

Death Obsession in Anton Holban's Novels

Adelina Lascu (Beldugan)

University of Pitești

adelina_lascu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Love, death, jealousy, detailed psychological analysis of innerself, intimacy study, music, the sea, the exacerbated pride of the protagonist, superiority or inferiority complex, the lucidity with which he examines the experiences are central themes of Anton Holban's works. Some of them are uniquely developed in an obsessive manner in each novel. Undoubtedly, the underlying obsession with death stands at the basis of Holban's creations. Most of the characters have different views regarding death, depending on temperament or cultural level. This does not wonder anybody taking into consideration the concern about the death accounted along the years, which has become a topic of interest to most people not because of the mystery that it generates, but rather because what happens after the great crossing. The semantic field of death is present in most of Holban's works. Words like cemetery, grave, icons, funeral, sick, sickness, pain, suicide, body, and death are used obsessively.

Keywords: obsession, death, mystery, psychological analysis, love

1. Introduction

The theme of death is fundamental in Anton Holban's novels. Depending on how they lived their life and their intellectual status, the characters are grouped into two categories: the mediocre - who are unable to feel the greatness of past moments and the imminence of death, and "the chosen,, - superior beings prepared spiritually for the end of their life. The obsession of death interlinks the three holbanian novels, *A death that proves nothing* (1931) *Joan* (1934), *Dania's Games* (1971) and, implicitly, their representative characters.

Anton Holban has always advocated for authenticity and for the cult of living, his work being deeply marked by autobiographical elements. Sandu, the protagonist of his works of psychological analysis, (*A death that proves nothing* - 1931, *Ioana* - 1934, *Dania's Games* finished in 1935 but published posthumously in 1971) is an alter ego of the author at different ages. Moreover, in the hero of the novel *Mirel* - 1929, his debut work, we find the same Sandu, troubled by the "whims" of adolescence. "For me,

literature is not hard: It is just my own transcription" (Holban: 1978: 58), the author confesses to his reliable friend Nelu Argintescu, the Professor from Galati who remained a faithful friend until his death. However, it should not be understood that the character and the author are the same person, on the contrary, the latter is the absolute master of the entire Romanian universe.

Throughout his entire existence, Anton Holban had health problems. The teenager had been spared from gym classes for medical reasons. The references to a nervous disease are frequent in his letters, as it will be seen below, where it can be deduced that the author has spent the last years of his creation in unbearable pain and in constant death threat. Knowing this, researchers of his work concluded that his nervous disease and imminent death influenced the writer's work essentially, being deeply reflected in his work. "Anton Holban lived too much, day by day, under the specter of death he had to face, too influenced by the presence of the irreversible catastrophe that he remembered in his most serene and tonic moments. [...] Only today do I realize that our friend used to die in every moment and expected some sort of confirmation to his whispered confessions." (Constantinescu 1969: 175). Testimonies of this fact are numerous, and Holban succeeds in wonderfully shaping a literary character, faithfully transmitting his obsession with death.

Through Sandu, people are divided into two categories: those who go through life without asking themselves any existential questions and those who live in mediocrity without even feeling the closeness of their final moments of life, without "tasting death." How unhappy must be those who do not have the talent to feel the happiness of their final moment and Holban's work is mostly populated by such people.

But the true vocation of death is owned by Sandu, who prepared his entire life for the grand finale, this coming as a reward for a life lived under its Incidence. Even in his last moments, Sandu will be disturbed by "the mediocres" that deprived him of the joy of being alone, to face, by himself, the long-awaited end and as "the chosen one" he will be annoyed by the neighbors that disturb him, the doctor who touches him, the relatives who are yelling at him. It has a unique opportunity to experience the fullness of a dream that he has pursued for so long and that now is ruined by the folly of others, for others cannot understand the taste, the talent of death being so rare." (Holban, 1974: 29).

The obsession is defined in specialized textbooks as a "sustainable mental disorder, an irruption into consciousness of a feeling or an idea that appears to the subject as a morbid phenomenon but which comes from his

own psychic activity, persisting for a longer or shorter period of time, in spite of his conscious will and of all of his efforts to get rid of that feeling or that idea" (Dictionary of psychoanalysis, 2009: 254). The obsession is closely related to psychasthenia, defined as "a mental rumination, accompanied by the feeling of unreality, that row surrounding reality is perceived in the form of pale images, deleted, colourless" (Galiarovski 1956: 426).

Sandu is constantly concerned with analyzing every experience, and especially probing in detail the issues of death. As a result of this obsession, he fails in his love life because "individuals like this are always undecided, unsure of themselves, distrustful of their forces. They are in a permanent oscillation, doubtful"(Ghiliarovski 1956: 426).

Sandu was indecisive and insecure in his relationship with Irina, whom he often desired so much that he eventually sent her away in a brutal way and, after a while, feeling that he missed her, he called her back again. The same hesitation tortured him later with Joanna, whom, although he claimed he loved, pushed her to the other one, permanently undermining the possibility of a life together. It is true that compared to Dania, who was much younger than him, Sandu felt an inferiority complex, which increasingly affected more and more his male pride. The Uncertainty and indecision are also the main characteristics of young Mirel, which is not surprising, these being Sandu's traits in adolescence.

2. Death - between the "elected" and the mediocre

In his first subjective novel, "A death that does not prove anything", Holban confessed that "the main character must be death, recurring as a leitmotiv" (Holban, 1978: 178). Even if the title itself refers to death, the heroine of the book did not feel the full intensity, "the magic,, of the end.

Irina was a young woman with a changeable nature, easily influenced and manipulated, incapable of strong emotion and deep meditations. The act of suicide in the name of love is undoubtedly an act of great courage, which was not entirely appreciated by Sandu.

The author's concept of death is nowhere better explained than at the beginning of the novel mentioned above. Thus, people are divided into two categories: "the chosen one" and "the mediocre man" (Holban, 1974: 29). For example, in the latter category there is the young and "easy-going" Bonbonel, who asked before she died nothing more but for his trousers to be put under the mattress for their stripe (Holban, 1974: 30). Ivonne Segal, Dumitra, the family's laundress, the stately gentleman Barbu Pandeale, the

superficial Viky are instances of people who cannot feel the greatness of their last moments.

For those petty people enumerated above, "there is a discrepancy between their commonplace lives of narrow-mindedness and the mystery of their death cancelled by the limitation of the protagonists" (Urdea 1983: 125). With her ultimate sacrifice, Irina, a human-being without major aspirations was about to be integrated by Sandu in "the chosen ones" as "at least in that moment she was great. (...) She proved that I was the light-minded one because I did nothing but fret" (Holban: 1974: 98). Doubt creeps again immediately, and for the last time, in the depth of his soul, coming to the conclusion that it could have been nothing more than an unfortunate accident in which he could have just slipped.

Sandu is certainly one of the persons chosen by death. For him, as for Schopenhauer, death is the true purpose of life. Deep and obsessive ruminations on the subject, the awareness of proximity of the final moment and the reporting of all the experiences of the great passing make Sandu a man prepared for an imminent death just as it happened with his grandparents from the short story "Grandmother is preparing to die".

In the novel Ioana, love and death constitute the major themes. As a superior human-being, the heroine realizes consciously the imminent death, but totally disagrees with Sandu's endless discussions on this topic. Moreover, Viky's disease appearing out of nowhere seems to be her debut of a certain death, with the relatives already wearing mourning clothes. Considered "Viky's emissary in gloomy lands," Ahmed, the cat, is the one that inexplicably falls ill, symbolizing the death of irreparable rift between Ioana and Sandu (Holban, 1974: 253). The Ceremonial of the separation between the protagonist and the animal is scary, taking place at midnight. The Darkness and the sea-waves were accentuating the macabre atmosphere, and the fear that Ahmed could be brought back to shore, lifeless, troubled her sleep before leaving Bucharest. Certainly, Ahmed was one of the "chosen ones", a messenger of the end of the love affair between Ioana and Sandu.

In time, researchers of Holban's work launched a series of assumptions regarding the relation between the biographic man and the cultural man or, rather, to what extent the events in the life of the author influenced his work. Obviously, it is impossible to prove such connections for any interpreter, but there are few direct links. Each heroine of the trilogy in which Sandu is the main character, apparently has a counterpart in reality. So, Irina, a recurring character just as Sandu, is the heroine of the novel *A Death That Does not Prove Anything* and of the short stories *Icons at Irina's*

tomb, The obsession of Death, Conversations With a Dead Woman, Two Sides of the Same Landscape, Marcel – she is based on a former lover of the writer from his student days, Nicoleta Ionescu. Irina's former student, Maria Dumitrescu, the one that briefly became his wife, is Ioana's model of the novel with the same name. Lydia Manolovici, the fashionable, rich Jewish woman who caused a painful rift in Holban's lasting friendship with Octav Șuluțiu, is Dania's character. Besides "a special human being with tempting femininity, full of sensuality and also subtle, intelligent" is the inspiration for two novels: "*Ambigen*" of Octav Șuluțiu and *People With Topper* signed by Zaharia Stancu who, moreover, enjoyed the charms of this young girl (Mangiulea 1989: 12). While Șuluțiu was writing a defamatory article against Holban, Lydia lived her romance with the latter.

Returning to the author's biography, much of his short life was marked by the "whims" of a nervous disease. In his correspondence with his close friend, Nelu Argintescu, there were frequent references to the disease that was wearing on his nervous system. "I suffer too much with the nerves to support any dissatisfaction. This volume (by dating the letter, February 20, 1932 can be inferred that it is about the Parade of teachers) does only belong to me through the exasperation that liberates hope in it. I am now writing worse things than you might like" (Holban, 1978: 51). Shortly before the publication of the novel *Ioana*, in another letter, Anton Holban confessed his fears that the disease could bring his death before he "had the leisure to enjoy it, however little" (Holban, 1978: 92).

Going through all the correspondence, the references to his poor health are obsessive. Also, in the last page of the novel "*Grandmother prepares to die*" (1934), in which the heroine is his grandmother (Eugen Lovinescu's mother), the literary critic, character-narrator, an alter-ego of Holban, he recites the pain: "I am in great, precise pain, and none of the many doctors understand what I suffer from. (...) Every day, every hour, I am forced to remember my tragedy. (...) It's been enough bleak years, I have run out of doctors and prescriptions. It'll all be over soon, I have no doubt (Holban, 1971: 220). The same suffering is described in *Dania's Games*, novel finished late in 1935. The grief was even greater as the relationship between the heroine and Sandu was about to end. "My health is shaky, I feel bad all throughout the day. (...) And Dania is also somewhere." (Holban, 1985: 55) Due to the prolonged bad states and doubtful diagnoses, Sandu seems resigned. "My illness is more intense than usual, but that is for the better. I make no effort to shake myself out of my misery" (Holban, 1978: 166). There are endless examples. It is certain that Holban lived his creative

years tormented by pain, some unbearable in a constant threat of death. In his essay *Love and death*, Ion Biberi believes that healthy people do not put much emphasis on the inner life, as they are engaged in a series of actions and they are concerned with external knowledge. On the other hand, "how shaded are the dramas of the people ruined by the awareness of strained heredity, how fertile are the sorrows without reason or unruly upsurges of the individuals hunted by organic misery" (Biberi 1971: 1983). In view of the above, we can say that Sandu is Holban's inner voice and through him the author expresses his vision of the haunting end.

In another work, *Thanatos - the death Psychology* reminds Ion Biberi three key terms of the basis of understanding, at least scientifically, i.e. time-fear-death. The Inner tension is immense because "the moments preceding death and forthcoming agony, the profound confusion of the organic life suddenly opened a subsequent spiritual register of life and a piece of truth that are imposed on conscience with the power of a new revelation" (Biberi 2000: 185). To feel death, says Sandu, it takes a special talent, but "talented people are rare" (Holban, 1974: 26) For some, death comes unexpectedly, the idea of the end which has no time to disturb them, but the sick ones have to live under its threat until the last moment. Sandu is outraged by the way most people perceive death: "How ridiculous seemed the idea that people make about death - a skeleton holding a scythe in its hand - when I thought of it I saw a fulfilled virgin capable of inspiring sensuality" (Holban, 1974, 67). Thus, the two categories of instincts "some that tend to death and others to the sexual seeking, which are trying and succeeding to renew life again and again" intertwine in an equation in which Thanatos is much stronger than Eros (Freud, 1996: 57).

He dreams of Irina as being dead and bride at the same time, and the image that seemed so real, terrified him even after he awoke. In the short story *Hallucinations*, he imagines his own death. "Can I call this torture of asking myself in front of any man, again and again, 'what would he say if I die?': a twitch"? (Holban, 1971: 220) The automatic behaviour of his stationery colleagues who always have the same pitiful attitude for any young man who has passed away too soon and the teachers unnecessary gossiping about his death, reinforce the belief that the talent of death is rare and only when you always live with care the end, you will give death the due importance.

In another short story, *Icons at Irina's Tomb*, Sandu faces death which he alleges that although it took Irina, it did not offer clear answers regarding the circumstances of the last moments in the life of his ex-girlfriend. And so, the doubts and anxieties will still torment him, "Irina in love ... then treacherous...

and now stiff (...) and maybe understanding with her former shaky logic, the eternal truths. (...) Irina threefold yet one..." (Holban, 1971: 50).

On the other hand, Irina's suicide causes a state of exaggerated frustration because Sandu understands that his desire for revenge for having been cheated on and forsaken will never materialize. Thus, "once again Holban's character is eminently the spectator of his own feelings, but not their actor" (Mangiulea 1989: 213).

In his latest novel, *Dania's Games*, Sandu would have liked to be able to talk more about death with his girlfriend, but the short time they physically met, Dania's age and superficiality had not given too many occasions to debate such an important theme for the protagonist. From this perspective, it is not legitimate to accuse the young girl, who was at about the same age as Mirel who did not give death the same significance which now gives Sandu. "The story of life and death obsesses you, that actually is the only problem that Destiny puts us up to" therefore Dania was too preoccupied with the material aspect of existence unlike Sandu who confesses the state of physical degradation that he is in (Holban, 1972: 522).

Dania's breakup becomes a huge problem directly proportional to his poor health condition, and "old phone seems a corpse" (Holban, 1985: 130). Death is now seen as a blessing as all his organic throes, but especially inner ones will cease.

3. Conclusion

Death will always be a topic of great interest for humanity because it is wrapped in mystery. Anton Holban is one of the writers who have given great importance to it, trying to explain his heroes through their own conceptions. As noted above, poor health and his condition have permanently nourished his obsession with death.

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