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Abjection and violence in *Monoceros*, by Suzette Mayr

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ABSTRACT. Through the analysis of *Monoceros* (2011), a novel by Canadian contemporary writer Suzette Mayr, we examine the entanglement between concepts of violence and abjection in literature. Mayr presents several characters that come into contact as a result of a suicide committed by a previously bullied student of a Catholic school. With the narrative as a reference, we propose to discuss the growing violence inside the school system in contemporary times, in this case as a result of sexual intolerance. Works by Nan Stein and Melinda York, who address the imposition of too strict gender roles on female and male students as one of the causes for violent outcomes among youngsters, will be our main theoretical references. We also discuss the topic of desire and abjection, mainly developed by Kristeva and Kulzbach, as illuminating perspectives for the analysis of the selected novel. We suggest that in *Monoceros* bullying is performed to guarantee fixed and binary models of gender identity, which ends up by promoting low self-esteem and feelings of awkwardness on individuals defined as different from the norm.

Keywords: school system, bullying, gender identity, Canadian literature.

Abjeção e violência em *Monoceros*, de Suzette Mayr

RESUMO. Através da análise de *Monoceros* (2011), romance de Suzette Mayr, escritora canadense contemporânea, examinamos os conceitos de violência e abjeção no texto literário. Mayr apresenta uma série de personagens que entram em contato devido a um suicídio cometido por um estudante vítima de *bullying*. Tomando o romance de Mayr como referência, propomos a discussão da crescente violência no sistema escolar, aqui, com base na intolerância sexual. Nan Stein e Melinda York, pesquisadoras que discutem a imposição de papéis de gênero excessivamente rígidos como uma das causas para a erupção de eventos violentos no ambiente escolar, serão algumas de nossas referências teóricas. Discutimos também, ao longo de nosso artigo, as relações entre desejo e violência, principalmente apoiadas em Kristeva e Kulzbach, perspectivas que iluminam a análise do romance selecionado. Defendemos que em *Monoceros* o *bullying* surge atrelado a uma tentativa de garantir modelos fixos e binários de gênero, o que acaba por promover baixa auto estima por parte dos indivíduos definidos como diferentes da norma.

Palavras-chave: sistema escolar, *bullying*, identidade de gênero, literatura canadense.

Introduction

Throughout the current article we discuss violence in the context of a contemporary Canadian novel, *Monoceros* (2011), by Suzette Mayr, a writer from Calgary, Canada. Mayr's latest novel brings up an episode of bullying in a Catholic High School as its central theme. The performed bullying finally results in the suicide committed by the persecuted student who happens to be an invisible (having already passed away) presence in the novel. There is an obvious crisis of values being discussed throughout the narrative, outbreaks of meaningless violence affecting not only the suicidal student, but also the whole educational system presented.

It is interesting to consider that Suzette Mayr produced a critical text on her process of writing this specific novel, published in *Canada and Beyond,* in 2011, only some months before *Monoceros* came out, in which she states that, this being her fourth novel, it might have been one of the most difficult ones to put together. First of all, she states this was not totally fictional, since a suicide really took place by one of the students attending the school her partner was professionally involved with. So, although she never met that specific student who committed suicide, Mayr understood the event as affecting many people next to her and eventually even her private life. By noticing the way that specific school involved in the 'real' case of suicide tried to disguise the theme, protecting itself from the scandal, she decided to write a novel on the injustice related to an invisible (because hidden) death, and the impunity often

protecting the ones who performed cases of bullying.

Thus, one might acknowledge that Mayr is making clear the initial impulse for writing *Monoceros*, although along that article she admits that the story 'gain its own life'. She states she was sure she wanted to "[…] write a fiction that, although addressing queer suicide, could not be as easily read as another example of the 'dead queer genre'" (MAYR, 2011a, p. 55). Besides, she was sure it had to take place in Calgary, Alberta. The book should be *queer* even in the level of the sentence. Thus, inspired by Virginia Woolf and mainly Gertrude Stein, she tried to repeat the word 'because' at the very beginning of each sentence of the narrative. Later on, she evaluated this was not a promising plan and decided to keep the repetition only in the first chapter of *Monoceros*, a repetition here supposed to take the role of a repeating chorus on the general theme. She wanted to address the "[…] outer circles of people affected" by the fictional suicide she was creating (MAYR, 2011a, p. 57), imagining how individuals might get touched by such an episode. So, although we are not going to bring any data on the 'real' suicide Mayr is referring to in the article while describing the process of writing that novel, we would like to keep in mind that we are dealing with a fictionalized event that, voluntarily or not, builds up a strong relation between context and text, internal and external factors. As suggested by the Brazilian literary critic Antonio Candido in his book *Literatura e sociedade* (1965), critics should take into account the social element, not externally, but as a factor of the very artistic construction. According to Candido, we should approach sociological or historical elements so as to allow an aesthetic interpretation that has already assimilated the social dimension as an art factor. Therefore, the external becomes internal and criticism is not sociological any longer, but simply criticism (CANDIDO, 1965).

Violence and the school system

Considering specifically the novel *Monoceros,* most characters in the novel are, one way or another, connected to the Catholic School in which the bullying takes place, as students, teachers, principals, counselors or relatives of the youngsters who attend that educational institution. Naturally, using the school itself as a site for the development of a narrative is nothing rare. Several writers from this and last century have been writing on educational systems and the school itself has been presented as the ideal place to bring up young characters to light. In Mayr's novel, however, the school is shown as if from the 'last desk' in class. As a reader, one is apart, detached from or not informed on any productive learning experience, any positive and progressive process that might (or should) be taking place. What one comes across in *Monoceros* is the inability of the school as an institution to help and protect those of its members suffering as a result of prejudice and discrimination. In more general terms, at the end of *Monoceros* one might question if anything besides hypocrisy and intolerance is being passed on to students at that school. It is impossible to deny that educational institutions have recently become quite violent places to be in, especially during the last decades of the 20th century and in several countries, but mainly in the North American context. The innumerous shootings, violent outbreaks taking place not only in high school institutions but also in primary schools and colleges in recent years seem to naturally link the topic of violence with the school system. In this context, it is often possible to identify explicit violence being directed against the other – the targeted one may be the teacher or ex-teacher, the principal, classmates or ex-classmates, and such violent outbreaks are frequently connected to bullying episodes.

Bullying has become one way of showing aggressiveness and intolerance towards other people without doing it in open ways. Probably the school environment is the most common place to see its workings. It is defined on the *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (2014) as the act of 'intimidating smaller or weaker people' but it is important to keep in mind that, in its archaic meaning, the word appears as connected to somebody 'hired to do violence'. Therefore, the idea of violence is immediately and explicitly there, impregnating the concept of bullying. One might infer that the fact of being intended as an intimidation towards some people taken as weaker characterizes bullying as an element in unequal systems of relationships in which several pschological games are at stake. In a similar direction, discussions on what the word 'violence' signifies has become more and more frequent and interdisciplinary and, thus, more difficult to summarize or define. So we really have to approach the concept from different perspectives, following what researchers and scholars on violence have been developing on the issue.

Suma Chitnis (1998), speaking in a conference on violence that took place in India, tries to see what differentiates it from a range of other kinds of negative experiences the individual might face. In this sense, she insists on asking: "Why is the pain

attached to violence more painful than any other pain? The fear, more fearful?" (CHITNIS, 1998, p. 11). Referring to a study undertaken in India and Korea, sponsored by Unesco, Chitnis (1998, p. 12) brings to light the following definition: "Violence in general is a coercive mechanism to assert one's will over another, in order to prove or feel a sense of power […]", which implies that it has also to do with the idea of perpetuating (or inaugurating) one's power over other people taken as powerless. There is, in fact, a frequent connection between violence and violation. According to The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1974), violation implies "[…] to treat (someone or something) profanely or with disrespect". So, following this definition, we have to agree with Chitnis (1998, p. 13) when she defends that, "[…] the essence of violence is a feeling of violation, of the transgression of what is considered to be human". It seems quite obvious that bullying can be taken as an act that violates the minimal 'humana traits' of the victim, making (or trying to make) this individual feel weak, out of place, rejected, almost inhuman.

If we consider Mayr's novel in this semantic context, it is possible to state that it brings up a form of psychological violence, this aspect becoming a structural part of the narrative itself. In fact, the suicide committed by a queer 17-year-old student referred to in the very first chapter of *Monoceros* conducts the development of the whole plot, determining the way all other characters relate to each other. The novel's first chapter, suggestively entitled 'Monday: The End', in which every paragraph begins with the word 'Because', tries to do the impossible, that is, make an absurd fact – the suicide of a young student – to become at least explainable, as far as one is able to keep a list of reasons for that to happen. On the first paragraph of Mayr's novel, one is informed of the bullying undertaken by some girls against a specific student, the leader of the girls being Petra. The group of girls not only spray 'u r a fag' on their victim's locker, but also take his skateboard, throwing it into the cold, icy river, from where he is not able to retrieve it, the board remaining deep down in the water, as if 'buried'. One can read the burial of the skateboard as an indicative of some tragedy lingering throughout the narrative. After that, the boy, always referred to along the narrative as 'the dead boy', gets a message sent by Petra stating "[…] [they] are going to kill [him]". (MAYR, 2011b, p. 10).

In fact, the never-admitted triangular affair formed by three characters, Petra, Ginger, and the dead boy, Patrick Furey, whose name we, as readers, only come across in his obituary, is from the beginning of the narrative announced as a violent, tense, tragic one. The two boys usually meet at the cemetery, halfway between their houses, where Ginger believes to be safe from other people's gaze, allowing his feelings towards his classmate to come up. In the first chapter we are immediately informed that Valentine's Day turned out to be one of the motives for the tragedy, since Petra becomes aware on that date about what is going on between her boyfriend and the dead boy. After Petra presses Ginger, he, afraid of all possible consequences that might come together with her threats, sends a final message to Patrick: "I can't hang out with y any more - this time its 4 real…I want my locket back" (MAYR, 2011b, p. 15). The locket, a symbol of the hidden love connection between the two boys, an object that used to belong to Ginger's deceased mother, marks the genuine sentimental exchanges taking place between them. Ginger gave it to the Patrick on Valentine's Day saying, "See, the rose engraved on the front [of the locker]? It's red. Red means love" (MAYR, 2011b, p. 12). The dead boy accepts the gift, asking why Ginger is not able to 'red him' at school. We as readers do not know yet that this is going to be their last meeting, the dead boy keeping the present as well as putting on Ginger's sweater as they get dressed and depart, not knowing it was given by Petra to Ginger. On the other hand, Petra is upset by the fact that Ginger gave her yellow roses for Valentine's Day. She is sure that yellow stands for friendship, not love. The yellow color of the flowers makes her deeply wish the death of the boy who is interfering in her love relationship. After seeing Patrick wearing the sweater she gave Ginger some days ago and becoming aware of what is really going on between them, the intensity of the bullying she performs against Patrick grows bigger and bigger.

It is important to mention that the narrative indicates that the 'almost dead boy' has earlier looked for some institutional help – Patrick tried to talk to the counselor about the spraying of bad words on his locker, the throwing away of his skateboard, several small acts against him that characterize the bullying he is suffering. Recognizing some queerness in the counselor, he even tries to indicate why he is being persecuted by suggesting his sexuality is being put into question. What comes out of that conversation is that the counselor is not able to deal with any themes related to sexuality, pretending he does not understand what is going on and not paying much attention to any complaints Patrick puts on the table.

Nan Stein (2007, p. 323), in a text on the growth of sexual violence in Elementary and Secondary

schools defends, after years of research on the school system, that

> […] over the course of the past few decades, incidents of sexual harassment in K-12 schools have been occurring at younger and younger ages and have become more sexually violent.

Although our main interest here is to discuss how bullying is represented in the novel under analysis, and not sexual harassment in general, there are aspects connecting these two concepts throughout Stein's research. She refers to verbal or psychological violence as aggressive responses to people's appearance, their sexual orientation, their race/ethnicity, even their religion. Nan Stein argues that the gender dimension is often left out in accounts on violence at schools. She states

> […] researchers on bullying, for the most part, have unfortunately failed to consider the ways in which adolescent boys (and adult men) unmercifully police one another with rigid and conventional notions of masculinity and the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality (STEIN, 2007, p. 328).

According to Stein (2007, p. 328), not to recognize these elements is "[...] to deny a central operating feature in boy culture, namely, the maniacally driven, tireless effort to define oneself as 'not gay'". From this perspective, it seems clear that violence must also to be acknowledged as a gendered phenomenon in order to better deal with bullying episodes at schools. In a similar direction Melinda York (2011) in her studies on violence states that it is clear that communities strongly marked by patriarchal paradigms have a tendency of being more violent against its non-masculine elements, since institutionalized inequality is present in the values, attitudes and behavior of such social groups.

In *Monoceros* it is interesting to observe that a female student, Petra, is performing or conducting the violence against Patrick while trying to assure heterosexual behavior on the part of Ginger, her boyfriend. She is the one who wants to control other people's feelings and performances, exerting some leadership on her classmates. Thus, she convinces her friends they have to give Patrick a lesson, in fact, several hard lessons. One might even consider that the name Petra was not chosen by chance by the author. Petra is the feminine form of Peter, derived from the Greek word *petra*, meaning 'stone or rock'. She is presented as a strong, 'rocky' character, not at all flexible, but her strength comes out as a very negative source of power she exerts on the whole group. When she hears about Patrick's suicide she simply reasons as follows, as the narrative voice puts it,

> So he killed himself. So sad. Too bad. So now he'll stop molesting her boyfriend. So glad. All she did was say she was going to rip his dick off. All she said was that she was going to kill him. Of course it was a joke. (MAYR, 2011b, p. 68).

The other female character in *Monoceros* who, in a sense, opposes herself to Petra is Faraday. Although Faraday is not involved in the triangle relationship established between her classmates, being, in fact, quite isolated in the school environment, she is able to perceive Petra's wickedness immediately. Faraday has a crash for unicorns – her earrings and shirts displaying different images of this mythical figure. According to the *Dictionary of World Mythology,* by Cotterel (1997), the unicorn is often connected to chastity and purity. Faraday, an isolated young girl, being more connected to the figure of unicorns than to other youngsters, is surprisingly the one who brings up some human traits to the plot itself. Living in a kind of mythical world she created for herself as a protection, Faraday is the closest one can get to the narrative voice in *Monoceros*. One might also consider that the unicorn in Astronomy is seen as part of the constellation of Monoceros. So Faraday is suggested as someone who is part of a system, a parallel, well-organized system not perceived or recognized by many people, functioning according to different rules. From this departed position, she is the one trying to make sense, since the beginning of the novel, on what is going on in respect to the dead boy, Patrick. Since the school does not know what to do after being informed of Patrick's suicide, just ignoring the fact for the first days, Faraday suspects something is not being told and puts the question to their English teacher on the first day Patrick is absent, " – Mrs. Mochinski? Where's Patrick today?" and the teacher, a bit nervous, answers: " – I don't know. He is away obviously" (MAYR, 2011b, p. 19). Later on we are informed the teacher is out of balance because of that suicide, not knowing what to do, as we read:

> The dead boy's desk sits in the middle of the room and she isn't allowed to say anything to the students because the principal doesn't have all the facts. Why would having the facts matter? (MAYR, 2011b, p. 39).

The novel follows the first seven days after the student's suicide, period of time in which nothing is being officially told to students about what happened to their classmate, in spite of all gossiping going on among them. Then, the narrative stretches

for eight more weeks, all referred to as 'Mondays after Furey's death'. So, although Patrick Furey is already dead, his absence conducts the construction of the whole plot. It is really possible to perceive that the main issue in *Monoceros* is not this particular death, but the way people involved in that school system are unable to deal with the causes and the consequences of the suicide undertaken by one of its members in consequence of actions performed inside the school environment. This is the reason why students have to keep discussing *Romeo and Juliet*, the love and deaths implied in Shakespeare's play, without making any reference to an extreme event that happened next to them, to one of their classmates, which also happens to involve love and death. This might be the reason why *Monoceros* provokes some level of discomfort to its readers. There are several very delicate issues being disguised in the conversations established among the involved characters. Thus, attuned with the discomfort that crosses the plot itself, some abject atmosphere raises during the reading of the novel, which we will discuss presently.

Abjection and the rejected desire

How does the idea of abjection become part of the plot of *Monoceros,* potentially affecting the reception of the novel? In their introduction to *The Abject of Desire*, Kulzbach and Mueller (2007) discuss strategies of aestheticizing the unaesthetic by and in cultural representations, trying to open up philosophical definitions of the aesthetic. The authors, agreeing with Menninghaus (2003) on his discussions on the idea of 'disgust', point out that in cultural production, what is perceived as 'disgusting', or unaesthetic, is often correlated with insights into the instability and the fragmentary nature of the self, since "[…] everything seems at risk in the experience of disgust. It is a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation" (KULZBACH; MUELLER, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, Kulzbach and Mueller (2007) follow similar paths to those developed by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection* (1982). For our focus, we consider as important the fact that the main idea defended by Kristeva, as well as by Kulzbach and Mueller, is the perception of abjection as individual or collective fear of 'otherness' that surface in very different situations, often evoking concomitantly a feeling of 'loathing and fascination'. So, Kulzbach and Mueller (2007, p. 8) state that

> […] the abject, which evokes both loathing and fascination, frightens when it manifests itself as bodily excretion because it is not the body itself, yet still a part of it.

The duality of being concomitantly included and excluded as a desired/rejected element marks the abject from the scratch, as studies on Psychology and Philosophy by Romanowski (2013) have defended.

Theories on the dyadic mother-child relationship, such as those presented by Kristeva (1982), defend that the first abject for any individual has to be the maternal body, since the one who gave birth to the new individual has to be expelled in order to allow the construction of borders that separate him/her from the (m)other. In this sense, "[…] what is expelled continues to be perceived both as attractive and as a threat to the separated self" (KULZBACH; MULLER, 2007, p. 9). If these authors refer to abjection as a necessary part of the mother/child relationship, a necessary phase of identity construction, we might consider that in *Monoceros* the abject that has to be eliminated is the homoerotic element. Patrick Furey is bullied and expelled from the group, almost forced to commit suicide, as a way of disappearing from the larger body (the school group) who does not accept him – he is the homoerotic element that provokes the desire/rejection of others. So, Petra appears as a tool for Ginger not to come out of the closet. She controls the social behaviour of both Patrick and Ginger, not allowing their homoerotic attraction towards each other to become publicly recognizable, as we read Ginger's regrets after hearing about Patrick's passing away,

> […] because his girlfriend Petra guessed the truth. And Ginger didn't deny that he wasn't sure he wasn't sort of maybe in love with Furey, even though for sure he was still in love with *her*. But he had to tell Furey it was over anyway (MAYR, 2011b, p. 51).

One is able to read vacillation all over Ginger's thoughts. He is not sure about his feelings while trying to make some sense of what happened. He remembers that, at his last meeting with the dead boy, when Patrick confesses being in love with him, he considered "[…] he wishes he could push the words, all in a clump, back into Patrick's mouth, that he could clump them into an icy snowball and whing them back" (MAYR, 2011b, p. 51). The almost edited, abject element, here represented by Patrick as homoerotic loving body, is perceived both as attractive and as a threat, similarly to what, according to Kulzbach and Mueller (2007, p. 9), takes place when abjection becomes visible:

> Encounters with the abject thus jeopardize personal and collective identity because they threaten the border of the subject and are accompanied by feelings of loss and loneliness. To escape the attraction of this dangerous otherness […] the individual must reject the abject in order to be able to define and defend the boundaries of identity.

One can also take into account what Iris Marion Young presents on the topic of abjection. Young (1990, p. 145) points out that marginalized groups such as people of colour and homosexuals often become the victims of a "[…] body aesthetic that defines some groups as ugly or fearsome and produces aversive reactions in relation to them", stating that

> […] the association between groups and abject matter is socially constructed; once the link is made, however, the theory of abjection describes how these associations lock into the subject's identities and anxieties (YOUNG, 1990, p. 145).

In fact, Patrick Furey becomes the source of abjection as a result of opening his feelings to Ginger, provoking in the later fear of being perceived by others as a homosexual; besides this, Furey's sexuality also provokes the school counsellor, since he has had a hidden relationship with the school principal for years, both not intending to lose their jobs in that Catholic school because of their private (forbidden) relationship. In this sense, one might infer if the abjection connected to Furey, the expelled element, represents, in fact, as Kulzbach and Mueller (2007) state, a threat to several of the other characters in the novel, bringing up the relationship between fear and desire, something they cannot rationally control.

Faraday, the girl who has a crash on unicorns in *Monoceros*, considers these mythical beings as possible saviours of generalized disgust she recognizes in her life as well as the lives of her classmates. Thinking of Furey's death,

> She wishes the dead boy had talked to her; she could have told him divine help would gallop down the hall any day now, she has arranged it, a blessing of unicorns is on its way to save them all, maybe during English, maybe a Monday morning, what a glorious day that will be, a Monday whinnying with unicorns (MAYR, 2011b, p. 65).

Since we mentioned earlier the frequent connections of unicorns to purity and chastity, one might infer if Faraday is, through these thoughts, trying to give some higher meaning to her classmate's death. Not by chance, the final chapter in the novel is entitled 'The Unicorns'. Here Faraday, dressed in her unicorn flannel pyjamas, reasons that "[…] there's no such thing as being normal, she's figured out. […] Unicorns are all she needs" (MAYR, 2011b, p. 259). She falls asleep and dreams of a group of unicorns coming to change her world.

> They scent her, they belong to her, they want her. But they also smell the school's sweaty, seedy smell of death, sweat squeezed out by fear and judgment. The blessing of unicorns seizes, ears pinned back, teeth bared, they begin to whinny. Eyes roll back, they bite the walls, strike the walls with their front legs, kick high with their hind legs. Pissing and shitting in fury, one shrieks. They all shriek (MAYR, 2011b, p. 260).

Those mythical, dreamt animals are finally running over and destroying that school, its buildings, its structures, while Faraday refers to that act as "[…] a breaking blessing" (MAYR, 2011b, p. 261). The presence of such undeniable animal traits brought to light by the unicorns' presence at the school environment at the end of the novel suggest not only the power of imagination and creativity in surpassing imposed limits, but also the importance of accepting the fact that attraction and rejection are personal and political forces at play in any human interaction, which only become problematic when violently suppressed.

Final considerations

The deadly atmosphere of the cemetery strongly present in Mayr's novel, the feelings only shown as 'red' when hidden, the fake-yellowish relationship between Petra and Ginger, the meaningless relationships established between the students, the workers, the principal, and the counselor at that Catholic High School, even the apparently meaningless content being taught day after day in classroom, all these aspects present in *Monoceros* question not only Patrick's hopelessness, but the school system as a whole. Agreeing with Compagnon (2001, p. 149), who defends that "[…] meaning is an effect experienced by the reader […]", we know we are invited by Mayr's text to fulfill the gaps and brackets she left on purpose throughout her narrative. Together with this necessary fulfillment, performed through the act of reading and making sense, we are invited to leave our comfort-zone not only as a result of the narrative strategies but also because of the topic being presented. In fact, the plot seems to point to the incapacity of nowadays' school system to deal with challenging situations resulting not only from new values and behaviors, but also with necessary alternative ways of learning and producing

knowledge – a knowledge that cannot be seen as totally detached from real life experience, with its intensity and sometimes violent, impulsive outcomes. This is the reason why *Monoceros* might be read as a call to society and, more specifically, to the school system, not only in the Canadian context, but also in broader terms. Literature produced on the topic of violence can, in fact, help us approach topics difficult to deal with in other contexts, because of their intrinsic abject, apparently illogic, unreasonable nature. By the reading of *Monoceros* and through literary discussions on its narrative focus it is possible to point out situations, real or fictional, in which humanity is being denied to some individual – be it male, female, white, non-white, queer or straight. In fact, it is interesting to notice that Mayr's novel attaches good and evil to both girls and boys, women and men, depending on how much they compromise to feel powerful and controlling. Schools could (and should) be places in which one would be invited to discuss the meanings - positive and negative - attached to both masculinity and femininity in more promising ways, avoiding violence, at least gendered violence, to come up so intensely, defying those who do not conform to traditional standards of sexual desire.

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