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## Misogynistic Representations of Dance and The Female Dancer in Patricia Highsmith's "The Dancer"\*

*Patricia Highsmith'in "Dansçı" Başlıklı Öyküsünde  
Dans ve Kadın Dansçının Nahoş ve Düşmanca Temsili*

### Abstract

*Little Tales of Misogyny* by Patricia Highsmith presents various circumstances where unconventional female characters are depicted unsympathetically, considered very precarious, and thus die in the end. "The Dancer" is one of those tales, in which the central female character Claudette is murdered by her dance partner Rodolphe while on stage. In this story, dance appears as a medium through which the female protagonist gains space, visibility, independence and power while, on the other hand, it causes her death at the end. This article will explore how representations of dance, sexuality and death reinforce the portrayal of misogyny, making the story a confusing one in terms of feminist reading.

**Key Words:** Misogyny, Dance, Female Sexuality, Death

**Jel Codes:** Y3, Y8

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\* This article is an enlarged and revised version of a paper presented at "Conference on Literature, Language, and Translation 'liLETRAd'" that took place on 7-8 July 2015 at University of Sevilla, Spain. It has not been published elsewhere before.

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## Introduction

Though Patricia Highsmith (1921-1995) is largely remembered with perhaps the most famous piece of her novel series titled the Ripliad, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), her shorter fiction was no less interesting than the Ripley texts. Especially the intriguing nature of stories in her book titled *Little Tales of Misogyny* (1974) is worthy of mention because the stories in this collection are very succinct, shocking and extraordinary in many respects, particularly in terms of their misogynistic treatment of central female characters. *Little Tales of Misogyny* consists of seventeen eerie short stories with unconventional and hence victimized female characters at the center of each.

Each story is a dark satire of patriarchal constructions such as proper sexuality, heterosexual marriage, female reproduction, prudery, housewifery as well as anti-patriarchal concerns such as transgression of patriarchal morals, sexually free women, and independent working women. The first story "The Hand," for instance, is an apt example for black humor. It tells the story of a proper suitor who asks a father's permission to marry his daughter. The absurdity of the story makes itself apparent just from the outset, in the depiction of a marriage proposal: "A young man asked a father for his daughter's hand, and received it in a box—her left hand" (Highsmith, 1980: 7). The man in "The Hand" gradually gets mad and finally dies in a mental hospital. Fluctuations between literal and metaphoric meanings in the story can hardly be grasped by the male character, who loses his sanity at the end. This can be considered as an attempt to satirize the patriarchal institution of marriage and its traditions. The stories titled "Oona, the Jolly Cave Woman," "The Coquette," "The Dancer," "The Mobile Bed-Object," "The Victim," and "The Prude" satirize tragic consequences of active female sexuality, especially out of wedlock. "The Female Novelist," and "The Artist" stand as ironic critiques of problems faced by productive, working women. "The Invalid, or, The Bed-Ridden" and "The Breeder" tease reproductive roles and functionality of women in patriarchal societies. "The Middle-Class Housewife" is a harsh mockery of hostility among women. "The Perfect Little Lady" implies the impossibility of bringing up pure, innocent girls. "The Silent Mother-in-Law" ridicules the stereotypical imagery of talkative older women. "The Evangelist" is making fun of religious commitment of women while the last tale "The Perfectionist" brings attention to women's neurosis which shows itself particularly with extreme devotion to household chores and domestic activities such as cleaning, cooking and knitting. As a matter of fact, the whole collection is absorbing and perplexing regarding both sympathetic and unsympathetic representations of women characters, making the stories apt for feminist, anti-feminist and misogynistic interpretations depending on the reader's tendencies and choices.

This is primarily because of the stories' ambivalent treatment of the term 'misogyny' in the collection, which is ironically included in the title as *Little Tales of Misogyny*, perhaps as an attempt to define and categorize the tales. However, whether Patricia Highsmith reprehends or reinforces misogyny and misogynistic representations of women characters in these tales is difficult to tell. This is because although the

collection abounds in subversive female sexuality, female visibility, assertiveness and various unconventional female conducts, the ambivalent treatment of such issues makes it nearly impossible to categorize these stories as feminist, anti-feminist, or, perhaps as misogynistic. In his review of Patricia Highsmith's *Little Tales of Misogyny*, Nicholas Lezard ironically expresses the same concern:

The book was first published in 1975 in German, under the title *Kleine Geschichte für Weiberfeinde*, appearing in English two years later. I should have looked closer at that German title: it means, literally, 'little tales for misogynists'. This is not a book to teach the misogynists a lesson: it's something you might give a misogynist on his birthday. (2015)

Lezard's apt words regarding the ambivalent treatment of woman hatred sounds convincing because in *Little Tales of Misogyny*, Patricia Highsmith presents various circumstances where extra-ordinary female characters are depicted unsympathetically, considered very precarious, and thus generally die at the end. Death appears as a frequent narrative punishment for unusual, unconventional and dangerous women characters, who transgress patriarchal sexual mores in this collection of brief and shocking tales written in a sharply ironic tone. Such issues in fictional texts are generally discussed in terms of representation, treatment and reception of female characters, all of which have been significant issues especially within Anglo-American feminist tradition. This article will hence briefly define feminist, anti-feminist or ambivalent fictional texts and, subsequently, analyze the story titled "The Dancer" as an ambivalent and confusing story mainly because of the misogynistic representations of the act of dancing and the image of an independent female dancer.

### **1. Feminist and Anti-Feminist Representations in Fiction**

How to approach a literary text by women, on women or about women has been the central concern of feminist literary criticism for decades. However, feminist readings of literary texts are diverse and cannot constitute a homogeneous methodology. This is mainly because it is almost impossible to talk about a shared female experience among women. In the first place, women do not constitute a uniform category. In the second place, it is crucial to be aware of additional sources of suppression and oppression such as race, class, and sexual identities as a result of which women may suffer from extra victimizations. This is possibly why variety of feminist schools such as Marxist, Socialist, Liberal, Radical, Post-colonial or, to be more specific, Lesbian feminism, Eco-feminism, Black feminism as well as their sub-types introduced diverse focal points to the field of gender and women's studies. However, two influential feminist literary schools are noteworthy especially in literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century: The French Feminism and the Anglo-American Feminism.

Broadly speaking, the French feminist tradition has been interested in female sexuality, female body, the use of language, and producing feminine texts while the Anglo-American school in literary studies has focused generally on images and

representations of women in fiction. The French school in literary criticism overlooks women's writing of past centuries while the Anglo-American school's main interest lies primarily in the works produced by women writers of the previous centuries. All in all, however, feminist criticism of a fictional text deals with representations and treatment of especially female characters as well as their actions and feelings in narratives that may evoke either feminist consciousness or anti-feminist backlash.

The narrative line, plotting, story, themes and characterization in fictional texts may or may not favor female characters. Defining a feminist or an anti-feminist text is a complex matter because of the difficulty of defining the terms themselves. The long history of movement and reactions against it make it hard to offer immutable definitions. Still, broadly speaking, a feminist text challenges patriarchal structures, beliefs and values either implicitly or explicitly by problematizing diverse concerns of the woman question. While doing this, texts with feminist undertones "provide a more powerful understanding of the ways in which society works to the disadvantage of women" (Morris, 1993: 7). This can be done by unveiling how long-rooted patriarchal standards mold women both in private and public spheres to benefit male-dominated society. Fiction is an affective medium, a convenient way of reflecting social phenomena. Therefore, its affective influences on reading populations cannot be underestimated. That is why feminist literary criticism considered fictional texts as narrative evidences of women's experiences.

On the contrary, anti-feminism is "a resistance movement against the advancement of women's rights. It tries to halt the development of new liberal attitudes towards the boundaries between the sexes, insisting that there are fundamental differences in sexual characteristics and roles which women should accept" (Sanders, 1996: 3). In fiction, anti-feminist tendencies show themselves through representation and treatment of women characters and women's experiences, again both in private and public spheres. That is, anti-feminist implications in texts by, on or about women reveal themselves through the way women characters, their actions and feelings are treated in the narratives. Influences of anti-feminism in fiction may reveal themselves through the narrative line that works for the disadvantage of female characters. Also, all kinds of sexist representations of both male and female characters, normalization of patriarchal thought systems and structures in fiction can be thought of as repercussions of anti-feminism in literature.

In-between these two tendencies lay ambivalent narratives, which resist classifications. Ambivalent texts are generally open to both feminist and anti-feminist readings; they fluctuate between two tendencies. Such texts contain subversive elements such as unruly women characters and their transgressive actions that challenge patriarchal norms. Also, however, these texts present resolutions and endings which turn events to the advantage of patriarchal thought systems. Patricia Highsmith's *Little Tales of Misogyny* is an ambivalent narrative in this respect, because whether the tales in the collection are for or against misogyny is difficult to tell. This article will discuss this by focusing solely on one of the tales "The Dancer."

## 2. "The Dancer"

In "The Dancer," the title female character Claudette is a popular dancer and a sexually active woman. She is in a relationship with her dance partner Rodolphe, with whom she works at a nightclub. Every night Claudette and Rodolphe perform an erotic dance which is a mixture of tango and waltz. In the final scene of their routine sensual dance performance, Rodolphe pretends to choke Claudette to death on the dance floor. This violent scene of the performance is presented as the most zestful moment that the audiences passionately enjoy. One night, however, at the end of their performance, because of either Claudette's infidelity or Rodolphe's jealousy, he literally throttles her. As a fatal result, Claudette dies while still on the stage in front of mostly male audiences, who witness her final moments perhaps with mixed feelings of awe and satisfaction.

In "The Dancer," dance appears as a medium through which the unconventional female protagonist gains space, independence and power. However, on the other hand, it strengthens a sort of pornographic female visibility and eventually causes her death at the end. This contradiction creates ambivalence regarding the treatment of misogyny in the story and causes confusion. This is mainly because the victimized woman character in "The Dancer" is unconventional in many respects from a patriarchal perspective, which is why it may be difficult for misogynists to feel sorry for her death on the dance floor. This is exactly where the emphasis lies in this article: representation and treatment of pornographic dance, sexuality, violence and death as a narrative punishment reinforce the portrayal of misogyny in Patricia Highsmith's story "The Dancer." Only a strict feminist reading, which also questions the conventionality and unconventionality of women, can notice that misogyny is indeed subtly criticized in these tales through dark humor.

"The Dancer" is a really brief tale as the other pieces in *Little Tales of Misogyny*. That all the stories in the collection are extremely succinct makes the tales less informative regarding characterization and plot. However, the brevity of the stories also make them intriguing and baffling especially with regards to the opening and closing parts. For instance, the opening lines of "The Dancer" introduce spicy issues such as pornographic dance, enchantment of extra-marital sexuality as well as the commercial success and profit they are supposed to create:

They danced marvelously together, swooping back and forth across the floor to the erotic rhythms of the tango, sometimes the waltz. At the age of twenty and twenty-two respectively, Claudette and Rodolphe became lovers. They wanted to marry, but their employer thought they were more titillating to the customers if they were not married. So they remained single. (Highsmith, 1980: 24)

The opening part highlights the centrality of female sexuality in the story. This is an important detail to start with because moral norms of patriarchy require that female sexuality has to be controlled and molded under the concept of what some people call 'good sex,' 'proper sex,' or, in other words, heterosexual sex within marriage. On the

other hand, however, in the story the opposite is presented as more exciting and appealing to mostly male customers of the nightclub, who are described as “jaded, middle-aged male clientele” (Highsmith, 1980: 23). Three significant concerns of feminist reading gain importance at this particular point: patriarchal treatment of female conduct, pornographic (and thus misogynistic) representations of female sexuality and the portrayal of masculine and feminine images.

The first one, patriarchy, has been one of the basic concerns of feminists starting from the early stages of the history of feminism. In their book *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan define the term in the following way: “Since the early twentieth century, feminist writers have used the concept to refer to the social system of masculine domination over women” (2004: 93). Likewise, in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Sylvia Walby, too, defines patriarchy “as a system of social structures and practices which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (1992: 20). Walby additionally specifies the areas which patriarchy suppresses women: “I am arguing that there are six main structures which make up a system of patriarchy: paid work, housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state” (1992: 16). In Patricia Highsmith’s “The Dancer” patriarchal domination, oppression and exploitation of the central woman character can be observed particularly in the areas of sexuality and violence, which are brought together in the pornographic representation of an erotic dance performance in the story. This is because in their performance

Rodolphe often appeared to be choking Claudette to death. He would seize her throat and advance, bending her backward, or he would retreat—it didn’t matter—keeping her throat in the grip of his hands, sometimes shaking her neck so that her hair tossed wildly. The audience would gasp, sigh, and watch with fascination. The drumrolls of the three-man band would grow louder and more insistent. (Highsmith, 1980: 23-24)

The way their dance performance is detailed in the story represents pornographic and thus misogynistic description of both dance and of patriarchal male gaze. In the first place, dance provides the female protagonist movement, visibility and independence in the public sphere. However, particularly in this description, dance also embellishes and reinforces violence against women through the representation of throttling on the stage, which is presented as the most blissful moment of the performance. In the second place, that the majority of the customers are male and that they especially find the violent and nasty scenes of performance pleasurable are worthy of emphasis. It is openly stated in the story that Rodolphe’s throttling Claudette on the stage “in an excess of passion . . . was what the customers came for” (Highsmith, 1980: 24). This means male customers were indeed paying exclusively to see and enjoy depiction of violence against woman epitomized by a pornographic dance performance. Apparently, such performative violence against the woman dancer on the dance floor is found exciting, appealing, and desirable by male customers. As the owner of the nightclub is aware of the potential profit he is making on such a performance, he does not want the dancers to get married. Here, the marriage institution in patriarchal societies is presented as something that

people cannot avoid at some period in their lives but also something which is tedious and uninteresting. This is because once married, Rodolphe and Claudette would have to act within the borders of conventional sexuality and thus would turn dull, less exciting and also perhaps less profitable for the nightclub.

At this point discussions regarding pornography and misogyny gain importance. In *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, Pilcher and Whelehan define pornography as "all forms of sexualized representation of women" (2004: 97) while on the other hand they highlight the difficulty of differentiating pornography from erotica: "it is very difficult to provide a clear definition of what constitutes 'pornography', as opposed to erotica or suggestive and titillating imagery. Often, the boundary between 'erotica' and 'pornography' seems to run along the lines of art versus tacky commercialism" (2004: 96-7). Considering how the story highlights the importance of commercial profit their dance increases, the dance performance of Claudette and Rodolphe can fit the description of pornography. This is because their dance is a representation of sexualised violence, which is what brings a huge commercial success to the nightclub. Moreover, such a performance reinforces "hegemonic masculinities," which is defined by Pilcher and Whelehan as "the culturally dominant ideal of masculinity centred around authority, physical toughness and strength, heterosexuality and paid work" (2004: 83) all of which appear as significant concerns in the story. Hegemonic masculinity in "The Dancer" can be observed by looking at both the performance of the male dancer Rodolphe and the male community whose male gaze appreciates his hegemonic dance, which, one day, results in a fatal ending.

In "The Dancer," Highsmith briefly implies that Claudette "stopped sleeping with Rodolphe, because she thought deprivation would wet his appetite" (1980: 24). Add to this, she was seeing other men. Little did she know, however, this would cause her death on the dance floor:

Rodolphe danced a splendid tango one evening. He pressed himself against her as usual, and she bent backwards.

'More! More!' cried the audience, mostly men, as Rodolphe's hands tightened about her throat.

Claudette always pretended to suffer, to love Rodolphe and to suffer at the hands of his passion in the dance. This time she did not rise when he released her. Nor did he assist her, as he usually did. He had strangled her, too tightly for her to cry out. Rodolphe walked off the little stage, and left Claudette for other people to pick up. (25)

Whether this was an intentional murder or not is impossible to tell because Patricia Highsmith avoids offering details about how characters feel and think deep inside. Still, the death of the transgressive woman character on the stage can be considered as something more than mere punishment of infidelity. Though on the stage dance appears as an overflow of intense feelings, in Patricia Highsmith's story it turns into a vehicle through which violence against women and female death is aestheticised as a part of

sexualized dance performance. Violent, horrid, or, in other words, pornographic representation of dance in this story results in the death of the central female character, who, as implied in the story, refuses to submit to patriarchal enforcements. As the title of the collection implies, from a misogynist perspective, death on the dance floor in front of mostly male audiences implies that the death of Claudette is indeed a double punishment. She not only loses her life, but she also lies there as a lesson learnt for the others.

### **Conclusion**

Dance in this story appears as a sort of abusive power of the male dancer over the female dancer and results in a performative sexual assault enjoyed by male audiences. Such a perspective reinforces the idea that patriarchal treatment of female conduct, pornographic representation of dance and construction of feminine and masculine images create a confusion regarding the treatment of misogyny in Patricia Highsmith's "The Dancer." Conventional or 'good' women are generally seen victims while for unconventional or 'evil' women such an ending is regarded inevitable. A misogynist reading such narratives may find nothing disturbing in them because s/he would think the ultimate tragic endings for transgressive women are well-deserved. This is mainly because of the patriarchal treatment of subversive female conducts in the tales. Still, although it is difficult to decide whether Patricia Highsmith's short stories in *Little Tales of Misogyny* are for or against misogynists, the sharp ironic tone in the tales can be thought of as a subtle criticism of misogynistic attitudes in patriarchal cultures, which will not go unnoticed by careful and critical readers.



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## PATRICIA HIGHSMITH'İN "DANŞCI" BAŞLIKLİ ÖYKÜSÜNDE DANS VE KADIN DANŞCININ NAHOŞ VE DÜŞMANCA TEMSİLİ\*

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### Özet

Patricia Highsmith'in *Bir Kadın Düşmanından Öykücükler* başlıklı öykü derleme kitabı sıradışı kadın karakterlerin tehlikeli bulunduğu, nahoş ve düşmanca resmedildiği ve genellikle anlatının sonunda öldürüldüğü öyküler içerir. "Dansçı" bu öykülerden biridir ve ana kadın karakter Claudette'nin partneri Rodolphe tarafından sahnede öldürülmesi ile sonuçlanır. Bu öyküde dans ana kadın karaktere alan, görünürlük, özgürlük ve güç kazandıran bir araç olmasının yanı sıra öykünün sonunda onun ölümünde de yol açar. Bu makalede dans, cinsellik ve ölüm simgelerinin "Dansçı" öyküsünde kadın düşmanlığını güçlendirmesi ve öyküyü feminist eleştiri geleneği içinde kafa karıştıran bir anlatıya dönüştürmesi irdelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadın Düşmanlığı, Dans, Kadın Cinselliği, Ölüm

**Jel Kodları:** Y3, Y8

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\* Bu makale 7-8 Temmuz 2015'te Sevilla Üniversitesi tarafından düzenlenmiş olan "Conference on Literature, Language, and Translation 'liLETRAd'" başlıklı konferansta sunduğum bildirim genişletilmiş ve yeniden gözden geçirilmiş halidir. Bu makale daha önce herhangi bir dergide basılmamıştır.

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