

What Can a Puppet Do? or: What Makes a Puppet?

Was kann eine Puppe tun? oder: Was macht eine Puppe aus?

Marie Berndt

ABSTRACT (English)

This essay presents a brief discussion of Helen Oyeyemi's short story "Is your blood as red as this?", from her 2016 collection *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours*. The story is set, for the largest part, at a school in London, where the main characters Radha, Gustav, Myrna and Tyche study the rather unusual art of puppetry. Their puppets however, are not merely tools in the students' hands, but have their own plans. The essay goes to show how Oyeyemi portrays both conventional and subversive strategies and outcomes of puppet-play and leaves the reader's head full of questions.

Keywords: puppetry, short story, Helen Oyeyemi, the uncanny

ABSTRACT (Deutsch)

Der vorliegende Essay skizziert die Kurzgeschichte "Is your blood as red as this?" aus der 2016 erschienenen Sammlung *What is Not Yours is not Yours* von Helen Oyeyemi. Die Geschichte spielt größtenteils an einer Schule in London, an der die Protagonisten Radha, Gustav, Myrna und Tyche in der Kunst des Puppenspiels unterrichtet werden. Ihre Puppen ,entpuppen' sich jedoch nicht nur als Werkzeuge in den Händen der Auszubildenden, sondern verfolgen eigene Ziele. Der Essay zeigt, wie Oyeyemi sowohl konventionelle als auch subversive Strategien und Wirkmechanismen des Puppenspiels beleuchtet und die Lesenden mit einem Kopf voller Fragen zurücklässt.

Schlüsselwörter: Puppentheater, Kurzgeschichte, Helen Oyeyemi, das Unheimliche

Dramatis Personae

At the beginning of Helen Oyeyemi's (2016) short story we are thrown into a stereotypical teen-angsty situation: the socially anxious 15-year-old Radha accompanies her older brother to a birthday party where she knows nobody but him. So far, neither has a connection to dolls or puppets, yet these human-like figures come to dominate the story gradually. The take-over begins slowly when Radha meets a girl at the party, Myrna, who is mentioned to study puppetry. Radha is infatuated with Myrna, and although her attraction seems to be unrequited they keep in touch after that night. Through their conversations Radha becomes more interested in Myrna's studies, so much that she eventually decides to apply to the puppetry school herself. The story moves along with her during the process of applying and preparing for her audition and finally depicts the audition itself. Throughout the process, Radha seems interested in, but not necessarily passionate about attending the school. Critically assessing her own talent and volition and comparing herself to her competitors, especially a girl named Tyche, she expects a rejection. The balance of the narration tilts when her application is accepted: the narrative voice shifts from Radha's first-person perspective to that of her doll, Gepetta, and the puppets take centre stage.

Gepetta is only Radha's second puppet. Her first puppet character fails her in the audition, so that older student Gustav, who has been watching, replaces it with a brass marionette from the school's store cupboard halfway through. Gepetta takes control from Radha immediately. She instructs her to "simply translate what [she] says" and to "[not] worry about the controls" (ibid., 95), promising that she will manage them for her. In the following paragraph, they act as one, telling Gepetta's story of origin together. Half a page later, Gepetta takes over completely as the narrating voice.

While Gepetta must certainly be counted as a main character, she is not the only puppet presented to the reader. The puppet that Tyche brings to her audition is a little chess queen. Tyche states defensively:

[...] she doesn't look like a puppet, but she is one. I know it because when I first picked her up I said something I'd never said before. I put her down and then when I picked her up I said the same thing again without meaning to, and again it was something I hadn't said before, even though the words were the same (91).

Like Gepetta, this chess piece is immediately attributed an agency of its own, feeding unfamiliar words into Tyche's mind, the nature of which will be discussed at a later point. Gustav does not limit himself to one puppet, he has a whole group of dolls constantly at his side. While both Tyche's and Gustav's puppets are often the subject in the sentences describing them, we do not get the impression that they have the same level of autonomy that Gepetta has. They are never shown to be physically apart from their student masters, never acting independently.

In contrast, the last puppet portrayed seems to belong to no student at all, to never be controlled by anyone but itself. Its name is Rowan Wayland, and though it is connected to Myrna, it is never labelled her puppet. On the contrary, while Myrna is on holiday, Rowan attends classes on its own and hands in assignments like any other student. It keeps to itself until Radha and Gepetta approach it; afterwards Rowan and Gepetta go on nightly strolls through the city while their human friends sleep, they discuss the students, judge them and exchange secrets. Wayland's presence and control over the plot increases steadily throughout the second part and, like Gepetta, it must be counted among the main cast of the story.

What can a puppet do?

Having introduced the central characters of both the human and the puppet kind, it is now time to face the conundrum announced in this essay's title – what can a puppet do? It is in the subject History of Puppetry, that this question presents itself, when the students are asked to hand in an essay in response to it and to present their own ambitions as puppeteers. We are offered a variety of answers to be picked up from the students' anecdotes, their finished essays, and their practices. In the following, these will be examined first, whereas the next section will take a closer look at the puppets themselves. While their actions should, logically, paint a clear picture of what a puppet can really do, I will argue that the manner in which they are represented instead wrecks any chance for a conclusive answer and raises more and more insoluble questions.

Following the assignment of the essay we first get a textbook answer from the puppets themselves. Rowan, who apparently has to hand in an essay too, "claim[s] the title made his mind go blank"; so Gepetta writes it for him, "simply

reassembl[ing] a few lines [...] from lectures [she]’d heard [...]. The role of the puppeteer is to preserve childlike wonder throughout our life spans, etc.” (107). This does not seem to be what they honestly think though (107), instead they have written what they assume the teacher wants to read.

Next, we are presented with Radha’s essay. Consistent with the previously made suspicion that she is not taking puppet school too seriously, she is unable to meet the minimum number of words required. Her level of ambition as a puppeteer is evidently quite low; there are no more details given on her essay, which seems therefore negligible.

While we do not get a glimpse into Myrna’s essay, she has been questioned in a similar direction by Radha when they first met, and from her answers back then it can be seen that she wants her puppet-play to change the world for good. She is convinced that “stories come to our aid in times of need” (83); she “believe[s] in the work that puppet-play can do”, has “seen it with [her] own eyes”, for example when her father included a clear outsider, physically disfigured child in a performance and took away her pain, cheered her up, made her part of her group (84p.). However, Rowan, who knows Myrna longest and best, is convinced that her noble intentions have led her onto a wrong path. In a story-within-the-story he tells Gepetta that her method to take pain away now “involves causing pain in the first place” (120). His accusation may be confirmed at closer inspection of how Myrna treats her fellow students. She leads both Radha and Tyche on romantically, while simultaneously keeping them at a distance and suppressing them. Thus, her idealistic image of what the puppeteer and his puppet can do is somewhat tainted by her practical approach.

Contrary to Myrna, Tyche initially does not seem to care about the audience of her puppetry at all. As described above, she has a face-to-face dialogue with her chess piece puppet, containing all new words that the puppet is feeding her. In fact, it turns out, their exchange consists of only one question and the attempt to answer it: through Tyche, the queen asks repeatedly “Is your blood as red as this?” (92). Thus, puppet and puppeteer make their audience think long and deep. Radha’s first intuitive answer for example, is “No, surely your blood is redder” (91); after a few minutes of pondering she even feels the urge to hurt herself in order to check the colour of her own blood (92). Tyche’s performance makes people think, question themselves; in consequence, it triggers impetuous emotional and bodily reactions.

Lastly, Gustav uses his puppets in a very different manner once again. His essay is not given to the audience either, but he seems to dissolve into the background whenever he’s performing, to completely disappear behind his dolls. When he is getting to know Radha, for example, he speaks through them only and uses them to gain Radha’s confidence, trust, friendship. Even physical contact between the two is easily established through teaching her the movements necessary to control his puppets (98pp.). Gustav’s camouflage works so well that she sometimes forgets he is there at all and tells him about her adventures with the puppets afterwards as if they had taken place without him (99). But not everyone finds his methods so enjoyable. Towards the very beginning, Myrna complains to Radha about his low-action performances:

He just lets them [the puppets] sit there, watching us. Then he has them look at each other and then back at us until it feels as if they have information, some kind of dreadful information about each and every one of us, and you begin to wish they’d decide to keep their mouths forever (88).

In this instance it becomes evident that Gustav leaves most of the puppeteer work to the audience. The plot of his play evolves entirely in the audience’s imagination, nothing of the secret knowledge Myrna dreads is indicated in his performance. Through his inactivity on stage he’s playing with the uncanniness of the dolls, with the audience’s fear of them being living subjects with knowledge and agency, instead of dead objects. In doing so, he triggers extreme reactions from his audiences. In Myrna’s case this is a distinct dislike and defensive stance towards anything he does; in the case of Radha, on the other hand, who feels more comfortable interacting with dolls than with people, he quickly achieves a high level of confidence and intimacy.

In summary it may be said that the students’ ambitions and methods vary considerably. Some want to merely astonish and entertain children and adults alike; some want their puppetry to divert the audience from their real-life issues, to help improve their mental health; some want to spark self-reflection and critical examination of the world in the audience; some aim to gain psychological access to the audience to an extent that would never be offered to fellow humans; some trigger the audience’s own fantasy and imagination, perhaps even fears, to be projected onto the puppets. All these are clearly things that puppets can do, things that the students intend them to do.

What does a puppet do?

But what happens when we observe the actual puppets? While they help their student masters with their ambitions and serve the purposes listed above as intended, they also clearly follow ambitions and purposes of their own. Gepetta and Rowan in particular are presented as capable of acting of their own accord. Some of their undertakings are still linked to the human characters, for instance when they discuss the students' actions, developments and relationships, or when they take part in classes alongside them. But there are also various situations in which the puppets act separately from the teenagers. On a day-to-day level that involves simple hobbies of their own like knitting, listening to knitting-podcasts, or riding night buses (106). On a larger scale, we get to know that the puppets' life spans are much longer than human ones. Both have had long histories and served different masters and purposes before they met Myrna, Radha and the others. Gepetta was human once, but when a disease threatened to kill her, the puppets in her care exchanged Gepetta's body parts with parts from their own bodies, thus saving her life (95p.). She regrets that conversion and has dissolved the group. She sees it as her task to ensure that these puppets never meet again, so that such a thing cannot ever be repeated (106f.). The back story of Rowan Wayland seems equally interesting. He was created as a "wooden devil" and used to be in the service of an alchemist in old Prague. When his master had to flee from court he was given the task of guarding his empty grave. For him, going to London with Myrna is just a brief interruption to this mission: "humans only lived a few years, so afterwards, Rowan could go home again" (119).

Gepetta states that

[t]he problem with Wayland is that he's a puppet built to human scale. Masterless and entirely alive. No matter how soft his skin appears to be, he is entirely wooden, and it is not known exactly what animates him – no clock ticks in his chest. Rowan is male to me [...]. He's female to Myrna. For Radha and Gustav, Rowan is both male and female. Perhaps we read him along the lines of our attractions (105).

While Gepetta was once fully human and is now fully doll, and always remained securely female and heteronormative, all of these categories are blurred in Rowan's case. His appearance is human-like and no one knows his source of life. He even breathes, as Gepetta observes enviously (106). What is it then that distinguishes him from a real human? He is not assigned a distinct gender identity or sexual orientation, which makes his character even more dubious.

Other than the humans, the puppets do not reveal their intentions, they hardly even hint at them. Gepetta makes a pact with Radha to help her in the audition in return for Radha's help later (95). But what is it she needs her help for? Rowan is not happy with Myrna's methods and states: "I'll deal with her and Tyche both" (120). But what does he do to them? The big finale, set at the school's end-of-year puppet show, removes all remaining clarity. The first slot of the show is to be filled by Gustav and Radha. Gustav's puppets are already arranged on stage, only their backs visible, but when Gustav walks onto stage, they turn around to reveal that all their throats have been slit brutally. Gustav seems to suffer a shock and lose consciousness, but to the audience "that fall of his [is] just as unreal [...] as the glazed eyes with which the puppets on stage surveyed their own innards" (123). No one is sure what is real and what is performance at first, it takes a while until an ambulance is called. Radha closes the dolls' eyes, collecting their bodies, while Myrna tries to help Gustav. As soon as he awakes, he searches for Radha and they look at each other with love, leaving Myrna feeling hurt and Tyche hesitant whether to comfort her or not. The reader is left wondering what just happened. Was this all part of the show put on by Gustav and Radha or was it staged by Rowan? And to what purpose? Teach Myrna a lesson? Take revenge on the students? Show them who is really in control?

Can a puppet do such a thing?

The story's title is the same as the little queen's big question – "is your blood as red as this?". Remarkably, the first part of the story, the one narrated by real-life girl Radha stands under the heading 'no', whereas the second, doll-narrated part carries the subtitle 'yes'. Positioned before and above everything that follows, this question expresses the quintessential effect of the story: it leaves the boundaries between what is human and what is an artificial imitation of humanity blurred. The reader is left wondering: Who qualifies as a living being with a soul? Who educates whom and who is whose plaything? Who pulls the strings? Whose blood is redder – the students' or the puppets'?

Reference

Primary source

Oyeyemi, Helen (2016). Is your blood as red as this? In Helen Oyeyemi, *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* (pp. 78-124). London: Picador.

About the Reviewer / Über die Rezensentin

Marie Berndt

BA and MA degrees in English Literatures and Cultures from the universities of Bonn, Swansea and Perugia. The MA thesis “‘Jamaicans wid ah different flag’: Representations of Precarious LGBTQ Lives in Jamaican Fiction of the New Millennium”, has been nominated for the Queen’s Prize and has won the GAPS Graduate Award in 2019; it is published on the website of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies. M.B. is currently employed as an academic researcher at the Department for English, American and Celtic Studies of the University of Bonn; she is also working on her PhD project with the preliminary title “Precarious Lives in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Literature”.



Correspondence address / Korrespondenz-Adresse
mberndt@uni-bonn.de