

The Holy Bitch That Can Be a Witch in *The Grass Harp*

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This paper comprises an analysis of the modernist American writer Truman Capote's novel *The Grass Harp* (1951) from a feminist perspective. While the novel treats the ostracizing of four people by the oppressive mindset of a patriarchal society, the female character Dolly Talbo who leads the banished group to live in a tree house becomes the embodiment of a Goddess image introduced by the New Age Spiritualities and Neopaganism. Creating a new culture for women as an alternative to the patriarchal system, in which concepts such as love, herbalism, and magic are sanctioned as sacred, and offering this culture as an opportunity to all human beings, Dolly Talbo can be perceived as a contemporary holy witch who becomes an occult and undermining threat to the patriarchal order.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Neopaganism, New Age Spirituality, feminism, patriarchal system

Introduction

New Age Spiritualities and Neopaganism appear as alternative belief systems to the patriarchal orthodoxies which have rejected female authenticity and thus become oppressive systems for women. With its emphasis on the consecration of female spirituality, and its celebration of an independent and liberated Goddess image, Witchcraft can be regarded as a form of New Age Spirituality. Though seeming to involve in a separatism of its own by rejecting the patriarchal system and its inhibitions, it does offer women a new vision of life and a new understanding of love. The main female character Dolly Talbo in the modernist American writer Truman Capote's novel *The Grass Harp* (1951) can be said to epitomize a holy witch of the Witchcraft tradition. In her passive resistance to the patriarchal society as the leader of an ostracized group, her association with the concepts of herbalism, chanting, love and love of life which are among the significant concepts of Witchcraft, present her as the Goddess image of the contemporary witches of the Wicca/Witchcraft tradition.

New Age Spiritualities as Alternative Belief Systems to the Patriarchal Orthodoxies

Truman Capote's novel *The Grass Harp* can be qualified as one of the most sensational and also the rebellious—though in a quite passive tone—novels of the late modernist American fiction. The novel narrated from the perspective of an orphaned teenager boy Collin Fenwick who is left to live with his aunts Dolly and Verena Talbo in a small Southern American town, focuses on the decision of Dolly, known as a shy introspective herbalist, to leave the Talbo house with Collin and their help Catherine as a reaction to her sister Verena who, as the richest and the most successful businesswoman of the town, wants to mass produce Dolly's medicines with the help of a physician. Having nowhere to go, the group retreats to a tree house in a China tree located in the River Woods area, the setting where Dolly gathers her secret herbs. Temporarily accompanied by

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two more characters, the company becomes a group of outcasts who learn to listen to their inner voices and redefine the concept of love yet mutually criticizing and criticized by the townspeople. While criticizing the norms and values of a changing society and culture, the community of seclusion also presents the pathetic experience of human life in cases of alienation and the search of communication and mutual love. As a matter of fact, as Malcolm Bradbury suggests, these dilemmas also reflect the grotesque mood of the American novels written in the 1940s and 1950s:

Set mostly not in the urban but the rural world, in the decline of the South ... often among children, neglected women, or the physically damaged or disabled, this fiction touched with the "tragic sense of life" that marked the times—was less concerned with sociological report than with the exploration of human loneliness and the eternal problem of evil. Broken communication and the failed love are prevailing conditions. Loneliness can lead to pure existential exposure, or perhaps to a saving religious awareness, in which knowledge of human evil becomes a step towards truth. (Bradbury, 1992, pp. 162-163)

While this—especially regional—late modernist fiction reflects a vision of disorder, fracture, and lack of communication, these experiences have come to underlie the widely shared moods of many writers in their endeavors of adaptation into the distinct historical and cultural transformations experienced all over Western societies. The roots of this "cultural revolution in Western societies ... were essentially anti-establishment, and cultural mores based in conservative social values were derided and attacked" (Russell & Alexander, 2007, p. 194). In parallelism with modernism's "attempts to offer alternative modes of representation" (Childs, 2000, p. 3) to the accepted perspectives of the period, the dissatisfaction with and the desire to deconstruct the deeply-rooted traditional norms, values and authorities can be seen in many fields. Hence, the vision of this period depicts "a renewed Romanticism based upon feelings" in which "notable manifestations were environmentalism; feminism; sexual liberation; drugs; electronic entertainment; gay, lesbian and transsexual liberation; occult fiction and films; crystals and tarots" (Russell & Alexander, 2007, p. 194). In tune with these changes, the power of traditional patriarchal religions also weakens since "orthodoxies of all kinds—especially religious ones—were mocked and reviled" (Russell & Alexander, 2007, p. 194). As a result, the changing perceptions about religious systems and basic institutions resulted in the development of alternative approaches towards a new understanding of life and existence. Feminist and woman-centered movements which emphasize the revaluation of female existence and which give voice to the long-repressed female experience comprise a significant aspect of these alternative approaches towards the deep-rooted patriarchal system.

Among these woman-based movements Wicca, Witchcraft and Neopaganism as alternative New Age Spiritualities can be given as examples to depict "vision of women standing together against the forces of repression" (Savage, 2000, p. 106). In their rebellious and revolutionary attitudes these woman-centered movements emphasize the necessity of offering alternative systems to the traditional male-biased religions which have long devalued female existence since "the maleness of God marginalizes or excludes the value and importance of femaleness" (Peach, 1998, p. 368). Therefore, "women's spirituality" which appears "as a form of religious separatism" encourages and celebrates the power of female independency and liberation (Russell & Alexander, 2007, p. 174). And the unity and existence of women in these communities are also perceived as a holy paradise in which the female "consciousness of immanence" is opposed to "patriarchal consciousness of estrangement" (Salomonson, 2002, p. 70). In this holy paradise structure, the dissatisfaction with the male-based God image is replaced by an authentic Goddess image referred to as witch.

Dolly Talbo as a Witch in *The Grass Harp*

Although not openly labeled as witch, Dolly's presentation in *The Grass Harp* as a worthy herbalist relying on her inner resources within her authentic female identity reminds the reader of the contemporary representation of the powerful witch or Wicca. The alternative life-style at the China tree realized in Dolly's guidance is perceived as a significant threat to the order of the small Southern town in which the basic institutions and social life are shaped by normative patriarchal religious forces. During their challenging visit to the tree house, a group of town authorities embodied in the identities of the Sheriff, the Judge and the Reverend refer to this threat against the order of the town—and in particular to the religious order—in these words:

I say shame on you. How can you have come so far from God as to sit up in a tree like a drunken Indian—sucking cigarettes like a common ... floozy. You may imagine you are getting away with something. But let me tell you there will be a retribution—not in heaven, right here on earth. (Capote, 1951, pp. 36 -39)

Besides foregrounding the dissatisfaction with the religious order threatening the ostracized group, these sentences uttered by Reverend Buster also depict the fear that the strange community on the China tree guided by Dolly might be a threat to the long-established order of the society. However, such an approach to the social outcasts becomes the proof of the widespread belief that “in contemporary fantasy, witches ... were endowed with an almost unlimited power to destabilize society, destroying its morality and forcing this world in a reversal of the divine order of things” (Schulte, 2009, p. 257). Indeed Dolly becomes a threat for that society with her different and uncommon image defined by the help Catherine as “a spirit, a pagan” who should not be “calculated by the eye alone” but who, as strange “acceptors of life” grant a different meaning to life, hence being “always in trouble” (Capote, 1951, p. 47). As a matter of fact, Neopaganism is accepted as an alternative religion which covers various New Age traditions under its umbrella among which feature concepts like witch, witchcraft and Wicca. Although this new tradition is perceived as a threat by conventional and conservative perspectives, it foregrounds the independent and creative human being who is “driven by an inner vision and light that is often hard to explain” (Telesco, 2005, p. 21). It is also significant that in Neopaganism “witches are attempting to retrieve the positive aspects of pagan religion and to weave them into a new, modern synthesis” in which “the positive values inherent in this attempt” foreground “individual creativity”, intuition and inner vision (Russell & Alexander, 2007, p.196). This inner vision which is granted to the Goddess image in the Wicca tradition is also explained as a “secret” or “an inner knowledge that literally cannot be expressed in words” and defined as “That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told” (Starhawk, 1998, p. 394). These secrets shared by witches are accepted as sacred and become for them a “direct expression of the life force” (Starhawk, 1998, p. 399).

In *The Grass Harp*, this secret life energy is explained as “the energy [they] spend” as “a great piece of luck provided [they] know how to use it” which helps them “to find out who [they] truly are” (Capote, 1951, p. 48). Dolly's secret energy guides her to find her true self in the rejection of all socially imposed roles and expectations. “You'd best look again: I am myself” (Capote, 1951, p. 103) says Dolly to her materialistic sister Verena who is ready to manipulate her power and energy.

As a matter of fact, this secret energy was granted to Dolly when she was yet a small girl by a gypsy woman who with her two friends was trespassing. Highly delighted by their physical appearances and behaviors, Dolly helps the women since one of them was in labor. In return for her kindness one of the gypsies grants Dolly the gift of knowledge and energy she will be endowed with for the rest of her life:

Then one of the old women took my hand and said: Now I am going to give you a gift by teaching you a rhyme. It was a rhyme about evergreen bark, dragonfly fern—and all the other things we come here in the woods to find: *Boil till dark and pure if you want a dropsy cure*. In the morning they were gone; I looked for them in the fields and on the road; there was nothing left of them but the rhyme in my head. (Capote, 1951, p. 16)

Thus, from her early girlhood, Dolly, endowed with the inspiration and guidance of this gift, has been able to establish a connection with the natural and spiritual worlds, which furnishes her with a higher consciousness:

About all natural things Dolly was sophisticated; she had the subterranean intelligence of a bee that knows where to find the sweetest flower: she could tell you of a storm a day in advance, predict the fruit of a fig tree, lead you to mushrooms and wild honey, a hidden nest of guinea hen eggs. She looked around her, and felt what she saw. (Capote, 1951, pp. 12-13)

Rituals of Witchcraft in *The Grass Harp*

As a matter of fact, this higher consciousness of Dolly can be illustrated as the “OOBES” in other words “Out-of-Body-Experiences” in the tradition of neopagan witchcraft; a personal intuitive experience in which the “awareness” of a witch is accepted as “all-encompassing”. Therefore, witches “see not only what is in front but also what is behind, above, below and on the sides—all at the same time” (Buckland, 2002, p. 88).

Dolly who combines “OOBES” with her inner intuition experiences a perfect harmony and communication with nature as well. Although nature is generally associated with emotional femininity and culture with rational patriarchy, nature in itself is acknowledged as “the temple of God” (Bercovitch, 1975, p. 152) even in the most patriarchal Puritan societies. However, nature gains a further significance for the New Age Spiritualities in which the witch is identified with the Goddess of nature. This relationship is explained by Starhawk (1998) as such:

Our relationship to the earth and the species that share it has also been conditioned by our religious models ... The model of the Goddess, who is immanent in nature, fosters respect for the sacredness of all living things. Witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology. Its goal is harmony with nature, so that life may not just survive, but thrive. (p. 397)

In *The Grass Harp*, Dolly’s harmony and communication with nature compose a significant aspect of her feminine identity. It is Dolly who comprehends the messages emanating from natural life which revitalize her OOBES in nature:

It was her habit, even when it rained, to loiter along an ordinary path as though she were dallying in a garden, her eyes primed for the sight of precious medicine flavorings, a spring of penny royal, sweetmary and mint, useful herbs whose odor scented her clothes. She saw everything first, and it was her one real vanity to prefer that she, rather than you, point out certain discoveries: a birdtrack bracelet, an eave of icicles—she was always calling come see the cat-shaped cloud, the ship in the stars, the face of frost. (Capote, 1951, pp. 85-86)

However, Dolly’s close relationship and communication with nature take us to a significant step in witchcraft rituals which is known as herbalism. Herbalism requires an understanding of the language of plants and herbs to be employed in the production of the magical energy used in healing. This concept of herbalism is explained as a significantly positive traditional ritual to be accomplished by all witches endowed with supernatural power. This concept has its roots not only in contemporary New Age Spiritualities but in all traditional witchcraft practices:

Traditionally witches have a general knowledge of herbs and their healing powers ... It could be important that Witches once again be the Wise Ones of Herbal Medicine ... Herbal medicine goes back thousands of years. It derives

from Wo/Man's needs for health and strength; cures for ills and the mending of wounds ... Throughout the ages mysterious healing powers have been attributed to certain wild plants, flowers and herbs. So-called "Nature Doctors" (witches) of the past were familiar with these natural remedies. (Buckland, 2002, p. 135)

Herbalism has become the most important aim of Dolly's life with which she prepares her "dropsy cure". Gathering wild herbs and preparing her secret concoction with them become a witchcraft ritual which should be accomplished in silence and secrecy. The little narrator explains Dolly's mysterious activities during these rituals in the following way:

We separated into the woods, each carrying a grain sack to be filled with herbs, leaves, strange roots. Noone, not even Catherine, knew altogether what went into the medicine, for it was a secret Dolly kept to herself and we were never allowed to look at the gatherings in her own sack: she held tight to it, as though inside she had captive a blue-haired child, a bewitched prince ... I was there the other day, and came across an old iron tub lying overturned in the weeds like a black fallen meteor: Dolly—Dolly, hovering over the tub dropping our grainsack gatherings into boiling water and stirring, stirring with a sawed-off broomstick the brown as tobacco spit brew. She did the mixing of the medicine alone while Catherine and I stood watching like apprentices to a witch. (Capote, 1951, pp. 15-17)

At this point, it is also worth noting that "sometimes doctors *rediscover* these ancient remedies and hail them as the outcome of modern research and science" (Buckland, 2002, p. 135). As a matter of fact, this is what Verena intends to do with the help of the physician Dr Morris Ritz. By mass-producing Dolly's dropsy potion she hopes to establish new business relationships. However, it is this intention of Verena that causes Dolly to leave her town and settle in the tree house. Instead of sharing her secret formula that links her to the magical world of witchcraft, Dolly decides to cut off her links with her social world.

Dolly's relationship with nature and the supernatural world is not limited to herbalism and her association with wild plants. The setting of the novel as well as the settlement of the outcast community at the China tree house is not a coincidence, but a deliberate choice. While the tree image suggests to the reader the outcast group's identification with the heart of nature and natural elements that detach them from the patriarchal culture and its inhibitions, norms and rules, it has further connotations associated with the mysteries and rituals within the witchcraft tradition. While the neopagans and witches believe in the sacred teachings of the tree, they also associate the sacred trees with a deity and being in the service of that deity:

It is common knowledge that our European ancestors once worshipped or highly venerated trees. Some trees were believed to house various deities and spirits. Throughout Europe sacred groves were established and dedicated to various gods and goddesses ... Tree branches were considered magical. Trees were once intimately connected to specific deities represented by a sacred tree. To carry a sacred branch was to declare oneself as intermediary of the deity or to be in some type of service to a specific god or goddess. The latter implied that one was also under the protection of his or her deity. (Grimassi, 2008, pp. 27-28)

In *The Grass Harp*, the China tree becomes a refuge and a place of belonging for Dolly and her small community, on whose branches they have been protected from the attacks and inhibitions of the patriarchal society. Besides being a site of protection and safety, the tree also becomes a holy guide to the mysteries of magical information since in ancient lore too it was believed that "trees stood as both doorways to hidden realms and as guardians to the entrance; their roots granted access to the Underworld as a pathway, just as the branches allowed spiritual access to the Overworld" (Grimassi, 2008, p. 28). The unusual China tree in *The Grass Harp* with its double trunk prepares a home for Dolly and her associates among its strong branches:

Just entering the woods there was a double-trunked China tree, really two trees, but their branches were so embraced that you could step from one into the other; in fact they were bridged by a tree-house: spacious, sturdy, a model of a tree house, it was like a raft floating in the sea of leaves. (Capote, 1951, p. 14)

It is this tree with its home-like branches that not only welcomes and embraces the witchcraft group but also becomes their “HOME” being associated with the “Holy Order of Mother Earth” concept in witchcraft philosophy (Telesco, 2005, p. 166). Therefore, their refuge tree home also becomes functional in bringing the holy harmony and order of the earth cycle to their existences.

Another significant ritual of the witchcraft tradition is the chants and music. As Russell and Alexander mention “neopagan witchcraft provide a great deal of room for poetry, dance, music” (Russell & Alexander, 2007, p. 196). On the one hand music for witches is perceived as a method of motivation for “building up the power within your body” (Buckland, 2002, p. 159). On the other hand, it should not be in a categorized form in order to bring about the inspiration for the stimulation of energy in the body. Therefore, within the song or the chant “there are no set words, no ready-made chants” since the chant “must suit the individual” (Buckland, 2002, p. 160). In *The Grass Harp*, the ritualistic chant takes the spiritualist community into the heart of nature for it becomes the voice and song of the grass singing and articulating the mood, life stories and mysteries of the inhabitants of the area:

Below the hill grows a field of high Indian grass that changes color with the seasons: go to see it in the fall, late September, when it has one red as sunset, when scarlet shadows like firelight breeze over it and the autumn winds strum on its dry leaves sighing human music a harp of voices. (Capote, 1951, p. 5)

However, the real voice, message and meaning of the chant is only heard by the witch goddess Dolly who is the only one to comprehend the stories and mysteries of many people in the chant of the grass while the rhythm stimulates the power in her body. “Do you hear?” she asks, “that is the grass harp, always telling a story—it knows the stories of all people on the hill, of all the people who ever lived, and when we are dead it will tell ours, too” (Capote, 1951, p. 5). In a sense, it is with this stimulated power given by the chant of nature that she communicates with the living and the dead. And it is with this chant that she will transmit her mysteries and stories to those others who are also able to hear the natural voice of the chant.

Meaning of Love and Life in *The Grass Harp*

In the tradition of witchcraft, the sacredness of life and the love of this sacred life are important concepts emphasized by the Goddess witch. Since witchcraft is accepted as “a religion of ecology”, in this system the Goddess as a part of nature “fosters respect for the sacredness of all living things” (Starhawk, 1998, pp. 397-399). After accepting and then digesting the sacred conception of life, witches are expected to embrace all living organisms with an unconditional love. Since “love for life in all forms is the basic ethic of witchcraft”, witches as contemporary Goddesses should “honor and respect all living things and serve the life force” (Starhawk, 1998, p. 398). As a matter of fact, in *The Grass Harp* the concept of love and love of life are declared in an all-inclusive manner:

We are speaking of love. A leaf, a handful of seed—begin with these, learn a little what it is to love. First, a leaf, a fall of rain, then someone to receive what a leaf has taught you, what a fall of rain has ripened. No easy process, understand; it could take a lifetime, it has mine ... I only know how true it is: that love is a chain of love, as nature is a chain of life. (Capote, 1951, p. 53)

Dolly has experienced these sacred emotions throughout her life. As she openly remarks, “I’ve been in love all my life” and “I have loved everything” (Capote, 1951, p. 53).

Although as a New Age Spirituality, witchcraft is a woman’s movement and thus can be perceived as a feminist agent, in its all-inclusive attitude, the witchcraft tradition “does not exclude the males” who nonetheless are accepted as “mini-rulers of narrow universes” (Starhawk, 1998, pp. 396-397). In *The Grass Harp*, Judge Charles Cool who at first visits the outcast group in the China tree and who falls in love with Dolly after comprehending her holy existence and genuine love for life, becomes a whole-hearted member of this rebellious group. Although never actualized, his marriage proposal is accepted by Dolly who embraces love of all kinds.

One of the significant lessons that Dolly teaches to her suitor Judge Cool is the concept of justice. In witchcraft, justice is not “administered by some external authority, based on a written code or set of rules imposed from without” (Starhawk, 1998, p. 398). Having been illuminated by this new awareness and consciousness, Judge Cool questions his life-long career and role as a judge in the society. At last he experiences a realization that “justice is an inner sense that each act brings about consequences that must be faced responsibly” (Starhawk, 1998, p. 398). In the novel, this new realization is manifested by his self-questioning in such an attitude: “I sometimes imagine all those whom I’ve called guilty have passed the real guilt on to me: It’s partly that that makes me want once before I die to be right on the right side” (Capote, 1951, p. 48). As Dolly responds, “You on the right side now” (Capote, 1951, p. 48). And this new side he is on becomes a proof of his transformation from a judge serving to the working mechanism of the patriarchal society to his new existence in an alternative society as a new embodiment of justice embracing the rights of all human beings.

Although Dolly is not openly addressed as a witch in *The Grass Harp*, her position as an outsider in a small Southern town of America while adapting an all-inclusive attitude towards life, practicing the teachings of the witchcraft tradition in her applications of the rituals of herbalism, chanting and love and her passive way of challenging the patriarchal society proves her to become a perfect model for the contemporary witches in Neopagan traditions and New Age Spiritualities.

Conclusion

The American writer Truman Capote’s modernist novel *The Grass Harp* introduces an alternative belief system and life style to the patriarchal authorities in the presentation of the protagonist Dolly Talbo’s authentic and autonomous female identity. Although she is depicted as a shy, introspective character throughout the novel, her passive rebellion and resistance to the patriarchal system while practicing the rituals of female spirituality in connection with contemporary witchcraft make her a suitable candidate for the Goddess image of the New Age Spiritualities. Her close relationship with nature and her association with herbalism, chanting, love and love of life become further proofs of her holy witch image suitable to the liberated feminine identity.

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