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Identities Assumed, Personal Spaces Violated. Tom Sharpe's Protagonist in Search of his Inner Self

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In his novels from the *Wilt* series, Tom Sharpe raises the question of the protagonist's identity and personal space threatened by the imposition of diverse social roles. The author introduces in a humouristic manner a whole parade of unusual personae, but the character that comes to the fore is Henry Wilt – a teacher and henpecked husband. His perception by the others differs largely from his self-imposed role as a parent and educator since he is taken for a murderer or a terrorist and a Russian spy in later instalments of the series. Wilt reluctantly assumes all these roles in the hope that such actions will help him retain his real self.

Wilt appears to be a rather grumpy, ill-tempered person with a sulky attitude towards both his wife and her new acquaintances. He himself feels bitter about his professional and family life and generally considers himself ill-treated by his family and fellow workers. His wife believes he is uncreative and lacking ambition whereas his colleagues accuse him of being ambitionless and inertial. In point of fact, the protagonist finds it surprisingly hard to define his real self. However, eager to refute a claim about being irresolute, he cites the virtues he would like to possess: “Decisiveness, ...the ability to act without hesitation, courage” (Sharpe 51). In order to reach his aim of what he perceives to be a birth of him as a new and free man, he plots to murder his wife since he deeply believes that she constrains him from being reborn and that she is the main obstacle in his quest to reach self-respect and self-assurance. Accused of murder (of which he is innocent) by inspector Flint, Wilt assumes the role of a murderer to retain his dignity, boost his ego and prove himself a hard and decisive man

he has always wanted to be. For Wilt to deceive the inspector is to triumph over the prevailing conviction that he is an unenergetic, uncourageous and uncreative man. He becomes what he desired for when he plotted to murder his wife: a hard, methodical and logical instigator. He finally realizes that under the layers of a teacher and a husband there has always lain his real identity of a manipulator and exploiter which helps him to free himself from the embarrassing roles his wife and other characters used to impose on him.

Raymond G. McCall in his article entitled *The Comic Novels of Tom Sharpe* points out

that what Wilt really yearns is the simple pleasures of a family man with a calm, loyal and dutiful wife by his side (64). Having achieved at least a small part of this fantasy (after all, his life is far from tranquility and his impetuous spouse is not his ideal), he feels determined to protect his personal and domestic space. At first unaware of considerable potential that lies within him, Sharpe's protagonist slowly develops from a henpecked husband and disrespected teacher into a skillful and ruthless exploiter. Once he has recognized his real self, he relies on it and does not restrain from employing it to survive through the hard times that buffet him and his family. Wilt endures being labeled a murderer and reluctantly assumes other roles imposed on him in the hope that such actions will help him protect his personal space.

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Uncanny Space in Poppy Z. Brite's *Drawing Blood*

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In Poppy Z. Brite's *Drawing Blood* (1993), the haunted house forms the narrative crux of the story, and the novel begins and ends with the main hero's – Trevor's – journey to the house in which his mother and little brother were butchered by his father (who later committed suicide.) In the town of Missing Mile, where the haunted house is located, Trevor teams up with another young runaway – Zach. The two runaways become a *queer family*, not only because of their sexuality, but because they form a strange and fragile union in a hostile supernatural milieu. The uncanny space that contains this new family unit merits a closer look, as it points to the difficulties of maintaining such a relationship in the traditional context of a suburban family house. The fragility and instability of Trevor and Zach's queer family is represented through the uncanniness of the space these two young men inhabit and the malevolent forces that constantly threaten to dissolve their new bond.

The abandoned, run-down house Trevor revisits is literally seeped in the uncanny imagery: the impenetrable ever-shifting shadows, the rusty stains both comforting and repulsive, and the eerie green light caused by plants overgrowing the windows. Brite also employs several stock Gothic motifs, such as the ghost of Trevor's dad appearing in the bathroom where he hanged himself, or the fact that electricity is still running, even after twenty years of non-paid bills. As the narrative develops, the house even presents Trevor with the very hammer his father used as a murder weapon, as if tempting him to follow in his father's footsteps and annihilate his own family.

In *Drawing Blood* the vision of the uncanny is at its strongest when it

signals the violent return of the repressed within the house. It materializes when Trevor learns that his father drugged him so that he would sleep through his family's murder and his father's subsequent suicide. The question that haunts Trevor is whether he was spared because his father loved him too much, or because he did not love him enough? Or maybe sensing a fellow artistic soul in his son, Trevor's father wanted him to relive the horrific trauma over and over again? Consequently, the father emerges as the first and most obvious agent of repression. The uncanny here is also linked with involuntary repetition, as Trevor returns to the murder-suicide site to confront his disloyal father. It is also the repetition compulsion that drives Trevor to replay the events from the past and kill his own family in order to acquire the same secret knowledge of his beloved's inner body his father was after twenty years earlier.

In the end, the house transforms into a portal into a nightmarish reality that exists at the intersection of Charlie Parker's music, drug-induced visions of Trevor's father and Trevor's own distorted drawings. The so-called Birdland becomes Le Corbusier's *l'espace indicible*, where spatial arrangements seem ineffable, impossible and awe-inspiring, while remaining oddly familiar. Thus, the architectural uncanny constructed by Brite serves not only to inspire fear, but also to show the inadequacy of the surrounding reality and the meager resources available to people desiring to establish a nontraditional family unit.

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Macdonald and Mailer “Against the American Grain”

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Dwight Macdonald and Norman Mailer enjoyed a deep if tumultuous friendship, cemented by shared artistic and political ideals rooted in the maintenance of cultural standards and a questioning of government authority. The manner in which their values and protests intertwined present a noteworthy contrast within 1960s radicalism, which for the older figures in the New Left was accompanied by a critical, conservative high-cult aesthetic.

The intellectual and personal camaraderie Macdonald and Mailer established first developed in early 1950s when they began to travel in the same social and literary circles (Wreszin 296, 345, 429-32). While Mailer admired Macdonald’s infinite enthusiasm for argument and culture, Macdonald praised not only Mailer’s writing but his approach to creative growth, which defied mass culture’s reliance on formula for the sake of popularity and, of course, profit. In his seminal essay “Masscult and Midcult” (1960) Macdonald contrasted Mailer with one of his contemporaries, James T. Farrell, in order to illustrate the difference between an artist, Mailer, and a workman who resorted to recurring themes to retain his audience. Farrell was “a standard and marketable commodity, like Jello,” while Mailer constantly “crossed up his public and his publishers by refusing to repeat himself.” From Masscult’s point of view, this meant that Mailer “jeopardized a sound investment in order to gratify his personal interest.” To Macdonald this fact made him “a cultural hero who wrote “against the American grain” – the title of Macdonald’s 1962 compilation on the evils of mass culture in which “Masscult and Midcult” was featured (27-28).

This tendency to go “against the American grain” manifested itself,

politically, in 1967. In October of that year Macdonald and Mailer, by that point both committed to the radical left-wing politics of anti-imperialism, participated in the March on the Pentagon – an explosive protest that railed against the Johnson administration’s ongoing war in Vietnam. Together the two made their way over Arlington Memorial Bridge, arm-in-arm, surrounded by much younger protesters chanting: “Out, demons, out. End the fire, and the war, end the plague of death.” Mailer evaded the sentinels, bolted towards the heart of military-industrial complex, and was promptly arrested. Macdonald, despite boldly antagonizing a guard, was not – to his great chagrin (Wreszin 433). Mailer recorded the entire episode in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), a journalistic account subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, which in a sense repaid Macdonald’s compliments in “Masscult and Midcult” by featuring his anti-government exploits. Mailer also took care to criticize the excesses of the counter-culture – sentiments Macdonald often shared (332). Unsurprisingly, in his monthly *Esquire* column Macdonald declared the book Mailer’s greatest work, a brilliant transforming of “journalism into literature” (47).

Though not immediately apparent, Macdonald’s “Masscult and Midcult” and Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* constitute a linked critique of capitalism’s effects on literature and foreign policy that, conservatively, sought to thwart mass culture’s spread and the counter-culture’s dismissal of tradition, and radically, aimed to dismantle American empire-building in southeast Asia. The question of whether this dynamic contained tensions, harmonies, or merely compartmentalized strains deserves further exploration, as does Macdonald and Mailer’s joint contribution to 1960s political activism.

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A Stranger in the Mirror – the Broken Mirror Stage in John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*

Michał Moliński

In 1959 John Howard Griffin managed to darken his skin color and become black due to drug administration and sunlamp treatment. Afterwards, the journalist decided to travel across the Jim Crow South as a black man and personally observe the mechanisms of intolerance in the USA.

Griffin’s “reality-based novel” (Wise 226) delineates the complex mechanisms of identity creation. Certain happenings that “would mark ourselves as discontinuous” (Bamberg 5) may have the power to distort the inner picture of the self people keep stored mentally. Changing complexion proves to be one of them. Thanks to the diary-based narration the reader can observe the synchronic identity shift the author undergoes. The only reminder of his past life is his name which – for research purposes – is left unaltered. The identity crisis erupts when the author looks into the mirror for the first time as a black man. The reflection does not resemble the remembered one. This in turn causes mental distress as the journalist finds himself “imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one” with whom he “fe[els] no kinship” (Griffin 10). The incident heralds the author’s identity crisis. It becomes hard for the reader to ignore the mirror stage reference. If one decides to analyze the scene using Jacques Lacan’s research, a certain revision seems proper. It appears that the Lacanian identity-forming mirror stage should be ‘reversed’, or maybe more adequately renamed the ‘broken mirror stage’ to fit the identity shattering process presented in *Black Like Me*. The first reason for the said adjustment is that Lacan’s mirror stage is the process of identity formation. When it comes to Griffin’s case, the readers are confronted instead with identity deformation. Furthermore, according to Lacan the mirror stage process denotes the “transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (1286). By contrast, Griffin does not identify himself with his

mirror reflection. Therefore, his condition after the mirror incident seems emotionally equivalent to Lacan's original pre-mirror stage, which implies that Griffin regresses from his body-image seen as a totality to its fragmented image. What follows the mirror phase in Lacan's opinion is the shift from the imaginary towards the symbolic; this shift gradually shatters the idealized (whole, integrated) self, because in the symbolic dimension the social I learns the meaning of and conforms to the symbolic order into which people are born. This order determines their 'new' identity and place in society, family, etc. *Black Like Me* again shows a reverse configuration: the symbolic, that is the "racist mythology" (Bonazzi 38), precedes the specular self-image and therefore constitutes another sign of the overturn.

In Griffin's *Black Like Me*, the black body coupled with the white self enabled the journalist to temporally remain a part of both worlds but truly belong to none. When the masquerade was revealed, the author was physically threatened and hanged in effigy in his hometown in Texas. The publishing of his observations directed public attention to racial injustice in the 1950s US. The book forced white people to ponder the realities of segregation, shaming them into observing that in order for the criticism of racial discrimination to be perceived as believable, it "had to be written not by a black man at all, but rather a white man only posing as black" (Wise 226).

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