about is Theodore. Otherwise, men are marginalized, mentioned only as someone's husband, son or father, almost as if to compensate for the traditional presenting of women as someone's wife, daughter or mother. Although in an unprivileged position in society, women are shown as stronger characters. While Theodore is locked-up in the lunatic asylum, his wife opens a business and despite it not being very profitable, she is still looked up to and respected in society. "All credit must go to her, say people of Fremantle, for maintaining the business and for training Abe to be such a competent business proprietor. They worked well together; they ran the business with a firm hand. Suppliers, customers, drivers all knew this and respected Mrs. Krakouer" (162).

Women are the centre of interest also as immigrants. Men came mostly as convicts, women came, as the novel states, "by their

volition" (24). How much of their volition is truly involved is certainly the matter of discussion. Brina and her sister escaped, many women came on bride ships or following their fathers and husbands, most of them probably "in search of a new life" (144). Was this not the only real "choice" a troubled woman had in the 19th century male-constructed patriarchal society?

Style of writing and the narrator

Style of writing changes according to genres and themes. The narrator is a master of combining and adapting styles in the fugal system. Reporting, journalistic, the matter-of-fact style is noticeable where the narrator gives account of official histories, or where she cites official documents or reports etc. Here is an example of an account of The Ugly Men's Association, which "was a voluntary worker's group with a constitution and a president, Mr A Clydesdale, who was a member of the Legislative Assembly. The association had established White City to raise funds and it was successful; at first, the revenue was used for political purposes [...] (73). The facts are listed, the tone is objective, uninvolved, there are many passive forms and the vocabulary is more official. Memoirs, an autobiography and biographies naturally employ more personal style, unconventional syntax, following stream of consciousness. The narrator often gives an impression of not only talking about someone, but talking to someone. Being addressed directly, the characters "enter" the story – they are not only talked about, but in some way become co-makers of the novel.

A note style is used for citing some official notes or documents, which is an official way of "storing memories". To demonstrate Theodore's mental confusion, sentences are broken into separate words, some words seemingly random and following his stream of thoughts.

As a reader being addressed directly, one is struck not only with his confusion on one hand, but also with his clearness of thought on the other hand. Thus, Theodore himself notices his occasional confusion and even his notes are sometimes confused and sometimes not.

The narrator is mostly first-personal, non-omniscient, and often addresses the reader or even the people, whom she is currently describing: "Sometimes it seems that your names are all I have of your lives. [...] Will I make up characters to fit what I want from you?" (26). The narrator tells us she is the "keeper of secrets, the family archivist, hiding behind a signature and a barrage of words" (20). She calls this tracing of family roots an obsession, a pastime, which she does not see as a useful or good one. Occasionally, characters themselves become narrators: Brina herself gives the account of her marriage. Hence the characters are not only talked about, but in some way become co-makers of the novel.

However, the narrator makes it clear that much information is actually not the matter of fiction, but facts, proven with official records and documents. For this purpose, birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, certificates of lunacy, doctors' records, voyage records etc. are quoted or summarized. There are also many accounts of emigration ships, arriving to Perth, feminist struggles, mentions of historical personalities and their speeches and actions etc., all pointing to how individual histories influence and are influenced by the (social) history of the country. For example, we learn about Brina and her immediate family right from her epitaph.

Destinies of other family members are unfolded as the novel progresses in the similar way, in the fugal system, wandering from one character to others and back, from one event to others and back, and nevertheless, from one decade to others and back. It seems that the only real consistency is the setting, i. e. Perth in West Australia.

Brian argues that *Finding Theodore and Brina* also becomes, "in part, a meta-discourse about a writer's process and progress, the difficulties and pleasures of research, the improbable coincidences, the secrets uncovered, the amazing stories found".

Conclusion

Terri-ann White's works offer a lot of material for further research and discussion. Although they are set in Australia and are (seemingly) autobiographic, they provide a good starting point for introspection and critical observation of any society.

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