

The Grotesque Body in Pat Barker's Toby's Room

Ruobin Yu^{1,a,*}

¹*Institute of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Baiyun Bei Road, Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province, China*

a. 20200110024@gdufs.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In Pat Barker's 2012 novel *Toby's Room*, numerous portraits of grotesque bodies are found—from the pregnant mother and the deformed fetus, a dead man's shrunken penis on the dissection table, to the disfigured faces of the soldiers who fought in the First World War—these grotesque images are closely related and logically intertwined in revealing the characters' secret mindset and inner struggles, as well as foreshadowing their fate, arousing the readers a mixed feeling of sympathy and great horror. Relying mainly on Bakhtin's and Clark's notions on the grotesque body, this study analyzes the implications of the grotesque body in *Toby's Room*, articulates the logical connections among them, and explores the author's intention of depicting the grotesque body in the novel. The study concludes that 1) Through the narratives of the grotesque body, Pat Barker weaves the characters' tragedies into the dim landscape of British society; 2) Barker is calling for the establishment of a new social order by depicting the grotesque body in the novel.

Keywords: Pat Barker, *Toby's Room*, grotesque body, Mikhail Bakhtin, John R. Clark

1. Introduction

1.1. Pat Barker and *Toby's Room*

Pat Barker, a winner of Booker Prize, has been viewed as one of the most influential contemporary British writers. Her novels are recognized by the direct, blunt, plainspoken writing style, yet tender, healing content.

Having been engrossed in the war through stories told by the grandparents who raised her, Barker showed an early interest in writing War fiction. After the success of her Generation Trilogy, which told the story of W.H. River's treating soldiers with PTSD during wartime, Barker turned to a group of art school students and their personal lives during and after the Great War. Under such a premise, *Toby's Room* came into being.

Toby's Room tells the story of a woman artist, Elinor Brooke, looking for the truth of her brother Toby's death on the battlefield of World War One while revealing an incestuous relationship between Toby and herself when they were young. The novel attracted scholarly attention immediately after its publication. Precedent studies mainly focus on exploring trauma and memory, women's positions during wartime, and the relationship between art and war embodied in the novel. Anne Whitehead's study examines the figure of "mask" in *Toby's Room*, pointing out that Barker explores art's role in simultaneously "masking and unmasking the violence of war [1]." Liu Humin, however, analyzes

Elinor's incestuous love for Toby from the perspective of ethical study, revealing the collapse of family ethics and social values in British before the Great War [2]. However, both studies are relatively one-sided in terms of the interpretation of the novel. There remains a lack of explanation on the connection between the incest and the war, between Elinor's personal trauma and the trauma of a whole generation.

On the other hand, the manifestation of horror and cruelty of the First World War through the depictions of all kinds of grotesque images is mentioned by some book reviews: "Barker makes us see, with steadiness and without sensationalism, the men with no eyes, the men with no mouth, the men with no jaws [3] ..."

Despite the portraits of disfigured faces of the soldiers, Barker adds to the novel all kinds of bizarreness and surrealness. Whether it is Toby's sister who died in the womb and eventually turns into a deformed fetus or a dead man's shrunken penis Elinor sees on the dissection table, which reminds her of the sexual intercourse with Toby, the novel creates "a kind of deformed reality [4]," a reality made up by memory driven by personal trauma, in this case, family trauma, incest trauma, and war trauma. Through the grotesque body's writings, Pat Barker connects these three types of trauma. She weaves an individual's tragedy into the tragedy of British society after the war to manifest that nobody could escape from the catastrophe.

Relying mainly on Bakhtin's notions on the grotesque body, this study aims at discussing the grotesque representatives in *Toby's Room*. By analyzing the implications of each grotesque images and articulating the logical connections among them, the study further explores the author's intention of depicting the grotesque body in the novel.

1.2. The Grotesque Body

Since the 18th century, the word "grotesque" has been used to describe the strange, mystery, magnificent, fantastic, hideous, or disgusting. In literature, the portrait of something grotesque might invoke a mixed feeling of uncomfortable bizarreness and sympathetic pity in the readers.

Mikhail Bakhtin coins it as the "carnival grotesque," which involves twofold overtones—exhilarating exaggeration and the ominously extraterrestrial. In art and literature, the portrayal of genitals, hands, mouth, nostrils, belly bottom, human defecation, sexual intercourse, and death are often regarded as carnival grotesque. "The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing...through which, the artist manifests impiety, violence, madness, and death [5]."

The core of such manifestation is to renew through degradation. According to Bakhtin: "To degrade is to bury, to sow, to kill." (156) Degradation is the letting down of what is abstract and ideal to a lower level of material life to bring forth something new and better. Also, Bakhtin explains in the book that "The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, complete unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits." (188) Bakhtin observes all bodies as one and as the same, relating to a greater circle of life.

The present study views the grotesque body portraits in *Toby's Room* as typical examples of Bakhtin's "carnival grotesque". Some of the grotesque representatives, whether it is the fetus that died and curled up in the womb, the shrunken genital of a dead man, or the losing nose and arms of a soldier are concerned with the physical life of human beings only in the absence of regeneration. They help the author create a fictional world full of despair and frustration, which almost seems realistic and solemn.

The novel's grotesque portrayal of the soldier defecating on the battlefield borders on John R. Clark's notions of the modern grotesque. Clark views the images of the grotesque body as lowering man's presumptuous view of himself. For Clark, modern grotesque literature invokes "the paroxysm of hopeless laughter and desperate, unnatural comedy [6]". Furthermore, the grotesque image mocks

and ridicules the self-delusional man who aspires to upgrade and promote himself by downgrading him to the status of a “defecating animal” (120). The image of a soldier defecating on the battlefield is a manifestation of human “degradation” through hopeless laughter and desperate comedy. It ruthlessly mocks the darkness and ugliness of the war itself by downgrading a man on the battlefield to a “defecating” animal, exposing the nature of war—the transformation of ordinary men into beasts without humanity or dignity.

2. The Grotesque Body in *Toby's Room*

2.1. The Mother's Hideous Pregnancy and the Deformed Fetus: Estrangement of the Family

The first grotesque appears at the very beginning of the novel. The mother, sensing Elinor's abnormalcy after the night sleeping with Toby, decides to uncover the secret of Toby's birth. “I never felt really well when I was expecting him...and when I went to labor, it was difficult [7].” After her hideous pregnancy, the mother gives birth to Toby and a “thing” that has died in the womb. According to the mother, the dead fetus was deformed and had turned into a parchment-like scroll of human tissues.

Two grotesque images are discovered here: the pregnant mother and the deformed fetus. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin mentions the “pregnant hags” in the famous Kerch terracotta collection. “pregnant hag” is a typical grotesque, according to Bakhtin, because it is ambiguous and paradoxical— “It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth.” In the case of *Toby's Room*, the pregnant mother manifests a different kind of ambivalence: it is a living who gives birth to death. The mother's body here represents the grotesque of a vibrant flesh mingling with an unborn yet decaying, deforming flesh, the undertone of which is chaotic and depressing.

The mother's hideous pregnancy echoes her unhappy marriage with her husband, who is irresponsible, indifferent, and pedophilic. The father cares more about his work than the family. When the dead fetus came out, he appeared to be “excited” instead of woeful, showing no concern for his wife; Elinor later reveals that she sees her father dating a young girl. The mother, on the other hand, rigid and neurotic, confines herself to a sickbed. Ignored by the husband, she pours all her love to Toby, the only male who still cares for her. The love transpasses the boundary of parental love. It is, in Elinor's words, “an obsession” (44). Therefore, she sees Elinor as a competitor— “Elinor was trying to read her mother's expression. Jealousy? Yes.” (22)—the mother's sharing of this unpleasant story turns out to be a warning against Elinor's unusual intimacy with Toby, revealing her hidden sexual desire towards the son.

The fetus, on the one hand, symbolizes the chaotic ethical dynamics in the household. According to Bakhtin, image of a fetus and an infant represent something new, and it means the rebirth of order. The fetus in the novel however, is deformed and dead, representing the dysfunction and estrangement of Elinor's family, uncovering the rotten and necrotic side of the household that is shielded by an elite and charismatic middle-class surface.

On the other hand, the fetus reflects Elinor's conflicted mentality. She regards herself as the incarnation of the dead sister. When Elinor observes herself in the mirror, she has this illusion of looking at the baby Toby had killed in the mother's womb. Then she suddenly realizes that Toby's kindness is not out of love but out of survivor guilt. Toby's eagerness to possess her and his jealousy when hearing Elinor talking about other boys originates from his tormented ego in search of the other part of him, which was lost as the twin sister died in the womb.

2.2. Shrunk Penis and the Removed Ovary: Elinor's Loss of Self Identity and Spiritual Castration

Before the incest occurs, there is a plot in chapter one where Toby forcibly kisses Elinor in an old

mill house. "His lips fastened on to hers with a groping hunger that shocked her into stillness," "his tongue thrust between her lips, a strong muscular presence..." (24)

The author compares kissing with eating. For Bakhtin, eating is a manifestation of the grotesque body because the act transgresses its own limits: "It swallows, devours, rends the world apart," and that "man tastes the world, introduces it to his body, makes it a part of his own." The kiss manifests the brother's intention of "sucking" and "devouring" the sister, making her a part of his own.

Moreover, the kiss is in fact, a metaphorical sexual intercourse before the real one takes place. Toby's tongue, here, represents the penis, while the motion of "thrust" indicates his latent sexual desire for Elinor. Toby's tongue, or his penis, so to speak, is "protruding," "irregular," and "secreting", which manifests "impiety, violence, madness, and death." For Elinor, it is the kiss of death. The unrequited and forbidden love for Toby, the incest-generated trauma, as well as Toby's attempt to forget about what happened between them, 'kill' Elinor from the inside. The brother "sucks" the life out of her. She thus becomes a part of him. It is mentioned later in the novel, when Elinor looks into the mirror after getting a haircut, she sees not herself but Toby in the mirror. Here, Elinor fails to recognize herself, which is why she secures herself to the dead sister after hearing the story. But more importantly, the plot indicates her identity crisis after the incest. She is gradually losing herself.

It is not only the "self" Elinor is losing. The following two grotesque images in the novel, a dead man's shrunken penis on the dissection table, and her illusion of being spayed, show Elinor's loss of sexuality and vitality after the incest. "...along the flat nave of his belly to where his penis lay, a shriveled seahorse on an outcrop of wrinkled and sagging skin..." (36) Somehow, the shrunken penis reminds Elinor of Toby and the night she spent with him in his room. Elinor describes this as reminiscent of being familiar, frightening, and unknown.

The male genitalia is yet another classic grotesque image. In Bakhtin's view, it is often related to a positive exaggeration, for it swells, expands, and protrudes, and most importantly, generates new life. However, the penis Elinor sees is "a shriveled" one with "wrinkled and sagging skin", the complete opposite of positive exaggeration or hyperbolization. The shrunken penis serves as an implicit explanation to the readers of Toby's sodomy by the end of the novel. Toby is not able to properly perform sexually with girls after the incest, so he has to seek sexual satisfaction from sodomy. On the other hand, Elinor's recalling the night with Toby while observing the penis indicates her loss of sexuality due to the incest-generated trauma, which also explains her sexual apathy when dating Kit and Paul. Unlike Toby, who physically lost sexual ability, she is spiritually castrated.

It is also manifested in chapter 3 when Elinor gazes at herself in the mirror, cupping her breasts and spreading fingers over her belly. She is captured by a sudden feeling of horror and jumps off the bed, "Sometimes, like this morning when she'd looked at Laura on the dais, trying not to imagine her in bed with Kit...she felt spayed." (40) Here, the grotesque appears to be the female body. Feminist scholars like Margaret Miles view the female grotesque as an "individual configuration and boundaries" taken away through "menstruation, sexual intercourse, and pregnancy. [8]"

Elinor's illusion of being spayed while touching her belly suggests her awareness of losing sexuality and vitality, for nothing could be regenerated and reproduced from her. The "child" is already dead before it could ever be conceived. Before the incest actually takes place, Elinor is unaware of the intense emotion she holds for Toby. However, after that night in Toby's room, Elinor realizes her abnormal desire, both emotionally and sexually, for Toby, as it is shown by her imitation of Toby's cupping of her breasts early on when they kiss in the mill-house, as well as the dangerous consequence their incestuous relationship may end up into, because unlike other couples they are not allowed to have "outcomes." Elinor is forced to withdraw her emotions and repress her sexual desire for him.

Furthermore, the grotesque images reveal Elinor's confusion, ambivalence, and fear of being a girl about to come to age, who is still adapting herself to the outside world. It is depicted in chapter two;

when Elinor returns to school, she compares herself to an animal leaving a blood trail in the snow. (30) Here, blood might suggest Elinor's bleeding from a ruptured hymen during the incest. The blood trail in the snow demonstrates Elinor's fear of the incest being discovered by others. Also, she is afraid of being "abnormal" and thus alienated.

On the other hand, the blood trail in the snow indicates that her life will never be the same as it used to be and that the depression, the horror, and the anxiety of alienation will always haunt her.

2.3. Disfigured Faces of the Soldiers: Direct and Indirect War Trauma

In the second half of *Toby's Room*, Barker shows the readers another kind of horror and despair through her writings of the grotesque in war. In the novel, battle scenes are rarely depicted since Barker's impression of the Great War mainly comes from her grandfather, who served in the British army and was wounded. However, she adopts a unique angle to observe the brutal, inhuman warfare. In chapter six, Barker goes into detail describing the character Neville's experience of defecating on the battlefield, and how he "had not been able to wipe himself properly after his last shit and his arsehole was getting sorer by the mile." (142)

Human defecation, for Bakhtin, is a manifestation of "degradation" in art. Clark views defecation in contemporary art and literature as a coming back to human nature. For Clark, defecation in modern art satirizes the "proud, self-delusional man whoever aspires to elevate himself and his dignity" as downgraded to the status of a "defecating animal."

Barker's depiction on Neville's defecation on the battlefield contains three different aspects. Firstly, it represents Neville's and also most of the young soldier's contempt for the war. The grotesque image of defecation "degrades" the preaching of just war and encouragement of heroism, and exposes the darkness, ugliness of the war itself. Secondly, it downgrades a man on the battlefield to a "defecating" animal, exposing the nature of war—the transformation of ordinary men into beasts without humanity or dignity. Thirdly, it echoes Neville's incontinence due to war trauma mentioned in later chapters, suggesting the devastating changes of the soldiers both physically and mentally.

Later in the novel, Barker spends two chapters writing another important grotesque—the deformed faces of the soldiers, through which she connects Elinor's story with the brutal warfare. Under the suggestion of her former Slade teacher, Henry Tonks, Elinor receives the job of sketching the soldiers' disfigured faces in Queen Mary's hospital. It is where she sees: "A man with one eye came up to her... the other eye was a moist slit with a few sparse eyelashes clinging feebly to the lid." (121) The facial deformation can be viewed as an externalization of the soldiers' conflicted and tormented mentality. The soldiers see their deformed faces as a stigma of coming back from the battlefield.

Early in the novel, it is known that Elinor spends most her time in the country house during the war, trying to stay away from the war and to escape from the reality. However, after witnessing these grotesque facial injuries, she feels disturbed and even forgets how to eat properly: "...chewing and swallowing seemed to have become hard work as if she too lacked the basic equipment for the task." (150) The facial injuries of the soldiers bring nothing but horror and pain to whoever sees them. Witnessing these grotesque images, Elinor encounters the fear of the war indirectly. The trauma transferred by the soldiers to Elinor, the previous trauma she received from Toby's death, and the incest intermingle and turn into a pain that is so overwhelming that she can not manage to escape.

Pat Barker is one of many people who turn the grotesque faces of soldiers into art forms. Ernst Friedrich, author of *War Against War* (1924), used grotesque photographs of war victims to campaign for peace. Henry Tonks, the actual historical figure, a war artist, produced a private and secret record of the disfigurement of the Great War through his portraits of the soldiers' disfigured faces, to which he explains that it is the loss of identity and individuality. Barker once said in an interview that "the one thing that gets empathy is a cry of pain—the reality of other people's body [9]." Contemporary society tends to make the casualties and experience of war more abstract, making it hard for ordinary

people to imagine the horror and the losses. Barker uses grotesque realism in her novel to break the boundaries created by modern society's abstraction of war and its casualties. Her vivid and almost horrifying portrait of the soldier's disfigured faces shows the readers that the sufferings of the combatants and the terror of war are more than just vague ideas.

2.4. The Fetus-shaped Stain on the Sheets: Possible Rebirth of Life

By the end of the novel, Elinor finally decides to leave her parents' house and start a new life with Paul. As she leaves Toby's room, Elinor uncovers a small stain on the mattress. The stain is described to be "a crescent shape, like a fetus curled up in the womb..." (231)

The stain is supposedly a mark of the incest, indicating that Elinor's trauma might never be removed. The shape of it, "a fetus curled up in the womb," resonates with the dead fetus at the beginning of the novel, also, the Elinor who has been killed, by the intricate relationship she has with her family, by the brother's fatal love, and by the war.

However, it also symbolizes the start of a new life. As Elinor leaves Toby's room for the last time, she is saying goodbye to the old world of pain and suffering and embracing a new life waiting ahead. As Barker herself mentioned: "I am more interested in the process of recovery, rebuilding...how far people be healed from traumas that ruin their lives—there are no easy answers but an underlying optimism about human beings," the fetus-shaped stain might stand for the rebirth of life. It suggests the hope of the future, expressing an aspiration for social reconstruction.

3. Conclusion

The ingenuity of *Toby's Room* lies in Barker's use of the grotesque to connect the life of each individuals, whether it is Elinor who falls in love with Toby, or Toby who is suffering from survival guilt, and the soldiers who are seriously injured, spiritually and physically in the war, against the bleak background of a once almighty nation of power and discipline falls dismally. In a harsh, brutal, and somewhat obscure way, she is writing a greater tragedy of people unable to receive rescue in a crumbling, failing society. Barker once said in an interview after publishing *Toby's Room*: "I think most of the time, we are living in little capsules, and these capsules rob along well, but they are never connected as they do in a war, in which the whole society is focusing one thing...and that is something I want to grasp [10]."

By depicting the grotesque body, Barker builds a gloomy, desperate, and traumatic literary world in which no one can be immune from the pain of the war. However, by the novel's end, the fetus-shaped stain on the mattress might suggest the rebirth of life. As Elinor leaves Toby's room for the last time, she is saying goodbye to the old world of pain and suffering and embracing a new life waiting ahead. It is observed that the author is calling for the establishment of a new social order.

References

- [1] Whitehead, A. "War and Beauty: The Act of Unmasking in Pat Barker's *Toby's Room* and Louisa Young's *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*", *The Recovery of Beauty: Arts, Culture, Medicine*. C. Saunders, J. Macnaughton, D. Fuller (Eds.) London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.218.
- [2] Liu, H. "Lack of Ethical Education, Misplaced Ethical Identities and Incest-engendered Trauma: A Study of *Toby's Room* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literary*, Vol. 2, No.2, June 2018, p.265.
- [3] Lee, H. "Toby's Room by Pat Barker". *The Guardian*, August 10, 2012, Retrieved on August 28, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/10/toby-room-pat-barker-review>
- [4] Vernon, J. "Rendering and Remembering". *New York Times*, October 5, 2012. Retrieved on August 31, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/books/review/tobys-room-by-pat-barker.html>.
- [5] Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Helen Iswolsky(Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- [6] Clark, J. R. *The Modern Satiric Grotesque*. Georgetown: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991.

- [7] Barker, P. *Toby's Room*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.
- [8] Miles, M. "Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque." *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Yates, James Luther Adams and Wilson (Eds.). Michigan & Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, p.134.
- [9] Jaggi, M. "Dispatches from the Front", *The Guardian* Aug.15, 2003, Retrieved on July 17, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/16/fiction.featuresreviews>
- [10] Penguin Press, "Pat Barker's interview with the Penguin Press", *Penguin Book* May 24, 2012 Retrieved on June 10, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/09780241144572,00.html>