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TOMASZ FISIAK
(UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ)

DEATH AND TWO MAIDENS (NO MORE): A GOTHIC FRIENDSHIP IN BERYL BAINBRIDGE'S *HARRIET SAID…*

ABSTRACT

Harriet said…, a lesser known, 1972 novel by an acclaimed writer Beryl Bainbridge (1932–2010), is a work about friendship. However, only apparently – as the events in the story unfold, the reader slowly realizes how toxic and corrupting the bond between the eponymous Harriet and her nameless friend (the narrator) is. Bainbridge, inspired by real-life tragedy, presents a haunting vision of friendship marred by violence, both emotional and physical. Two adolescent girls devise a specific life ideology and as they explore the limits of their self-understanding, they transgress social norms, which ultimately leads them to a completely gratuitous crime. Hence, an important questions arises – is it still a friendship or, rather, a form of mutual exploitation? What makes their relationship Gothic? The aim of my analysis will be to respond to these queries.

KEYWORDS: death, friendship, Gothicism, female tyrant, Bainbridge, Carmilla

STRESZCZENIE

Harriet said…, niewydana nigdy w Polsce powieść autorstwa Beryl Bainbridge (1932–2010), tylko z pozoru opowiada o przyjaźni dwóch nastolatek – tytułowej Harriet oraz bezimiennej narratorki. Bainbridge, zainspirowana prawdziwą tragedią, przedstawia w swym tekście przejmujący portret relacji opartej nie tyle na zaufaniu i wsparciu, a raczej na emocjonalnej przemocy. Harriet i jej przyjaciółka uciekają od swoich dysfunkcyjnych rodzin w świat osobliwie rozumianych „wrażeń" i „wiedzy". W pogoni za doświadczeniami, zwłaszcza natury erotycznej, wikłają się w niejednoznaczną relację ze starszym mężczyzną, co prowadzi do nieuchronnej tragedii. Tym samym zasadne wydaje się pytanie, czy w przypadku dziewcząt można nadal mówić o przyjaźni, czy może bardziej o wyzysku. Dlaczego ich relacja ma charakter gotycki? Co łączy bohaterki powieści Bainbridge z bohaterkami słynnego opowiadania Josepha Sheridana Le Fanu pt. „Carmilla"? Prezentowany tu artykuł będzie próbą odpowiedzi na powyższe pytania.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: śmierć, przyjaźń, literatura gotycka, Bainbridge, Carmilla

Beryl Bainbridge belongs to a group of writers whose *oeuvre* has been unfortunately mostly overlooked or underrated. Nominated five times for the Man Booker prize, she never won one in her lifetime, receiving only posthumous Best of Booker award in 2011, a year after her death. What is more, her texts garnered rather

unsatisfactory attention also within academia.[1] The situation is slowly changing, though, and more works on her literary output appear, with 2008 *Understanding Beryl Bainbridge* by Brett Josef Grubisic and Brendan King's *Love by all sorts of means: A Biography* (2016) being primary examples.

Bainbridge's frequent exploitation of the grotesque and the macabre can also be blamed for the "invisibility" of her novels, especially at the beginning of her career. Her first two works, *A weekend with Claude* (1967) and *Another part of the wood* (1968), went unnoticed by the public. It was only the third one, 1972 *Harriet said*…, that freed Bainbridge from literary obscurity and, at the same time, caused major controversy.

Bainbridge wrote *Harriet said*… already in the late 1950s, but had to wait well over a decade before she could convince her publisher, Duckworth, to print it. *The Telegraph* 2010 obituary divulges that the novel, "the chilling tale of two adolescent girls, who first corrupt and then destroy their middle-aged hanger-on, framing him for a murder they themselves commit" was "inspired by headlines of the Hulme murder case in New Zealand" ("Dame Beryl Bainbridge" 2010).[2] As it depicted two depraved teenage girls, "in the late 1950s [the novel] was regarded as unpublishable filth" (ibid.). Unsurprisingly, no brave publishers agreed to touch the manuscript. One editor responded:

> Your writing shows considerable promise, but what repulsive little creatures you have made the two central characters, repulsive almost beyond belief. And I think the scene in which the two men and the two girls meet in the Tsar's house is too indecent and unpleasant even for these lax days. (qtd. in Grubisic 2008: 36)

Fortunately, in 1972, *Harriet said*… was finally released and a relative success followed. Bainbridge agreed: "When it eventually did appear [it] had very good reviews. There were intimations of suppressed lesbian relationships, which led to violence. But by today's standards there wasn't any explicit sex or violence in it, was there?" (Guppy 2000). But even without any explicit scenes, the novel remains quite controversial, because it offers a disturbing portrayal of its teenage antagonists, their awakening sexuality, disobedience to any kind of authority and friendship verging on mutual exploitation.

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[1] Helen Carr blames this situation on the fact that "[her] novels have never fitted in[to current categories like magic realism, postmodernism, or gender theory]. She has always dissociated herself from feminism, and there has so far been little feminist criticism of her work" (2007: 78–79).

[2] In the infamous 1954 Parker-Hulme case, two adolescent girls, Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker, killed the latter's mother. In 1994 Peter Jackson directed a film based on these events: *Heavenly creatures*, starring Kate Winslet and Melanie Lynskey. In several interviews (e.g., with Shusha Guppy) Bainbridge admitted that she was deeply moved by this murder and thus commenced to construct the plotline of her debut novel around a similar motif.

The text starts with a cryptic scene of two girls running through the woods, reassuring each other that they will act according to the plan they have just devised. The reader immediately realizes there must have been some kind of mischief, hardly imagining how shocking it was. As Auberon Waugh puts it,

> the children coldbloodedly [walk] away from the old man's house and [discuss] when they should start screaming. We assume, throughout the build-up to this event which comprises the rest of the book that they have either successfully tempted this old man, called Mr Biggs to some illicit sexual act and are now going to denounce him to the police or, rather more likely, that he has resisted them at the last moment and they are going to denounce him just the same for crimes he has never committed – a fairly frequent occurrence, we are told, when teenage girls are rebuffed. (1972)

Indeed, the story then goes back to the beginning of summer holidays. The narrator, who remains nameless throughout the novel, extensively describes her ambiguous friendship with the eponymous Harriet and even more ambiguous relationship with Mr Biggs, a middle aged man from the neighbourhood, frustrated with his wife and the fact that "[their] dancing days are over" (Bainbridge 2000: 27). The Tsar, as the girls call him, looks for sympathy and sexual gratification outside the marriage. The three characters meet more and more frequently, but "it is his sexual kiss [with the narrator] at the fair … that encourages the girls to pursue their experimenting on him" (Grubisic 2008: 43). A strange love affair between the narrator and the Tsar, with Harriet as the observer, advisor and planner, continues through the summer and culminates in a sexual encounter, much to Harriet's chagrin. At the end of the story, the girls decide to humiliate the Tsar and punish him for sin and weakness, but the final meeting of the three ends up tragically with an inadvertent murder of the Tsar's wife, who arrived unexpectedly at home. Harriet and her friend decide to put the blame on Mr Biggs, carefully removing any signs of their presence at the Biggs' house. Simultaneously, they grow more and more aware that this event has just concluded the period of carefree childhood, and that the whole adventure with the Tsar served as a specific rite of passage for them.

Harriet, whom Auberon Waugh terms "a psychopath," evidently possesses command over those who stand by her side. The narrator observes: "she it was who always decided our actions, and told me what to write in the diary" (Bainbridge 2000: 54). The diary mutely bears witness to the development of their troubled friendship. There they are supposed to discuss their new experiences, a notion given a great significance in the text:

> In the beginning we had never searched for experience. True we didn't follow the usual childish pursuits. We never played games or behaved like playmates, we never verbally abused each other except on occasions deliberately, to reassure our parents. …We took to going for long walks over the shore, looking for people who by their chosen solitariness must have something to hide. We learnt early it was the gently resigned ones who had the most to tell; the voluble and frantic were no use. They seldom got beyond pity for themselves

> and at the end mouthed soft obscenities. At first Harriet was interrogator and I spectator. When she questioned adults and probed their lives I was content to listen. She said we were not to become involved, we were too young, only to learn. She said our information was a kind of training course for later life; living at second hand was our objective until we were old enough. But of late, even at school and away from Harriet's influence, the process of analysis went on. It had become a habit: the steady search to discover the background of teachers; the singling out of girls older than myself who might add something to what I already knew. (39)

Willingly or not, their precociousness adds moral ambiguity to their relationship. Grubisic notes:

> In addition to [the] depiction of conventionally anguished adolescence, Bainbridge's characterization highlights the girls' eccentric philosophy of experience … which involves a repeated pretense of being conventional and normal and, accordingly, acting shocked or surprised or amused when they know that convention dictates they should be. (40)

The risky game they play with the Tsar also rejects any conventions or social norms. As a result, "[the] characters are imprisoned in and victims of not only the physical world, but also their own conceptions of the world, their pasts, and the conventions of culture" (Wennö 1993: 58). They need the Tsar, for he is "exotic and mysterious because he is an adult male whose friendship with [the narrator] breaches the decorum represented by her parents and community," and the relationship with him, no matter how inappropriate, enables them "to define themselves and to define the boundaries of their morality" (Grubisic 2008: 42). The narrator describes their quest for new emotions as an ongoing process, continually demanding something fresher and more intensive. Anna Olkiewicz sees that "searching for experience takes a form of systematic questioning of adults" (2005: 267), for adults do not really set an example to the girls and cannot be relied on. They are weak, petty and hypocritical (the narrator's parents), violent (Harriet's father) or simply irresponsible (the Tsar or his friend, Mr Hind). Hence, in "the absence of parental authority and wisdom" (Wennö 1993: 140), Harriet and her friend invent values for themselves and become self-anointed teachers of self-produced ethics.

The falseness of life in the suburbs convinces the girls to separate themselves from those around them. The narrator bitterly observes:

> I could see the next-door neighbour looking through the kitchen window into our garden. We must have made a charming group. Tea on the lawn, the mother surrounded by children, the clear voices. At least we looked real. Even if Harriet and I were alien it could not show. (Bainbridge 2000: 41)

A typical domestic scene suddenly gains a Gothic dimension. The afternoon tea, biscuits and polite small talk build a façade for emotional detachment and coldness. The narrator continues:

> Without Harriet I was irritable and bored. I did not have any other friends, partly from inclination and partly because none of the families I knew sent their children to boarding school. I was a special case, as Harriet observed. I had gone when younger to a private school in the district but I was a disgrace owing to the dirty stories found written in my notebook, and everyone agreed I was out of control and going wrong and in need of supervision. I did know, even without Harriet having to tell me, that I had learned the shameful stories at school in the first place, that I did not have an original idea on the subject and that really they were scared of me and Harriet being so intimate. We were too difficult. Nothing else. (10)

She thus reveals how isolated she is from her parents and neighbours. The same applies to Harriet. Both girls grow up in a toxic environment. The narrator's father is mostly indifferent to her. Her mother keenly supports the insincere image of a happy family, but she also does not seem to bother much about her child. Therefore, in her desperate quest for attention and love, the girl turns to Harriet, who quickly gains control over her and starts to manipulate her, contradicting the popular idea that female friendship provides the underlying structure for a community and offers support for an individual (Caine xiii). But Harriet's familial background also reveals the unfortunate circumstances of her upbringing. Her father is a domestic tyrant; the mother, on the other hand, plays a minor role in the household, called by both her husband and her daughter "little woman" (68), a nickname hinting at her fear of the abusive husband and the eventual withdrawal from the domestic sphere. Overall, it appears that the girls' basic needs are satisfied – the parents feed them or provide them with clothes, but, simultaneously, deprive them of emotional bonding: "we both tried very hard to give our parents love, and security, but they were too demanding" (35). However, in *Harriet said*… not only the parents fail in their role of authorities. The same applies to the Tsar. Grubisic comments:

> [T]hrough a disdainful depiction of [him] (an immoral and irresponsible adult but, of greater significance, also an uncreative, uncommitted, and weak one), Bainbridge directs an indictment at one character, effectively punishing the figure for his failing by forcing him to take responsibility for the girls' crime. (2008: 46)

As the girls cannot turn to any adult for help or advice, they turn to each other, which, ultimately, has horrible consequences.

The girls, left on their own, start to behave in an unruly way, which exposes them, especially Harriet, to rumours and insults. The narrator's mother calls Harriet "a nuisance" (Bainbridge 2000: 55). One of the neighbours thinks of her as "That Dreadful Child" (ibid.). Mrs Biggs, the Tsar's wife, goes so far as to visit the narrator's mother with a warning:

> She told my mother that Harriet was a bad influence but she never went to Harriet's parents. Harriet had met her in the street and told her to mind her own business. She was so angry that the woman recoiled from her. (25)

The most suggestive name attached to Harriet is that given by the local Canon, who finds her "the Constant Nymph" (84), pointing to her dangerous infantile eroticism and building a parallel with another name she received before: "Dirty Little Angel" (37). She is a nymph and a fallen angel, i.e. a mysterious menacing creature and a sinner in need of purification. To make matters worse, she enforces her "evil" on the narrator, who is already an outcast. Grubisic highlights that "the narrator is observant enough to comprehend that she is unusual and abnormal" (2008: 39), that she exists as an outsider, for she is a precocious teenager, a child discovering her budding femininity and a person investing her energy into a dangerously homoerotic friendship. As a result, she grapples with ostracism of the local community.

The reference to the fallen angel is not the only biblical allusion used to expose the girls' otherness. Elisabeth Wennö, using David Punter's approach, initially introduces *Harriet said…* as "the story of the girl who beds her symbolic father and kills her symbolic mother" (1993: 139), reviving the Freudian reading of the novel, but later she adopts the biblical interpretation, seeing in Bainbridge's text a modern rendition of the myth of the Fall. Wennö admits that "the girls' quest during their summer holiday with its overtones ... of the lost paradise is an ambiguous quest for both reunion with 'father' as creator, and rebellion against 'father' as authority" (140). Just like Eve, they are unable to resist the desire to try the forbidden fruit of knowledge and experience. The Tsar, in fact a weak version of the biblical snake, instigates their pursuit of erotic fulfillment and prompts their ultimate fall. Yet, even without the Tsar's "aid," the girls reject the authority of God and adults, discovering knowledge about the world in an intuitive way. In this self-created post-Fall world "the moral codes governing behaviour are corroded, distorted or subverted" (Grubisic 2008: 37). Hence, even the murder becomes "an active decision [which] asserts character disavowal of a significant conventional moral code" (38). For the girls, the whole situation is a test of their friendship and an important life lesson. In a methodical analysis of the surrounding reality, Harriet takes the role of an active agent, an empowered female, whose command over her life (and the lives of others) gradually increases. Yet, the narrator enjoys this power-dependence relationship and, typically for teenagers, values Harriet's opinions more than her parents' or teachers', acting according to Harriet's will: "she told me what she had decided" (Bainbridge 2000: 82). The narrator acts as if she were Galatea shaped by Pygmalion:

> It was Harriet who drew well, not me. It was Harriet who was educated; she told me what to read, explained to me the things I read, told me what painters I should admire and why. I listened, I did as she said, but I did not feel much interest, at least not on my own, only when she was directing me. (22)

Bainbridge parodies the religious references. Harriet suddenly starts to play the role of a singular deity. The narrator explains: "I had such belief in her and faith, that whatever she told me I accepted utterly" (23). It is hard not to view Harriet

as a corrupted or even satanic idol, especially whenever the title phrase occurs. Indeed, the words "Harriet said" open the text and reappear like a biblical formula throughout the novel. The narrator goes on emphasizing the scope of control Harriet possesses over her decisions, choices and opinions:

> When "Harriet says," the world is not only created but also recorded as "holy writ" in the secret diary that the narrator writes to Harriet's dictation. But, like God, Harriet does not only create a perception of the world through words, but also through acting ("God said," "God made," "God saw it was good"). (Wennö 1993: 142)

And, actually, there is no room for their separation as it involves anxiety – the believer finds it difficult to separate herself from the corrupted object of worship.

Harriet, however, may be also considered a modern recreation of the Gothic tyrant, even though Bainbridge subverts the classic Gothic damsel-tyrant binary opposition (yet, she definitely gives a Gothic twist to the girls' friendship). The girls start as "seemingly innocent witnesses of an appalling murder from the first part" to transform into "ruthless oppressors whereas the adults (Mr Biggs and his wife) become victims" (Olkiewicz 2005: 268). The roles constantly merge, making it difficult to identify any of the girls as the oppressor or the oppressed. Mr Biggs appears to be "damselized" by the girls' plotting: "[t]he effort of moving the Tsar into position, the strain of compelling him to carry out my plan made me realise the power and drive Harriet needed to be always manipulating and coaxing me along the lines she desired" (Bainbridge 2000: 93). On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice that they, especially the narrator, are equally used by him. Although Mr Biggs appears rather kind-hearted and naïve, he too eagerly and quickly crosses a thin line of the normative sexual behaviours. Starting an intimate relationship with a girl at least three times younger, whose ideas of love and sexuality have just started to materialize, certainly can be viewed as abuse, as he abuses his privileged position of power, age and experience. The facts that the narrator looks and behaves in a more mature way than her age would suggest and that the Tsar desperately longs for affection he missed in his marriage do not justify his actions. The Tsar, however, is not the only sexual predator in the story. A similar role is ascribed to his friend, Mr Hind, who lusts for Harriet. Harriet, aware of this, plays with him, just as the narrator decides to play with the Tsar, especially once their erotic relationship commences. The girls may claim to have full control over their bodies and awakening sexuality, but, undoubtedly, they are used. Mr Biggs, "imprisoned in an old body and an unsatisfactory marriage … yearns for the freshness and promise of youth" (Wennö 1993: 149). At one point, the girls see a lovemaking scene between Mr Biggs and his spouse, which initially horrifies them, but later becomes a source of inspiration. This particular event has its consequences. Wennö explains:

> The sexual union between Mr and Mrs Biggs does not bring about any change but is followed by separateness, and so is the sexual union between the narrator and Mr Biggs. In both cases the essence is one of domination and submission rather than one of union and liberation. Thus, the power relationship between Mr Biggs and the narrator is temporarily reversed and the narrator rejoices in her superior young fitness. (141)

The dynamics of the reversal keep on switching from one party to another. The narrator agrees to the Tsar's illicit advances, but, at the same time, she does not really enjoy their intimacy, claiming their first kiss was flat and cold, and their embrace dry, calculated and sad (Bainbridge 2000: 53). Even their first sexual encounter, the effect of curiosity, evokes mere boredom: "pinned there raptureless, a visit to the doctor, nothing more, and a distant uneasy discomfort of mind and body as if both had been caught in a door that had shut too quickly" (135).

Generally speaking, it is hard not to notice that *Harriet said…* bears a striking likeness to Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's short story "Carmilla" (1872),[3] the eponymous antagonist recreating Carmilla, her nameless friend becoming a modernized rendition of Laura. Both pairs of characters start as mere friends, yet their relationship soon turns into a dynamic struggle for power. Both Harriet and her friend, as well as Carmilla and Laura, discover and explore their sexuality, each of them in her own way. Carmilla is already aware of her physical attractiveness, but Laura and Bainbridge's anti-heroines have only just begun to gain that awareness. Bainbridge, contrary to Le Fanu, does not overexploit the erotic aspect of her characters. Nevertheless, the sexual initiation plays a significant part in both cases. Laura weakly struggles to liberate herself from Carmilla's caresses, as she subconsciously longs for them: "from these foolish embraces, which were not of very frequent occurrence, I must allow, I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies seemed to fail me" (Le Fanu 1947: 240). Bainbridge's character finds it equally difficult to free herself from Harriet's spell: "I wished I could erase my love for Harriet as easily as footprints" (Bainbridge 2000: 81). On the other hand, the narrator, in opposition to Laura, openly reveals the inherent need to maintain a close relation, both physical and mental, with her friend/foe: "We stood for a moment looking at each other and I wondered if she might kiss me. She never had, not in all the years I had loved her" (7). This affection strengthens after the accidental murder of Mrs Biggs: "Now that Mrs Biggs was truly dead I would do whatever Harriet wanted. I would never doubt her again but acknowledge she was more beautiful than me" (151). The narrator truly appreciates Harriet's wit, charm and orderliness: "I did love Harriet then. She was so wise, so good, so sweetly clever and able to cope with the situation" (151). Laura reacts similarly to Carmilla's qualities: "I was charmed with her in most particulars" (Le Fanu 1947: 238). However, among these

[3] Le Fanu's short story depicts a budding friendship between Laura, a shy teenager and a daughter of a rich nobleman, with Carmilla, a demonic femme fatale of uncertain background (who later turns out to be a vampire).

subtle affections, there is also a place for erotic desires, because for all four of them sexual initiation becomes the source of valuable experience.

What further brings Harriet, her friend, Carmilla and Laura together is their position of an outcast in their respective milieus. Carmilla is a vampire, a lesbian and a vagabond with no real place of her own. Laura lives to fulfil her father's expectations (of becoming a Victorian ideal of "the angel in the house") and is deprived of any company apart from two matronly carers. In *Harriet said…* the narrator stands out from her peers as the girl living in a boarding school and a nuisance who would always engage in some kind of trickery (as suggested by the Tsar at one point). Harriet, considered an evil child and a fallen angel, a "tragic little Muse" (Bainbridge 2000: 87), is ostracized for her ostensible promiscuity. All four reject commitment to the roles of dutiful daughters, choosing self-exploration and independence instead, even though it is not very explicit in Laura's case. In fact, they all face lack of acceptance and a strong sense of estrangement.

Their isolation is reinforced by their disavowal of God and religion, although again, in Laura's case, it is not overtly stated. Harriet and her friend perform certain pagan rituals, which culminate in Harriet's mock baptism inside the church. The narrator also mentions how "Harriet met a priest once but … said he was awful, his fingers stained up to the knuckles with nicotine and obviously he hadn't got a vocation because the body was a framework to the soul and his frame was dreadful" (18). This scene bears a strong resemblance to two particular scenes in Le Fanu's short story: when Carmilla reacts with anger to the peddler's offer to give her a cross, or when she rebukes Laura for singing a Christian song at the sight of the funeral procession.

Moreover, Bainbridge's antagonists demonstrate vampirical qualities identical to Carmilla, and like Carmilla participate in the seduction-rejection-destruction sequence. Carmilla is a literal vampire, but Harriet and the narrator also behave in a vampirical way, overpowering the Tsar and, once the seduction is complete, repudiating him. The result of their attack, acquiesced in by the Tsar, is the accidental murder of his wife and, probably, his subsequent social death. In truth, the murder may be viewed as a punishment for all parties – for subverting the social norms and standards, for searching for forbidden love, for playing precarious games. No one is going to triumph – Mr Biggs's fate seems rather grim, as does the girls' who might (not) conclude their friendship or live with a guilty conscience. Non-conformism and appetite for the illicit leave everyone with a strong sense of loss – of innocence, happiness and freedom.

These two pairs of characters share one further similarity, namely their liminal status, for all of them are in the "betwixt-and-between period" of their lives (Turner 1994: 18). Victor Turner writes that "certain liminal processes are regarded as analogous to those of gestation, parturition, and suckling. Undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns" (9). Undoubtedly, the four heroines

can be considered transitional beings, situated not only at the margins, but also at the crossing of different categories and life phases. The Harriet-narrator pairing exists somewhere in the middle between youth and adulthood, maturity and immaturity, innocence and experience, goodness and evil, oppression and tyranny, desire and fear, but also appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviours. Admittedly, their liminality is caused mostly by the fact that they are teenagers heading towards adulthood, yet still possessing many of the qualities of children. Their borderline existence is constantly emphasized by the recurrent image of tadpoles. Also the setting of the first kiss between the Tsar and the narrator exudes symbolism – it is a funfair, which suddenly no longer just symbolizes a child's dream about entertainment, lights and joyful music. The funfair bears witness to the narrator's first important erotic experience with an adult man, and, consequently, loses its innocent status. Bainbridge's anti-heroines appear to be aware of their vague situation, therefore they try to exclude the narrator's younger sister, Frances, from their company. The narrator explains: "I had to push her from me for her own sake, because of Harriet and me. I did not want her to be like us. God willing she would grow up normally and be like everyone else" (Bainbridge 2000: 16). Her resolute approach confirms her and Harriet's in-between-ness. On the one hand, they try to protect Frances from the corruption they notice in themselves. On the other, they themselves are in need of a guide who would help them distinguish between excitement and experience, for they often confuse these categories. In their confusion, they take for granted certain events that should never have taken place, and mistake them for new adventures to describe in a secret diary. In the face of the Tsar's courting, Harriet says: "Events must be logically concluded. We must be tidy" (70–71), this tidiness and practical approach being the only reliable things they can adhere to in a world of chaotic and conflicting emotions. The relationship with the Tsar is indeed tidy and appropriately staged. First, it is idealized and romanticized. Then, it takes the shape of a real love affair, before it culminates in an erotic encounter. The seeming antagonists choose to humiliate the Tsar to end the story in a spectacular way. The narrator notes:

> How could I not understand her. I would have given all the power of my too imaginative mind and all the beauty of the fields and woods, not to understand her. And at last I gave in to Harriet, finally and without reservation. I wanted the Tsar to be humiliated, to cower sideways with his bird's head held stiffly in pain and fear, so that I might finish what I had begun, return to school forgetting the summer, and think only of the next holidays that might be as they had always been. (130)

Gail Godwin adds that "events are concluded, rapidly and violently, under the influence of Harriet's corrupted young logic. It is the grownups of this story who are seduced and slain and then tidily sacrificed for the 'good of the children'" (1973). Even the murder that follows may be considered a liminal experience, a peculiar stage of the ritual of formation. Its fortuity results from wrong decisions, failed

expectations, false impressions and lack of control. The girls' command of the events is illusory. They may act in an adult way, yet, at least in part, they mentally remain in a comfortable children's world where troubles seem distant and insignificant. Thus, the murder becomes the means to leave the comfort zone of childhood and, in a particularly corrupted way, face the implications of adulthood. *Harriet said*… accurately reveals "adolescence's frequent, unpredictable swing between mature and infantile behaviour" (ibid.). Anna Olkiewicz views the novel's conclusion as the triumph of the Dionysian child: "the primal evil and disruptive energy within the child are liberated and threaten the adult collectivity" (2005: 268). On the other hand, she admits that "these Dionysian tendencies cannot be only viewed in terms of evil and disruptive behaviour. The primal energy, enthusiasm and dynamism are associated with the intensity of feelings experienced by adolescent characters" (ibid.).

Such intensity of emotions implies yet another thing, something exceeding the question of liminality. On the basis of the text's meandering narration, the reader may be under the impression that the narrator and Harriet are in fact two sides of the same person, suffering from split personality, torn between inertia and hyperactivity (as in the case of Laura, Carmilla being a projection of her subliminal desires). Thus, the murder may be a mere figment of imagination, a product of the subconscious of an emotionally imbalanced teenager who has only just gained awareness of her sexual needs and is yet to find the means to satisfy them. More so, it appears to be a self-imposed flagellation for sinful thinking of physical pleasures. Harriet, if treated as the narrator's alter ego, implements her desire to be bold, courageous and sexually independent. In this way, the murder might seem a symbolic death of the narrator's childhood innocence and an ensuing birth of her sexuality. It is proof that she has just entered the world of experience. Within her split personality, she stands for the emotional and spontaneous, whereas Harriet symbolizes the rational and logical. Undoubtedly, the most striking fact about the narrator is that the reader never acquires a chance to learn her name. She remains anonymous throughout the novel, becoming an everywoman who embodies the anxieties of a pubescent girl. What is more, it is difficult to assess what she really thinks, because the majority of her opinions are filtered through Harriet's outlook on the world. Even the choice of a name of her double is not random. "Harriet," an Old German name which inherently means "Ruler of the Household" (Astoria 2008: 130), signifies a free spirit with busy dynamic lifestyle (Watts 2008: 161), i.e. the qualities the narrator certainly lacks.

Overall, Harriet and the narrator may seem morally deplorable, but, as Grubisic puts it, they are also

> relatively attractive because their self-fashioning and intellectual enterprises demonstrate creativity and individuality, albeit of an admittedly perverse kind. Revulsion, after all, requires an accepted notion of normal, good, and right, and in *Harriet said*… the embodiments of those humanistic values are background figures, their sentiments hardly pointed to as valorized and championed norms to adhere to. (2008: 46)

Grubisic mentions the process of self-fashioning which pertains to Harriet and the narrator, but it is equally valid in relation to Carmilla. What is more, he uses a very significant word to describe the girls: "revulsion." They evoke fear and revulsion; so does their friendship, which is not exclusively a bond of trust and support, but, rather, a form of exploitative experiment, leading the girls towards an ultimate disaster.

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