

Patterns of Male/Erotic Fantasy in Coover's "The Babysitter"

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at studying the patterns of the male fantasy in Robert Coover's erotically charged short story, "The Babysitter". The story centres on the image of a Babysitter stepping into a bathtub for having a shower while the phone in the living room rings, driving her out of the tub to answer it by the time the towel wrapping her pulls off giving a view of her naked body. In a rapid succession of one hundred and seven fragmented paragraphs, this image vividly recurs in

and rolls up through the fantasies to fantasies of its male characters, blurring and overlapping these, creating fresh new versions of the story from the Babysitter being raped to the Babysitter saved from being raped. The study examines a clear line of development in the fantasies of each of these characters. Considering age, sexual orientation, experiments, adjustment and satisfaction, personality, and other socio-cultural variables, it (re)conceptualizes their fantasies as falling into certain patterns like obsessive, childlike, romantic, or deviant. And, finally and most importantly, it explores the binary power relation embedded in these fantasies wherein the Babysitter poses a fetish, an inanimate, sexualized object while the fantasies around her confirm to male/sexual power, violence, and masochistic pleasure. The research approaches the fantasies with psycho-feminist viewpoints.

Key Words: Robert Coover; The Babysitter; Male Fantasy; Erotic; Binary Power Relation; Fetish, Psycho-Feminist Viewpoints

INTRODUCTION

As a theory of fascism, Male Fantasies sets forth the jarring - and ultimately horrifying - proposition that the fascist is not doing 'something else', but doing what he wants to do.

Theweleit insists that we see and not 'read' violence. He forces us to acknowledge that these acts of fascist terror spring from irreducible human desire.

- From "Foreword" by Barbara Ehrenreich

Among the vanguard of American postmodern writers to come of age during the late 1960s, Robert Coover is highly applauded as a vital experimentalist whose innovative works offer insight into the contemporary sex-stricken, middle-class, American society and the role of the author. In order to capture the male fantasies of different ages, he

fabricates his 1969 short story, "The Babysitter", in a canvas of minds where streams of consciousness take hold of the narrative strain, shifting it back and forth in a way which creates an intricate web of fantasy. Though the story itself is a piece of fiction, the term, "fantasy", is used in the study to imply the events that entirely reside in the minds of its characters instead of those they experience. It is long since the critics have recognized the association between 'fantasy' and 'sex'. That "sex is composed of fiction and fantasy" is an often quoted remark (Kaplan, 1974: 84). The most intriguing, if not most common, fantasies concern romance and sex (qtd. in Leitenberg, 1995: 169). Accordingly, central to all the male fantasies of "The Babysitter" is an erotic image of a Babysitter who steps into a bathtub while the phone in the living room rings, driving her out of the tub to answer it by the time the towel wrapping her falls apart giving a view of her body. As the narrative proliferates from mind to mind in every paragraph, the image vividly rolls up through the fantasy to fantasy, blurring and overlapping these, creating different versions of the story from the Babysitter being raped to the Babysitter saved from being raped. This paper explores the patterns of these male fantasies which are essentially erotic and confirm to the power dynamic between male and female persistent in our phallogocentric society.

The crucial question which might be posed at the outset of the study is how it gets possible for the same reader to conceptualize different versions of the story at the same time in the same narrative space. The vast majority of the critical works on "The Babysitter", have quite rightly aimed at to grab hold of this perplexity created at the thread of the narrative. Maya Sonenberg, (1997) in her "On Reading "The Babysitter" for the 34th Time", has tried to perceive it by projecting the story in the "multiplex where 16 versions of the American dream play out simultaneously on 16 different screens". Marie-Laure Ryan (2006: 671) explains this short story by her "do it yourself" strategy and argues that "the contradictory passages in the text are offered to readers as material for creating their own stories". On the other, another group of researchers has focused on the fusion of fantasy and reality of the text categorizing it into the cluster of met fiction. For example, Gordon (1983: 120) states Coover descants upon the counterpointing realities and fiction of our lives and the violence, inanities, and sexuality that permeate the media which dictate our conscious and even unconscious behavior. This kind of met fiction creates suspense and captivates its readers by forcing them to contemplate the structure of the story (Evenson, 2003: 94). Though all these readings are quite significant, no research has yet been approached the fantasies from a psycho-feminist standpoint.

This study argues though "The Babysitter" denies the reader a linear structure; it has still to be considered highly structured in its presentation of male fantasy. In the disintegrated arrangement of the text, it finds a clear development of these fantasies which gradually get more and more vivid, vivacious, and overlapped. However, considering age, sexual orientation, experiments, adjustment and satisfaction, personality, and other socio-cultural variables, the study observes variation in the nature of individuals' fantasies. The paper sets Mr. Tucker's obsessive fantasies against the childlike fantasies of his son, Jimmy, and Jack's romantic fantasies against the deviant fantasies of his friend, Mark. It argues the erotic ways the Babysitter appears in their fantasies encompass the process of how the male gaze looks at and objectifies the female body. The Babysitter in Coover's story poses a fetish, an inanimate, sexualized object which is unquestionably desired by its male characters as a means of exercising their perverted desires. The fantasies, therefore, seem to comply with the existing power structure between dominating male and subjugating female in the society and to confirm to male violence and masochistic pleasure.

THE OBSESSIVE DESIRE OF HARRY TUCKER

The fantasies of Harry Tucker in "The Babysitter" seem to spring from what the Austrian Psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, terms as 'repressed desire'- the pleasure seeking impulses which are suppressed in the 'id' (the source of instinctual physical, especially libidinal pleasure in human psyche) by 'ego' due to social norms and behavior. The entire story circles around the events of a single evening when almost nothing happens except that Mr. and Mrs. Tuckers attend an evening party while their Babysitter takes care of their children, Jimmy, Bitsy, and a little one, at home. Most of the events which seem to happen, therefore, take place only in the fantasies of its characters. Harry Tucker is a married, middle-aged man whose fantasies are triggered by the unnamed Babysitter stated above. His fantasies seem to develop juxtaposing the erotic fantasies of sexually assaulting the Babysitter with the absurd and demeaning image of his wife, Dolly. Throughout the story, it gets clarified that Mr. Tucker is no longer physically attracted to his wife, who always floats in his imagination as fat with broad thighs and in need of a girdle so tight that it hurts. Being frustrated at the age and the appearance of his wife he longs for his golden years in high schools with girls. This inadequacy of fulfilling desire in his personal life drives him seeking alternative ways, and the teenager Babysitter at home, therefore, appears as a vulnerable object to ponder on. Since the societal norms hinder to materialize his repressed desire, it gets outlet into his world of imagination. His mind obsesses over the Babysitter. He muses mostly over her naked bodily parts as "bare thighs, no girdles, nothing up there but a flimsy pair of panties and soft adolescent flesh", and repeatedly imagines her "light brown pubic hair" grown on her floppy tummy or "left in the bathtub" (Coover, 1969: 186-87). The repressed desire in his 'id' pulls him look secretly at the Babysitter whether in bathtub, or in kitchen, in TV room or elsewhere to receive voyeuristic pleasure- the derivation of sexual pleasure by looking at people secretly, especially when those being seen are undressed in bathtub or engaging in sexual activities. While going to a cocktail party offered by a family friend, he stares at the Babysitter in the kitchen with a longing even when his wife accompanies him with full party mood. He sees in his imagination Bitsy is pulling on her skirts, Jimmy is tickling her in the ribs. They are laughing and rolling over floor making her blouse off the skirt, showing a patch of bare "tummy" which "[He'll]I'll spank" (Coover, 1969: 186). Indeed, these types of fantasies, appeared in his mind, inform the male prerogative for projecting the female body.

Harry Tucker remains so obsessive to his fantasies that he seems to create and to live in his own world. The world of dream and fantasy seems to go beyond Harry's rational world to the realm of 'super real', the unconscious or irrational components of mind stated in 'surrealism'- a literary and artistic movement of 1920s and 1930s arose from Dadaism and influenced by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. He projects his own fantasies upon the Babysitter, who, as he believes, flirts with him as a sign of response to his longing. She is projected as "sitting at the end of the kitchen table there with his children she had seemed to be self-consciously arching her back, jutting her pert breasts, twitching her thighs: and for whom if not for him" (Coover, 1969: 185). The age difference provides a special allure for him. While "she huddles in his arms like a child, he wraps her nakedness" lovingly, paternally, and knowledgeably (Coover, 1969: 192). However, nowhere in the text we have had any implication that she is attracted to him. On the contrary, on several occasions of the story, she expresses her desire to leave this job as she gets it difficult to manage three naughty kids. Indeed, Harry lives between consciousness and subconscious. Most often, he is brought into consciousness by worldly externalities or human interactions. Dolly's query, at the outset of the text, "what do you think of our

babysitter", brings him into consciousness for a while pushing him back into the realm of fantasy again: "how compact, how tight and small his body is" (Coover, 1969: 185). His desire of joining her in the tub leads him parody a popular song "I dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown (pubic) Hair" at which everybody in the party burst out laughing (Coover, 1969: 193). In his fantasy he joins her in the bathtub when the soap slips away of his hands into the tub. He is so taken over by his fantasy that he speaks out, "help me find it [the soap]" to which his host replies, "Sure Harry. What'd you lose" (Coover, 1969: 194). "Aspirin", he answers at which he receives scold from his wife that he has totally gone drunk. The experiences of conscious and subconscious realms, therefore, get together in Harry's fantasy which, indeed, reflect and to some extent complement each other in a world of reality where the female body serves as merely the sexed object.

Harry's fantasy around the Babysitter in the bathtub is as much sexist as Laura Mulvey (1975) examines in "The Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey concedes the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema which presents the man as bearer of the look who enjoys objectifying women into mere objects "to-be-looked-at-ness" (rather than subjects with their own voice and subjectivity). With the course of time, Harry's fantasy gets more and more intricate and erotic. In one set of his fantasies, he goes back home from the party and finds the Babysitter into the tub, sees her "soft breasts rise and fall in the water, and her tummy looks pale and ripply" (Coover, 1969: 90). He joins her in the tub, kisses her wet body, and soaps her back, "smooth and slippery under his hand" (Coover, 1969: 90). He squeezes her close between his thighs, pulls her back toward him, one hand sliding down her tummy between her legs. However, in another set, he sees her not in the tub, but "stepping into the tub, one foot in mat, one foot out... Bent over slightly, buttocks flexed, teats swaying, holding on to the edge of the tub. She grabs for a towel but he yanks it away" (Coover, 1969: 191). Again, in another version, he catches her right at the moment, "emerge[ing] from the bathroom" (Coover, 1969: 197). Wrapped in a towel, she answers the phone, while his two kids pull the towel away and he sees her completely naked. The fantasies goes on this way, however, the image of the Babysitter remains unique as ever before. She stands for the fetish in the male desire demonstrating the male erotic imagination at work.

Harry also indulges in masochistic pleasure by violating the Babysitter in his fantasy. "In fantasy, people are relatively free to indulge their primitive lusts and brutish impulses in ways that might be unacceptable in reality" (Wilson, 1997: 27). Rape has, therefore, been the most common of all male fantasies. As the man imposing power over the woman, and as the older and experienced man, Harry easily takes advantage of the Babysitter to fulfill his perverted desire. He is no longer fantasizing about touching or being touched but having sex with the Babysitter. His fantasies turn into the fantasies of violent rape and, in one possible event, end in the death of the Babysitter. The obsession over her body and the sexual fantasies become more aggressive. He thinks, "(...) her thighs spread for him, on the couch, in the tub, hell, on the kitchen table for that matter" (Coover, 1969: 193). In one version of the fantasy he goes back home and finds Jack and Mark, raping the Babysitter. This idea gives him a perverted pleasure and he experienced an erection at which everybody in the party stares at. However, the most violent fantasy appears by ravishing the Babysitter. He goes home and rapes the Babysitter. He embraces her savagely, clutching his calloused old hands roughly at her backside, "pushing something between her legs, hurting her" (Coover, 1969: 203). The ultimate male power over the female body and soul, therefore, gets exposed to in a very pathetic manner.

JIMMY'S CHILDLIKE FANTASY

Comparing to the middle-aged Harry, his son, Jimmy, seems to embody the age a male child may start fantasizing over the female body. First and foremost, his fantasy informs male child's desire and fear of looking at or touching the female body. It involves the same image of the Babysitter in bathtub and her nude body when the towel slips away. In his fantasy, he peeps through the keyhole in the bathroom "just in time to see her big bottom as she bends over to stir in the bubble bath" (Coover, 1969: 191). As the peeping Tom (adapted to literature and psychoanalytic theory as one as obsessive voyeur, fixated into a perversion, whose only sexual satisfaction may come from spying on others while they are engaged in some sort of lewd behavior) of the Hollywood films, he gets pleasure by secretly looking at her. Trying to see as far down as the keyhole will allow, he bumps his head on the knob which makes a sound. Out of fear he says the Babysitter he needs to go to the washroom. This fear encapsulates both the desire and the fear of looking at her. When the Babysitter asks him to wait he replies he cannot wait since he is anxious to hide his desire by proving he is really in pressure. Caught between fear and anxiety, he urinates. Though, as a child, his fantasy cannot reach to the point of making love to the Babysitter or raping her, it is as much erotic as a child of his age could be suspected.

His fantasy also incorporates the male child's curiosity about its body and the bodily differences between male and female. After the act of urination, the Babysitter drags him into the bathroom and asks him to pull down his pants. The idea of lowering down of his pants triggers another set of fantasy in him. He fantasizes that the Babysitter is asking him to soap her back as a sort of punishment for wetting his pants. He soaps her back, smooth and slippery under his hand. Caught by the fear of its reality the soap gets slip off his hand into the tub. In another version of his fantasy, he feels shy to pull down his pants before the Babysitter. She shouts in anger and starts to pull off his pants by herself. The idea of the Babysitter undressing him adds fuel to the fire, and his fantasies get more erotic than ever before. In his fantasy, her hands reach to his loins to wash him. His little thing starts to spurt, spraying her arms and hands at which she says, "how moist and rubbery it is! And you can turn it every which way. How funny it must feel" (Coover, 1969: 200). The fantasy of Jimmy, therefore, could be considered as the childhood fantasy of his father, Harry, which might also be interpreted as the vice versa.

THE ROMANTIC FANTASY OF JACK

The fantasy of the Babysitter's boyfriend, Jack, on the other, encapsulates the anxiety, the passion, and the desire of a young lover. He is anxious about her beloved; however, his anxiety obliquely sheds light on the sexual insecurity the women feel in the male dominated society. He remains tensed that his girlfriend is having a job in a house where there is a middle-aged man like Harry. He is so worried that in his fantasy, he sees Harry raping his beloved who is screaming and protesting violently. "Get off her, Mr. Tucker", he gets furious (Coover, 1969: 199). His fantasy of anxiety is also triggered by his friend Mark as the later starts nagging behind him to have a visit to the Babysitter. As a lover he is possessive of her girlfriend and would not let anybody to have a share of 'it'. This anxiety triggers another set of fantasies in him. In his imagination, he finds Mark seducing the Babysitter, "She's crying... Her skirt is ripped to the waist... Her panties lie on the floor like a broken balloon" (Coover, 1969: 190). He shouts at Mark and slugs him in his jaw. However, this scene is juxtaposed by another version of his fantasy where the Babysitter seems to enjoy Mark's company. He discovers her "kissing Mark". But the text

does not demonstrate any proof of vulnerability from the part of the Babysitter. She is loyal to her job and remains busy with the best care to the kids. His anxiety, therefore, showers light upon male suspicions over their female partners. In fact, the fantasies in "The Babysitter" are just as real as "reality". It is the woman who gets victimized at every cause.

Despite being the lover, Jack does not restrain himself from victimizing the Babysitter by his male gaze. On the one hand, he enjoys with her "whirl[ing] airily, stirring a light breeze, through a magical landscape of rose and emerald and blue" (Coover, 1969: 185). Passing time watching television sitting beside her when the Tuckers are out makes him passionate. He gets addicted to her "sweet odor", "softness of her blouse", and to her "gentle shadows amid her thighs" (Coover, 1969: 185). He remains bemused in the fantasy of the Babysitter lying under a blanket, kissing her: "her breasts, under both their hands, are soft and yielding" (Coover, 1969: 189). He fantasizes he "would protect her, would shield her, if need be, with his own body" (Coover, 1969: 185). He is so possessed by his imagination that in his imagination, he fantasizes to "wash her wounds, help her dress, he'll take care of her" (Coover, 1969: 190). On the other, he looks through the bathroom pane to see her nude. He also tricks to see her naked body by calling her from nearby when she is in the bathroom. What is more demeaning is that he involves Mark in his process of entrapping the Babysitter to his voyeuristic pleasure. Therefore, she is not sexually safe even with his lover. To materialize his desire he may take steps which is sexually assaulting to her.

The development of his emotion from simply touching or taking care of the Babysitter to possessing her sexually marks a clear line in his fantasies. Driven partly by Mark's push, partly by his own desire, he steps into Mark's trap that drives him visiting the Babysitter. In one version of his fantasy, he calls her and asks for permission to visit her. He earns for several times, but she refuses. This suppression of desire makes him impatient. He directly goes to the Tucker's home and has had sex with her while she is not prepared for it. However, in another version, he gets angry with her repetitive "no" and brings Mark along with him to teach her to be "good" (Coover, 1969: 193). There, at Tucker's home, their adolescent sexual fantasies come true amid shocking violence. It seems very unlikely that Jack, who wants to save her wholeheartedly, molests her together with his friend. Perhaps, being failed in reality, he exercises perverted means in his fantasy. However, for each cause, it is the Babysitter who is to be violated as a sexualized object.

MARK'S DEVIANT FANTASY

We are also taken into the sexual fantasy of Mark which is utterly aggressive. His fantasy incorporates tricks, mass rape, violence, and killing. As he is not a lover of the Babysitter he feels no honor for her. On the contrary, he always muses over her to materialize his unlawful desire. He pushes Jack to visit her together. As Jack is unwilling to go along with Mark, the latter incites him in a very cool way. He applies different techniques to pull Jack go and visit her. As he knows Jack is worried about the safety of his girlfriend, he encourages Jack to tell her, "we're [they're] coming over to protect her from getting raped" (Coover, 1969: 188). As Mark is a "cool operator", Jack sways over his own timidity. Being crazy he offers a lot of options as to go and "spank her", "just go and rape her", "tell her to be good" (Coover, 1969: 192, 193). Failing to materialize his sexual fantasy he tries for voyeuristic pleasure first. The idea of peeping through the bathroom pane drives him visualizing before his eyes the Babysitter, nude in the tub. This fantasy goes long and

vivacious. She runs water in the tub, undresses. Before pushing down her panties, she stares for a moment at the smooth silken panel across her tummy, fingers the place where the opening would be. Then she steps quickly out of the tub, feeling somehow ashamed, unhooks her brassiere, weighs her breasts in the palms of her hands watching herself in the bathroom mirror. He then revises his fantasy thinking the window pane is of "frosted glass" and he cannot see anything clearly (Coover, 1969: 196). The failure of watching the Babysitter in the bathroom drives Mark making another trap to watch her naked. He makes Jack call her over the phone while she is about to in into the bathtub so that, in a hurry to answer the phone, she may not care about the towel or the towel itself may slip away. Therefore, in his fantasy, she cannot but come out of the bathroom while the towel falls apart and he receives sexual pleasure to see her naked. These long, vivid, and repeated imageries mark the male erotic fantasy about the female body.

From the very beginning of the text, the fantasy of Mark marks aggressiveness, masochistic pleasure, and violence. His fantasy seems to verify the view of Barbara Ehrenreich, quoted as the "Prologue" of the study. In his fantasy, he gets never satisfied with simply seeing the Babysitter from the nearby bushes. He says Jack, "I'm going in after her, man, whether you're with me or not" (Coover, 1969: 197). His pleasures are of perverted types which get manifested in mass rape and killing. It is Mark's wish to do it together: "together, man, we could do it" (Coover, 1969: 186). In one version, he along with Jack goes at Tuckers' home and rapes her. He is so fluttered that he feels, "(...) it's really happening" (Coover, 1969: 196). In his imagination she participates with him. She closes her eyes when Mark kisses. Her hand is under his pants, pulling it out, pulling it toward her, pulling it hard. While raping, his bestiality comes out. He groans, "we're gonna to teach you how to be a nice girl" (Coover, 1969: 196). "Give her a little lesson there, Jack baby", he shouts (Coover, 1969: 196). He calls Jack, "C'mon, man, go! This baby's cold! She needs your touch" (Coover, 1969: 196). However, in another version, they are discovered and hindered by Harry Tucker who is just back from the party to do the same thing. Mark gives him a blow to death. In this way his fantasy ends with the ultimate violence of killing and raping.

Taken together, it could be drawn the 'male fantasy' in "The Babysitter", would have interchangeably been read as the 'erotic fantasy'. It is observed from the discussion above that all the male fantasies revolve around a set of sexualized imagery of the Babysitter. The Babysitter stepping in or within the bathtub, the Babysitter answering the phone call while the towel wrapping her wet body pulls off, and the Babysitter being raped (by all except Jimmy) are the common images all fantasies revolve around. At a point, all the bestialities and the perverted desires of male eroticism meet, getting culminated in the dangerous forms of violence as raping and killing. Coover, in this regard, may imply the commonest of all male fantasies involves sex and rape. It is also examined the images appear in their fantasies as means of exercising their repressed sexual desire which they fail to materialize in reality. Besides, though the images vividly revolve around their fantasies, the vividness remains unique to portray the Babysitter as a sexualized object. In each case, the eroticism and the violence in fantasy demonstrate those in reality victimizing the women in every possible way, and fabricating male power, aggressiveness, and masochistic pleasure.

And, in the entire text, the Babysitter is not once mentioned by name which makes her more into a sexualized object than a real person. This notion is intensified by the broken-up form of the story and the uncertainty about which events 'really' happen to the characters and which are only imagined. It is also asserted in the word, 'babysitter', which

starts with a small letter. This study uses the capital letter, 'B', while writing the word, 'Babysitter', with a view to countering the sexualized objectification of the Babysitter. It seems Coover obliquely criticizes the male desire of objectifying the female body, and the social formations which have shaped the desire. However, "The Babysitter" is written with such delirious freedom and imagination that the author, rather than being in complete control of fantasy, may have been a bit possessed by it, too.

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