THE IMAGE OF THE GRAVEYARD AS A CULTURAL SYMBOL IN TRACY CHEVALIER'S FICTION

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Abstract: *As a Post-Postmodernist writer, Tracy Chevalier is very fond of telling stories full of symbols and cultural references. In her attempt to show that the feminine spirit has always managed to pervade the narrow mentality of various patriarchal epochs, she presents strong female characters, meant to illustrate each of the three hypostases of womanhood: femaleness, femininity and feminism. In two of her novels,* Falling Angels *and* Remarkable Creatures*, she uses the image of the graveyard as a metaphor of the feminine spirit "buried" under the conventions of the oppressive Victorian society. This article analyses various representations of the cemetery as a cultural symbol, with a view to demonstrating Chevalier's ability to bring lost worlds back to life.*

Keywords: *femininity, symbols, mentalities.*

In an attempt to connect two of the main topics of her fiction, art and femininity, and, at the same time, to ironically illustrate the interest of a certain social class in the Victorian epoch, Tracy Chevalier presents the graveyard as a cultural symbol, both in *Falling Angels* and, in a different key, in *Remarkable Creatures*. The metaphor of the cemetery as the most significant place in a certain epoch is meant to illustrate how people's way of thinking changes in time, and to recommend that the old representations should be "buried" and replaced by new ones.

In both of these novels, the image of the woman as a mere housewife and mother is replaced either by that of a suffragette (in *Falling Angels*), or by that of a female scientist (in *Remarkable Creatures*). The way in which the protagonists of these novels manage to change people's mentality is presented by the author as a lengthy process, in which a few brave women introduce a new paradigm of femininity in a male-dominated society.

In *Falling Angels*, the practice of commemorating the dead as a way of living is described as one of the main characteristics of the Victorian epoch. This was the period in which many funerary monuments were erected in different styles, and an entire code of conduct for funerals and mourning periods was established, reaching its climax with the publication of an entire compendium of mourning practices.

All the female characters of this novel are fond of going to the cemetery almost every day, as a sort of cultural practice. They even develop a sort of rivalry concerning the shape and size of the funerary monuments they choose for their family graves: the urn versus the angel.

Symbolically speaking, the angel stands for the old bigot mentality, according to which only buried bodies can let their spirits fly like angels. However, at the end of the novel, the angel falls from the grave and gets crashed, thus showing that the old mentality should disappear for good, since the spirit should not "fly" only after death, but also during the person's lifetime. Especially the feminine spirit should "fly" towards knowledge and social equality, without letting itself influenced by social conventions or religious practices. Kitty Coleman, the protagonist of the novel, is a suffragette who insists on replacing the angel with an urn – a recipient reminding of the

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womb, therefore a powerful feminine symbol. Her dislike of the angel is explained by her daughter as a form of rejecting the narrow-mindedness and sentimentalism cultivated by the Victorian society, which the feminists oppose:

> Mummy calls them [the angels] vapid. I had to look up the word – it means that something is dull or flat or empty. I think she is right. That is certainly what their eyes are like. Mummy says angels get more attention than they deserve. When there is an angle on a grave in the cemetery, everyone looks at it rather than the other monuments around it, but there is really nothing to see. (Chevalier, 2001:48)

Kitty Coleman's disagreement with the partisans of the Victorian principles is reflected in the outfit she chooses for the Queen's funeral. Disrespectful towards the late sovereign, she comes to the funeral dressed in a blue dress, and explains her bold gesture as a way to raise people's awareness that her Majesty's death should bring about many changes:

> I didn't think black quite the thing to wear for Queen Victoria. Things are changing now. It will be different with her son. I'm sure Edward will make a fine king. He's been waiting long enough. (Chevalier, 2001:14)

However, most of the ordinary women perceive Kitty's rebellious gesture as a disgrace or even a blasphemous attitude towards the sovereign's memory:

> I almost cried to see the blue silk Kitty Coleman was wearing. It was an affront to the eyes, like a peacock spreading its feathers at a funeral. (Chevalier, 2001:17)

Since the narrative technique of the novel is to compile many first-person short stories, Kitty's point of view on this event reveals her hatred towards the graveyard as a cultural symbol of Victorianism, whose coercion principles, disguised as sentimental values, are against her feminist ideals:

> That blasted cemetery. I have never liked it. To be fair, it is not the fault of the place itself, […] but the sentiments that the place encourages in mourners are too overblown for my taste. (Chevalier, 2001:11)

In Kitty's opinion, the graveyard represents in microcosm the entire British society at the end of the 19th century: an amalgam of people, trends, movements and tastes, where class distinctions were preserved even after death. The aristocracy used to have mausoleums, the middle class had statues, the lower classes erected simple grave stones, whereas the Dissenters were buried at random in a remote corner of the cemetery, with nothing to remind people of them, except a huge cedar tree. Kitty revolts against this unfair treatment applied to those who did not belong to the Church of England; she considers the late Queen responsible for this and, as a form of protest, decides to spend most of her spare time in the Dissenters' part of the cemetery:

> The Dissenters' section is where all people who are not Church of England are buried – Catholics, mostly, as well as Baptists and Methodists and other sorts. I've heard suicides are buried back there. (Chevalier, 2001:46)

The Victorian code of conduct imposed a lot of conventions related to funerals: a certain dress code, gestures, rules for carving and placing the funerary monuments. This is the reason why the cemetery has started to look like a ridiculous mixture of architectural styles, based on the idea of opulence. Everything in the Victorian society,

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even the style of the funerary monuments, was meant to reflect abundance and led to excess: an excess of feeling, of social norms, of class divisions:

> It has a lugubrious charm, with its banks of graves stacked on top of one another – granite headstones, Egyptian obelisks, Gothic spires, plinths topped with columns, weeping ladies, angels and, of course, urns – winding up the hill to the glorious Lebanon cedar at the top. I am even willing to overlook some of the more preposterous monuments – ostentatious representations of a family's status. […] The excess of it all is too much. (Chevalier, 2001:11)

Unlike Kitty Coleman and the suffragettes, the other female characters of the novel pride themselves on taking good care of their family's graves, which are considered a representative symbol of their social position and a sign of respect towards their ancestors:

> It is so important that the grave be a proper reflection of the family's sentiments to our loved ones. Livy knows that very well, and she was right – the grave did need some attention, especially after that monstrous urn went up next to it. (Chevalier, 2001:17)

The elders, as Queen Victoria's adepts, strongly believe that a man's behaviour can be guessed from the way he deals with his family's graves. For example, Kitty's mother-in-law, Mrs. Coleman, relied on this criterion when she chose her husband. These pages of the novel are full of irony and remind us of Oscar Wilde's sarcasm towards the Victorian way of choosing the right spouse:

> When my husband and I were married he brought me to the cemetery to show me the Coleman family grave, and I was all the more certain that I had chosen well in a husband. It looked to be a solid, safe and orderly place, […] the preferred burial place of our class. Far be it from me to complain. (Chevalier, 2001:74)

As a representative of the old mentality, Mrs. Coleman thinks that people's attitude towards death has changed. Young women go to the cemetery just to display their elegant dresses, to breathe a bit of fresh air and to meet their acquaintances, as if they were going to the park. When she complains about this lack of respect towards the dead, Kitty blames Queen Victoria for teaching the young ladies that the cemetery is a romantic place and for feeding them only with cheap, sentimental ideas, meant to keep them away from the real social issues:

> We have Queen Victoria to blame for it, elevating mourning to such ridiculous heights that girls with romantic notions grow drunk from it. […] If we can't criticise her now, when can we? (Chevalier, 2001:91)

This excessive sentimentalism, seen as a major fault by the suffragettes, is ridiculed by the author, who presents the young ladies' strange attitudes towards mourning. As a highly romantic character, Lavinia Waterhouse is the typical Victorian young lady, characterized by weakness, sentimentalism, frivolity and hypocrisy. She even writes a guide, ridiculously entitled 'The Complete Guide to Mourning Etiquette by Miss Lavinia Ermyntrude Waterhouse' and decides to mourn a distant relative just to have the opportunity to wear a fashionable mourning dress – another irony towards the Victorian excessive taste for fashion and adornment, whose sarcastic depiction reminds of Lewis Carroll's view on the Victorian society:

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It is so nice to have someone to mourn properly. And now I am eleven and old enough to wear a proper mourning dress, it is even better. (Chevalier, 2001:101)

Lavinia's taste for expensive clothes and jewels as means of mourning is influenced by Queen Victoria, who mourned her husband for forty years, but she always wore the finest dresses and the most precious jewels:

> The Widow mourns the longest because she is the saddest. What a terrible thing it is to lose a husband! […] Our own late Queen wore mourning for her husband Albert for the rest of her life – forty years!' (Chevalier, 2001:102)

The feminine excess of sentimentalism towards death is compensated by a man's viewpoint. After a lifetime spent among graves, Jack Jackson, the superintendent of the main cemetery in London and Kitty Coleman's secret lover, is entitled to criticise people's attitude towards their dead. After Kitty's death, when her husband ignores her last wish to be cremated and buries her in the family grave, Jackson digs her up, secretly burns her body at night and spreads her ashes over a bed of primroses like those on which they made love for the first time. In order to explain his gesture, he tells Maude, Kitty's daughter, that, contrary to popular belief, the graveyard is a place for the living, a reflection of people's life and not of their death.

> What people do with their dead is usually a reflection of themselves rather than of their loved one,' I said. 'Do you think all these urns and angels mean anything to the dead? It takes a very unselfish man to do exactly what his wife wants without his own – or society's – desires and tastes entering into it. […] I've often thought this place is really for the living, not the dead. (Chevalier, 2001:271)

Maude finally agrees with Jackson and draws the conclusion that the graves that the dead would choose for themselves would be very different from those that the living decide to arrange according to their own taste, irrespective of their dead relatives' wishes. For example, instead of an angel or an urn, her mother would have liked a grave with Emmeline Pankhurst's statue on top and with the suffragettes' slogan beneath:

> If my mother were to choose her own grave it would have a statue of Mrs. Pankhurst on it and under her name it would read 'Votes for Women.' (Chevalier, 2001:271)

In *Remarkable Creatures*, Tracy Chevalier presents another kind of graveyard, but preserves the same symbolism. In this novel, she brings forth a graveyard of fossils, meant to be dug out by two women, Elizabeth Philpot and Mary Anning. They belong to the same Victorian society and have to fight against the same social prejudices, because the male scientists are not willing to let them join the scientific world.

The beach where they find the fossils – the graveyard, as they call it – is the symbol of the society they live in: the climate is rough, there is a continuous competition for survival, women are treated as mere companions, but not as researchers in their own right, and men are ready to kill each other just to have their names associated to that of a newly discovered fossil.

Despite being continuously discriminated, Elizabeth and Mary try to assert their own individuality as female scientists, in an epoch in which women's identity was considered shifty and incomprehensible. Just like the fossil fish whose shape is unclear and unpredictable, their status of spinsters cannot be easily accepted by the society:

Married women were set like jelly in a mould, whereas spinsters like me were formless and unpredictable. (Chevalier, 2010:20)

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As time goes by, they start resembling the fossils in the graveyard; being surrounded by death all the time, they "petrify" their feelings and, instead of looking for a man's love and the warmth of a home full of children, they look for new specimens of ichthyosaurs. Since they spend more and more time on the beach, digging out dinosaur bones, their physical aspect gets more and more similar to that of an "ichie":

> Her cheekbones and especially her jaw were more prominent, long and straight and hard like an ichie's. […] She was like a fossil that's been cleaned and set so everyone can see what it is. (Chevalier, 2010:298)

Just like the angels in *Falling Angels*, the fossils described in this novel are a symbol of the old Victorian mentality that must be "dug out" from people's minds. Here, Chevalier restates her feminist idea that women must fight for their rights. Elizabeth and Mary fight for having their work acknowledged by the academic society, but the "petrified" mentality of the men of science prevents them from reaching the level they deserve. Although they are appreciated for their ability to discover fossils, therefore for their special relationship with death, which is considered a feminine attribute, they are not allowed to give names to their specimens, because, as Jacques Lacan pointed out, naming is a masculine attribute and is associated to life:

> Learned men were discussing it at meetings and writing about it, and Mary was excluded from their activity. She was relied upon to find the specimens but not to take part in studying them. […] Konig had had the privilege of naming the ichtyosaurus, and Conybeare the plesiosaurus. Neither would have had anything to name without Mary. I could not stand by to watch suspicions grow about her skills when the men knew she outstripped them all in her abilities. (Chevalier, 2010:249)

At the end of the novel, Chevalier mentions that the only reference to Mary Anning was made 'in a scientific context in France in 1825, when Georges Cuvier added her name to a caption for an illustration of a plesiosaur specimen' (Chevalier, 307), whereas Elizabeth Philpot's name appears only in a thank you note sent in 1834 by the Swiss scientist Louis Agassiz, who named some fish species after her. The sad conclusion that the author draws is similar to that in *Falling Angels*, reiterating the idea that, back in the Victorian times, women had to make compromises in order to see their work acknowledged: 'A woman's life is always a compromise.' (Chevalier, 2010:269)

In both of the novels we have perused for writing this article, Tracy Chevalier proves her full maturity as a writer. She manages to bring to life an epoch when the social, political, cultural and gender paradigms were shifting and it was very difficult to find an image that could best describe people's interests and mentalities. Therefore, in both of these novels she opts for the metaphor of the graveyard, which brings together otherwise disparate characters, ideas, feelings and symbols and provides a unitary viewpoint on feminine identities throughout time.

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