

# **Borders and Boundaries in Rita Dove's Poetry**

## **Fronteira e limites na poesia de Rita Dove**

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### **Resumo**

Esse artigo apresenta uma leitura do poema de Rita Dove, poeta laureada afro-americana. "Parsley" é um poema narrativo baseado em um dos mais abomináveis fatos da história moderna: o assassinato de vinte mil haitianos em 1957 pelo ditador dominicano Rafael Trujillo. Alguns elementos tais como processos de dominação (cultural, lingüística, social e política), colonização e poder, apesar de estarem implícitos no texto, são muito claros e vívidos no poema. Apesar de estar descrevendo um evento histórico, Rita Dove é tão imaginativa quanto uma romancista, o que já seria suficiente para enriquecer o poema. Somam-se também o lirismo e os aspectos formais usados com maestria, que juntos são responsáveis por dar a "Parsley" lugar entre os maiores poemas da literatura norte-americana.

**Palavras-chave:** Poesia norte-americana moderna, ensino de poesia, linguagem.

### **Abstract**

This paper presents the reading of a poem by Rita Dove, the African-American poet laureate. "Parsley" is a narrative poem based on one of the most abominable facts of modern history: the murder of 20,000 Haitians in 1957 by the Dominican Dictator Rafael Trujillo. Some elements such as domination processes (cultural, linguistic, social, political), colonization and power, though implicit in the text, are very vivid in the poem. In spite of dealing with a historical event, Rita Dove is as imaginative as a novelist, and that would be enough to enrich the poem, but there are still the lyricism and the formal aspects she uses and which are responsible for placing "Parsley" among the greatest poems of North-American literature.

**Key words:** Modern North-American poetry, the teaching of poetry, language.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of literature in foreign classes has gradually lost its relevance in the last two or three decades. Due to some urgent needs of our society, the study of English has emphasized the practical purposes, technical aspects, spoken rather than written approaches. Probably a literature course based exclusively on the formal aspects of the literary theory will please just a few interested students. But considering that literature may be exploited throughout other aspects such as cultural, linguistic and personal ones, there will be a chance of reconsidering its incomparable role.

Teaching literature is more than an exercise of interpretation. It can be a different way of dealing with reality and with historical facts. The twentieth century was the scenery of great and fast changes which guided our history through winding roads, many times unknown. Thanks to literature – and here we detach Modern American Literature – it is easier and more pleasant to get in touch with all this transformation that characterized our modern times.

Especially, teaching poetry and reading poetry may suggest only delight. But as a piece of literature, a poem also embraces historical facts, everyday life and cultural aspects that are different approaches to poetry. Thus, not only to entertain us but also to develop a sense of criticism of our modern society, poetry stands for both teachers and students as a harmonious instrument.

As an example of how fascinating dealing with poetry is we may detach the activity that was developed with a group of undergraduate students in the course of Modern North-American Literature, at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. The students were asked to search in the North-American Literature of the twentieth century and find examples of literary work that, breaking the limit of the chronological time, would live forever due to their themes. This work arose a never-ending discussion among the students and the results, the papers and seminars they have presented, were of an unexpected magnitude.

One of the seminars presented by the students was about the poem “Parsley” by Rita

Dove, which together with the students that worked on it, we hereby analyze more deeply and exploring other points of view. We chose Bakhtin’s theory of language and text and his social-historical perspective of analyzing discourse to guide our reading and to be the basis of the present study. This way we are discussing here the characteristics of the text related to culture, to power and to language, which place the poem among the greatest pieces of literature. There are, of course, different possibilities or ways of analyzing this poem – and yet here Bakhtin’s theory of chronotope is present. It means, depending on *where* and *when* the reader is, his/her interpretation will change because his/her focus or point of view will also change due to the different backgrounds he/she is inserted in.

## 2 THE AUTHOR AND THE POEM

The poet laureate Rita Dove, a young African-American woman, was born in Akron, Ohio in 1952; graduated from Miami University at Oxford, Ohio; post-graduated in 1977 (MFA-Master in Fine Arts); is a professor of English at the University of Virginia; was the winner of the 1987 Pulitzer in poetry; and is the first African-American writer to hold the post of Poet Laureate. Her poems encompass more than the history and lifestyle of her own nation. She offers her voice to inform each of us about our world.

Throughout Rita Dove’s poems it is possible to enlighten social facts related to the U.S. history and the African-American culture. Also, because of her experiences and studies in different countries and with different cultures, she became an expert in translating problems about racism, sexism and social prejudice into an understandable language. As a perceptive observer, Rita Dove manages to create artistic expressions of reality but avoids being infected by it.

The reader can identify himself/herself with the experiences, thoughts and situations depicted in the poem. Rita Dove, in “Parsley”, provides the reader with clues to realize, through the exploitation of linguistic features such as the usage of significant words, how



possible it is for him/her to complete his/her scheme of identification and so, to have a comprehension of the situation described.

The meaningful words that Rita Dove chooses allied to an extraordinary technique and delicate feelings build her poems step by step without the interference of anger, indignation, "blackness". Poetry is her means of touching people's souls, of arising people's curiosity, of pushing people into history and into questions that she does not even propose to answer. On the contrary, she leaves us, her readers, to deal with our feelings about the facts she describes.

Among her outstanding poems there is one that trespasses all borders and boundaries and is a memorable transcultural incursion that is the narrative poem "*Parsley*", which tells the abominable history of the Dominican Republic under Rafael Trujillo (Dominican dictator) who killed about 20,000 Haitians in 1957. Surprisingly this human tragedy described in the poem did not happen due to frontier questions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, which had been shortly redefined, although it happened on Trujillo's sugarcane plantations on the Haitian border. The point was the great number of Haitian immigrants that escaping from their poverty "invaded" the neighbor country seeking for work. Consequently, more and more Dominicans were unemployed.

The first historical fact is set here: there is a country, Haiti, that facing social and economic problems, pushes in a way its citizens to a neighbor country, the Dominican Republic. On the other hand, another social, political and economic chaos is set up. The only way out the dictator found was throughout a pseudo ethnic cleaning, once those peoples have almost the same origins.

Trujillo focused on getting rid of those undesirable guests in a very peculiar way – throughout language. As a psychopath, he found a way out to close the officially open border: once the Haitians were Creole speakers of French, it would be difficult for them to pronounce the rolled "R" in *PEREJIL* (Spanish word for "*Parsley*"). Thus, those who failed the right articulation of the "R" were considered Haitians and sentenced to death.

In "*Parsley*" Rita Dove masters a unique

way of telling us part of our recent history probably known by a few people. It is amazing the way some historical facts just vanish in front of us. As the poet once explained, the poem is not a product of a research except for the historical facts, in other words, Trujillo made that to the Haitians, indeed. Actually, Rita Dove based on these facts developed the poem in such a way that it sounds so vivid and so close to reality that her readers are able to rescue this horrible event in history.

### 3 A READING OF *PARSLEY*

With this historical description the poet allows the reader to enter the world she is depicting, in a softer way though. Because even if the reader does not have any previous knowledge about the history she is telling in "*Parsley*", he/she will be able to comprehend all aspects involved in it through Rita Dove's skillful arrangement of ideas, words, and techniques.

The poem is divided into two main sets: *The Cane Fields* and *The Palace*. The first part is a villanelle, which she masters as notably as Oscar Wilde and W.H.Auden once did. The second consists of seven stanzas of seven or eight lines each. It is relevant here to observe the antagonism that undergoes this separation. *The Cane Fields* may represent the powerless colonized side while *The Palace* stands for the powerful colonizer one, though those persons are not present in the text. These two forces are shown in strong opposition, yet there is not even a word of condemnation or judgment.

Rita Dove chooses beautifully the words and formal aspects such as repetition of words that contain the letter "R" to be rolled: *parrot*, *spring*, *word*, *ring* and of course "*Parsley*". Besides, some other words are specially used to qualify *The Cane Fields* and *The Palace*: *swamp*, *cut*, *green*, *gnaw* for the former and, *boots*, *curtains*, *ivory cage* for the latter. Also, there are some words or expressions that are used in both places: *lie down*, for example, implies the cut sugar cane and the dead bodies of those killed by Trujillo.

The element *parrot* not only is wisely chosen but also the most significant symbol of people without a linguistic identity, people

## 4 CONCLUSION

who just imitate. By naming the Haitians who were Creole speakers of French as *parrots* Rita Dove makes it clear to us that the method chosen by El General (Trujillo) does not recognize their identity. They are distinguished by a shibboleth (a word or pronunciation that distinguishes people of one group or class from those of another). Pronouncing properly the word *perejil* does not mean that they are Spanish speakers, as a mispronunciation also means the same. But *parrot* also appears in *The Palace* as the pet Trujillo owns.

Another significant element in the text is *cane* that in this poem stands for both sugarcane and walking stick, which is a relevant point if we consider that El General leans on both. No matter what *cane* we may be talking about, it imposes a limit or a border between the sugar cane fields (people) and the palace (ruler). As we read the poem and face the word *cane* we are able to create an image of the general, which is the ideological limit between the colonized and the colonizer worlds and also to create an image of the sugar cane plantation that is the material limit between these two worlds that co-exist in the same space.

Another very important point to consider is the frivolous way Trujillo's psychopathic mind works in Rita Dove's words: "As he paces he wonders *Who can I kill today.*" or when he thinks of his mother Katharina whose name was pronounced "*Katalina*" by the condemned-to-be Haitians. Still here the poet imposes a lyric tone when she describes the general and his thoughts "*a startled tear splashes the tip of his right boot. My mother, my love in death.*" And again she changes "*He will order many, this time, to be killed.*"

The general himself behaves just like a parrot in the sense he imitates those who once came from abroad to control the island. He is an example of the reflexivity present in most colonization processes. He is able to see himself only through the image of the "other", but this "other" is the "powerful people" whose symbols of their dominant category are many as for example "*The parrot, who has traveled all the way from Australia in an ivory cage*" (note here the reification of the parrot) which belongs to El General. Also his boots or his cane which are symbols of wealth and power, enable him to walk differently. Different even from the man he used to be as a soldier: "*how stupid he looked!*"

In order to analyze the poem based on its social-historical perspectives instead of its formal linguistic aspects only, we found in Bakhtin's theory a more proper way to discuss this piece of literature. Also because this work was born to answer the exercise proposed in a literature class: to find in the North-American Literature of the twentieth century examples of literary work that, breaking the limit of the chronological time, would live forever due to their themes.

As we have discussed in the introductory part of this work, literature is also a way of socializing and sharing knowledge. The poem we present here is an excellent example of how possible it is to bring real world into literature, keeping all lyricism that is inherent to poetry.

Questioned about the Trujillo she created, Rita Dove answered, "*It was important to me to try to understand that arbitrary quality of his cruelty. And I'm not afraid of making him too human. I don't believe anyone's going to like him after reading my poem. Making us get into his head may shock us all into seeing what the human being is capable of, and what in fact we're capable of, because if we can go that far into his head we're halfway there ourselves.*"

According to Bakhtin's theory of chronotope every concrete utterance of a speaking subject is related to where and when he/she is speaking. What Rita Dove does is to give us as many places and time as possible in order to allow us to have different interpretations of the historical fact described. And, mastering language in a unique way, the poet links past and present.

As Bakhtin (1985) once said, a great work of art transcends the borders of its own time to live in the centuries, in the great temporality, to become contemporaneous in all age. That is exactly what Rita Dove does with "*Parsley*": she rescues a historical fact that is even previous to her own time and places it in the great temporality. With "*Parsley*" the history of a people will be forever contemporaneous of any reader.

The poem rescues the memories of the past, reconstructs the history in the present and evokes the memories of the future since it guides the readers' minds into the complex scenery of the countries involved. We, the readers, are tempted to know more about Haiti and The Dominican Republic, their



peoples, their cultures, their languages, their histories.

It is amazing how conscious Rita Dove is of the effect her poem may cause on us. It is no less marvelous how precise she was in choosing the words to describe the horror of a process of domination. For El General is the one who "dictates" the rules, and once *dictare* (Latin) means to *pronounce* what is to be done and what was supposed to be done was exactly a pronunciation of a word chosen by him: *perejil*, Rita Dove rescues history throughout a shibboleth "a single, beautiful word."

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## 6 APPENDIX

"Parsley"

### 1. The Cane Fields

There is a parrot imitating spring  
in the palace, its feathers "Parsley" green.  
Out of the swamp the cane appears

to haunt us, and we cut it down. El General  
searches for a word; he is all the world  
there is. Like a parrot imitating spring,

we lie down screaming as rain punches through  
and we come up green. We cannot speak an R-  
out of the swamp the cane appears

and then the mountain we call in whispers Katalina.  
The children gnaw their teeth to arrowheads.  
There is a parrot imitating spring.

El General has found his word: *perejil*.  
Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining  
out of the swamp. The cane appears



in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.  
And we lie down. For every drop of blood  
there is a parrot imitating spring.  
Out of the swamp the cane appears.

## 2. The Palace

The word the general's chosen is "*Parsley*".  
It is fall, when thoughts turn  
to love and death; the general thinks  
of his mother, how she died in the fall  
and he planted her walking cane at the grave  
and it flowered, each spring stolidly forming  
four-star blossoms. The general

pulls on his boots, he stomps to  
her room in the palace, the one without  
curtains, the one with a parrot  
in a brass ring. As he paces he wonders  
Who can I kill today. And for a moment  
the little knot of screams  
is still. The parrot who has traveled

all the way from Australia in an ivory  
cage, is, coy as a widow, practicing  
spring. Ever since the morning  
his mother collapsed in the kitchen  
while baking skull-shaped candies  
for the Day of the Dead, the general  
has hated sweets. He orders pastries  
brought up for the bird; they arrive

dusted with sugar on a bed of lace.  
The knot in his throat starts to twitch;  
he sees his boots the first day in battle  
splashed with mud and urine  
as a soldier falls at his feet amazed—  
how stupid he looked! – at the sound  
of artillery. *I never thought it would sing*  
the soldier said, and died. Now

the general sees the fields of sugar  
cane, lashed by rain and streaming.  
He sees his mother smile, the teeth  
gnawed to arrowheads. He hears  
the Haitians sing without R's  
as they swing the great machetes:  
*Katalina, they sing, Katalina,*





*mi madre, mi amor en muerte.* God knows  
his mother was no stupid woman; she  
could roll an R like a queen. Even  
a parrot can roll an R! In the bare room  
the bright feathers arch in a parody  
of greenery, as the last pale crumbs  
disappear under the blackened tongue. Someone

calls out his name in a voice  
so like his mother's, a startled tear  
splashes the tip of his right boot.

*My mother, my love in death.*

The general remembers the tiny green sprigs  
men of his village wore in their capes  
to honor the birth of a son. He will  
order many, this time, to be killed

for a single, beautiful word.



