

Rereading a Classic Book for Young Adults: The Representation of Death in Aidan Chambers' *Dance on My Grave*

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Abstract

Although in 1982 Chambers' book, *Dance on My Grave*, was considered bold, rather provocative, today, almost forty years later we can only treat it as one of the classic daring books that still attracts and challenges modern readers, teenagers and adults. And if the issue of homosexuality mainly identifies the novel nowadays seems commonplace, the matter of death stands virtually as a threatening scene throughout this book. However, the novel's central hero named Hal Robinson, trying to clear his memories up, after he had experienced an adolescent love that still surpasses everything, entices all but poetically his teenage friends-readers into a dance that exorcizes death and praises life. Following Hal in his pursuits, the present paper seeks, though not exhaustively, to provide some more insights into Chambers' novel concerning the torturous search of the self as well as the depressing idea of inevitable death that is very closely linked to the transgressions of adolescence.

Keywords

Adolescence, Aidan Chambers, Death, Identity, Homosexuality, YA Readers

1. Introduction

In *Dance on My Grave*¹ we are introduced to death manifested both literally and

¹One of the most read books written by Chambers and second in the Aidan Chambers' "Dance Sequence" (of six novels: *Breaktime*, *Dance on My Grave*, *Now I Know*, *The Toll Bridge*, *Postcards from No Man's Land* and *This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn*), *Dance on My Grave* was first published in 1982. The book has been edited out several times to date, while it has been translated into many languages. In 2020 it also formed the basis of the film *Summer of 85* (Été 85) directed by French François Ozon. However, obviously due to its theme, the novel "was challenged at the Montgomery County Memorial Library System in 2004 by the Library Patrons of Texas" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dance_on_My_Grave#cite_ref-9 accessed on 05/12/2020).

riences that he feels changes him, not the experiences themselves. As he confesses, “Because of writing the story, I am no longer now what I was when it all happened. Writing this story is what has changed me; not having lived through the story” (Chambers, 1982: p. 221).

As William Banks (2009: p. 35) asserts, many characters and especially the queer ones, in young adult novels, “are most useful if they’re dead or gone”. Katelyn Browne (2020: p. 1) observes that all these characters “have been closely connected with death”, while Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000: p. 122) affirms that engaging with death seems inevitable. Actually, the whole of Chambers’ book is consumed by death. The language and symbolism are throughout echo mortality. Hal describes the people on the beach “[...] a morgue of sweating bodies laid out on slabs of towels” (Chambers, 1982: p. 9), and Barry, at their first meeting, as “The Body” (Chambers, 1982: p. 22). Hal commentates his own and the actions and objects around him in terms of death. The bath at Mrs Gorman’s house he sees as a tomb, a sarcophagus. He also contemplates the Egyptians faith in death through the building of the pyramids and later relates old, cultural traditions of treating dead people, traditions which seem repulsive and barbaric (Chambers, 1982: p. 200).

Hal’s interest in death is more than adolescent preoccupation; it is natural for someone at the brink of adult life, experiencing for the first time the joy of autonomy, of youth and beauty to be alarmed by the transience of this freedom. Mortality is frightening as age appears to be devoid of possibility. Hal himself views it as a ridiculous, sorrowful state. “My eyes will be palely vacant, staring with gaga incomprehension at all and nothing while weeping from no other sorrow than the blight of age. I will not be able to control my water; will spill my food down my chest where it will leave festering fungoid spots on my holey cardigan, and children will laugh at me in the street and call me unhappy names” (Chambers, 1982: p. 102). Hal defines his own death fascination as lunatic, “if your hobby is death, you must be mad”.

Hal’s interest in death whilst all-consuming is more academic than fatalistic. Although he does contemplate suicide after Barry’s death, Hal is predominantly concerned with staying alive evinced by his reaction to the capsizing of the “Tumble”, “I was not yet tired enough of life, I decided to wish for a trip to that certain grave. Death I was interested in; being dead, I was not” (Chambers, 1982: p. 17). Hal, however, courts death. In his obsessive search for a bosom friend, he meets Harvey, a mad scientist with a precocious interest in experimenting with electricity. Harvey seems intent on blowing himself up.

Barry, the next contender for the boy with the can of magic beans, also has a death wish—a wish that is realized whilst he is trying to reach the unattainable speed just ahead. The drunk Barry and Hal stumble upon on their way back from the cinema, is also intent on “shuffling off this mortal coil”,³ trying to dive

³The phrase refers to the widely known and quoted “To be, or not to be”, the opening line of Prince Hamlet’s soliloquy/confession in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 1). There are many allusions to *Hamlet* “shuffling off this mortal coil” in the book. Hal is in many ways Hamlet’s foil, haunted by an oath to a dead man to carry out a deed he is reluctant to fulfil. The grappling with the corpse in the morgue echoes Hamlet’s grappling with Ophelia in her grave. Barry and Hal visit a production of *Hamlet* in London, afterwards Barry demands that Hal swear to dance on his grave, if he should die first. This is paralleled by the ghost of Hamlet’s father’s demand that Hamlet give an oath of vengeance.

is understandable, he has been left alone to face up to himself. Barry has betrayed his idea of friendship by precipitating this unwelcomed self-examination. “My mother calls it a migraine. Maybe it is. But I know what I call it. Fright. Funk. Shame. Guilt. Locked up anger trying to get out. Self-pity” (Chambers, 1982: p. 167).

Chambers uses Hal’s visit to the morgue to examine the nature of identity, the disparity between what is and what seems to be. Hal dressed in the guise of a lovesick girl, visits the morgue, requiring concrete proof that his lover is dead. It is only because Hal reacts inappropriately to the sight of Barry’s body that the travesty is realized, the scene moves from melodrama to farce as Hal’s disguise is literally stripped away to the astonishment of the morgue attendant. This symbolic uncovering is a major theme in the book. We witness it after the capsizing of the “Tumble” when Hal is forcibly stripped by Mrs. Gorman and later when Hal visits Barry’s grave and literally attempts to uncover the body by attacking the grave in a frenzy of grief. Chamber’s interest lies in the layers individuals apply to distort truth, or to create a more palatable reality for themselves.

Hal is disturbed by his transformation and only goes through with the scenarios because of his compulsion to see Barry once more. “I’ve got this compulsion. It’s crazy, I know. But I’ve got to see him. I mean his body. I have to know for certain. I can’t explain. I just have to, that all” (Chambers, 1982: p. 198). Hal feels that he is surrendering his identity through his disguise. He feels vulnerable and exposed. His ensuing de-frocking at the hands of the morgue attendant echoes Kurt Vonnegut. “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be”. This warning of the peril of failing to be vigilant is dramatically enacted in the morgue, Hal lets his guard slip and his identity is laid bare for all to see.

Hal is determined to carry out his oath to dance on his grave. For Hal this action is necessary to appease his guilt, to acknowledge his friendship that was and to affirm his new realized self, his aloneness. Hal feels that his sickness is attributed to his failure to perform the dance. “I’m stuck with this till I’ve kept my promise” (Chambers, 1982: p. 229). This haunting of an oath unfulfilled strongly echoes *Hamlet* again. “I promised Barry, I said, to dance on his grave. He would have danced on mine if I had died first, it was an oath” (Chambers, 1982: p. 225).

In essence Hal’s dance is a ritualistic casting off of Barry, a recognition of what was, a releasing, a letting go. It is during the first dance that Hal acknowledges his anger and grief, letting himself cry. Hal’s anger manifests in his hacking at Barry’s grave. He is angry at being left alone, to confront reality alone. “Being angry as well as sad, but not knowing why I was angry, made me even more upset. I started gasping for breath as the tears choked me...And in a frenzy began hacking, stabbing, digging, using his lollipop number-stake as a spade, flinging the soil aside in any direction” (Chambers, 1982: p. 235).

The violence of the dance is suggestive of the dramatic change that Hal has undergone. He fulfils his oath through the dance but also more importantly he mourns the death of his own self, his innocence, idealism and obsession. I had

band. The ghostly woman has also died, her personal death of self is more disturbing because she still exists, although spiritless. “If I think of her when I am on my own, she’s like she was when I was little; laughing, busy, always on the go, and talking all the time. But she isn’t like that now. Now she is a frightened woman who hides [...]” (Chambers, 1982: p. 231). We witness her hiding from a violent film on the television behind her book entitled *Mrs. Pinkerton Came to Die*. In her exchanges with her son she is without opinion, indecisive, almost without will. She presents a sad figure of a human being hiding from the world, frightened of life.

4. As an Epilogue

Rereading Chambers’ novel in this paper, I actually decided to reflect own reading, a past reading many years ago. Furthermore, of the many theoretical texts that have dealt with YA Literature in the meantime—e.g. regarding the various conceptualizations and research methodologies of adolescence (Trites, 2014; Gavin, 2012), or the new directions in the study of Children’s and YA Literature (Wolf, Coats, Enciso & Jenkins, 2011; Reynolds, 2007; Hunt, 2004; McCallum, 1999)—some have led me to enrich my present approach with a certain amount of additional insights detected throughout Chambers’ novel.

Among the three preponderant discourses Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000: p. 122) distinguishes in YA novels—that is to say: identity, sexuality, and death—the latter seems to be the most powerful in *Dance on My Grave*, as it essentially includes and unites the other two. As a result, the ongoing association between the three does not surprise us at all as readers, while death through the search for identity and sexuality appears almost expected. Besides, Chambers extends the idea of death from the literal to the metaphoric.

Chambers employs a controversial and sensitive theme in choosing to examine death in his book. Faithful to his point of view that literature for non-adult readers “at its best attempts to [...] recreate and seek for meanings in human experience” Chambers (2000: p. 42), he really explores areas of human experience that are ugly and unpleasant, areas we would perhaps rather not dwell upon, in order to elucidate them, to re-interpret the old sense of things (Rosenblatt, 1978: pp. 12-13, 107-108). Through Hal we witness a struggle with obsession, possessiveness, jealousy and death. Hal wrestles with despair and with the problems of identity, reality and truth. The author through his protagonist challenges our acceptance of traditional customs, encouraging us to question whether Hal’s dance is essentially offensive or simply another type of ritual. Hal’s ritualistic dance is viewed as a horrible desecration, a sacrilegious abomination because it is not commonplace or accepted behavior. Objectively, it is no more absurd than accepted rituals of death.

Aidan Chambers in *Dance on My Grave*, albeit through death, triumphs in challenging traditional gender definitions whilst presenting the reader with a powerfully well written book. After reading the novel we are not left with any

marvelous formula that will address the issues raised. What is achieved is a raising of our consciousness, an opportunity for the reader to dwell upon these areas for themselves. In fact, every literary narration/incident, even that of death, as “an event in time” in Rosenblatt (1978: p. 12) words, affects us not only when we come together with the literary text but also after reading it, later, during our real life as human beings.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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