

THE REVIVAL OF MYTHICAL STRUCTURES AND GOTHICISM IN
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES

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RESUMO: Na esteira do renascimento do gótico, o americano Seth Grahame-Smith transforma o clássico romance *Orgulho e preconceito* de Jane Austen em um *mash-up* – termo que descreve a remixagem de músicas, videoclipes e filmes na internet – com o título de *Orgulho e preconceito e zumbis*. A inesquecível heroína de Jane Austen, Elizabeth Bennet, além das qualidades de beleza ímpar e argúcia, é dotada de extrema habilidade no manejo de espadas, punhais e quaisquer tipos de armas. As cinco irmãs Bennet são campeãs na luta contra os “não mencionáveis”, os mortos que voltam à vida espalhando terror e morte, na ânsia insaciável de devorar cérebros humanos. Para a análise da desconstrução paródica do romance de Austen e seu caráter de narrativa gótica, este artigo considera; a) a sobrevivência de estruturas míticas em heróis e heroínas, criados pela *mass media*, que preenchem até hoje a função de narrativas paradigmáticas para a existência humana e de lembrete constante das verdades essenciais; (Eliade, 1972); b) o renascimento paralelo do gênero gótico, evidenciado pela peculiar visão de comicidade e terror no romance de Grahame-Smith; e c) o conceito de metacultura popular.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: **Orgulho e preconceito e zumbis**; renascimento gótico; *mash-up*.

ABSTRACT: *In the wake of the current revival of the Gothic both in literature and in the mass media, the American writer Seth Grahame-Smith has transformed Jane Austen’s classic novel **Pride and Prejudice**, into a mash up – a term used to describe the remixing of music, video-clips and films in the internet – with the title of **Pride and Prejudice and Zombies**. Jane Austen’s unforgettable heroine Elizabeth Bennet has had added to her qualities – outstanding beauty and sharp wit – extreme skill with swords and daggers and every other kind of weapons. The five Bennet sisters are champions in the struggle against the “unmentionables”, the dead that are returning to life spreading terror and death, in their insatiable craving for the brains of the living. For the analysis of the parodic deconstruction of Austen’s novel and its Gothic character, this paper considers: a) the survival of mythical structures in heroes (and heroines), created by the mass media, which fulfill up to this day their function of paradigmatic narratives for man’s existence and as a constant reminder of essential truths (Eliade, 1972); b) the parallel revival of the Gothic as a genre, evidenced by the peculiar black comic vision of Grahame-Smith’s novel; and c) the concept of popular metaculture.*

KEYWORDS: ***Pride and Prejudice and Zombies***; Gothic revival; *mash-up*

As a devoted and faithful Jane Austen reader I was shocked by the image of Elizabeth Bennet as a zombie on the cover of Seth Grahame-Smith’s makeshift “novel”, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. The story places the Bennet family in an England which has been ravaged for fifty years by the plague of the living-dead, insatiable consumers of human brains, referred to as “unmentionables”, by narrator and characters alike. The author acknowledges that he was commissioned by his publisher at Quirk, a rather obscure publishing enterprise at the time, to write the book, a task which he fulfilled in six weeks. He hit the jackpot as the book sold a million copies in a few days.

This is not surprising. Ever since J.K. Rowling published the first of the eight volumes of her Harry Potter series, in 1997, — whose sales have reached the astonishing number of 1 billion copies — a new wave of the popular taste for Gothic narratives has reached all types of media: cinema, TV, comics, and by the cultural industry as a whole. Figures of monsters, skulls and esoteric symbols have been finding their way into tattoos and paintings on clothing.

The fact that the taste for the macabre is not an isolated phenomenon led to our hypothesis that mythic structures, as primeval narratives, survive in such products of mass literature which explore the basic concern of every human being, the finite character of man's existence. The concept of myth for Mircea Eliade goes back to its archetypal character of "true narrative of the various, sometimes dramatic, irruptions of the sacred in the world of man (ELIADE, 1972)

As human cultures become more civilized, mythic narratives lose their sacred character to become entertainment rather than true explanations, and give origin to the conventional forms of popular, folk and fairy tales and, at the passage of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century tales of the so-called "Gothic terror". In the last decades, there has been a revival of that specific form in mass literature. Stories about witches, werewolves, vampires and other supernatural beings have been explored by a succession of authors, instantaneously raised to the category of best-sellers, immediately adapted to film and in the sequence transformed into artifacts of mass culture — cartoons, comics, pulp fiction, remixing of popular songs, as well as T shirts, jackets, video games, character dolls or whatever shape the industry may come up with.

Roland Barthes examines the whole paraphernalia of mass culture artifacts in 1957 France, in his book *Mythologies*. Considering that language is not a transparent vehicle of communication, but a means of repression used by bourgeois elites to submit the lower classes, Barthes makes both an ideological critique of the so-called mass culture and a semiological analysis of that language. In his view, mass-produced cultural artifacts are meant to be consumed by the popular classes as marks of ideal standards of living to be reached at all costs bringing about new profits for capitalist production.

We see Barthes' mythologies at work in the making of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Faced with the task of writing a book that would respond, in his publisher's words, to "the movement of creative infraction of young people who rather than mere consumers have the necessary technology to transform it", Grahame-Smith rewrites Jane Austen's masterpiece in the format of a *mashup*. The term describes the remixing of music, video clips, films, etc. practiced by every youngster with access to the Internet.

Grahame-Smith makes use of every possible resource to effect his re-reading of the novel. Basically he uses the supernatural and the grotesque by adding zombies to Austen's plot in a parodic deconstruction of her heroines, transformed into champions in the handling of swords – katanas — ,daggers and muskets to fight the invasion of the living-dead. The garish scenes of the attacks by blood-craving zombies reproduce those in horror movies. Elizabeth's encounters with zombies involve spectacular escapes and last-minute fantastic demonstrations of skill that evoke the technique of Westerners, adventure, action and science-fiction movies. The success was instantaneous, which evidences our

hypothesis of the power of the mass media to create new versions of heroic myths and of the essential attraction of man at all times to the mythological hero, who is able to eliminate monsters and, thus, reconstitute safety to his social group.

Mircea Eliade points out that mythical structures survive in today's world in icons created by the mass media such as comic strips characters – Captain America, Super Man, Spider Man, Batman and others — that are twentieth century versions of mythological and folk heroes. “They represent the ideal of a considerable part of society to such a point that any changes in their typical conduct or, worse yet, their death, may bring about vigorous protests among readers.” Eliade's observations, dated 1972, have to do with an attempt by the publishers of Marvel Comics in the United States, to bring Super Man's extended career to a close. They had to go back, however, in the face of the public clamor raised in favor of the hero, who proves to be very much alive — in the company of Spider Man, Batman and others —, in XXI century films that enhance their feats by means of the limitless resources of modern technology.

The mythological hero may have a thousand faces, as demonstrated by Joseph Campbell's essential work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but the structure of the mythical journey is reducible to a single pattern: **separation, initiation return**. After journeying through the world, submitted to all kinds of ordeals, the hero returns to his communal group in order to share the prize he has conquered in the course of his adventures. The heroines of Austen/Grahame-Smith undergo Spartan training under Master Liu, the renowned Chinese master of martial arts, who punishes their faults with merciless floggings. On their return they offer the King their services as skilled, unbeatable fighters, whose loyalty belongs first and foremost to their country. In Elizabeth's words: “My talent and my times demand my service, and I believe the Crown more pleased to have me on the front line than at the altar” (GRAHAME-SMITH, 2009, p. 115).

The denotation of myth as legend can also be associated with Jane Austen's realistic work, in a seemingly paradoxical relationship. A legend of domesticity, retirement and piety has been constructed by her first biographers, members of the Austen family, who endeavored to present the world an idealized image. Literary critic and author Roger Sales grants the wide repercussion of *Memoir of Jane Austen*, a biographical report published by Reverend James Edward Austen-Leigh, in 1870, the privilege of giving birth to the so-called “Austen industry”, a veritable rising tide of idolatry that has carried away laymen as well as intellectuals. This tide of praise and admiration reaches our century, when Austen's novels exert a singular attraction over scriptwriters, and over film and TV directors. Six of Austen's novels have been made into film, five of them in the commercial circuit, and two of them granted the prestigious Academy Award – best adapted script to *Sense and Sensibility* and best actress to Keira Knightley, for her performance in *Pride And Prejudice*. The latter is the absolute champion of adaptations, re-readings and diverse recreations, Noticeable are a musical version in the spectacular colors of the Indian cinema at Bollywood and the TV series *Lost in Austen*, in which a girl who is crazy about the novel and its characters, switches places with Elizabeth Bennet. An inordinate problem arises: the young little Englishwoman has no desire to return to her Regency period in the past.

Simultaneously with the Jane Austen myth, critics have viewed the writer as being aware of her times, particularly of the unfair status of women in a strictly patriarchal

society. Such is the questioning position of Sarah Tytler, a nineteenth-century critic, who observes in Jane Austen's novels and letters voices that contradict the ideal image created by her family. Elizabeth Bennet as a zombie most certainly reflects the critical, satiric and even sarcastic Jane Austen seen by unbiased critics and scholars.

In his creation (or recreation) a literary genre, called *mush-up*, for lack of a more appropriate name, Grahame-Smith has some trumps: the knowledge of the original work by the public, if not directly acquired from the text, certainly by means of its intermediatic adaptations, by the present trend of Gothic narratives and, particularly, by the enduring force of attraction of myth over man, as essential narrative and ritual, whether in primitive times or in the 21st century.

The universal theme of the hero who saves or attempts to save his people from serious danger recurrent in diverse cultural traditions informs *Beowulf*, the epic poem written in the rude alliterative rhythm of Old English. The struggle of the hero, endowed with supernatural strength against the monster Grendel, resurges in the battles between Elizabeth Bennet and bloodthirsty zombies, in the literature of a young scriptwriter in the 21st century.

The fiendish monster Grendel snatches thirty of King Hrothgart's warriors from the communal hall, where they slept after the royal banquet:

The fiend accurst,
Grim and greedy, his grip made ready;
Snatched in their sleep, with savage fury,
Thirty warriors; **away he sprang**
Proud of his prey, to repair to his home
His blood-dripping booty to bring to his lair. (PRIESTLEY, p. 29)

The first attack of the unmentionables also occurs at a communal reunion, where the Bennet sisters are first introduced to the gentlemen of Netherfield. The repulsive aspect of the living-dead, their flesh in varying degrees of putrefaction, is surpassed by their unleashed fury, seizing and feasting on a few of the guests who were too near the windows. It is "Beowulf" reenacted: "When Elizabeth stood, she saw Mrs. Long struggle to free herself as two female dreadfuls bit into her head, cracking her skull like a walnut, and sending a shower of dark blood spouting as high as the chandeliers" (Austen/Grahame, p. 14).

Zombies' insatiable greed for human brains is put into relief by the pastiche of the celebrated opening sentence in Austen's original: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains" (p. 7). The substitution of "zombies in search of brains" for 'a single man in search of a wife', besides reversing the ground rules of Jane Austen's realist fiction, establishes the tone of grotesque and absurd humor of Seth Grahame-Smith's adaptation: a horde of unmentionables is seen attacking a bed of cauliflowers with cannibalesque appetite.

The return from beyond the grave that has fascinated man ever since immemorial times fits the Jungian concept of "collective unconscious", storage of primeval images, or archetypes, inherited by mankind. From mankind's collective unconscious there emerge in the form of myth visions and religious ideas common to numerous cultures and historical

periods. It is the spiritual beliefs of afro-Caribbean voodoo that give birth to the figure of the zombie. It is the archetypes in literature that attract readers and hold them entranced.

In Edgar Allan Poe's works, probably the best known example, the death of a beautiful woman in strange eerie circumstances — psychic survival in "Ligeia", premature burial in "Berenice" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" — is a recurrent theme in the Gothic scenery of his tales. Ligeia, Berenice, and Lady Madeline Usher haunt the mind of the protagonists, creating the sole effect of terror, passion or horror that is part of Poe's image as an icon of popular culture in the United States. Poe has been widely exploited in different media: comic book versions, illustrated editions, painting and photography, besides the single most significant medium, the cinema. His is such a deeply ingrained image that it has become part of what Mark Niemyer calls "popular metaculture", when "at some point or another products of popular culture break away from their original inspiration, gaining an often increasing independence and circularity in which they tend to make reference to themselves more than to their first referent" Rooters for the Baltimore Ravens do not probably have the slightest idea that the name of their football team comes from the title of Poe's celebrated poem.

Attempting to elucidate the concept of meta-popular culture, Mark Niemyer insists: popular culture and meta-popular culture overlap to a greater or lesser extent in their referents. In the specific example of Poe's short stories: "popular culture results in some people knowing the movie and not the short story, while meta-popular culture results in some people registering a certain recognition in the name of the football team but not necessarily even having seen the movie" (HAYES, 2003, p. 207).

If applied to Jane Austen and, particularly to *Pride and Prejudice*: at the level of popular culture, some people in England would recognize the film, but would not have read the book; it would reach the level of meta-popular culture with a certain recognition of the zombies-*Pride and Prejudice* association by people who had not seen the film and had never read Austen's novel or heard about Grahame-Greene's *mashup*.

The belief in zombies among practitioners of Afro-Caribbean voodoo and the superstitious fear felt by the population in general were approached by the African-American anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston, in *Tell my horse*, a report of her trip to the Caribbe, in 1930. For upper class Haitians the whole thing was a myth, similar to the werewolf in European tradition. Nevertheless, says the researcher, "I had the good fortune to learn of several celebrated cases in the past and (...) the rare opportunity to see and touch an authentic case. Hurston informs she listened to the broken noises made by the zombie, a woman named Felicia Felix-Mentor who had returned from the dead, according to highly reliable authority. Hurston photographed the zombie in bright daylight and concludes "Now I know that there are Zombies in Haiti. People have been called back from the dead". And for what reason? As an act of revenge or as sacrifice to pay off a debt to a spirit for benefits received. It is their fate to toil endlessly as beasts of burden with neither conscience nor memory. Hurston sees parallels with the old European legends of the sale of the soul to the devil, with local Haitian variations (p. 181-184).

The archetype of the living-dead has been recurrent in several channels: in film since George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, in 1965. Nearly fifty years later the

living-dead are alive and kicking (apologies for the paradox) in *Zombieland* (2009), a film whose plot centers on zombies: a mutated strain of the mad cow disease has turned most humans into cannibalistic zombies, but the film is a highly comic report of the eventful journey of some survivors on their way to Los Angeles.

Reviews were mostly favorable: Claudia Puig of *USA Today* said that “underlying the carnage in *Zombieland* is a sweetly beating heart”; and that “This road movie/horror flick/dark comedy/ earnest romance, action film hybrid laces a gentle drollness through all the bloody mayhem.” *Time* magazine’s Richard Corliss described the film as an exhilarating ride from start to finish. “This isn’t just a good zombie comedy”, he stated. “It’s a damn fine movie, period. And that’s high praise coming from a vampire guy.”

Movie critic Roger Ebert praises the film’s humor, despite its primary focus on zombies that might have made it dreary. The same can be said of Grahame-Smith’s *mashup*, whose macabre humor ridicules quaint mannerisms and melodramatic qualities underlying horror narratives. Benjamin F. Fisher argues for comedy and satirical intent in both Hugh Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and William Beckford’s Oriental Gothic novel *Vathek* (1896): “Whatever the status of humor in these works, a strong tendency to lampoon that readers could interpret as intentional or unintentional comedy in Gothic writings, entered and has continued to be vital in Gothic tradition” (Fisher, p. 76).

In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Grahame-Smith deconstructs Jane Austen’s mimetic mode of representation with its chronological timeline, psychologically constructed characters and organic unity, by making use of the fantastic, which “being composed of two modes (the mimetic and its opposite) creates a dialectic that refuses synthesis”. In other words, the author uses fantasy as a technique to dislocate and subvert. The combination of fantasy and the comic vision becomes a true mental circus, where too much happens at the same time: “hierarchies are toppled, and pedants become fools, and fantasy becomes fact, and the sacred becomes wonderfully marvelously profane (OLSEN, 1990, p. 32).

Within the mythical structure of the struggle between Good (the Bennet sisters and lady Catherine de Burgh) and Evil (the children of Satan) the author uses the stock-in-trade of different genres of mass literature: Gothic horror narratives, Westerners, romantic and adventure pulp-fiction, etc By alternating freely among the grotesque, outright pornographic, and the use of clichés, the novel results in a tremendous *mash-up* in an atmosphere of satire, absurdity and comic exaggeration. It is part of the Christian ritual to cut off the head of one’s loved beings who have been killed by the plague, in order to avoid their being transformed into Satan’s slaves. Lacy Catherine de Burgh herself — a woman who had killed ninety aberrations armed only with a rain-soaked envelope — had been forced to behead the cleric who had preceded Mr Collins at the Rosings parsonage.

Graham-Green is handed out a readymade warrior-heroine: Elizabeth Bennet is brave, fearless, intelligent, daring, witty and endowed with the gifts of quick perception and instantaneous reactions. In Austen’s realist fiction, Elizabeth Bennet’s attitudes subvert the nearly sacred rules of the marriage market — she refuses two marriage proposals — and her characteristics put into question the paradigmatic pattern of the marriageable girl. She has extraordinary qualities of intelligence, sharp wit, acute perception of the ridicule

aspects in other people's follies, and strong pride in her own abilities. Lady Catherine de Burgh herself is unable to intimidate the girl from the top of her imperial heights. Despite her errors of judgment concerning Wickham's personality, she is able to act efficiently in a world where power is actually held only by men. Smith has merely to transform Elizabeth's strength of will into extraordinary ability in martial arts.

Elizabeth is the great heroine in the struggle against the unmentionable, but her creator does not refrain from mocking his creature freely. When she realizes Mr Collins's interest in marrying her, she can hardly hold down a wave of vomit, disgusted by "the mere thought of marrying someone whose sole ability with a blade was cutting slices of gorgonzola." Invited by Cel. Fitzwilliam to demonstrate her finger strength, Elizabeth demurely ties a modesty string around her ankles, places her hands on the floor and raises her feet high. It is in this position that she tells Cel Fitzwilliam about Darcy's improper behavior in Meryton, refusing to dance. Thus, Grahame Smith's heroine is placed upside down in the celebrated scene in which, in Austen's novel, Darcy and Elizabeth exchange their first meaningful uninterrupted exchange, though mediated in both authors by Cel. Fitzwilliam.

The novel's romantic interest gives way to the heroine's ability in martial arts, thanks to her Spartan training in China. Invited by Lady Catherine de Bourgh to demonstrate her skills against three ninjas of her ladyship's bodyguard, Elizabeth rips open the belly of the first one and strangles him to death with his own large bowel; cuts off the hands and the leg of the second and beheads him in the sequence. The third ninja had hardly moved as Elizabeth's katana pinned him against a wooden column. Approaching her opponent, Elizabeth "delivered a vicious blow, penetrating his rib cage, and withdrew her hand — with the ninja's still-beating heart in it". In a cannibalistic scene, she bites off a piece and still chewing, comments lightly that the Japanese heart is tender in comparison with others she had tasted.

In response to Mr Darcy's humiliating marriage proposal, she attacks him with a series of kicks, forcing him to counter with "the drunken washwoman defense" (151). At this point, Grahame-Smith has his hands full turning things toward the happy-ever-after ending of the original text: consistently, he appeals to another offspring of myth – fairy tale. Riding a white stallion, Darcy comes to Elizabeth's rescue from a bloody entanglement with 25 unmentionables that she keeps at bay with a branch ripped off from a nearby tree.

The absurd comicity of the text attracts today's reader notwithstanding its hard-to-believe turns. The heroine not only overcomes the forces of Evil, but also gets her Prince Charming in the process. According to Eric Rabkin this is one of the functions of fantastic world: to offer safety and stability as alternatives to the factual world of fluctuation and growth. W. R. Willis emphasizes the search that the modern novelist undergoes for an adequate mythology, "making use of inherited mythologies or creating his own, sometimes reworking the material of tradition (IRWIN, 1976, p. 159-160). Irwin is obviously referring to practitioners of "high literature", but his observations can be easily applied to mass literature.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies was written by commission and it was necessary to make deep alterations in the original text in order to make it palatable to new masses of

consumers that demand immediate enjoyment. Hopefully, our arguments have shown that all those changes can be referred back to anachronisms in narrative forms. It is not, therefore, paradoxical or surprising, that contemporary cultural industry has been registering such high profits.

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