

GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME'S ANABELLE: A POSTMODERN REWRITING OF POE'S ANNABEL

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Abstract: This article examines the character Anabelle, from Loida Maritza Pérez's novel *Geographies of Home*, as a postmodern rewriting of Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee, from his homonymous poem. The many coincidences between the two characters allow this reading of the novel's Anabelle as a parodic appropriation of the nineteenth century character, aiming at subverting the canonic representation of romantic love and the romantic heroine.

Keywords: Postmodernism; parody; intertextuality.

INTRODUCTION

"The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network."
(Michel Foucault)

Half-way through the reading of Loida Maritza Pérez's novel *Geographies of Home*, the reader is struck by this character called Anabelle. In a world peopled by Marinas, Pilars and Esperanzas, a character with such an Anglo-sounding name seems misplaced, especially being a character that was born and raised in the Dominican-Republic, probably without any contact with the Anglo culture.

As the narrative proceeds, the reader realizes that perhaps there is a reason behind the apparently strange choice of the name Annabelle for such a character, since she reminds us more and more of Edgar Allan Poe's character Annabel Lee, from his homonymous poem, written and published in 1849. The *coincidences* between the two characters go far beyond the name.

Firstly, there is the strong presence of nature, especially of the sea and the wind, in both characters' contexts. Poe's poem starts with the lines:

*It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee* (POE, 1996, p. 957, my emphasis);

Throughout the poem, other references are made to the sea, and the poem closes with the following lines:

*And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea* (POE, 1996, p. 958, my emphasis).

In *Geographies of Home*, Papito – the focalizing character of the chapter in which Anabelle is introduced to us – met Anabelle in his youth in the Dominican-Republic, in his hometown of Barahona, which also lay by the sea. In fact, “the first time he saw her *she had been sitting on the beach* in a white cotton shift hiked to just below her hips and with her plump legs extended *to receive the sea rolling like her lover onto shore*” (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 151, my emphasis).

Even more remarkable than the presence of the sea is that of the wind in both the novel and the poem. Although the sea plays an intense role in the natural background of both characters, the wind does actually take an active part in both their stories. The first four lines in the third stanza of “Annabel Lee” read:

*And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee* (POE, 1996, p. 958, my emphasis);

And it was this chill that killed the character, which is confirmed in the fourth stanza, in lines 5 and 6:

*That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee* (POE, 1996, p. 958).

In Pérez's novel, the wind assumes tremendous proportions in the form of a tropical storm. In the middle of it, as Papito struggled to reach higher ground, he saw:

[...] someone walking from the opposite direction. So disconcerting was the sight that he came to an immediate halt. The apparition – for no person of this world would have moved so carelessly in a storm – drifted toward him with its back against the wind, its white dress transparent against its skin, its feet barely touching ground. When it moved past him, its body reeling from the force of the wind pushing it along, Papito believed that fatigue and the terrors of the storm had made him see what could not possibly be there.

Heart pounding with alarm, he turned to follow with his eyes the apparition posing as Anabelle (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 156, my emphasis).

As he watched what was actually Anabelle and not an apparition, Papito noticed that the girl seemed to be sacrificing herself to the wind: “Her arms flew up and her torso bent forward at a precarious angle. In *defiance of gravity*, she sustained this position and *offered herself to the wind*” (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 156, my emphasis). And, although her offer was not accepted, she, as Annabel Lee, also died short after her encounter with the wind.

Furthermore, as young girls in a men’s world, both characters were closely protected by their families. Annabel Lee’s noble family came and removed her from the company of her beloved, as we see in the poem’s third stanza, in lines 5 and 6:

*So that her highborn kinsman came
And bore her away from me* (POE, 1996, p. 958),

Similarly, Anabelle’s father was overprotective of his daughters and “controlled them with an iron will” (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 152), not allowing any suitors to come near Anabelle. She was always in the company of her younger sisters, and the townspeople warned Papito against approaching her, “or her father [would] come after [him] with a machete” (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 152). Anabelle always appeared in the novel dressed in white – as already shown in a previous quotation –, evoking an idea of chastity, which also reminds the reader of the maiden Annabel Lee, even if later both Papito and the reader will be startled at the realization that Anabelle was not a virgin any more.

In short, those are the features that made the novel’s Anabelle resemble the poem’s Annabel in such a noteworthy manner. Believing that in a postmodern work, like *Geographies of Home*, *coincidences* like those are not really chance occurrences, this article investigates how the novel’s character Anabelle may be read as a postmodern rewriting of the poem’s Annabel.

POSTMODERN PARODY AND INTERTEXTUALITY

The very first chapter of Linda Hutcheon’s (2002) *The Politics of Postmodernism* – “Representing the Postmodern” – begins with the question: “What is Postmodernism?”. Those readers who expect a clear and concise definition to follow are certainly surprised by the “answer” to the question:

Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word “postmodernism.” As a result, any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions. It will aim to say what postmodernism is but at the same time it will have to say what it is not (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 1).

Therefore, according to the author, any endeavor to define Postmodernism in clear-cut terms is pointless, and the best efforts to define it will have to include more what it is not than an exact definition of what it is. However, although one may not succinctly define Postmodernism, it is still possible to delineate some of its characteristics in a broader perspective.

One of these characteristics – and one which has a governing role – is the use of parody. Generally defined as a satirical or humorous imitation of serious pieces with the mere intention of ridiculing the original, parody has gained a more serious tone in postmodern art. In fact, postmodern parody is very much like the one defined above, but it goes beyond ridiculing the original: it aims at subverting it. By appropriating previous works of art into their works, and rewriting them through their own perspectives, postmodern artists contribute, firstly, to show that those classic representations are not irrefutable truths as they are constantly considered, and, secondly, to foreground the fictional status of History, since it is now possible to rewrite it in art. In other words, postmodern artists first install the past, in order to later subvert it.

Consequently, an important concept in postmodern art is “the presence of the past” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 244). Opposing Modernism’s break with history, Postmodernism revisits it, yet not in a nostalgic manner, but in a critical way, dialoguing with the past not only of art but also of society, so as to emphasize the constructed status both of aesthetic forms and social formations. “The past whose presence we claim is not a golden age to be recuperated” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 244-245), said Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi about the architecture of the “Strada Novissima”, but his words may be extended as well to describe other arts, including literature.

Therefore, although there has been quite a dominant trend in criticism which affirms that Postmodernism is apolitical, this kind of parody is nothing but political, as it aims at deconstructing fossilized artistic and social aspects. In fact, it has been the parodic aspect of postmodern art that has led to this view of Postmodernism as separate from politics. The defenders of this perspective accuse Postmodernism’s parodic appropriation of being narcissistic, self-reflexive and having limited accessibility, being accessible only to those able to recognize the sources being parodied. However, as it underlines “in its ironic way the realization that all cultural forms of representation – literary, visual, aural – in high art or the mass media are ideologically grounded, [...] they cannot avoid involvement with the social and political relations and apparatuses” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 3). Although Postmodernism lacks a theory of agency which aims at political action, Postmodern art is indeed political in the sense that its representations, though self-reflexive and aestheticized, do endeavor to de-naturalize the ideological groundings of both art and social practices. As Linda Hutcheon points, “postmodern art [...] uses parody and irony to engage the history of art and the memory of the viewer in a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through a reconsideration of their usually unacknowledged politics of representation” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 96).

Being parodic, postmodern art has an undeniable intertextual facet. Those who blame it for being inaccessible and elitist, since only those with a wide cultural baggage might be able to recognize some of the intertexts being parodied, overlook the fact that the use of intertextuality can also empower the audience. The authority of authorship is questioned by the growing participation of the audience in the construction of a work, since meanings are now open to interpretation, and both the concepts of author and reader, as those of reading and writing, are challenged. If, on the one hand, intertextuality accounts for the work of art’s closure and dependency on other texts, on the other, the intertextually constituted audience has an important role in the production of

meaning and is even independent to search for meanings which the artist herself may not have thought of and can participate in an active and creative way in the construction of the work, as co-creator. That being so, this article presents a reading of Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home's* character Anabelle as a parodic re-creation of Edgar Allan Poe's character Annabel Lee.

ANABELLE VS. ANNABEL LEE

As mentioned formerly, in the Introduction to this paper, the resemblance between *Geographies of Home's* Anabelle and Annabel Lee is uncanny. However, it is in the differences that the parody resides and those will be focused now in view of the previous discussion on postmodern parody.

Firstly, though Annabel Lee's description is not provided in the poem, one may picture her, based on all the imagery of Romantic heroines and, more particularly, on the widespread images of Poe's heroines portrayed in films, as a white and, most probably, blond girl. Anabelle, on the other hand, had "bronzed skin" and "woolly hair" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 151), as is expected of a Dominican character. This way, Pérez calls attention to the constructedness of the image of the romantic heroine, which mirrored the image of the upper-class European-looking nineteenth-century woman, and re-creates the character as a lower-class Caribbean-looking twentieth-century woman.

In reality, Anabelle's social class is not clear in the novel, but one may conclude she comes from a lower class, since Papito's intentions to marry her, being him from a poor background, signal the fact that she probably belongs to the same class as him. Annabel Lee, on the other hand, clearly comes from a wealthy background, since her "high-born kinsman" is mentioned in the poem's third stanza, fifth line. This shift from a character belonging to a high social class to one belonging to a lower one may have a parodic overtone if we consider that the original Annabel was created as part of a Romantic work, whereas the parodic Anabelle is a much more realistic – as realistic as a fictional character can be – portrait of a lower-class Dominican girl in the midst of the twentieth century. In other words, Poe's Annabel belongs to a world of castles by the sea, whereas her parodic version belongs to a world in which the vicissitudes of reality play a much heavier role. While Annabel Lee "lived with no other thought than to love and be loved" (POE, 1996, p. 957), Anabelle lost her mother very young and has to help raise her sisters. Not by accident, Papito notices when first meeting the girl that she looks like "someone who had lived far beyond her years" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 151).

Furthermore, the context in which Anabelle lives was far more notably patriarchal than that of Annabel Lee. While Annabel was free to spend time with her beloved, Anabelle's father controls his daughter "with an iron will" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 152). The following passage illustrates clearly what kind of social constraints are imposed upon girls at that time and place:

[Papito] intended to ask Anabelle's father for permission to visit her at home. To prove his intentions were honorable, he would assure them that he was employed and owned a home able to accommodate her and the many children he hoped they'd have. [...] More importantly, he would not, as he suspected others before him had, disrespect the father or the daughter by attempting to meet with her alone (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 154).

Later on, as Papito discovers the real reason for the girl's father's overprotection, the reader realizes that those social conventions, instead of protecting Anabelle from harm, contribute to a much bigger harm:

Only now, confronted with the evidence of Anabelle's belly protruding against the soaked fabric of her dress, did Papito understand why his friends had warned him to find himself another girl. Only now did he understand as well why she had hidden in shapeless garments throughout the previous months (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 158).

Realizing that Anabelle is pregnant and that her father has not done anything about it, Papito is abhorred by the conclusion to which he arrives: the girl has been impregnated by her own father. This unspeakable truth is actually never said in the novel, but it is clear to Papito and is also to the reader. Pérez, thus, deconstructs Annabel Lee's status as a maiden while raising awareness to the fact that patriarchal conventions might be much more harmful than is generally thought to women living under them.

After the initial shock, Papito decides to maintain his plans to marry Anabelle: "He would remove her from her home. He would marry her and help her raise her child so that she'd never again have to hang her head in shame. He would deliver her from the unnamable misery she had endured until that day" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 159). Though honorable as his intentions may sound, Papito again appeals to the same social conventions that allowed Anabelle's father to abuse her while society did nothing, since the father is believed to own the daughter. Pérez, however, writes a different fate for Anabelle, away from conventions, which is achieved only in death. As the girl dies, she frees herself not only from her abusive father but also from the prescribed gender role of wife and mother she would have to play, had she lived and married Papito. In a way, by "placing herself directly in harm's way" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 157) and dying, despite of all Papito's efforts to save her, Anabelle refuses to have one man deliver her from the misery caused by another and finally takes control of her fate, being given some measure of agency in the narrative.

Anabelle's lack of agency in the novel is emphasized by her not having a voice. She literally never speaks. This fact is constantly hinted at by the author in passages such as: "Papito imagined that her voice would be as enchanting as her name" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 152) and "Her lips emitted a sound which held no words" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 158). This is indirectly reinforced by the joke Papito suddenly remembers, while trying to save Anabelle, about the donkey that can speak and the bewilderment of the dog which exclaims "Imagine that! [...] A donkey speaking!" (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 159). Much like a donkey, a woman is also not allowed to speak in that context.

Finally, one may also read Papito's life after the death of Anabelle in parodic terms. In the poem, Annabel Lee's beloved affirms their eternal love and his everlasting devotion to her:

*And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.*

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
 Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
 And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
 Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
 And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
 Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
 In the sepulchre there by the sea,
 In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Papito, despite his adoration of Anabelle, as a working-class man, cannot afford to live on love for the rest of his life. He has to make a living, which is easier with a wife. He moves on to marry Aurelia, with whom he has fourteen children, and immigrates to the USA, although his thoughts still return him to Anabelle at a time of distress. Therefore, not only the romantic heroine but also the romantic hero are rewritten by Pérez in her novel.

CONCLUSION

Through this parodic recreation of the original character, Pérez critically deconstructs the classic view of romantic love and the romantic heroine, while foregrounding the oppression of women in patriarchal society. Therefore, “through a double process of installing and ironizing”, Pérez “signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 89).

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Resumo: Este artigo examina a personagem Anabelle, do romance *Geographies of Home*, de Loida Maritza Pérez, como uma reescritura pós-moderna da *Annabel Lee* de Edgar Allan Poe, personagem de seu poema homônimo. As muitas coincidências entre as duas personagens permitem essa leitura da Anabelle do romance como uma apropriação paródica da personagem do século XIX, com o objetivo de subverter a representação canônica do amor romântico e da heroína romântica.

Palavras-chave: Pós-modernismo; paródia; intertextualidade.