Doll Being: On the Doll Metaphor in an Afro-American, a Feminist and a Post-Colonial Contexts

A metáfora "ser boneca" em contextos: afro-americano, feminista e pós-colonial

Denise Almeida Silva

Abstract

This essay explores the connotations of the doll metaphor in the characterization of the Other in three different contexts: the Afro-American in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, *the feminist in Margaret Atwood's* The Edible Woman *and the post-colonial in J. M. Coetzee´s* Age of Iron. *Analysis of* Invisible Man *centers on the use of the Sambo metaphor, explored in the duplicity of its conception as the expression of a humble dependence and as a mask of survival. A persistent icon of repressed femininity, the doll metaphor is used in n Margaret Atwood's* The Edible Woman *along with the icon of consumption, following the protagonist's progressive alienation from herself and her identification with her old dolls. Finally Coetzee´s* Age of Iron *analyses the doll metaphor against the background of a South Africa afflicted by the apartheid policy, in which an aged white woman feels to have had a doll-like existence, and experiences her terminal cancer as the rightful retribution for one who lives a doll-like, hollow existence.*

Palavras-chave: boneca, Outro, preconceito.

Resumo

Analisam-se as conotações da metáfora "ser boneca" na caracterização do outro em três contextos distintos: o afro-americano, em O Homem Invisível, *de Ralph Ellison, o feminista em* A Mulher Comestível, *de Margaret Atwood, e o pós-colonial em* A Idade do Ferro, *de J. M. Coetzee. A análise de* O Homem Invisível *enfoca o uso da metáfora do boneco Sambo, explorada na duplicidade de sua concepção como expressão de humildade e dependência e como máscara de sobrevivência. Em* A Mulher Comestível, *a metáfora da boneca, ícone da feminilidade reprimida, associa-se à do consumo, traçando-se a progressiva alienação da protagonista de si mesma e sua identificação com as bonecas da infância. Finalmente, analisa-se em* A Idade do Ferro *a metáfora da boneca no contexto da África do Sul da época do apartheid, na qual idosa mulher branca percebe-se como tendo vivido como boneca, e avalia que o câncer que devora seu interior, deixando-a oca como um brinquedo, é justa retribuição por tal estilo de vida.*

Key words: doll, the Other, prejudice.

Denise Almeida Silva é doutora em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa pela UFRGS; professora de literatura inglesa e língua inglesa na URI e UERGS.

Endereço para correspondência: Olavo Bilac, 143 Porto Alegre, RS 90040-310; d_asilva@portoweb.com.br

A doll is, by definition, a small figure of a person used as a plaything. Being a figure, a doll resembles people in appearance, but fundamentally differs from them not only in scale but, more essentially, in nature: while people are endowed with vital energy, dolls are inert beings. The latter characteristic accounts for doll passivity, which makes them be used—instead of acting, they are acted on. Finally, being toys, dolls, however seriously regarded by their owners, are but playthings. This essay studies the connotations of the doll metaphor in the characterization of the Other in three different contexts: the Afro-American in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the feminist in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and the colonial in J. M. Coetzee´s *Age of Iron*.

Doll imagery in Ralph Ellison´s *Invisible Man* largely evolves around Sambo, the stereotypical image of the black as the naïve entertainer.[1] As described by Stanley Elkins, Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was "*docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration*" (ELKINS, 1976, p. 82). So persistent was the infantilization of slave behavior that even freed slaves were viewed as children who would display utter dependence on their masters. Like children, they were described as being given to "*impetuous play, humorous antics, docile energies, and uninhibited expressiveness*" (ELKINS, 1976, p. 13). Later, as emancipation was in the air, notions of sexual prowess were added to those of uninhibited impetus, spreading a fear that free black men would also be free to lust after white women.

Historic revisions that say Sambo behavior to have largely been but a social mask complicate this contradictory vision of Sambo as the docile yet potentially dangerous entertainer. "*Slaves who behaved like Sambos, might not have actually Sambos*," Liza Simmons warns: rather than a veil to hide inner emotions of rage and discontent their behavior may have been the expression of such feelings (SIMONS, "The origins", par. 10).

Acceptance of the Sambo mask as a survival strategy forced the African American slave into a dual life: besides the private face, reserved to the slave community, there came into being a public face, adjusted to the beliefs white America hold about them, and largely informed by the notion of the naïve and happy-go-luck slave. While acceptance of the Sambo mask made the slaves the butt of ridicule and laughter, becoming a source of entertainment for the slave owner,[2] it also provided them an internal source of humor, for the Afro Americans knew well the deliberate sabotage, work slow downs and stoppages to be a resistance strategy rather than the evidence of inherent laziness and lack of reasoning ability. When called to entertain their *massa*, sometimes only the slaves themselves got the true joke, as in the dialogue registered by Peter Randolf in 1855:

> "Pompey, how do I look?" the master asked.
> "O massa mighty. You looks mighty."
> "What do you mean mighty, Pompey?"
> "Why massa you looks nobles."
> "What do you mean by noble?"
> "Why, suh, you mean looks just like a lion."
> "Why Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?'
> "I saw one down yonder field the other day massa."
> "Pompey, you foolish fellow. That was a jackass."
> *"Was it mass? Well suh you looks just like him"* (in SIMONS, "The origins", par. 15)

As enacted in the encounter between Afro-Americans and the white hegemony, personality split not only brings about issues related to the contrast between appearance and reality but above all questions connected to Afro-American identity. Likewise, the exploitation of Sambo imagery in *Invisible Man* is linked to his quest for his true identity and oscillates around the alternatives of adopting a survival mask or fully assuming his true self. The latter alternative comes along with the discovery of his essential invisibility, which is the outcome of his journey through intellectual and industrial America, and of his interaction with its white and black population, both of which ignore him. "*I am invisible*," discovers the protagonist, "*simply because people refuse to see me. …When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me*" (ELLISON, 1972, p. 3).

[1] Two other doll comparisons appear in Ellison´s *Invisible Man*: the pewkie doll one (during the battle royal, referring to a white dancer) and the jack-in-the box one (in the battle royal and in Tod Clifon´s death episodes). However, since the Sambo metaphor is the only doll metaphor extended explored in the novel, analysis is limited to it.

[2] Journals, narratives and diaries of slavery time confirm the notion of the black slave as the ultimate entertainer. Perception of difference was turned into a form of entertainment, and every aspect of slave life, including their leisure activities, rhythmic movements and dance, religious and burial ceremonies were watched with amusement by whites. Simmons/ Watkins 1984

It is as a promising young man that the Invisible Man is first associated with Sambo, the entertainer buffoon. A boy of recognized talent, on his graduation day he delivers an oration in which he shows humility to be the essence of progress, and is invited to repeat it at a gathering of the town´s leading white citizens, receiving a scholarship to the state black university. Before, however, he is made to fight blindfolded with nine other Afro-American young men for the amusement of his white audience. Throwing money at an electrified rug and watching the boys´ painful contortions as they grab the money further amuse the audience. While the men laugh and talk in their chairs, a man turns to the Invisible Man, and winking at him confidentially encourages him, "That´s right, Sambo."

However acknowledging the royal battle to cause loss of dignity, division and derision, the Invisible Man abides to the conditions imposed by the white leaders because he honestly believes them to be able to see him as a person, recognize his talent and help him to fulfill his own version of the American dream. In fact, it is because he is convinced that success, recognition and the status of a new Booker T. Washington[3] only depend on the possibility of delivering his oration before the white leadership that he so desperately clings to the opportunity.

Although the leaders identify him with Sambo, at this early stage he does not accept the possibility of playing Sambo and assuming a double identity. On hearing one of the leaders yell to have bet his money on his opponent, the Invisible Man considers whether he should "*try to win against the voice*" or whether this would not go against his speech, being thus "*a moment for humility, for nonresistance*"(ELLISON, 1972, p. 25). The dilemma needs not to be faced at this early stage because he is knocked down by his opponent, a circumstance that guarantees white to be right.

Although not deeming the assumption of a Sambo conduct as a positive attitude, the Invisible Man has long been familiar with this dual behavior pattern. At his deathbed his grandfather, the dissenter, surprised the family by confessing to have lived a double life. Apparently meek and an example of desirable conduct, the grandfather tells his family slave life to have been a fight, and urges the family to adopt Sambo-like behavior and teach it to the new generations,

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome ´em with yeses, undermine ´em with grins, agree ´em to death and destruction let ´em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. … "Learn it to the younguns" (p. 16)

Having wondered a long time about the true meaning of his grandfather's words, the Invisible Man is given an example of the behavior advised by him when Dr. Blesoe, the college dean, takes his Sambo mask off before him. Exemplarily humble before the white trustees, Bledsoe reproves the Invisible Man for having acceded to a white trustee's will, showing him the slaves quarters, an experience that proves to be extremely traumatic to the trustee. "*We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see*" (p. 100), he confides to his student. The interaction between Bledsoe, the trustees and the college students at the religious service that evening further dramatizes how the first remains in control despite his apparent subservience. Although acting humble, Bledsoe treats the trustees with a surprising familiarity, "*placing his hands upon their arms, touching their backs, whispering to a tall angular-faced trustee who in turn touched his arm*" (p. 112). Service begins at his subtle command: nodding without turning his head, he orders the organist to play as if giving "*a downbeat with an invisible baton*." Looking up at the platform from his far back seat, the Invisible Man perceives the people on it as "*doll-like figures moving through some meaningless ritual*" (p. 113 and 115). More notably than the distance, that reduces people´s contours, the metaphor reminds of leadership capacity, questioning who leads and who is led in this context.

In New York, where he is suggested to move after Bledsoe has him leave the university, people whom the Invisible Man relies on repeatedly disappoint him. Bledsoe´s introduction letters prove in fact to be condemnatory in nature; his black workmates in the factory do not rely on him, nor actually hear what he says; the white people at the Brotherhood use his oratorical gift without

[3] American teacher and adminisstrator who began the Tuskegee Institute, one of the first American colleges for black people. His autobiography is called Up from Slavery.

allowing him freedom to act on his own. "*Say what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they'll do what we wish*," advises Brother Jack, warning, "*You will have freedom of action—and you will be under strict discipline to the committee*." (p. 350-351)

Freedom to obey is only transformed in freedom to act after the Sambo doll episode. Having been assigned the mission of regaining people's confidence in Harlem after the disappearance of Brother Tod Clifton, the Invisible Man comes into the latter as he sells unlicensed paper dolls. After centering on Clifton and his friend´s monitoring of a tall approaching policeman, description moves on to the doll itself, focusing on the Invisible Man's first impression of the toy, "*something moving with furious action … some kind of toy*," and the fascination it exerts on the audience. A minute description of the doll follows, emphasizing its physical aspect (a grinning flat doll made of orange and black tissue paper), its mechanics (it was caused to move by a "*mysterious mechanism*") and the nature of its movements ("*up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriating sensuous motion*"), finishing in a note of estrangement—the doll moves in a dance "*completely detached from the black, mask-like face*" (p. 421). Characterization, which points to race through color and the stereotypical movements associated with Afro-American dance, and emphasizes a split between what seems to be the exterior and interior nature of the doll, anticipates its naming as Sambo.

As if doubling the description, Tod Clifton's advertising dwells on Sambo´s stereotypical behavior: it is docile, submissive and totally dependent on the owner's initiative to engage in action.

> *Shake it up! Shake it up*
> *He's Sambo, the dancing doll…*
> *Shake him, stretch him by t the neck and set him down,*
> *—He´ll do the rest ...*
> *… he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile ...*
> *You simply take him and shake him ... and he does the rest.*
> Besides, it is an entertaining plaything:
> *He´ll make you laugh, he'll make you sigh, si-igh*
> *….The dancing doll*
> *….He´ll keep you entertained, he´ll make you weep sweet—*
> *Tears from laughing* (p. 421 - 422).

The doll has contrasting effects on the audience and on the Invisible Man. While the first is entertained, the latter thinks it to be degrading. The doll impresses him as a flouncing of everything human, and Clifton´s attitude as a betrayal of the Brotherhood which, he then thinks, fights so that Afro-Americans wouldn´t become "empty Sambo dolls". However, the Invisible Man´s placing of one of the dolls in his pocket along with the chain link given to him by Brother Tarp makes the doll synonymous with slavery, foreshadowing his final discovery of the fact that the he was as invisible to the Brotherhood as he had been to everybody else.

Causing Tod Clifton to be killed by a policeman, the unlicensed Sambos act as the trigger that moves the Invisible Man into action. In a first moment, reflection about the Sambo doll leads to questions around agency. Observing some Negroes at the subway platform he wonders who is really outside history, people who, like him, are enlisted by the brotherhood or anonymous men, "*in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll . . . . running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominant stand*" (p. 431). Back to the district, while lamenting both Clifton's senseless death and his failure in transforming it in an educational moment, the Invisible Man observes the doll and wonders what had made it dance. As much as he tries to make the doll move, he fails until he notices a black thread and pulls it, slipping it over his finger and stretching it taut. Only then does he realize that Sambo´s dancing is not caused by the doll's own attributes, but has all the while obeyed Tod Clifton's control. Next the Invisible Man moves into action, raising the black masses and attracting a huge crowd to Clifton´s burial. Having acted without the Brotherhood's permission, he is censored and disciplined, coming into the discovery of how the Brotherhood uses people.

Considering all his past experiences, the Invisible Man perceives that nobody has paid attention to him as a person and that he has always been manipulated. This knowledge frees him to his final underground hibernation and his role as the spokesperson for all those who, like him, have been overlooked and manipulated.

Gender, rather than race, is the focus of the doll metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. As the title of the novel implies, consumption plays an important role in the novel. Verbs describing the action of eating, such as chewing, licking, tasting and swallowing, recur; different responses to hunger are contrasted, as eating with gusto or contrastively, fiddling with

food, or totally rejecting food. Action often occurs in places where consumption takes place, from the kitchen, the setting of the many of the chapters in the novel, to restaurants and invitations to go to the restaurant, meetings at bars, lunch hours, and an end-of-year party, described as consisting largely of the consumption of food. Narrative also privileges shopping for food, visits to the supermarket, food shopping lists, menu planning, menu description, and ingredients for a recipe. With the exception of a few chapters in which protagonist Marian McAlpin interacts with Duncan, a self-centered young man who lives in the present and doesn´t usually project expectations on her behavior, consumption imagery pervades the book. The option does not surprise in a narrative that focuses on the protagonist's progressive sensation of being eaten up, especially after her engagement, when she feels choked by her fiancé's progressive demands on her and by his expectations about her behavior. Likening consumption to energy consumption and thence to lifelessness, eating metaphors reinforce doll imagery in the novel.

Doll imagery proper appears in the last chapter of the first part of the book, being the culmination of a series of moments in which Marian gets progressively aware of having been ignored as a person by Peter, her fiancé.

The first of these moments happens soon after a dinner at her friend Clara´s, in which Ainsley, Marian's roommate, declares Peter to be monopolizing her. Seven months pregnant of her third unplanned child, Clara provides the living image of possible outcomes of a married relationship which, although happy, is somewhat reductive. That night Marian dreams to be dissolving, like melting jelly.

When Marian is next described in Peter´s company, she agrees to make love in a bathtub in spite of feeling it to be uncomfortably hard and ridged, and of conceiving of the bathtub as a coffin. Her thoughts go back to the first time she had been to Peter's apartment, in which she had allowed herself to be manipulated into the bedroom. The suggestion of relationship pattern in which she complies to Peter's will, disregarding her own feelings, is confirmed in the next chapter by a description of her hurt feelings at Peter's remark about her inability to cook, and by the register of her repressing a sharp comment because she had been "deliberately refraining at Peter's for fear he would feel threatened." (65) This repression/silencing pattern starts to be broken towards the end of Part I, when Marian introduces her friend Len to Peter and Ainsley. As Marian observes the men talk to each other, she is taken by panic by suddenly realizing that Peter does need her and wants to depend on her as long as she acts as a stage-prop, silent but solid. Caught by panic, she cries, lets go of Peter´s arm, and runs from him. Later, that same night, as the four of them meet at Len´s apartment, she hides under Len´s bed, experiencing mixed feelings: resentment, for being left unaided under the bed; amusement and indignation for being treated like a sulking kid when located by Peter; rage by the superior gallantry with which Peter deals with all the situation. She feels to have broken out, though; in spite of ignoring from what or into what, she experiences a sense of accomplishment for having at least acted. Marian begins to plan a reasonable relationship pattern, and engages in an apartment cleaning-up that includes a pair of old dolls.

Description of one of the dolls dwells on the same consumption metaphors usually associated with Marian. Its fingers and toes are almost chewed off; emphasis is given to the doll´s mouth and her (lack) of eating capacity, centering on its " *face…. almost eroded but still* [with] *its open mouth with the red felt tongue inside and two china teeth, its chief fascination, as I remember."* Marian also remembers how she used to leave food in front of the doll overnight only to be disappointed the next morning when it was still there (p. 109).

Doll-like passivity, which would always surprise Marian as a child, increasingly comes to characterize her in the second part of the novel. First person narration, adopted in the first part, changes into third person narration as the narrative of Marian's estrangement from her own self progresses. Her doll-transformation is accompanied by the same inability to eat food displayed by her old doll. While struggling to accommodate herself to Peter´s wishes, allowing him to drain her initiative, Marian feels her body as refusing to allow her to feed on anything that is living or alive, however hungry she feels. If first happens while in the company of her workmates; then when eating out with Peter, a month after she started letting him choose the menu for her. Both had been ravenous, and both begin slicing and chewing at the same time. Marian, however, is unable to finish her steak. Instead, she exams Peter´s conduct, his newly adopted pattern of laughing at her and

disregarding her opinions, until the sight of a hunk of muscle leads her to the realization that it is flesh and blood that she is devouring. A vegetarian diet is adopted, but the option proves not to be a solution, since carrots and later canned rice pudding come to be rejected. Afraid of being censored or misunderstood, Marian refrains from commenting on these changes with Peter, and wonders whether she is normal.

Marian´s interior drainage, symbolized by her body´s refusal to food consumption, is further symbolized by her adoption of Peter´s beauty patterns. Her make up for Peter´s final party develops as a long conceit in which the beauty parlor becomes a hospital where she is etherized, operated and transformed into a doll. The episode vibrates with defamiliarizing details which stress her passivity: her buying a short red dress which she doesn't think to be really her, but the saleswoman does, the minute description of the hairdresser's operation on her head, and of the nail polishing and making up, details that look extra on her body. At the beauty parlor she is said to check her appointment with a woman "*disturbingly nurse-like and efficient*." Hair-washing is likened to an operation on her scalp and the hairdresser is compared to a doctor putting clamps, rollers, clips and pins in her body. Finally, after having had her hair dried, she is described as having been returned to the "doctor's" chair (228-230).

Having been manipulated against her will, Marian arrives home feeling like "*a child's wheeled wooden toy being pulled along by a string*." Final identification with the dolls occurs as she gets ready for the party. Looking back at the two old dolls at either side of the mirror, she sees

> *herself in the mirror between them for an instant as though she was inside them, inside both of them at once, looking out: herself, a vague damp form in a rumpled dressing-gown, not quite focused, the blonde eyes noting the arrangement of her hair, her bitten fingernails, the dark one looking deeper, as something she could not quite see, the two overlapping images drawing further and further away from each other; the centre, whatever it was in the glass, the thing that held them together, would soon be quite empty. By the strength of their separate visions they were trying to pull her apart* (p. 241).

The idea of hollowness is again exposed at the party, when Clara's husband refers to married women's surrender to their husbands and children as an invasion of the soul, a fight between feminine core and feminine role in which the first loses, leaving the core destroyed, hollow. This notion is further developed in the picture-taking episode at the party through Peter's characterization as a murder of souls, a "*marksman with his aiming eye …waiting for her at the dead centre*," and in her vision of herself as being reduced to a doll.

Not only does realization of doll status lead her into action, but a doll is made instrumental in the process of restoring her integrity. Having fled from the party, she invites Peter over to discuss the situation, and bakes a cake in the form of a doll. Cake planning and decorating is described as minutely as the make-up section that had produced her doll masquerade, and is accompanied by her removal of the last remains of the hairdresser's convolutions. Her re-creation is followed by an act of creation, as she next models the baked cake into the format of a china doll. Finally, she acknowledges doll status to be the result of an assimilative process, and ironically offers the cake, the visible representation of that process for Peter's consumption, "*You´ve been trying to destroy me . . . . "You´ve been trying to assimilate me. But I´ve made you a substitute, something you´ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn´t it? I'll get you a fork*."

Her appetite recovery and the scene in which she eats the cake immediately follow Peter's flight from her apartment, living the cake uneaten. Narrative is resumed in the first person, concluding with the description of her cleaning up the apartment and looking for a new job and a new meaningful relationship.

In contrast with Ellison and Atwood, in whose narratives the doll metaphor is associated with traditionally discriminated minorities, J. M. Coetzee opts to associate doll imagery with the white hegemony in his *Age of Iron* (1992). Written during a particularly troubled period in the history of apartheid South Africa, the novel has as its protagonist an aging white intellectual. Sheltered in the safety of her secluded world, Elizabeth Curren is suddenly shaken by the discovery of a breast cancer; later, having been made to host her maid's son and his friend John, she gets first hand contact with school activism and the techniques used in its repression. Realization that such techniques would amount to bloodshed causes her to feel ashamed. Elizabeth wonders whether she should resign to the situation, confiding to Vercueil,

> "*. . . . Perhaps I should simply accept that that is how one must live from now on: in a state of shame. Perhaps shame*

is nothing more than the name for the way I feel all the time. The name for the way in which people live who would prefer to be dead."
Shame. Mortification. Death in life. (COETZEE, 1992, p. 86)

Although unrelated to the boys hit by the policemen, as part of the white majority she feels to have been directly affected. Conceiving of power as something intrusive and therefore unavoidable, she feels to have been infected by it and blames the country leadership for having spoiled her life, corrupting her sense of honor.

All her life Elizabeth Curren has strived to preserve honor, electing shame as her guide. As she explains,

> *as long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonor. That was the use of shame: as a touchstone, something that would always be there, something you could come back to like a blind person to touch, to tell you where you were. For the rest I kept a decent distance from my shame. I did not wallow in it. Shame never became a shameful pleasure; it never ceased to gnaw me. I was not proud of it, I was ashamed of it* (p. 165).

Corruption of shame into a shameless feeling of accommodation to social injustice reinforces Curren´s sense of victimization. She feels madness in the air, a kind of schizophrenia which divides the country in two. As described in her outing to Muizenberg, side by side with the calm countryside there is a zone of killing and degradation so barely perceptible to the population at large that it seems to be a bad dream. However, if dream-like distancing allows for distancing, degradation proves to be as unavoidable as power, and keeps intruding in her consciousness. Repetition of a process of consciousness arousing and accommodation ends up replacing shame before injustice with shamelessness; it is the shamefulness of that shamelessness that strikes Curren now, once she thinks the process leads to paralysis and damnation:

> *Something presses, nudges inside me. I try to take no notice, but it insists. I yield an inch; it presses harder. With relief I give in, and life is suddenly ordinary again. With relief I give myself back to the ordinary. I wallow in it. I lose my sense of shame, become shameless as a child. The shamefulness of that shamelessness: that is what I cannot forget, that is what I cannot bear afterward. That is why I must take hold of myself. . .. Otherwise I am lost* (p. 119)

Curren´s sense of victimization and her desire to go into action grow after she sees the bodies of five school children murdered by the police. The brutality of the scene is intensified by the fact that she knows one of boys, her maid´s son, Bhheki. Feeling numb in body and soul, she is particularly impressed by the bodies "*massive, solid presence.*" Comparing herself with the boys who had been murdered for having taken action against injustice, she views herself as being in a state of slumber, a dead sleep in which she has intimations of a time in which she was alive. As Curren attempts to produce an explanation of how life was taken from her, she comes to visualize herself as a doll: "*from the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I*" (p. 109).

Her reasoning progresses to weigh the possibility of the recognition of doll status on the part of a doll,

> *A doll? A doll's life? Is that what I have lived? Is it given to a doll to conceive such a thought? Or does the thought come and go as another intimation, a flash of lightning, a piercing of the fog by the lance of an angel's intelligence? Can a doll recognize a doll? Can a doll know death? No: dolls grow, they acquire speech and gait, they perambulate in the world; they age, they wither, they perish; they are wheeled into the fire or buried in the earth; but they do not die. They exist forever in that moment of petrified surprise prior to all recollection when a life was taken away, a life not theirs but in whose place they are left behind as a token. Their knowing a knowledge without substance, without worldly weight, like a doll's head itself, empty, airy. As they themselves are not babies but the ideas of babies, more round, more pink, more blank and blue-eyed than a baby could ever be, living not life but an idea of life, immortal, undying, like all ideas* (p. 109-100).

Because dolls live in a suspended space between actual and ideal existence, and like all ideas are both more perfect than the actual thing and more defective than it, wanting the spark of life, Elizabeth Curren clings to the memory of her mother, so as to reconfigure herself as a living being. On the other hand, death is made particularly present to her by the acknowledgment of her shared responsibility in the bloodshed and by the psychological pressure caused by her terminal disease.

Cancer impresses her as a rightful restitution: like a doll, she is now hollow, a

shell. "*To each of us fate sends the fight disease. [. . .] Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab*[4] *sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light*" (p. 112). Curren attributes her sickness to the accumulation of sorrow and shame:

> *I have cancer. I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself . . . .*
> *I caught it by drinking from the cup of bitterness. You will probably catch it too* (p 145 and 156).

Casting herself in the double role of victim and defendant, Elizabeth Curren both wants to appease her consciousness by blaming the state for the impoverishment of life quality (both her own and of the population at large) and recognizes her own willed participation in the process. As a victim she views herself as part of the doll-folk, the passive recipient of the state depleting action. Feeling betrayed, twice does she refer to herself as having been robbed: as one "taken from her cradle" and when feeling like "a man who has been castrated . . . . in maturity." The latter metaphor emphasizes a blunting of emotions, which become blurred, leading to stupor and detachment. She no longer loves her country. Like a man who has loved before, she knows from memory what love is, but is no longer able to summon up the love itself. (121-122). On the other hand, in a letter to her daughter she acknowledges her lack of love for the other as a personal option:

> I do not love this child sleeping in Florence's bed. I love you but I do no love him,. …it is because I do not with a full enough heart want to be otherwise that I am still wandering in a fog. . . .
> *I cannot find it in my heart t love, to want to love, to want to want to love. I am dying because in my heart I do not want to live. I am dying because I want to die* (p. 136-137).

Against doll-like stupor, which paralyses and ultimately leads to damnation, Elizabeth Curren plans to engage in spectacular action, burning herself before the Parliament. Two factors deter her action. Difficulty of attempting against her own life is reinforced by the perception of the total uselessness of the act. Very likely no life would be changed, and she would be found wanting in Florence´s judgment, being deemed by her as clown. In Curren´s estimation, Florence would only value death as the crown of a life of honorable labor or as irresistible end, as when it comes of itself. Clinging to life, Curren finally decides that since there is both life and death in her, her final duty is towards life: "*There is not only death inside me. There is life too. The death is strong, the life is weak but my duty is to the life. I must keep it alive, I must*," she rationalizes.

Affected by a terminal illness, and living in a country which is equally afflicted by a terminal condition, in contrast with the protagonists of the two other novels, Elizabeth Curren´s is unable to move much beyond the recognition of belonging to a doll-people race. While the Invisible Man and Marian McAlpin are shaken from their stupor soon after acknowledging their doll status, and move into action, Curren´s awakening is just marked by her recognition of her status. In spite of the different scenarios, a common pattern is shared by the three novels, though: doll status is largely unconscious, demanding one not to be aware of the fact of being or having been manipulated by someone else. Blindness to the doll-like condition is achieved through a blunting of feelings that largely comes from accommodation and habituation to far from ideal conditions. A moment of revelation is then needed, so that the protagonists get an insight of their real condition, and are again able to take a stand. Remaining dolls or regaining humanity, accommodating or changing the course of their lives, living or dying—these are options which are reserved to the ones who, unlike doll-people, are able to author their own lives.

[4] The term cancer derives from *karkinos*, the Greek word for crab.

REFERENCES

Atwood, Margaret. *The edible woman*. New York: Bantam Books, 1996.

Coetzee, J.M. *Age of iron*. New York: Vintage International, 1992.

Elkins, Stanley M. *Slavery: a problem in American institutional and intellectual life*. Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1976.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible man*. New York: Vintage, 1972.

Boskin,Joseph. *Sambo: the rise and demise of an American jester*. New York: Oxford U. P., 1986.

Simmons, Lisa. *The origins of black humor*. Homepage Chatham College, Pittsburgh. Disponível em: <http:www.chatham.edu/PTI/comedy/Simmons_02.htm>Acesso em: 21/08/2003.