

Presentation of anti-semitism in Mcgrath's gothic novel *The Wardrobe Mistress***Gamze SABANCI UZUN¹**

APA: Sabancı Uzun, G. (2019). Presentation of anti-semitism in Mcgrath's gothic novel *The Wardrobe Mistress*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (Ö6), 302-308. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.648897

Abstract

In an interview with Francis Gertler , Patrick McGrath proposes that there has been very few written about “the revival of fascism in England immediately after the war” and that he cannot explain why this is so. And thus he published *The Wardrobe Mistress* in order to explore the reasons for the return of the fascism after the end of World War II. Although at a first glance the novel appears to be surrounded by gothic props such as the uncanny return of the dead body, the dark and gloomy setting, the reader is also concerned about its handling with anti-Semitism, as the main character is a Jew and her dead husband was a strong Nazi sympathizer. Thus, in addition to its Gothic traits, the novel transmits a political message about fascism in a gothic sensibility. By implementing the gothic genre's traditional uncanny element into a political arena, McGrath proposes that fascism is also similar to the dead bodies which continues to reappear in a more tormenting way. Therefore this paper will present McGrath's parodic relation with the Gothic genre, which he labels as “new gothic” in order to explore the novel's representation of anti-semitism by ironically juxtapositioning a dead Nazi soul and a living Jewish body.

Keywords: New gothic, fascism, parody, uncanny.

Mcgrath'ın the *Wardrobe Mistress* adlı romanında anti-semitizmin tasviri**Özet**

Francis Gertler ile yaptığı röportajda, Patrick McGrath “savaştan hemen sonra faşizmin İngiltere’de tekrar ortaya çıkması” hakkında çok az yazıldığını ve bunun neden böyle olduğunu açıklayamadığını söylemiştir. Bu yüzden de 2017 yılında *The Wardrobe Mistress* adlı romanı yayınlamıştır ve romanda özellikle faşizmin aslında hiç bitmediğini ve sessizce nasıl geri döndüğünü anlatmıştır. Her ne kadar ilk bakışta roman, ölü bir beden in esrarengiz bir şekilde ortaya çıkışını, karanlık ve kasvetli yer ve zaman gibi gotik elementler ile donatmış olsa da, okuyucu aynı zamanda romanın anti-Semitism’i nasıl ele aldığını da görmektedir. Romanın anti-semitizm örgüsü, ana karakterin bir Yahudi olması ve ölen kocasının daha sonradan öğrendiği kadarı ile bir Nazi sempatizanı olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır ve böylelikle roman, Gotik elementlerinin yanı sıra, gotik bir yaklaşımla politik bir mesaj da aktarmaktadır. Burada görülen şudur ki, gotik edebiyatın en önemli temalarından biri olan “bastırılmışın geri dönmesi” olarak tanımlanan tekinsizlik konusu, bu sefer savaştan sonra bastırılmış olan faşist ideolojinin sessizce ama daha yıkıcı bir şekilde geri döndüğüdür. Sonuç olarak bu makalede, ölü bir Nazi ruhu ile yaşayan bir Yahudi bedenini nasıl ironik bir şekilde bir araya

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getirerek anti-Semitizm'i işlediğini gösterebilmek adına McGrath'ın "yeni gotik" olarak adlandırdığı gotik türüyle olan parodik ilişkisi incelenecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yeni gotik, faşizm, parodi, tekinsiz.

Introduction

In an interview with Francis Gertler, novelist Patrick McGrath pondered why so little has been written about "the revival of fascism in England immediately after the war". *The Wardrobe Mistress* published in 2017 can be seen as his own attempt to deal with this silence. The novel is surrounded by gothic props, such as the uncanny return of a dead body and an overriding dark and gloomy setting; at the same time, set in the theatre world of Golders Green, and drawing on Jewish mythical traditions of malevolent possessing spirit of the *dybbuk*, the unquiet soul of a deceased person, the novel is also haunted by the troubling spectre of anti-Semitism. What McGrath himself would understand as his parodic relation with the Gothic genre, a relation which he characterizes as "new gothic", allows him to explore the novel's representation of anti-semitism through the vehicle of an ironic juxtapositioning of the soul of a dead Nazi and a living Jewish body. Thus this paper argues that McGrath's particular take on the Gothic genre allows the transmission of a powerful political message via its very gothic sensibility.

Critics of Patrick McGrath know that he very much enjoys indulging in gothic elements within his fiction, despite his reluctance to be labelled as primarily a writer of gothic fiction. His frequent use of ghosts or the ghostly setting, his tendency to transgress boundaries to exploit the "fear of the Other", and his depiction of terror within an ostensibly safe environment arguably make him a well-placed representative of contemporary gothic literature. Yet, his version of gothic is not the same as the traditional understanding of Poe-esque Gothic. In an interview with Gilles Menegaldo in 1997, he points out that

the Gothic genre is a mature genre; it's a mannered genre, and to work in it with any real freshness or originality is difficult. My first impulse was to play with its very well-established conventions; that inevitably became a form of pastiche as I exaggerated motifs, images that had already been well exaggerated by two centuries of development. (1997, p. 111)

Establishing a parodic relation with the Gothic genre, he begins his journey into the genre primarily through subverting the exterior setting. The places he uses are not dark, gloomy and in the middle of nowhere, but rather dark, gloomy and in the middle of well-known and recognizable places like London or New York. By bringing the terrifying into the familiar, McGrath dramatizes the possibility that terror exists in the heart of the familiar. Indeed, Sue Zlosnik suggests that McGrath's choice of common time and place is "[a]n engagement with the wider implications of Gothic in its different contexts. Individual tales of transgression and decay may point to larger stories of cultural abjection and crises". (2011, p.14). While the traditional Gothic uses the exterior setting as a place to project fear, McGrath subverts this trait by placing fear inside – in the interior. In his novels, it is common to see the decay of well-trusted institutions like family and the medical profession as a means of showing that the source of fear can no longer be projected onto an exterior, supernatural force; rather it is internal to the very fabric of society and catalyses its interior entropy. Looking at the family, McGrath's novels frequently feature strains in the intricacies of family relations and the discovery of family secrets as the source of terror. Choosing a female protagonist is McGrath's way of "playing with [Gothic's] very well-established conventions" (Menegaldo, 1997, p. 111). Although much work has been devoted to the place of women in Gothic literature, which would propose alternative ways of being for women, as Zlosnik points out, starting

with Anne Williams in 1995, the female gothic applies not only to characters, but also “to plot structures and narrative forms” (2011, p.82). Despite his gender, McGrath likewise entered into the genre of the female gothic, and began to use women as the key protagonists of his novels, frequently turning them into monsters. In so doing, he successfully uses women as the site of two conflicts, “the rationalizing of a male-dominated scientific establishment that cannot recognize its own monstrosity and the [phenomena of] aristocratic masculinity” (Zlosnik, 2011, p. 83) so as to “experiment with the fictional possibilities of different feminine subjects” (Zlosnik, 2011, p. 84).

Fascism as the return of the repressed

Set in London's theatreland, in the Golders Green of 1947, *The Wardrobe Mistress* (2017) opens with its central character Joan in mourning after the unexpected death of her actor husband Charles Grice, known as “Gricey”. The novel starts with the sudden death of Gricey, who falls down the steps after an argument with Julius, the couple's son-in-law. Being Jewish, over time Joan comes to believe that her husband's spirit has returned to her as a *dybbuk*, a homeless soul that takes possession of a living body, judging that Gricey has found refuge in the body of Frank Stone, his understudy on account of Stone's remarkable ability to perfectly imitate her dead husband's role in *Twelfth Night*. The extent of Joan's grief is made manifest in her obsession with recreating him through his clothes, which first she tailors to fit herself and then to fit Frank. Daubed in his clothes and affecting a perfect imitation of Gricey, Frank, like Joan, is Jewish, but the idea of Gricey's soul taking possession of him in the form of a *dybbuk* haunting emerges over the course of the novel to be deeply ironic, as Joan discovers that Gricey had secretly reconciled himself to a past of involvement in fascist activities as an active Nazi partisan. Joan's perception of this uncanny return places her and many other characters in the novel within a nightmarish context of anti-Semitism.

The first half of the novel focuses on Joan, and she is described as a typical wife who lives as a shadow of her husband. Gricey had been the voice in her life, and thus she grieves “not only with his absence, and a silence that once had been filled by that incomparable man” (McGrath, 2017, p. 10). “He wasn't there to advise her, and she was angry about it, and frightened too” (McGrath, 2017, p. 10). When his voice is gone, Joan is left with only solution, to find and use her own voice; this simple act of self-realisation is what really frightens her. As a wardrobe mistress, she is used to working with fabrics and clothes, which easily hide her. She lives behind the curtains, backstage, a structural support to the husband with the leading role and his share of the limelight, a dynamic which in the novel persists into their marriage. Therefore, when Joan hallucinates her death husband giving stage directions to Joan “Now just pull yourself together, dear. You're on” (McGrath, 2017, p. 6) her anxiety arises. As a result, she is not only grieving for the loss of her husband, but also for herself, and her acquisition of a new leading role in the society: after the death of Gricey, it is Joan who is the one to be seen.

A grieving wife who recreates her dead husband is suggestive of a trope in gothic fiction popularized by Edgar Allan Poe and his story “Ligeia”, where the (male) narrator also grieves for his dead spouse, and attempts to resurrect her through his second wife. Like “Ligeia”, the novel begins as a tale of grief manifesting itself in fantasies: both the narrator in “Ligeia” and the narrator in the novel deal with the death of their partners through obsessively remembering certain parts of them. In Poe's story, it is her eyes that the narrator fixates upon, and in *The Wardrobe Mistress*, it is his clothes. Joan finds solace in the touch and smell of his clothes, imagining she can hear his voice and sense his lingering presence.

Connecting Edgar Allan Poe's story with McGrath's novel signals the latter's preoccupation with parody and thus leads readers to read the novel through the lens of Poe-esque gothic, in which "the uncanny" and "the abject" appear repeatedly, both presenting a concern with boundaries. Transgression, a key motif in McGrath's novels, is thus imbued here with the uncanny and the abject, unveiling Joan's experience with liminality as a cognitive bridge that will lead to the interpretation of the culturally unspoken. As Sue Zlosnik claims "Abjection within the Gothic text frequently signifies both fear concerning the breakdown of culturally constructed boundaries of identity at a particular historical moment, and an attempt to shore them up" (2011, p. 7). Just as when in Poe's story the narrator's hallucinations signal the transgression of boundaries between life and death, Joan also experiences the same sense of anxiety as a result of liminality. Readers of Poe are thus prepared for a narrative journey which takes the central protagonist from mourning through hallucinations toward an end of madness; McGrath likewise encourages his readers to contend with what is it that is really lost and how the process of mourning answers that question.

What the readers clearly see here is the fictionalization of Freud's theory of a process of working through mourning, with acting out as a primary way of dealing with unwanted reality. According to Freud, "[m]ourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction" and in mourning "the world has become poor and empty" (Freud and Gay, 1995, p. 310). Furthermore, he argues that mourning comes to a decisive end when the subject severs its emotional attachment to the lost one and reinvests the free libido in a new object. Looking at the novel, the reader sees that the first way Joan works through her loss is to restage her relationship with her husband by altering his clothes to her fit, so that she can wear them and feel him because clothes are a language that Joan understands. By the help of this nonverbal language, Joan recreates and repeats her memories with her husband whose spirit she can still feel. But then her belief that Gricey's spirit lives on takes on a more dramatic form as Frank Stone, Gricey's understudy, proves himself able to take over Gricey's part in the *Twelfth Night* and enact the role exactly as her husband did. His uncanny performance impresses all involved, including Joan, but for her, the meaning of Frank's performance is more profound as it is proof to her that her dead husband's spirit has returned. "She regarded him critically, and in her mind's eye she saw him as he'd look when [the costume] fitted him properly; and, yes, for just a second she closed her eyes and Gricey was there" (McGrath, 2017, p. 35). This impression compels Joan to develop an interest in Frank, who she sympathises with as he is obviously poor and finding it difficult to feed himself. She decides to help the youth and begins to use her skill with a needle to alter Gricey's clothes to fit the young actor's poverty-ravaged form. As expected, the tentative pair becomes close, as Joan tailors her dead husband's suits to her young lover's body, but coming in the wake of her grief, the relationship is complicated, with Joan unable to dissociate her acts of tailoring with creating in her own mind a space for Gricey "to return". McGrath shapes a memorable love story ignited by contrasting desires: "...she ran her fingers through his thick hair and gazed out the window, thinking, he'll fall in love with someone else, that's what'll happen next. Someone who can do more for him than I can . . . So something between them died a little that night" (McGrath, 2017, p. 163). For a brief moment Frank holds a place in Joan's life, but it becomes clear that no amount of alterations are going to stem her grief.

The second half of the novel begins when Joan discovers her deceased husband's fascist uniform in the back of a large wardrobe. The discovery sparks a realization that Gricey had been a Nazi sympathizer. For the Jewish Joan, coming to terms with this unsettling reality was "another kind of grief..., and far worse, ...what she thought of as the second death. Her sorrow now was for herself, that he hadn't allowed her to hold him in her memory as she would have liked to, but had left her with only a mask" (McGrath, 2017, p. 140). The readers witness a dramatic shift in her emotional state, from yearning for the return

of her dead husband to loathing, as she starts thinking of him as “the hypocrite. Gricey the deceiver. The betrayer. The charlatan, the traitor. Oh, he was a character all right...” (McGrath, 2017, p. 104). It becomes apparent that his life outside the theatre was as much a performance as when he was on stage. Indeed, for Joan “[t]heir life together now seemed nothing but an elaborate performance of pretense and disguise, yes, his whole life a performance, he'd never stopped performing...” (McGrath, 2017, p. 225). She then discovers that Gricey had been involved with Oswald Mosley and his followers, and her revulsion prompts a move into political activism. She joins Julias and Gustly in their efforts to infiltrate the British Union of Fascists in London, and plans to attend meetings to learn about their strategy and report back to the anti-fascist group. It is here that the novel turns into a historical gothic that is both terrified of and curious about England's recent past, a past which repeats itself in the novel's present.

This shift in the novel casts what we know about Joan's family history in a new light, and one that informs her sense of rage and betrayal which prompts her anti-fascist activities. Early in the novel we are told that her family arrived in London at the end of 19th century from Eastern Europe and settled in Stepney, part of the East End known for “poverty, overcrowding, violence and political dissent [...] and Jews” (McGrath, 2017, p. 20). Although neither she nor her family were victims of the Holocaust, they had nevertheless faced the anti-Semitism that also existed in London and, after the war, were targeted in attacks of brutality by British fascists and Nazi-sympathisers who continued to target Jews in the East End shouting “Hitler didn't go far enough, didn't finish the job” (McGrath, 2017, p. 20). Similar to Jews in other parts of Europe, those who had settled in Britain were always vulnerable to being subjected to overt discrimination as they were widely constructed as “aliens” to the British population. Oswald Mosley's British fascists were the logical and extreme end of such endemic racism, and openly supported Hitler's anti-Semitic, as dramatized in the novel with the following hate speech:

England cannot afford to drop her guard! We are under attack as never before. But it comes not from the skies, no, but from within! From within! We must be rid of the alien parasite! The Jew power must be stopped! (McGrath, 2017, p. 193).

The fascists openly advocated for the idea that “Britain [is] for the British” (McGrath, 2017, p. 192), with a nativist white Anglo-Saxon understanding of what British was. By artfully yet realistically conveying the atmosphere of post-war London, McGrath reminds the reader of an uncomfortable truth about British history: that a homegrown version of German genocide was a remote but distinct possibility in the mid-twentieth-century. Thus, just as in the first part of the novel, the ghost of Gricey haunts Joan, in the second part, the Holocaust and the hatred personified by the British Union of Fascists haunts London's Jews. Just as Joan would wear her husband's clothes to feel him, Oswald Mosley's British followers would don their fascist uniforms to feel the power of Hitler within themselves.

Considering that Joan is a third generation Jew, “she never made any sense about why it was always her people who got picked on when times were hard” (McGrath, 2017, p. 20). Joan herself is referring to the long history of anti-Semitism that existed in Europe, including Britain, prior to the unmatched horror of Holocaust, but in so doing, McGrath prompts the reader to consider the contemporary phenomenon of the post-[direct] memory [of the Holocaust] generation of Jews who, according to Marianne Hirsch, “[describe] the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (2012, p. 103). The third generation is therefore merely aware of the atrocities during the Nazi regime, which can never be equated with the actual experiences, as Joan's reflections suggest. Since the experience belongs to the survivors that have memory-consciousness of the actual events, it can only entice the imagination of others. As Gary Weissman aptly surmised, “no

degree of power and monumentality can transform one person's lived memories into another's" (2004, p. 17). As contemporary fiction, the novel can also be read in the light of this dilemma. At the beginning, when Joan could not make any sense of the anti-Semitic activities of the fascists, because she had not gone through what the anti-Semitism her ancestors had experienced; nevertheless, perhaps McGraths suggests that it was the abstracted nature of her post-memory became realised by her discovery of Gricey's fascist tendencies which went on to be transmitted into a concrete experience when she decided to fight against the British fascists. Her determination transforms her from a silent woman grieving the death of her husband to one ready to take her life into her own hands.

Going to the meetings of "blackshirts", Joan learns to assume a persona. During the meetings she acts as the wife of a Nazi partisan, not as a Jew, so that she can safely gather information. One can thus conclude that Joan is now "on", as in 'on-stage', the embodiment of a previous hallucination where she envisaged Gricey uttering these words to her; now *she* is the actress performing a leading role. In the course of playing that role, she is asked by the leader of the fascist group to give a speech from a platform, her metaphorical stage. As she prepares for her speech behind the platform, she sees Edgar Cartridge - a member of the fascist group, all dressed in black. The vision shocks her into action, and instinctively she takes the sewing shears out of her bag and stabs him. This act of murdering her political, would-be existential, enemy dramatizes for the reader that Joan is finally done with Gricey. Her act of political violence manifests the exorcism of the malevolent *dybbuk* Gricey, whose dissemblance and betrayal, once revealed, has turned Joan mad. And, unlike Gricey and the actors who surround her, for Joan this is not a performance but rather a moment at which the Jew has takes her revenge on the Nazi. The transgressive tendency of a woman who was a silent and docile mother at the beginning, is finally revealed in this extraordinarily powerful act. As Jocelyn Dupont notes "McGrath's *ars poetice* certainly can be said to rest on the poetics of transgression and its narrative potentials [...] In Mc Grath's diegetic universe, transgression becomes the norm; every narrative is contaminated. Each is a tortuous, diseased journey over murky waters with some foul undercurrent" (2013, p. 4).

Conclusion

To conclude, in *The Wardrobe Mistress*, McGrath skillfully intertwines gothic with history to create a historical gothic, true to the tenet that the Gothic "buries in the shadow that which had been brightly lit, and brings into light that which has been repressed (*Gothic*, 157). Using Gothic's tendency to bring out the repressed, by pivoting around a historical event he creates a space for the obliterated Jews of Europe to return with vengeance. While the novel initially encourages the readers to see Joan's journey as the desire for the return of her husband, what the narrative arc of the novel reveals is that her desire is actually to return back to life herself, a desire she achieves through murdering a fascist. Therefore, by moving from the gothic mode into the political thriller, McGrath presents the novel as an attempt to "demetaphorize" the Gothic by bringing to light the terrifying concerns that the Gothic codes in repressive, symbolic discourse. With dybbuks, both real and false, McGraths shows that fascism is also a kind of theater- always-already a re-enactment of itself, and always at risk of a reprise.

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