

CONVERSION AND SUBVERSION TRAITS IN RURAL REALISM BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

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Abstract: Rebreanu, Verga, Blasco Ibáñez, Hardy and Reymont illustrate the European realistic traditions characterised by strong impact writing focused on actual daily reality. This article is a comparative analysis of the realistic vein, predominant in all rural novels. The conversion aspects mentioned in the title deal with the themes (fundamental and universal ideas) explored in their literary works: the injustice of existence, ideas of social classes and access to them, and men dominating women. Subversion stems from discrete romantic insertions and the desperate belief that god is not just, but whimsical and uncaring, in a world where moral does not necessarily mean fair and achievement is a temporary illusion. Subversive also is the authors' unsparing irony and willingness to gaze into the abyss of a deterministic universe. The many-sided artistic inclinations of these authors (poetry, drama, novels, philosophical and political insights) emerge in their writing as potential subversion areas seen in characters' surprising angles, facets and messages. They act as role models for the contemporary cultural atmosphere in their own countries, and explore novel directions, that will prove valid art avenues for future creators.

Keywords: conversion, subversion, rural realism, impacts of tradition and modernity

Rebreanu, Verga, Blasco Ibáñez, Hardy and Reymont illustrate the European realistic trend characterised by strong impact writing focused on actual daily reality. This is an analysis of the realistic vein, predominant in all rural novels. The conversion aspects mentioned in the title deal with the themes (fundamental and universal ideas) explored in their literary works: the injustice of existence, ideas of social classes and access to them, and men dominating women. Subversion stems from discrete romantic insertions and the desperate belief that god is not just or fair, but whimsical and uncaring, in an environment where moral does not necessarily mean fair and achievement is a temporary illusion.

Conversion aspects firstly focus on the injustice of existence. Unfairness dominates the lives all protagonists and their families to such an extent that it begins to look like a general aspect of human life, impossible to shatter or surpass. Heroes see first-hand that there is no justice for them on any level, factual or divine. There seems to be no compensation for the unhappiness suffered in their days. The moral atmosphere of the novels shows characters as a playground for inner voices or outside forces governed by no justice at all. The transformations of the aspects that rule human life are absolutely unpredictable. The rural rituals practised by the farm workers at the opening of the novels set the stage for further developments escaping the protagonists' control or preparation.

A further conversion issue is the changing idea of social class. The prose we investigate presents complex pictures of both the importance of social class and the difficulty of defining access to a superior class in any simple way. All main characters are strongly marked by

confusion regarding their respective improvement in the social status, one of the main concerns in the novels.

In point of conversion, last but not least, critics observe the issue of men dominating women in the realistic rural universe, which constitutes one of the recurrent themes in the novels we discuss. The power they exert stems from basic strength, from their aspiration to superior socio-economic status and from the wider range of privileges and mobility opportunities men enjoy as compared to women. Sometimes upstarts, other times imposing privileges that exist only in their minds, with no real basis in the actual daily life, men give in to a purposeful command of exerting wrongful exploitation in full awareness and knowledge of doing so. Such acts of abuse are the most life-altering events that women experience in novels. However, these are not the only instances of force, as there are other, less blatant examples of women's passivity to dominant men. Female devotion for men with a different agenda is not merely fanciful love, but, at times, unhealthy obsession or hope against hope for the better. Some girls appear utterly blinded by desire for a man who, we are told explicitly, does not even realize they are interested. This sort of unconscious male domination of women is perhaps even more unsettling than men's outward and self-conscious cruelty. Even Angel's love for Hardy's Tess, as pure and gentle as it seems, dominates her in unhealthy ways, as he substitutes an idealized picture of her country purity for the real-life woman that he continually refuses to get to know, denying her true self in favour of a mental image that he prefers. Thus, her identity and experiences are suppressed, albeit unknowingly. This pattern of male domination is finally reversed with Tess's murder of Alec, in which, for the first time in the novel, a woman takes active steps against a man. Of course, this act only leads to even greater suppression of a woman by men, when the crowd of male police officers arrest her at Stonehenge. Nevertheless, for just a moment, the accepted pattern of submissive women bowing to dominant men is interrupted, and her act seems heroic. Women are two mere 'voices' for Rebreau's Ion, the epitomes of wealth and lust. Jagna and Hanka, Reymont's opposing portraits of wives, represent untamed nature's fertility with no ethical boundaries, and restricted self expression by moral double standards, respectively. Verga's women are desperate for a socially valid and well accepted marriage subsequent to a passionate transgression, and will ruin any prospects of happiness for the partner who buys this 'whole package' as flawed as it is. Indeed, it is an arrangement resulting in bitter disappointment and dissolution of wealth and identities.

Successful novelists fully acknowledged and praised in their own lifetime, these authors reveal many-sided artistic inclinations (poetry, drama, novels, philosophical and political insights) which emerge in their writing as potential subversion areas seen in characters' surprising angles, facets and messages. They are role models for their contemporary cultural atmosphere and explore novel directions that will prove valid art avenues for future creators.

These artists completed their general education informally through own erratic reading, and became interested in both fiction and poetry/drama. After early attempts at writing both short stories and poems, they decide to concentrate on fiction, re-learning, re-inventing and modernising literary expression in their native tongue. They persevere astutely, even after their careers are well launched, and, throughout their lifetime, they compete with themselves, in their quest for perfection.

These artists possess unsparing irony and indomitable willingness to gaze into the abyss of a deterministic universe. The atmosphere is one of grim warfare with farmers fighting the tragedies of drought and disease, like in Blasco Ibáñez's *La barraca*, or Verga's *Nedda*, in a continual struggle and inevitable defeat of plant and man. The rural environment showcases the

forces of nature both outside and inside of man combining them to shape the human destiny. Against a background of immemorial agricultural labour, they present characters at the mercy of their own passions or finding temporary salvation in the age-old rhythms of rural work or rural recreation. Men in their fiction are not masters of their fates; they are played by indifferent forces which manipulate their behaviour and their relations with others; but they can achieve dignity through endurance, and heroism through simple strength of character. Most of such novels are tragic despite hinting at the bitter ironies life is capable of.

Their prose explores the disparity between human desire and ambition on the one hand and what fate has in store for the characters on the other. But fate is not a wholly external force. Men are driven by the demands of their own nature as much as by anything from outside them. Life is governed by tragic mechanisms, stemming from the thwarted love and aspirations of that rural class of cottages to which the authors belonged by birth or youth experiences. They knew first-hand isolated, rural areas, and were able to witness the old village community as it had been with little change for centuries. Hence they are deeply affected by the disturbance or utter breakdown of such communities during the course of their lives.

Female body presence hovers between exposure and invisibility, with displaced modalities of representation. Revealing double standards and drawing attention to (in)visible women, these authors break new ground. They are again clear trend innovators by going beyond pastoral clichés and lavishing attention to nature and bodies at work in the fields, all vivid scenes of rural activity.

Striving for *'have'* instead of *'be'* is a relentless driver of fragmentation, and it triggers the breakdown of previous patterns of attachment/relationship to place. Characters ultimately encounter defeat and death at the hands of circumstances; hence the tragedy transcends the purely local and individual issues. Thus the scope of human endeavour becomes restricted.

With sensory impressions, the reader shares the direct experience of daily life, or of a kind of work which is pragmatic, painstaking but fruitful. The text conveys a restorative quality in step with the natural cycle of vegetation and the very rhythm of life. During work in the fields, gender boundaries are blurred, and so are social divisions, as men and women strive together for best yields. Vivid images of rural work enhance the sense of community rather than the need for productivity, but they will become obsolete as profit and upstarts will prevail, radically transforming the village. What ensues is that the earth is dug up and forced to produce, just as peasants are made to work until they drop; the texts suggest that people and nature have been mutually devalued and abused by the growing patriarchal exploitation of the land. Paradoxically, progress brings greater instability. The link to place, livestock and the community is perverted. It is interesting how steam machinery replaces the notions of community with productivity. The mock romantic oddly picturesque views symbolize the parasitic relation of the impostors to the land. These writers break new ground by daring to depict the constant displacement and dislocations that upset the rural equilibrium, and by exposing peasants' exploitation through a kind of work that is becoming mechanized and inhuman.

Unlike Rebreanu, Blasco Ibáñez and Verga, Hardy and Reymont resort to sensational event iterations, like surprise, dramatic suspense, irony of circumstance, and reversal of fortune, which strain the probability of the novels, but the artists take comfort in the realization that probability of character is far more important than probability of incident. Their protagonists do not suffer from an undermining flaw or fatal error in judgement, but from paralysis of the will. In their great novels Hardy and Reymont saw man beaten down by forces in-side and out-side himself and sought to record man's eternal struggle with fate. These are souls capable of great

feelings to the edge of exultation and nobility of passion, so their tragedy is the defeat of the romantic hero's desire to reach a higher spiritual state. The drives of their characters to achieve lofty states of mind are powerful enough to make their protagonists some of the most passionate in world literature.

Though technically belonging to the century they were written in, these novels anticipate the next one in regard to nature and subject matter treatment. They profoundly question society's mores by comprehensive portrayals and even understated advocacy for the hero. Many of the books encountered brutally hostile reviews, and the reactions catalysed by such attacks partly precipitated the authors' long-contemplated transition from one type of fiction to another.

The authors plunge the reader into an inhabited universe with a long history, and in order for this to become fully clear it is necessary to also take account of the unique customs and the original way of life of these region's dwellers, conveying the audience an in-depth meticulous experience of people's living conditions, situations, behaviours, and social relationships. So the traditional rituals and the native language are localised and belong to the area just as the natural environment does. In their letters and diaries, these artists confessed that the superstitious acts and customs in the novels could be trusted as true records, and were not merely auctorial inventions. Folk events reuniting the community convey the joy and vitality of the people living there, epitomes of national traditional areas, maintaining many of its historically defining customs in the face of the ongoing process of change. This natural life of the locals is also reflected in their religious attitudes.

Certain characters reflect upon themselves, thus acknowledging the mix of new and old they are; acting as figures of guilt, they judge themselves according to the prevailing social norms which they will challenge subsequently; others display strong resistance to norms from the very beginning. Old vs. new is observed in the approach to the generation gap: parents and their children. Although the two spaces are connected from the outside, their inhabitants do not understand each other.

Conversion and subversion traits in rural realism in the studied interval are intrinsic parts of the peasant universe which undergoes multiple transformations and shifts of epic proportions; time shows no patience to individuals or communities, and some ways of life decay while others prevail, without ethical retribution. Tremendous changes challenge social categorizations of rural people's lives: the workfolk face economic upheaval and national menace, as in the works of Reymont, Rebreanu and Hardy, with migrations among farms becoming increasingly popular for the last artist. People used to work on one farm for a lifetime, but in Blasco Ibáñez and Hardy's novels they tend to move over shorter time intervals, showing that the life of rural people is becoming more unstable and that the rural population has decreased in numbers and living standards. In the past, there were craftsmen and farmers with people in the countryside, whose life goals and lives were stable, but their trade no longer survives. Families, who were the backbone of village life in the past, and also depositaries of village traditions, had to move. Hence it is harder for rural traditions to be passed on to new generations, which, in turn, only exacerbates village decline. Shifts bring about poverty and lowered status, anxiety, frustration and incapacity of re-shaping one's own identity as prompted by the new circumstances. Conservative outlooks dominate the rural spaces showcased in the studied novels, but this is a world full of vital resources, capable to face its fate and live on to tell the story, just as Rebreanu, Verga, Blasco Ibáñez, Hardy and Reymont do in their still enduring masterpieces.

Rural people's structures of feeling and psychology concentrated in archetypal protagonists still serve lessons of life to readers nowadays, beyond literary trends and fading fashions. Can we truly say that Ion's drive to *have* in order to *become acknowledged* as what he truly *is*, never haunts our thoughts today? Can we really silence inside ourselves the echo of Batiste's determination to withstand adversity or envy and prevail, ultimately? Could we ever leave our village undefended, at the mercy of invaders, or will we fight with the strength of all nature's elements, like Reymont's peasants? Could we ignore duty, or comply with it, like the Malavoglias? Difficult as life may be in their villages, and it is, this way of living has its resources and values, in an imperishable universe created by these writers, and open for readers to revisit when they feel like tasting a bit of eternity.

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