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Romance and Irony: Archetypal Antagonists and Literary Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Robert Foulke and Paul Smith's view of literary narratives in their *An Anatomy of Literature*, this paper explores how narrative irony intrudes on narrative romance. The purpose is to show how, from an archetypal perspective, narrative irony subverts the components of romance by exercising a blurring effect on the traditional romantic aspects such as the quest, the world of values and triumphant recovery. Foulke and Smith argue that these two narrative function most by implication rather than in a straight foreword fashion: "The narrative pattern is not identical with the observable features of the text but is implicit in them" (p. 3). This paper examines one prime literary example to illustrate the archetypal nature of narrative romance and irony. Additionally, it demonstrates, by exploring three short stories, from Joyce, Hawthorne and Welty, how narrative irony mocks narrative romance by mimicking its constituents.

Keywords: *Romance, Irony, Archetypal, Literary Narratives, Short Story*

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1. Introduction

Using Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and his profound understanding of archetypes, Robert Foulke and Paul Smith, editors of *An Anatomy of Literature* (1972), propose four conceptual frameworks to interpret literature through archetypal analysis. These narratives are romance, tragedy, comedy and irony. This paper examines the contradictory nature of

two of these four narratives, which are the narratives of romance and irony. Additionally, this study explores how these two narratives function when applied to different literary works. The paper examines "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" written anonymously, and Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*. It also touches rather briefly on Joyce's "Araby", Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", and Eudora

Welty's "A Worn Path." Not only does the use of these narratives help readers elicit meaning but also examine a literary piece in terms of analogies and comparisons.

2. Romance and Irony Narratives

Irony and romance are marked as opposite narrative worlds. Irony represents the world of aversions whereas romance stands for our desires. If the common representation of romance is the quest then the norm in irony is "antiquet" which suggests "a pointless series of adventures that ends in failure and ignominy" (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 13). Frye himself links irony to romance; he suggests, "the central principle of ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways" (1957, p. 223). The touch of reality that Frye refers to renders the idealism of the romance inadequate and therefore the happy course of events in romance falls short of its aim. Irony and romance unfold different worlds of assurance and uncertainty. The ironic narrative assumes familiarity with the convention of the romance and then mocks its content.

3. Narrative Romance

Narrative romance is always associated with the mysterious and the supernatural; that is why it moves towards myths and legends. To Frye, hence, romance is the articulation of a desire, "nearest ... to the wish-fulfillment dream ... The perennially child-like quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space" (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 47). In romance, dreams are realized and social or moral order is reestablished. Irony does not give this sort of affirmation but rather twist it into satire. In general, narrative romance instigates and dramatizes the initiation of the young hero in which he gives vent to naiveté and longing

for serenity. To Foulke and Smith, such a simplistic understanding of the initiation phase of romance does not hold water. They argue that in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" the complexity of Gawain's initiation and "the unfathomable mystery of the Green Knight are not naïve and simplistic" (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 48).

Narrative romance as the literary manifestation of a quest can be interpreted, according to Frye, in two ways: either as rituals, as examined by James G. Frazer (1959), or as dreams, as examined by Carl Jung (Stevens, 2001). To Jung, therefore, the romance is the search of the "libido" that is the instinctual energy for a fulfillment whereas to Frazer it represents the "victory of fertility over the wasteland" (Frye, 1957, p. 193). To Frye, the romance unfolds itself primarily through a ritualistic and sequential pattern of an idealized world, which narrative irony often attempts to subvert. Foulke and Smith consider the initiation of the hero as the mark that characterizes narrative romance, which initiates a departure from an innocent world and an entry into a world of experience. The hero appears in the figure of a redeemer confronting a challenge in which he will lose innocence but gain wisdom. It is a preliminary event that leads to the romantic quest. Which is a journey that often leads to a confrontation with the dark opponent. "Sir Gawain and Green Knight" can be seen as a dramatization of that romance sequence.

3.1 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Prime Romance

To Foulke and Smith, narrative romance is a journey whose prelude is called the initiation of a hero. It signals the rite of a passage in which the hero outgrows his early innocence. This opening prologue leads to another romantic norm which is the quest; a journey into an unknown world. The goal of the quest can be the pursuit of a treasure, a beautiful woman or in the name of chivalry



and honor. The antagonist makes a good appearance in this particular part of the narrative. His mysterious and sometimes ambiguous qualities make him more interesting than the protagonist himself. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is one of the best romance narratives to discuss as a case study in archetypal criticism.

The atmosphere of revelry that initiates the poem as the lords and ladies of Camelot have been feasting for fifteen days for the New Year's Day is a premonition to the appearance of the Green Knight. The dominant myth that runs throughout the poem as a definer and a unifier of its structure is that of Dionysus as there are several motifs and images peculiar to that particular myth. Given that mythical attributes are considered part of narrative romance, I argue that the connection with Dionysus serves to link the poem to mythical stories. In *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*, Branimir M. Rieger (1994) points out that "Dionysus is the god in Greek mythology and literature who induces madness, passion, irrational behavior and frenzy; his influence and cults posed an alternative which threatened the more rational and severe Apollonian aspects of Greek thought" (p. 2). In this sense, the Green Knight embodies the Dionysian paradox, which represents "the variety and contradictions inherent in the worship of Dionysus," (Hughes, 1975, p. 52). His green costume and the holy bob he holds in one hand symbolize nature and fertility, but his other hand carries an axe which is a symbol of artifice and civilization. Moreover, the Green Knight can be identified with Dionysus because "he keeps appearing to us in different shapes, telling us to leave our sanctuary of orderliness [exemplified in the perfect harmony of Camelot] and join his revels" (Hughes, 1975, p. 56).

Disguise is one of the manifestations of the Dionysus myth which is of course relevant to the way the Knight dresses as he makes his first entrance: "For man and gear and all/Were green as green could be" (p. 149-150). The disguise motif continues to exercise significant impact. It is reminiscent of the Dionysus myth. The disguise in green, for instance, evokes images of how Zeus came disguised to Semele and then Hera adopting another disguise (Kerenyi, 1976, p. 110). The entrance of the Green Knight establishes the threat of a destructive force to the peaceful life of Camelot which is also peculiar to the figure of Dionysus as the destroyer of kingdoms in demand of allegiance, "And your court and your company are counted the best, /And so at this season I have sought you out ... Now be it seen straightway/Who dares take up the game" (259,299-300). The Green Knight is a perfect embodiment of the Dionysian figure as a representative of the unconscious (Hughes, 1975, p. 53). In this sense, the Green Knight can be considered a manifestation of the repressed fears of violence experienced by Gawain and the other knights that might one day threaten Camelot or at least King Arthur and burn their Troy-like city to the ground. The fact that the narrator mentions the Troy incident at the very beginning of the poem shows that this particular idea is rooted down in the collective unconscious of the knights themselves. The Green Knight as a Dionysus figure manifests these instinctive fears and therefore must be stopped.

In the poem, the Green Knight himself showed the nature of a reveler rather than a grim enemy, "Gay was this goodly man in guise all of green" (p. 179). The Green Knight represents both the artificial and the natural worlds, and he seems to be a superhuman as well as a supernatural figure.

The fact that the Green Knight survives decapitation shows his power of resurrection which, like Dionysus' figure, represents what is incredible and frightening. Sir Gawain begins his quest and thus initiating the first phase of the narrative romance. The process of initiation starts as he heads out into the wilderness, encounters various foes but always prevails over them. As he nearly freezes to death in winter, he, therefore, repents his sins and when he looks up, he sees a magnificent castle. As the norm of the quest manifests itself in the form of a struggle so as Sir Gawain when the lady of the castle puts him in a unwarranted situation by testing two knightly virtues: his valor and chastity.

The final phase of the poem conforms with Foulke and Smith's suggestion that "the moral system of the romance shifts from the rigid dialectic of the religious quest, and ... the antagonist assumes the role of a neutral or benevolent presiding elder in whose presence the hero, however experienced, becomes childlike" (1972, p. 55). This situation happens when the Green Knight spares Gawain, it is clear that the knight has changed from a character obsessed with the absolute justice of pacts and agreements into one who understands the possibility of compassion and mercy. He calls it his right to spare Gawain from decapitation, and explains, "You are so fully confessed, your failings made known, / And bear the plain penance at the point of my blade" (2391-2392). Moreover, the fact that the King finally turns out to be the Green Knight himself reemphasizes and extends the disguise motif in the poem, which is reminiscent of the Dionysus myth as Dionysus disguised himself when he came to the daughters of Minyas.

4. Narrative Irony

Narrative irony is not associated with a definite pattern. To Foulke and Smith, it is a verbal force and a modifier as it establishes

"a contrast between statement and implication" (1972, p. 857). It negates the affirmations of the romance by implying its opposite. The narrative irony seems to parody any explicit judgment or ethical norms that are either out of practice or unrealistic in content. Irony is derivative in nature in the sense that it copies other patterns and subjects them to its more pragmatic perception of reality. It is, therefore, fragmentary and incongruous as it mocks the flesh it feeds on, "it seems somehow parasitical, living on the other narrative patterns and drawing its substance from another value system" (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 865). The hero figure in irony is actually a blend of an antihero and a tragic figure that is denied not only success but also any dignity in his struggle. His powers are diminished by antagonists that can be humans, social systems or natural laws.

Paradox, therefore, appears vividly in narrative irony whose world presents no particular pattern; it is a world of contrast "between the stated and the implied ... between the assumed and the real role of a character" (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 858). The pattern of narrative irony thrives on implication and opposite narrative expectations. Parody intervenes as the violation of a convention that requires a balance between subject matter and form. In effect, narrative irony exercises a demoralizing effect on the romantic quest by excluding any certitude or absolute morals. Irony, therefore, questions or denies any assumptions that preside over other narrative patterns. It is both derivative and demanding. In a similar way, the main character of the irony can either be the counter part of the invincible hero of the romance or an inversion of a character in other narratives.

4.1 Conrad's 'The Heart of Darkness': Plucking the Heart of Romance



A Polish writer who is known for his anti-heroic fictional characters, Joseph Conrad's novel narrates how five men are on the deck of their small pleasure boat that lies anchored at the mouth of the Thames. Waiting for the turn of tide as darkness begins to fall; the men recall the great men and ships that have set forth from the Thames on voyages admirably towards the unknown. They converse on the glory of imperialism, accomplished by those "bearing the sword, and often the torch" (p. 2). Their narration in itself a narrative romance which Marlowe parodies by establishing a contrast between the Roman times, when the "civilized world" was discovering the mysterious and unsettled British Isles, similar to how the British are now discovering and settling the unexplored areas of the world. He states that the Roman explorers were "men enough to face the darkness" (p. 4). This reference to the early Romans' hardships and conquest in England is similar to the hardships of the British in Africa. Marlow compares these ancient explorers to the modern European explorers, whom he regards as lesser men. The contrast for Marlow is that the pure idea behind imperialism could help to redeem its robbery of foreign land. In other words, the initiation phase in the poem is remarkable with the first encounter and the interested listeners of the company of King Arthur; in the novel the splendor falls into familiarity as the avid listeners in the poem are now merely Marlowe's idle listeners on the yacht at anchor in the Thames who are of course uninterested in the narration.

In "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", the initiation phase abides by the rules of narrative romance in the sense that Sir Gawain's first encounter with the Green Knight is a first round rather than a final event. In *The Heart of Darkness*, the first phase of Marlowe's journey is an account

about his visit to the company's office in Brussels which in fact questions rather than establishes the validity of this journey. Outside the office where his interview was to occur sat the women who were knitting black wool (symbolic of a funeral shroud). He refers to them as "guarding the door of Darkness." Ironically, behind them a map of the world in bright colors, and Africa appears in the very center of the map in yellow colors and with the Congo moving through it like a snake wrapped in mystery. These women made Marlowe uneasy as they sat without any apparent reason likewise Marlowe's journey will be with no ultimate purpose.

Characters wise, Conrad creates the character of Kurtz out of all the contradictions and madness of imperialism. Kurtz is a total contradiction of himself and breaks all the rules of human law. Marlow calls Kurtz insane mainly because he has great difficulty dealing with the reality of the man. Namely, Kurtz' actions parody every romantic or idealistic step in his quest in Africa which, unlike Sir Gawain's situation, denies him recognition and rather brings about a mental disintegration as well as physical illness; an identity crisis peculiar to the modern age. Frye's idea of applying a more realistic content to romance can be seen when Marlowe parodies his aunt's ideas about imperialism, "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (Part 1, p. 9). Her story is a romance that at least morally fits Sir Gawain's quest but Marlowe's grim touch of profit-hunt imperialism is shocking and real.

As the journey starts, the French steamer takes Marlow along the coast of Africa and Marlow watches the "sordid farce" of imperialism. He begins to think that his trip

is not a pilgrimage but a nightmare. Marlow ultimately sees no beautiful castle; instead, there is the Outer Station with “a scene of uninhabited devastation” (p. 87). The final phase, furthermore, is no happy scene of complacency and compromise like in Gawain’s poem; on the contrary it is that of Marlow as an antihero who is forced to bring himself in line with either the hypocritical colonial bureaucracy or the rule-defying Kurtz. It is a world where moral and social standards have no relevance to the present evils and where absurdity is the only answer to a world that has already gone insane. In this paradoxical world of reality, *The Heart of Darkness* parodies the world of harmony in Sir Gawain’s romance and invites both madness and paradox as manifestations of the Dionysus myth.

4.2 Joyce’s Short Story “Araby”

An Irish Novelist and short story writer, James Joyce’s “Araby” is a narrative irony that subverts narrative romance. The realistic account of this story of infatuation fits Frye’s understanding of parody. The boy’s description of Dublin as “blind” with blind ends emphasizes the paralyses of the city and its inhabitants since nothing happens there. The initiation phase is disturbed by sheer adoration and no action. The story conforms to the romantic pattern as it draws on the romantic convention of a boy who is under the spell of being “set above the rest of the commonplace world and singled out for a quest” (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 57). The beginning of the story parallels the initiation phase in the narrative romance. The boy keeps talking about a girl that he has not spoken with yet. The boy undergoes a change from innocence to experience as he narrates his obsession with the young girl “her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side” (p. 409). As the narrator feels that “her image accompanied me even in places the most

hostile to romance” (p. 409) so as the story maintains its touch of romance in spite of the grim sense of reality and immanent failure.

The realistic details of the early part of the story in which the boy does nothing but wait and watch rob the story of any impending sense of adventure necessary to narrative romances. Her name was not a summons to his courage or audacity but instead “to all his foolish blood” (p. 4). And when she does speak to him, she asks for no grand mission. She simply asks for a token from a bazaar so the majesty behind the deed diminishes. In other words, the quest begins when the girl speaks to him and elicits from him a promise of bringing her something since she cannot go to the bazaar. Eventually, the fact that he ends up late in a mediocre bazaar denies him the claim of heroism. The boy’s inability or unwillingness to buy the token as he arrives late stems from his sense of failure and disappointment that he was fighting to reach a place which turned out to be no Eastern Enchantment as the title signifies but a mere local market with two Englishmen on cheap holiday.

Joyce’s “Araby” is, therefore, more complex case of narrative romance, which complies with the modern demands of contemporary literature in terms of allusiveness and ambiguity: “The story challenges readers to articulate the interpretative values that allow one to distinguish a powerful narrative from idle speculation” (Fagnoli and Gillespie, 2006, p. 51). Another pre-literary archetype emerges here which is that of the puberty rite of passage in the sense that the boy in “Araby” moves from innocence to maturity. His senses become keener and he feels ahead of his age as his friends become now mere children to him. The boy experiences a disappointing, dead end which makes him look at himself “as a creature driven as derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with



anguish and anger” (p. 12). The road to the bazaar stands for a rite of passage to puberty out of which the boy becomes sadder but wiser. To Foulke and Smith, the story presents a fit pattern of romance narrative in which the forces of light and darkness are divergent. There is the heroine who sets the quest in motion and the obstacles that detain the hero and finally the journey to a world of fantasy (1972, p. 61). The despair of the final scene of the bazaar, however, is not an act of parody but a demonstration of the last lesson to be learnt in the process of moving from an imaginative world of love into that of reality and thus the archetype of puberty as a step to maturation closes the final phase of descent and recognition.

4.3 Hawthorne’s Short Story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

A Nineteenth-century American novelist and short story writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” parodies narrative romance in terms of the young man’s quest to find Major Molineux and in the way the story presents the paradoxical elements of “the comic antagonism between the old and the new societies, and in nearly every instance the older society wins or works a hard lesson on the younger” (Foulke and Smith, 1972, p. 872). The story opens with a powerful premonition that “people looked with most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power which did not emanate from themselves” (p. 191). The early scenes show how Robin’s enthusiastic search for his kinsman will be nipped off in the bud. The people he asks either ignore or mock his inquiry, which again foreshadows his imminent failure. The romantic journey of winning an inheritance or finding wealth is parodied here with the more realistic encounter with a changing world of anxiety.

The young man enters the city “with as eager an eye as if he were entering London city” (p. 192). The archetype of puberty, thus, emerges here as Robin moves into maturity: “A classic coming-of-age story in which the young Robin Molineux leaves his country home for the city of Boston, where he hopes to trade upon his kinsman’s name and position and so make his way in the world” (Person, 2007, p. 50). According to Joseph Campbell, the puberty ritual is the rite of a passage “through which a child is compelled to give up its childhood and become an adult _ to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult. This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo” (p. 152). Robin’s change into experience is accentuated in his diabolic laughter which was the loudest in the crowd. The contagious laughter that seizes Robin signifies the ritual of entering the world of adults; a world of paradox and insecurity which is definitely peculiar to that of narrative irony.

4.4 Eudora Welty’s Short Story “A Worn Path”

First published in a volume of short stories titled *A Curtain of Green* in 1940, Welty is a twentieth-century American novelist and short story writer. “A Worn Path” is about an old African-American woman from Phoenix Jackson “with her tremendous self-sacrifice and the love for her little grandson she frequently goes on an adventurous journey from the old Natchez trace into town to get some medicine for her grandchild who swallowed lye some years ago and is frequently suffering from sore throat” (Hofer, 2003, p. 1). In Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path,” the pattern of romance is aptly portrayed with a modern understanding of the quest. It is a tale of a self-sacrificing woman who has spent so many years doing

the same journey that in the long run it became a duty or an act rather than a quest. The old woman tells the nurse that she almost forgot why she has taken the hard trip. Old age has diminished the heroic act leaving her with only the dignity of doing it. What is admirable is not the chivalric courage but rather the patience and persistence in there. She starts her journey in the manner of the Greek heroes by invocation (Scholes, Phelan, Kellogg, 2006, p. 242). She calls the “Sun so high” and with tears she says “The time getting all gone here” (p. 53).

The obstacles on the way are all simple objects of nature such as thorns or a crossed logs and she keeps invoking the woods to keep away its denizens of the “coming running my direction. I got a long way” (p. 56). The initiation phase continues as she takes her first steps and talks to herself. In Phoenix Jackson’s quest, external obstacles are assimilated into a context of familiarity rather than adversity. She is almost blind but she can still find her way through these barriers be it a tree or a fence. Her arrival to her destination is the only triumph that she acknowledges with silence. When the nurse asked her about the boy, Phoenix’s facial expression was the only answer that could tell the hardships of the journey, “her face was very solemn and withdrawn into rigidity” (p. 59). Although the trip is not over and the destination is not final, Phoenix, as the name itself refers to the idea of resurrection, shows no signs of giving up. The archetype of puberty here ironically refers to the fact that this is a woman who has already and thoroughly experienced the passage of age and knows very well the ties that bind in a show of commitment.

5. Conclusion

There is a profound and yet sinister sense of humor in applying reality to romance. The relationship of irony to romance is complicated and sometimes ambivalent.

Irony disparages the assumptions of romance and parodies its narrative pattern. In terms of structure, both romance and irony move in parallel lines but differ in their assumptions. Regardless of its subtlety or naivety, narrative romance lends itself to the reader as a process of ascendancy as in the case of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. It is generally idealistic, progressive and well-linked to myths. Sir Gawain undertakes the course of a mythical quest to encounter the Green Knight which takes the form of a perilous journey. In sharp contrast, Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* unfolds a narrative irony that parodies the narrative romance that dominantly features in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”.

The short stories discussed here illustrate how narrative irony subverts the idealistic and cheerful aspects of the romance into world of grim realism. In Joyce’s “Araby”, there is a reversal of a romantic pattern that the story parodies. The boy’s bitter experience sets the story away from any idealist assumptions or at least of final reward typical of narrative romance. In Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”, Robin keeps looking for a guide, he keeps telling himself “You will be wiser in time” which is immensely ironic as this realization materializes by encountering the “horror” that Conrad’s Kurtz speaks about in his last words. It is not the horror of having to live in a rotten world, even worse it is that of contributing to its filth. Similarly, in Welty’s “A Worn Path,” the old woman arrives to town by virtue of her resilience, by unceremoniously forgets or is exhaustingly unable to utter the reason that prompted her quest in the first place. These short stories retain some of the components of narrative romance only to recreate their own insidious realities, in which, ironically enough, it is the enemy that lies within that becomes so intrusive and threatening.



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