

Sexuality, role-play and frustration in Roberto Arlt's "Una tarde de domingo"

Abstract: This study examines the processes whereby the protagonist of "Una tarde de domingo" attempts to escape from the hypocrisy of the dominant moral code, and how he ultimately fails. He attempts to escape by exposing how those around him play socially ordained roles – and by denigrating them. These roles are imposed through gossip and through the mass media. However, he fails as he too plays a role, that of the outsider.

Keywords: sexuality, morality, role-play, degradation, Bakhtin.

Resumo: Esse estudo examina o processo pelo qual o protagonista de "Una tarde de domingo" procura escapar à hipocrisia do código moral dominante, e o modo com que ele finalmente fracassa. Ele procura escapar expondo como os que estão a sua volta desempenham papéis socialmente determinados – e denegrindo-os. Estes papéis são impostos através da fofoca e da comunicação de massa. No entanto, ele fracassa à medida em que ele também desempenha um papel, o do estranho.

Palavras-chave: sexualidade, moralidade, desempenho de papéis, degradação, Bakhtin.

Roberto Arlt is best known as a novelist, playwright and journalist, but he was also a prolific writer of short stories, and published two collections: *El jorobadito* (1933) and *El criador de gorilas* (1941). Nevertheless, his short stories have received less critical attention than his other work. In the current study the way in which "Una tarde de domingo", from the collection *El jorobadito*, addresses the protagonist's sense of alienation in a society in which people play predetermined roles will be examined. His attempts to expose this role-play and with it the hypocrisy of bourgeois society will be examined, as will the means by which his efforts are thwarted. In "Una tarde de domingo" the protagonist, Eugenio Karl, goes for a walk one Sunday after sensing that something out of the ordinary will happen to him that day. He bumps into a friend's wife, they flirt and then go to her flat, where Karl hopes to seduce her, but this flirtation comes to nothing and they talk for a while before going their separate ways.

“Una tarde de domingo” is, in many ways, representative of Arlt’s work. In the prologue to his edition of Arlt’s short narrative, Domingo-Luis Hernández mentions a number of recurring elements, “como la convulsión existencial [...], el rechazo al compromiso matrimonial, la revisión de los quebrantos sexuales, la presión ambiental o la distancia” (Arlt, 1995, p. 10). Here he refers to “El jorobadito”, but his comment could also apply to “Una tarde de domingo”, which contains a strong critique of bourgeois morality and of the machinery that supports it. Throughout the story Karl attempts to escape from this machinery, but his attempts inevitably fail as, like the other characters, he finds himself reduced to playing a role, in his case that of the rebel.

Karl’s attempt at seducing Leonilda attacks the values that underpin bourgeois morality, both by breaking the taboo of marital sanctity and by betraying a friend. In fact, sleeping with Leonilda appeals to him precisely because it involves stealing her from Juan and so humiliating him. Again one sees how “Una tarde de domingo” is representative of Arlt’s work; Karl’s desire to transgress is reminiscent of the desire Óscar Masotta ascribes to Estanislao Balder, the protagonist of *El amor brujo*, Arlt’s fourth novel. He claims that Balder seeks, “el mal puro, quiere convertirse en una voluntad absolutamente mala” (1965, p. 63). Indeed, Karl even comments on how long it is since he has slept with a friend’s wife. It is the act of transgressing society’s limits that excites Karl, more than the sex itself. However, even here the role-playing that marks the characters’ behaviour is present as Karl attempts to maintain a mask of respectability. The narrator observes how Leonilda regards Karl with a smile which is, “un esguince lacio, taladrando perspicazmente la hipocresía del hombre que trataba inútilmente de desempeñar la comedia del ciudadano virtuoso” (1995, p. 91).

One of the key means by which Karl struggles against conformity is the degradation of those around him. One example is his aforementioned desire to humiliate Juan. Another example is his interest in, “[el] amor espiritual..., es decir, [el] amor de las jovencitas. No me explico por qué dicen que las mujeres jóvenes son espirituales” (1995, p. 98) and especially his relationship with:

una jovencita, medio literata y medio tuberculosa. Vamos a tomar un café juntos; a los cinco minutos me hablaba de sus pijamas de colores, de sus manos «marfilinas y pálidas», del tabaco rubio y de la música de Debussy... ¿Sabe lo que hice? Pues paré en seco sus confidencias de arte trascendental, preguntándole si menstruaba con regularidad y si movía todos los días el vientre... (1995, p. 98).

Evidently Karl's interest here is far from spiritual. In fact it is precisely an affront to the spiritual. His insistence on the taboo aspects of his lover's physicality is a response to her efforts to define her identity in purely spiritual terms while simultaneously attacking the spiritual love that he considers to be characteristic of adolescent women. Instead he emphasises her mortality and sexuality, thus deflating her pretensions and highlighting her animal nature. Karl objects to her pretensions because he sees in them the social hypocrisy that so disgusts him. She plays a role, that of the bohemian intellectual, and so Karl attempts to unmask her by degrading her.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism is pertinent here. As Bakhtin observes:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...]. To degrade [...] relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth (1984, pp. 19-20).

However, there is an important difference between Karl's degradation of those around him and Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque because according to Bakhtin the carnivalesque consists of a consensual suspension of society's normal rules, whereas Karl's transgressions stem from his inability to understand and accept these rules. As a result his attempts to break the rules imply imposing his worldview on others. Furthermore, he attempts to break these rules in order to assert his own individuality, whereas Bakhtin insists on the collective nature of the carnival celebration. Karl's sexual urges are in fact a manifestation of the bourgeois individual. A third important difference is that in the carnivalesque there is, as Bakhtin observes, a productive comic element, but in "Una tarde de domingo" this productive element is replaced by a negative view of degradation: Karl's degradation of his adolescent lover is an attempt to exercise power over her by moulding her to his ideal image of how she should be. As an outsider Karl is the individual *par excellence*. His rejection of the reigning social order actually reinforces his place in this order rather than freeing him from it.

The importance of the civilization/barbarism dichotomy in Latin American thought is widely documented, and plays an important role in "Una tarde de domingo". Karl's behaviour is driven by his premonition at the start of the story, and so has an irrational motivation. This element of irrationality is also present in the depiction of the city. Instead of being a civilizing presence in a wild continent the city be-

comes a dangerous primeval place where people are driven by instinct rather than reason. For example, the narrator describes Karl's fear that part of a building or an electric cable will fall on him. The dichotomy between the city as a locus of civilization and the *campo* or jungle as loci of barbarism is questioned: the falling cornice brings to mind a rock fall and the cables perhaps recall the lianas in a jungle. Karl's irrationality and his concept of the city as a dangerous place undermine the accepted view of the city as a civilizing influence. Instead it becomes a location in which people maintain a façade of civilization that hides their darker desires.

Karl's negative view of the middle-class morality can also be seen when he asks Leonilda how her husband would react if he caught them *in flagrante*. Specifically he wants to know if Juan would kill him. When Leonilda says that he would not, Karl replies:

Ya ve... nosotros los maridos modernos ni somos capaces de retorcer el pescuezo a una canalla que nos roba la mujer. Cierto es que esto de no retorcer el pescuezo a la cónyuge es una conquista del pensamiento y de la civilización... pero, de cualquier forma, a veces es agradable asesinar a alguien... en nombre de una superstición (1995, p. 99).

Karl feels emasculated by the conventions of civilization, a feeling that afflicts many of Arlt's characters. As Jaime Giordano notes, "Cualquier persona que viva de su imaginación o, por lo menos, no la tenga todavía arruinada, se sorprenderá de lo mediocre de la civilización" (1985, p. 82). In fact, what troubles Karl is not the mediocrity of civilization, but the fact that it obliges people to mask their desires, and so upholds the hypocrisy that so offends Karl.

Karl's discontentment with bourgeois morality also manifests itself in his opposition to the hypocrisy surrounding female sexuality. He tells Leonilda that he advised his young lover to:

augmentar diez kilos y después perder la virginidad. ¿No opina, Leonilda, que las mujeres desde los catorce años deb[er]ían tener derecho a acostarse con quien¹ se les diera la gana? [...] Pero es horrible obligarla a una mujer a custodiar su propia virginidad... (1995, pp. 98-99).

The conventions Karl criticises here are based on a hypocritical attitude to sex according to which women must be virgins when they marry and must remain faithful to their husbands. Men, however, are permitted a far greater degree of sexual freedom. For example, when Karl meets Leonilda in the street, he does not initially recognise her and is pleased that an unaccompanied woman breaks the taboo of speaking

to a stranger: "Las costumbres de las mujeres afortunadamente son cada vez más libres" (1995, p. 90).

Karl inhabits a society in which women are classified according to the familiar virgin/whore dichotomy. The hypocrisy in this moral code is illustrated by the behaviour Karl attributes to Leonilda's husband, Juan. Karl imagines him leaving work and, "corriendo hacia un prostíbulo clandestino, escogiendo las rameras de trasero extraordinario" (1995, p. 93). That it should be a clandestine brothel offends Karl's hatred of pretence. Also, one can see the importance of physicality for Karl as he draws attention to the "trasero extraordinario" of Juan's imagined partner. As Giordano notes, "La ciudad ha hecho perder al hombre el sentido de su cuerpo" (1985, p. 87). Karl imagines Juan attempting to regain this sense of physicality by frequenting brothels, and emphasises physicality by drawing attention to the prostitutes' behinds. Karl attempts to regain contact with his physicality through his attempts to seduce Leonilda.

These visits to brothels contrast with how Karl imagines Juan reacting if he were to discover him with Leonilda. Karl thinks, "Perder quizá un amigo. Solos los dos. [...] Y él tendría entonces derecho a decirme: ¿No sabías que el mundo está repleto de mujeres? Y vos fuiste hacia mi mujer, mi única mujer" (1995, pp. 91-92). As Karl wryly observes, "Todos los maridos tienen una única mujer, cuando ésta se encuentra en trance de acostarse con otro" (1995, p. 93). Here Karl imagines two contrasting situations: Juan being unfaithful without any feelings of guilt; and his furious reaction if his wife were to be unfaithful. The difference between the behaviour Karl ascribes to Juan and Juan's supposed reaction if his wife were to do the same underlines the double values at work.

As is shown above Karl deliberately degrades those around him in order to offend the sensibilities of a moral code he sees as hypocritical. Nevertheless, the framework supporting this code holds firm and Karl's actions are ultimately futile. This raises the question of how these social norms are upheld and why Karl fails. It is not through violence that this machinery maintains the moral code, but instead through more insidious methods such as gossip and aspirational images in the media. Karl reassures Leonilda that he will not mention their encounter to his wife, since, "a ella le faltaría tiempo para írselo a contar a sus amigas: '¿Sabían que la mujer de Juan invitó a mi esposo a tomar té a solas con ella?...'" (1995, p. 97). He adds that his wife:

Es una mujer honrada. Todas las mujeres honradas son más o menos como ella. Más o menos impúdicas y más o menos aburridas. A momentos les

gustaría acostarse con los hombres que las encaprichan; luego retroceden y ni con el mismo marido casi se acuestan (1995, p. 97).

Karl rails against the hypocrisy of his wife and her friends who would judge Leonilda for behaving in a manner in which they themselves would like to behave.

Another way in which the dominant morality maintains itself is through incentives. As Michel Foucault notes:

power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Superego exercising itself only in a negative way (1980, p. 52).

In “Una tarde de domingo” these incentives function through the images of glamour that appear in the press and at the movies. These clichés mould Leonilda’s aspirations by offering her the prospect of an alternative to the frustration of her marriage. She says to Karl:

A mí me gustaría irme lejos. Vivir como los artistas de cine. ¿Usted cree que es verdad lo que dicen en los diarios de la vida de los artistas de cine? [...] Ve, Eugenio..., ésa es la vida que me gustaría hacer. Pero es imposible ahora (1995, p. 96).

The “ahora” with which she finishes this phrase is poignant as Leonilda will never transcend her class and live the life of fame and luxury to which she aspires and which she deceives herself about ever achieving. Instead the glimpses of glamour and dreams of a new life afforded by the press and the cinema are but a distraction from the grinding boredom of her everyday life. Karl sees this and accuses her of being taken in by what she sees, describing her as, “una pobre mujercita. La eterna mujercita que cree en las pavadas del cine” (1995, p. 101). As the Argentine author and critic Ricardo Piglia observes:

Para Arlt la sociedad está trabajada por la ficción, se asienta en la ficción. En este sentido se podría hablar de un bovarismo social. Hay una crítica muy frontal de Arlt a lo que podríamos llamar la producción imaginaria de masas: el cine, el folletín y sobre todo el periodismo son máquinas de crear ilusiones sociales, de definir modelos de realidad (1993, pp. 30-1).

In his work, Arlt exposes how fictional modes can shape reality by influencing people’s behaviour, and their expectations.

In the case of “Una tarde de domingo” this process can be seen in the different masks adopted by the characters. The word *comedia* is

used on several occasions to describe the characters' behaviour. On one occasion Karl "[hace] la comedia del ciudadano virtuoso" (1995, p. 91) when he attempts to seduce Leonilda. Later, when she asks Karl not to talk about sex, he says, "Ahora es usted la que hace la comedia..." (1995, p. 100), thus suggesting that Karl is aware that the image she projects, as a faithful wife who sees sex as an unsavoury marital duty, is but another mask. Leonilda aspires to one role – the glamorous film star – but meanwhile she plays another; that of the faithful wife, pretending that she finds the mention of sex shocking. All of the characters play roles: Karl plays that of the rebellious outsider; Leonilda's role is that of the bored wife turned vamp; Juan that of the cheated husband and betrayed friend; and Karl's nameless wife is assigned, in his imagination, the role of the betrayed wife turned moral arbiter.

Another illustration of cinematic convention shaping the characters' behaviour can be found when Karl and Leonilda are alone in her flat. Karl asks her if she is bored in her marriage. She says yes, and then:

Se produjo un silencio tenebroso, en el cual ambos intercalaban examen, mirándose a los ojos, como una película parlante deslizaba en los oídos de Karl, estas palabras: "Solos. Diez minutos antes ibas por las calles de la ciudad, apestabas del tedio dominguero, [...] esperando una aventura centelleante. [...] Y ahora no sabes de qué modo iniciar la comedia" (1995, p. 94).

This voice, which mocks him for his inaction, is like the cinematic device of the voiceover, but instead of describing the character's feelings in order to enlighten the audience it goads Karl about his inaction.

Leonilda plays the role of the frustrated wife turned seductress. When the two characters are in her flat she complains that she is bored with her life and admits that sometimes, "[Juan] piensa que no debíamos habernos casado. Otras veces, en cambio, me dice que tengo todo el aspecto de una mujer que ha nacido para tener un amante" (1995, p. 94). Karl asks if Juan has explicitly told her to take a lover, but Leonilda replies that he has not. Then, perhaps in response to what Leonilda has said, or maybe acting under the influence of that morning's premonition, Karl says, "¿Y entonces para qué me ha propuesto usted hoy que viniera? Desea serle infiel a su esposo. ¿Y para eso me ha elegido?" (1995, p. 95). But Karl has misread the situation: Leonilda does not actually intend to be unfaithful to Juan. Instead she plays the role of the bored wife turned seductress.

Even Karl's attempts at escaping from the norms of middle-class society involve him in playing a role: that of the outsider. Even rebellion has been co-opted and so Karl's attempts at escaping from the

role-play required by society simply result in him playing a different role. The failure of his attempt to lift his mask and that worn by Leonilda is symbolised by the door to her flat. As he climbs the stairs on his way to the flat he asks himself if Juan “la habría adaptado a ella a sus preferencias sensuales” (1995, p. 93) but this reverie is interrupted when he comes face to face with the door. Later, when he leaves the flat the narrator explains how Leonilda watches him approach the same door. Again the physical space of the city comes to symbolise the characters’ desires as this door represents the boundary both of Leonilda’s personal space – her flat – and of her individuality. The door represents a boundary she will not let Karl cross as to do so would undermine her sense of identity by obliging her to play a different role, that of the adulterous wife. Not only does Karl fail to take Leonilda to bed, but his attempts at escaping from the hypocrisy of bourgeois society are hollow: instead of proposing something better he simply degrades those around him; instead of escaping from the limitations of the individual he asserts his own uniqueness and superiority to those around him; and instead of calling for sexual freedom he humiliates a young woman in a less powerful situation.

Note

1 The original reads: “debían tener derecho a acostarse con quién” (Arlt, 1933, p. 127).

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