

Smiljana D. Rakonjac

Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu
Dr Zorana Đinđića 2
Studentkinja doktorskih studija
smiljana.rakonjac@gmail.com

doi: 10.19090/zjik.2020.169-179

UDK 821.111.09Carter A..

оригинални научни рад

GAMES AND PLAYING IN ANGELA CARTER'S NOVEL *WISE CHILDREN*¹

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to analyze the elements of Johan Huizinga's game theory in Angela Carter's novel *Wise Children*. The novel, which depicts the life of twin sisters Dora and Nora Chance, former dancers and actresses, exemplifies Huizinga's idea that culture does not originate from games, but that it rather develops in and through them. The main elements of playing which were analysed are the music and dancing and the novel's protagonists' attitude towards them as well as the costumes and life energies that novel's main protagonists have, despite their age. These elements were analyzed so as to show that both Huizinga and Carter saw games as a way to both legitimize the illegitimate through theater, music and dancing, but also to redefine social subversiveness and the concept of the carnivalesque.

Key words: game theory, carnivalesque, Johan Huizinga, Angela Carter, *Wise Children*.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga starts analyzing games and playing in general by revisiting the already existing definitions of play. The definitions vary when it comes to the standpoint the authors took or the element of play they decided to analyze. The play can be understood as a discharge of energy or as a need for relaxation or as an outlet of energy which could be harmless. What these definitions lack, from Huizinga's point of view, is the true understanding of fun, which is the crucial element of playing. Huizinga singles out fun as the crucial element since it resists any analysis or logical interpretation. Play has a totality which cannot be denied and the fun of it is actually the element which shows that a man is more than just a rational being since he engages in something which is supra-logical and even irrational. He understands the creation of culture as a game

¹ "Games and Playing in Angela Carter's Novel *Wise Children*" was originally written as a seminar paper for the subject *Novels of Angela Carter*, mentored by Prof. Dr. Nina Muždeka.

whose origin is no less than that part of men which is, at the same time, both natural and essential in/for one's existence (Huizinga, 1970: 68). He will go on to define games as free activities that take place within time and space, that are constantly repeated and that, finally, create some kind of order (Huizinga, 1970: 17). From his point of view, it is wrong to see culture as originating from the game, but rather developing in games and taking their form (Huizinga, 1960: 232). The definition he gives is related to the concept elsewhere known as **rag** and he describes it as an extensive display of noisy and disorderly conduct carried out in defiance of authority and discipline (Huizinga, 1960: 13). Furthermore, Huizinga states that in the 17th century it was a fashion to liken the world to the stage on which every man plays his/her own part. However, the play element was not acknowledged. Huizinga rather sees it as an echo of the Neo-platonism which took a turn towards moralization and vanity (Huizinga, 1960: 5). Although Huizinga wrote about games in cultures in general, heavily relying on the form they took in ancient Greece, the culture that Angela Carter writes about in her last novel *Wise Children* is the specific one – the culture of modern England. Carter's idea was to place the characters which are considered marginal by the society next to the characters that belong to the dominant class and show that the marginal characters can express vitality and strength despite their social position and that, in this way, they can well reside next to the members of the dominant class. What makes the context given in the novel specific and recognizable are not just the references that she keeps making, but also its genesis which is reflected in the setting and the narrative of the novel. The culture of the main protagonists in the novel, sisters Dora and Nora Chance, is shaped by the power of Shakespeare's narrative. Although this narrative, through its own genesis, took various forms, even the commodified ones, its influence on the life and culture of the Chance sisters is omnipresent. In the foreword to the book *Re-visiting Angela Carter*, edited by Rebecca Munford, Jacqueline Pearson will describe this influence and its reflections on the novel in the following way:

As a novel 'about English culture' and about Shakespeare 'as one of the originating myths of English culture' (Day 95), *Wise Children* simultaneously demythologizes and remythologizes. English culture is depicted as saturated with commodified, fetishized versions of Shakespeare, evoked by the repeated reference to Shakespeare's head on a £20 note. But at the same time Carter appreciated Shakespeare, and not only as the apotheosis of low culture, 'the intellectual equivalent of bubblegum'. Self-confessedly a 'rather booksy person', she acknowledges the continuing power of his narratives, and their ability to shape both the legitimate culture of the great Shakespearean actors and the

illegitimate, both literally and metaphorically, culture embodied by Dora and Nora Chance. The story of Shakespearean actors takes on the form of Shakespearean comedy, with its multiple pairs of identical twins evoking *The Comedy of Errors* (ca. 1594) and numerous other Shakespearean allusions. Dora and Nora Chance's lives are even comically overdetermined by their residence in Bard Road, Brixton (Munford, 2006: 4-5).

In the novel *Wise children*, the most interesting elements that are related to Huizinga's concept of games are the physical space, that is, the setting in which the novel takes place and the importance of drama. In this paper, these elements are going to be analyzed as important both for the understanding of the novel and Huizinga's theory, but also for their mutual interconnectedness. When it comes to the setting, the crucial element is the importance of the theatre where real life drama takes place and where people can be who they really are. On the other hand, the concept of drama, as it was understood in ancient Greece, is important for understanding the dionysian ecstasy of the Chance sisters and their passion for art and game that is in stark opposition to the activities that are prescribed by the society and which, according to their definition, should be useful for one's life.

GAMES AND PLAYING IN *WISE CHILDREN*

The main protagonists in the novel *Wise children* are Nora and Dora Chance, illegitimate twins of a great Shakespearean actor called Melchior Hazard. At the time the novel opens up they are two elderly ladies preparing to go to a party organized by their father. Although aged, they are still in love with costumes, make-up and a theatrical approach towards life. The crucial place in their life is the theatre. When discussing Angela Carter's attitude towards the theater, Ali Smith notices the difference between its representation in Carter's earlier works and her novels *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus*. She argues that, at this point, it is the first time that she uses that space positively. Moreover, the theatre becomes the space where women realize their potential and where the female principle transforms from its enforced passivity to an active, (self) creating principle. Smith says:

Elsewhere in Carter's work, theatres burn angrily and liberatingly down. But in *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus*, she positively uses the space – she makes something else of it, with characters who use it and make a living by it in a world where it's hard to make a living if you're a girl and you're poor. Take the horrific graffiti representation of a woman as a zero, passive, a ring-shaped 'O', a 'sign for nothing', 'a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled,' as Carter puts it in the first pages of *The Sadeian Woman*, a nothing from whose 'elemental

iconography may be derived the whole metaphysic of sexual differences.’ If you compare this to what Carter does in her final two novels with the circus ring, the theatre– the space were we act – then a whole new performative metaphysic of .potential becomes possible (Carter, 2006: 14).

The theater in *Wise Children* is not just a physical realm, limited by borders and the physical space it takes. Quite the opposite, Carter’s theatre has no borders. In this sense, it resembles the ancient squares which were the places of highest social ideals, functional and metaphorical at the same time, but also similar to a stage on which the most beautiful and the greatest performance took place – real existence (Božović, 2014: 9). The actors themselves are greatly shaped by it and there is no single point that could separate the actors and the space. For example, Melchior Hazard becomes a knight due to his services to the theater, a theatre in Shanghai is named after him and at his birthday party he is referred to as *Mr British Theatre, himself*. The theater is the theme of the novel not just the physical setting where the plot takes place. The novel depicts the theater as an embodiment of a culture. With deterioration of the values in culture, there is a deterioration of the theater as well and this is represented through the Hazards who desperately try to adapt to the new values, but they fail and the only thing they manage to do is look silly. Writing about the theatre as a theme of the novel, not just the setting in which the plot unfolds, Linden Peach says:

...theatre as subject or metaphor and theatricality – in the prose style and in the flamboyance of ideas – have always been important dimensions of Carter's writing, driven by her ironic self-consciousness. However, in *Nights at the Circus* (19984) and *Wise Children* (1991), theatre is a theme of the novels, as intertextuality is a theme in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Heroes and Villains*, not least because the characters in both novels are professional performers. Indeed, at the end of *Wise Children*, we have a list of “*Dramatis Personae*” (in order of appearance) (Peach, 1998: 138).

In order to understand Carter’s interest in the theater it is important to take a look at the ways in which she got drawn to it. The main influence was the theatre of China and Japan as well as Shakespeare and Renaissance drama. The folk’s tradition in Shakespeare is embodied in the travesty of his characters, in their pantomime and mimicry. Another influence was that of Brecht who saw alienation as the main element of the theatre and the one which had its origin in the folk stories and fairytales. Angela Carter’s interest in the theater and different traditions found their place in her novels and they are today defined as postmodern fairy

tales (Peach, 1998: 140). Inseparable from the game theory and the theatre is the concept of the carnivalesque which was first introduced by a Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in 1929 in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin defines carnival as a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess, where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled (Bowers, 2004: 67). Carnival also embraces all the people with no distinction between the actors and spectators and it has a universal spirit; it is the special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such a universal essence breaks the distinctions and the barriers suspending all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions of usual life (Bakhtin, 1984: 7-10). However, the concept of the carnivalesque which is usually associated with folk stories and fairy tales did not find its place in Carter's novels. Upon reading the titles of her novels or their synopsis, one may think that this concept will be extremely used and developed in her writing. Quite the contrary, Carter had many reservations about it. The main reason why it is not so is the fact that Bakhtin's concept, usually seen as extremely subversive and radical, challenging the existing rules and models of living by forming communities which, through the carnival, manage to escape the pitfall of the already-programmed life schemes, for Carter was also a kind of a controlled eruption whose only purpose was to maintain the existing order. In 1992, when asked to talk about her attitude towards this concept, Carter said:

It's interesting that Bakhtin became very fashionable in the 1980s, during the demise of the particular kind of theory that would have put all kinds of questions around the whole idea of the carnivalesque.... The carnival has to stop. The whole point of the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped (Peach, 1998: 143).

Sage further discusses the status of the theatre in Carter's novels as an illegitimate power where games and playing take place. Being illegitimate is closely connected to the status of the Chance girls as illegitimate children. In the beginning of the novel, Dora Chance introduces herself and her twin sister as illegitimate children of the great Shakespearian actor Melchior Hazard. They live in the part of the city which is off the beaten track, rarely visited by tourists whereas their father lives on the legitimate side of the river Thames. It is not just their family status that is illegitimate, but also the place where they live. This binary opposition of legitimate and illegitimate is in the foreground of the novel. It makes enough room to place these oppositions side by side and show that the Chance sisters managed to draw their strength and life-oriented energy from all

that is unrighteous, illegitimate, low (Cavallaro, 2011: 5). They are illegitimate children of the father who is described as the pillar of the legit. The fact that they performed in the halls and thus entered the realm of the legit makes it impossible to make a clear distinction between the two worlds. The girls are able to use the theatre as space not constrained from the outside. They can be who they are and play out their theatrical persona in the life outside the theatre. Sage compares Carter's novels to William Shakespeare's works in the sense that Carter tries to embody the tradition that one could find in Shakespeare centuries ago. The tradition which can be described as camp, using Susan Sontag's concept from the 20th century, was already present in Shakespeare due to the fact that it had already been rooted in the English tradition. Men dressed as women, at the same time glamorous, cynical and carnivalesque, do not express their opposition towards the established values and rules, but they rather suspend it for a while in their game. What Carter wants to do is introduce carnivalesque trait to her characters thus making it impossible to suspend it at any time, but rather live it out. According to Linden Peach, Carter sees theatre as the center of illegitimate power the way it used to be in the Renaissance.

When talking about the difference between life and theater, Dora Chance does not see its plasticity as a source of satisfaction. It is rather human interaction, basically represented through spit, glue and will power, that creates the magic of the theater and is, at the same time, its essence. This vision of the theater is similar to the dionysian element that characterized the Greek drama. Huizinga describes it as ecstasy, fascination and excitement (Huizinga, 1970: 194). The concept was made popular by Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote about Apollo/Dionysus duality. This duality can be compared to the dualities of legit/illegit, rich/poor and high/law that Angela Carter explored in her novel. Nietzsche defined Apollonian arts as plastic and the Dionysian art as the non-visual ones. These two creative tendencies develop alongside one another and are often in fierce opposition. However, these two types of creative energy transform one another and are finally united in order to beget Greek tragedy (Nietzsche, 1995: 1). Angela Carter, by the end of her novel, has united her protagonists despite the differences they had throughout the novel. The novel ends with a conclusion that it is a great joy to sing and dance and such a closing corresponds to Bakhtin's and Nietzsche's description of how the carnival ends. If carnival represents the promiscuous and horizontal axis of narrative relations then at carnival's end we return to verticality the line, the family, history's determinings, time's irreversibility (Sage, 1994: 55). This is also to demonstrate Bakhtin's understanding of the carnival as having a peculiar

logic of the inside out (a l'envers) and of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings (Sceats 2004: 179).

Dora finds this excitement in the moment when the curtain is just about to go up, the theater darkens and the audience is still a glow that can be seen through the bottom part of the curtain. The element that Dora recognizes as dionysian is also to be found in Charlotte Salomon's *Life? Or Theater?* – a musical play written during the Nazi occupation of France. Saloman, a Jewish painter who fled Nazi Germany, in the final years of her life, just before being caught and deported to one of the concentration camps, made this piece that combined the elements of the autobiography, musical play and painting. This play made from various art forms disabled that it becomes easy to understand, analyze or retell. Salomon's idea of life being a theatre is what the reader encounters in *Wise Children*, especially in Dora's depictions of the theater scenography and its overall purpose. She wants the props to leave the realm of the solid and physical. The scenography does not exist only to make the whole setting of the play real and credible. In her opinion, it should go beyond that and bring about the magic and illusion that not only she as a performer but also the spectators need.

On the other hand, the concept of drama, as it was understood in ancient Greece, is important for understanding the dionysian ecstasy of the Chance sisters and their passion for the art and game that is in stark opposition to the activities that are prescribed by the society and which, by their definition, should be useful for one's life. Further in the novel she depicts the actors themselves becoming part of the scenography. They are left without their ability to communicate to the audience and are seen as props in the show. With the scenes of the play being made and the process carried out, the reader is struck with the change that had taken place. The theater becomes a show with actors becoming ab/used and the author of the play is compared to a great dictator. When listing all the services that are found in the studio itself, Carter alludes to the ways in which the theater has been debased. Dora's depiction of the ways it looked like in the past and the purpose it has in her eyes is in stark contrast to what it has become. There is no playing, there is no dance. It is turned into a set of services that are to be found inside the studio and that distance the theater itself from its purpose. The purpose is not the communication between the play, the actors and the audience, but rather its practical and functional aspects. Games and playing are opposed to being useful. According to Huizinga, game is not and cannot be useful. From the 18th

century onwards, it was designated to be useful and to teach, although Huizinga does not see this characteristic as inherently related to playing. The game that originates from the essence of one's being is reflected in and through dance. In the novel, dance and dancing parties are often mentioned by the Chance sisters. In one way, they represent dancing as part of their life, but also they show the degeneration of this life-affirming activity. Starting from the Greek drama, where the chorus had an important role, over Rimbauld's idea that it is dance and nothing but dance that expresses basic human freedom, what the reader finds in the modern time and in the Carter's novel is the fact that music and dance have also been commodified. The TV shows take part in the process and make it less dignified and less beautiful than in the times when it was what made the Chance sisters world famous. At another point, Dora Chance would describe the importance of dance. She makes a difference between her and her sister's raddled old age and what they used to live in the past. Another detail that may be interesting is that the tango and dancing of her past had no limit. Although it is supposed to last for four minutes the dancing could go on as long as the band was able to play. Excessive vitality of the Chance sisters, despite their ripe age, is demonstrated through the ability to dance for a long time. What is more, time stops being absolute and loses its meaning when dancing and the two dancers behave as one body and one's individuality is suspended as long as the dance lasts. There is no formal end of the dance which is another detail that suggests the freedom it entailed despite the steps that one had to know in order to dance it.

Finally, Huizinga differentiated four types of games. The first one are the competitions or **agons**, the second one are the games which test one's luck or **alea**, the third type are the games in costumes or **mimicry** and the last group are the games of ecstasy or **ilynx**, the word which in Greek means the whirlwind. For example, Dionysus, Greek god of ecstasy, was always represented wearing a mask. It is interesting to note that in the novel *Wise children* competition is mentioned only once. Grandma links it to the world of men and war. When discussing the meaning of war she sees it as a competition between old men who cannot stand the young ones and therefore decide to kill them. Understanding war as a competition between men is in stark opposition to the world of female protagonists in Carter's novels. If men stand for competition, that is agons, then her female protagonists stand for the world of ecstasy. For example, the Chance sisters, despite their age, dedicate their full attention to their looks, make-up and attire. Maggie Ann Bowers describes such attitude as excessive liveliness (Bowers, 2004: 66). Also, the modern dance, especially tango, consists of the steps

which are taught and which have to be followed if the dance is to have its standard form. The improvisation, which characterizes jazz, the most popular genre of the age when the Chance sisters performed, is exemplified through their attitude to life. They improvise with their socially constructed roles. Although both childless, they act as mothers to their goddaughter Tiffany or as daughters of Grandma Chance who is their guardian. However, the costume games are particularly interesting when talking about the novel *Wise Children*. Costumes are present from the beginning to the end of the novel. They are not just important for Dora and Nora as props in their professional life in the theater, but also privately they adore dressing up. It is in detail that Carter describes their excitement when applying lipstick or wearing high-heels. Be what it may, the protagonist who is the best example of the importance of costumes as a means of being transported to a different I, that is, a different identity, is Melchior Hazard. Although he identifies as theater himself and loves his costumes, it is actually the crown that his father wore that becomes intangibly interwoven to his character. The importance of his crown, from his perspective, reaches far beyond the importance of his wealth, fame and even his family. He identifies to it to such an extent that, when having lost it, he feels that his own identity is gone. When his house burnt down to the ground during a party and while he still had no news of his daughters' whereabouts, he laments the loss of his crown. He would say that it is more important than wealth, fame, women or children. The crown is more important because he inherited it from his ancestors and his identity depends on it. For his brother Perry, on the other hand, it is just a thing and he cannot understand how his brother can be so much in love with it. For Perry, Melchior's costume games are just a source of mirth and ecstasy. He finds no true meaning in the object itself but rather in the game that he plays with his brother who desperately wants his crown back. The games, which are the crux of the novel, can only be played out if there is a duality through which they can be expressed. In *Wise children* they are represented through the oppositions existing within one family. It is this opposition that creates the dynamics of the novel and eventually gives room for the full understanding of its meaning.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the elements of Johan Huizinga's game theory in Angela Carter's novel *Wise Children*. As a novel that depicts the life of twin sisters Dora and Nora Chance, former dancers and actresses, it makes use of games and playing on many levels and in many ways. In this paper the elements which were analysed are the music and dancing, costumes and the

ecstasy that used to characterize the Dionysian principle in ancient Greece. Firstly, music and dancing and have an important role in this novel. They are related to the ragtime, the era when jazz was at its peak, and the protagonists use it not just as a means of expressing themselves, but also as a way of deconstructing the present they live in. These concepts perfectly correlate to Huizinga's idea that culture does not originate from games, but that it rather develops in and through games. Dancing of the Chance sisters and their attitude towards it correspond to the idea that a game is a free activity which takes place inside the limits of time and space, that it repeats itself and that it manages to create some kind of order. Secondly, the theater was analyzed not just as a physical place where art is made, but also as a realm where real life drama takes place. Moreover, the theater being a great inspiration for Carter, Chance sisters are unable to make difference between their private lives and the theatre. They live out their roles and their life becomes their stage. In this way, they manage to live in ecstasy and excitement which is achieved by not being entrapped in the social roles, but rather by being free through the omnipresence of art in life and through the theatrical features it had in the life of the Chance sisters. Finally, the costume and its importance for them are analyzed as another aspect of Huizinga's game theory. The costume is seen as a way of bridging one's identity and creating a possibility to become somebody else and appropriating other identities. Although the costume is an important part of the theater life and the families Hazard and Chance are theatrical families, the most important costume is actually the crown and it is the one thing which represents a means of complete identification to the theater tradition for Melchior Hazard.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2009. *Rabelais and his World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bowers, Maggie Ann. 2004. *Magic(al) realism: The new critical idiom*. London: Routledge.
- Božović, Ratko. 2014. *Igra ili Ništa*. Beograd: Čigoja.
- Carter, Angela. 1993. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* London: Penguin Books.
- Carter, Angela. 1998. *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*. London: Penguin Books.
- Carter, Angela. 2006. *Wise Children*. London: Vintage Books.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1970. *Homo Ludens*. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska.
- Munford, Rebecca. 2006. *Re-visiting Angela Carter*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1995. *The Birth of Tragedy*. London: Dover Publications.
- Peach, Linden. 1998. *Angela Carter*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Sage, Lorna. 1994. *Angela Carter: Writers and their work*. Plymouth: Northcote House.
- Sceats, Sarah. 2004. *Food, consumption and the body in contemporary women's fiction*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Sellers, Susan. 2001. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Publications.
- Tonkin, Maggie. 2012. *Angela Carter and Decadence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smiljana Rakonjac

Les jeux dans le roman *Wise Children* par Angela Carter

Resume

Le but de cet article est d'analyser les éléments de la théorie du jeu de Johan Huizinga dans le roman d'Angela Carter *Wise Children*. Le roman, qui dépeint la vie des sœurs jumelles Dora et Nora Chance, anciennes danseuses et actrices, illustre l'idée de Huizinga que la culture ne provient pas de jeux, mais qu'elle se développe plutôt en eux et à travers eux. Les principaux éléments du jeu qui ont été analysés sont la musique et la danse et l'attitude des protagonistes du roman à leur égard, les costumes et les énergies de vie que les principaux protagonistes du roman ont, malgré leur âge. Ces éléments ont été analysés pour montrer que Huizinga et Carter voyaient les jeux comme un moyen à la fois de légitimer l'illégitime à travers le théâtre, la musique et la danse, mais aussi de redéfinir la subversivité sociale et le concept du carnivalesque.

Mots Clefs: la théorie des jeux, carnivalesque, Johan Huizinga, Angela Carter, *Wise Children*.