

# BAKHTINIAN AND KRISTEVAN THEMES IN TRACY CHEVALIER'S FALLING ANGELS

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[Tracy Chevalier'in "Düşen Melekler"inde Bakhtinian ve Kristevan Temaları ]

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to read Tracy Chevalier's novel *Falling Angels* (2001) in the light of the following concepts: Mikhail M. Bakhtin's dialogism and Carnival and Julia Kristeva's Semiotic and abjection. This article is divided into four parts: The first part points out important characteristics and implications of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and seeks to demonstrate that *Falling Angels* can be considered as a dialogic novel. The second part explores Bakhtin's notion of Carnival and tries to show that Carnival is a central theme in Chevalier's novel. The third part discusses Kristeva's concept of the Semiotic and seeks to demonstrate its significance for the portrayal of the novel's main character, Kitty Coleman. The fourth part explores Kristeva's concept of abjection and tries to show its impact on several female characters in the novel. By reading *Falling Angels* through the lens of the Bakhtinian and Kristevan concepts of dialogism, Carnival, the Semiotic and abjection, this article aims to elucidate the interrelationship between language, history, society, culture, the

psyche and the body – of Chevalier’s fictional Victorian women and of 21st-century flesh and blood women.

**Keywords:** Dialogism, carnival, the semiotic, abjection, women’s writing, contemporary English novel.

## ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı, Tracy Chevalier’in *Falling Angels* (2001) romanını şu kavramlar ışığında okumaktır: Mikhail M. Bakhtin’in diyalog ve Karnavalı ve Julia Kristeva’nın Göstergebilim ve iğrençliği. Bu makale dört bölüme ayrılmıştır: İlk bölüm, Bakhtin’in diyalog kavramının önemli özelliklerine ve sonuçlarına işaret etmekte ve *Düşen Melekler*’in diyalojik bir roman olarak değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini göstermeye çalışmaktadır. İkinci bölüm, Bakhtin’in Karnaval fikrini araştırıyor ve Karnavalın Chevalier’in romanında ana tema olduğunu göstermeye çalışıyor. Üçüncü bölüm, Kristeva’nın Göstergebilim kavramını tartışıyor ve romanın ana karakteri Kitty Coleman’ın tasviri için bunun önemini göstermeye çalışıyor. Dördüncü bölüm, Kristeva’nın tiksinti kavramını araştırıyor ve romandaki bir dizi kadın karakter üzerindeki etkisini göstermeye çalışıyor. *Düşen Melekler*’i Bakhtinian ve Kristevan diyalog, Karnaval, Göstergebilim ve iğrenç kavramlarının merceğinden okuyarak, bu makale kadınların yaşamlarında dil, tarih, toplum, kültür, ruh ve beden arasındaki karşılıklı ilişkiyi aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır - Chevalier’in kurgusal Viktorya dönemi kadınları ve 21. yüzyılın gerçek kadınları.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Diyalog, karnaval, göstergebilim, iğrençlik, kadın yazıları, çağdaş İngiliz romanı.

## **Introduction**

The thought of Mikhail M. Bakhtin has been a decisive influence on the work of Julia Kristeva. Consequently, Kristeva's work shares multiple similarities with Bakhtin's. Both Bakhtin's and Kristeva's works display a strong interest in language, subjectivity, history, society, culture and literature. Both Bakhtin and Kristeva have argued that language should be examined as a multiplicity of dynamic utterances rather than as a static system. Both have considered human beings as "speaking subjects" and drawn attention to the relationship between language and human consciousness, claiming that human consciousness is intersubjective. Another important similarity between the works of Bakhtin and Kristeva is their view of the human body: Both have sought to remedy the devaluation of the human body it has undergone in the course of the history of the West since the rise of Christianity and to restore the lost balance between body and mind suffered by the modern individual. Both Bakhtin and Kristeva have called for a re-evaluation of the Western notion of the relationship between the subject and the object, i.e. between the "I" and the "other", arguing that the "other" should not be regarded as an object but as another subject. Both Bakhtin's and Kristeva's works can be considered as seeking to countervail the oppression, marginalization and silencing of the "other", such as women, children, the working classes and people of colour. An important difference between the works of Bakhtin and Kristeva is the fact that Kristeva's work is primarily concerned with female bodies and minds, i.e. it is concerned with female subjectivity and the place and representation of woman in general and the mother in particular in Western society, culture and art. According to Kristeva, the human body plays an important role in language acquisition and in the formation of the subject. She has argued that subjectivity and signification are rooted in preverbal, instinctual and sensory experiences in the maternal body and in close relation to it. Thus, Kristeva has "put forward a more embodied understanding of signification, one based on the subject and its formation at the juncture between the 'corporeal, linguistic, and social'" (Lechte and Margaroni, 2004, p. 11). The adjectives corporeal, linguistic and social also aptly sum up the major concerns of Bakhtin's works.

### ***Falling Angels* as a dialogic novel**

Bakhtin has made a distinction between dialogic and monologic texts and genres. As a genre the novel tends to be dialogic; the genres of poetry and drama tend to be monologic. However, not all novels are dialogic and not all poems and plays are monologic. In monologic novels the voice of the narrator has more weight and authority than the voices of the characters. Besides, the narrator is granted the last word. By contrast, in dialogic novels the voices of the characters have as much weight and authority as the voice of the narrator, and the narrator does not speak a final and finalizing word. The dialogic novel constitutes an unresolved and unresolvable dialogue which remains open to further responses and to the future. It is “pregnant with an endless multitude of dialogic confrontations, which do not and cannot resolve it” (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 119), and it makes the consciousness of the reader “pregnant with responses and objections” (Bakhtin, 2001, p. 1206). Bakhtin’s use of the adjective “pregnant” in the two statements quoted above is suggestive: It suggests the close relationship between Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism, Carnival and the grotesque body. Besides, it foreshadows Kristeva’s ideas about the close relationship between the Semiotic and the human body, especially the maternal body. Although Bakhtin has argued that novels tend to be dialogic whereas poems and plays tend to be monologic, he has also argued that “[n]ovelistic discourse is poetic discourse” (Bakhtin, 2001, p. 1197). This statement seems to contradict Bakhtin’s overall view of the novel and poetry as distinct and in opposition to each other. It brings to mind Kristeva’s use of the term poetic, which expresses her appreciation of a particular kind of literary language. Bakhtin has called the kind of literary language which he has valued most highly dialogic, polyphonic and heteroglossic. The term polyphonic is associated with music. Bakhtin (1999, p. 115) has argued that the novel is constituted by a polyphony of different voices and that the principle of polyphony is a “musical” principle. He has further argued that “[t]he novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types” (Bakhtin, 2001, p. 1192). Besides, Bakhtin (2001, p. 1193) has referred to the novel as “symphonic”. It can be argued that *Falling Angels* is a dialogic novel because it orchestrates its themes through multiple heteroglossic voices. These voices are engaged in a dialogue with each other and with the reader. *Falling Angels* is narrated by twelve different characters. There is no narrator. Consequently, these twelve different characters are neither judged nor

interpreted by a narrator. No final and finalizing word is spoken about them at the end of the novel. Technically, the last word is spoken by Simon, a young working-class boy, but the novel remains nevertheless unresolved beyond its ending, which is characteristic of the dialogic novel. The novel, especially the dialogic novel, allows for the inclusion of many different voices and languages. Most importantly, it allows for the inclusion of voices which have traditionally been excluded from the realm of literature: the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized and the silenced, for example, the voices of working-class people, women and children. As Graham Pechey (2007, pp. 28, 29) has claimed, the appeal and relevance of Bakhtin's thought "lie among those classes which have never ruled", for example, "women under patriarchy" (ibid). In *Falling Angels*, traditionally oppressed, marginalized and silenced voices are given prominence: The voices of women, children and working-class people are given more space and thus more weight than the voices of men and people belonging to the middle-class. Bakhtin (2001, p. 1192) has argued that "[t]he novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types". The different characters in a novel, especially in a dialogic novel, represent different social classes and different world views. The characters in *Falling Angels* represent their respective social class and concomitant world-views. The characters' world views are represented as being different from and occasionally conflicting with each other. For example, when Caroline Black, a middle-class suffragette, asks Jenny, Kitty's maid, to contribute money to the Suffragette movement, Jenny makes the following remark to Mrs. Baker, the cook: "They ain't fighting for my vote – only for women who own property or went to university. But that Caroline Black had the nerve to ask me to donate some of my wages 'for the cause'." (Chevalier, 2001, pp. 227, 228)

Bakhtin has argued that language is characterized by conflict and tension. Every word contains conflicts and tensions between different possible meanings. The word exists in "an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object" (Bakhtin, 2001, p. 1202). Thus, words exist in an environment of "other" meanings. Bakhtin has put a strong emphasis on the relationship between the "I" and the "other". Traditionally, the "I" has been considered as equivalent to a subject, and the "other" as equivalent to an object. But this view of the "other" is limiting, devaluing and hostile. In much of Western literature, i.e. in its monologic works, the "other" is represented as an object, not a subject. According to Bakhtin, only dialogic texts affirm the "other" as another subject instead of representing it as an object. In

Bakhtin's thought, "I" and "other" are equally valid and important. No individual can become a subject without an "other". A distinctive "I" can only emerge and develop in relation to an "other". As will be pointed out later, Kristeva has put forward a similar account of the relationship between the "I" and the "other". It can be argued that, in *Falling Angels*, the female and working-class characters are not depicted as objects but as subjects, i.e. as valid human beings. In *Falling Angels*, Simon's father and Jenny are portrayed - in a very subtle and subdued fashion - as subjects: Both are depicted as wellsprings of love, practical knowledge and wisdom. Jenny is shown to be the central figure in the life of Kitty's daughter Maude, who finds more love and help in Jenny than in her mother, who is distant and detached. When Maude gets her period for the first time, Kitty is at a Suffragette meeting and Maude must turn to Jenny for help. Maude haughtily proclaims that she knows what getting one's period means, but, as Jenny points out to her, Maude does not know what to *do* about it. In the situation described above, Jenny's practical knowledge is shown to be more valuable than Maude's theoretical knowledge. Similarly, Simon's father is portrayed as a wellspring of practical knowledge and wisdom. He knows better than anybody else (the socially superior graveyard manager Mr. Jackson included) about the craft of grave-digging. Besides, he is depicted as a man who accepts his station in life and the human condition: More than any other character in the novel he embraces the inevitability of death and displays a peace of mind utterly untypical of modern man. His peace of mind is substantially derived from his commonsensical knowledge that no human being is superior to any other in death.

Bakhtin has argued that the novel, especially the dialogic novel, is engaged in a continuous dialogue with other genres, both literary and non-literary. It can be argued that *Falling Angels* engages in a dialogue with multiple literary texts and non-literary discourses, such as Shakespeare's plays, Victorian poetry, and Women's Suffrage, among others. It can be argued that Jenny and Simon's father resemble the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and the gravedigger in *Hamlet*, respectively: Maude is much closer to Jenny than to her mother. Their relationship seems to echo the relationship between Juliet and her nurse. Similarly, Simon's father's remark that "When you're dead you're dead. You don't need an angel [he is referring to the fancy angel statue on the Waterhouses' grave] to tell you that. Give me a pauper's grave any day" (Chevalier, 2001, p. 134) calls to mind Hamlet's conversation with a gravedigger shortly before Ophelia's burial: When the gravedigger draws Hamlet's attention to a skull and

explains to him that it is Yorick's, the king's jester's, Hamlet realizes that a king's skull looks the same as a pauper's skull (cp. *Hamlet* 5.1.144-185), i.e. he realizes that all human beings are equal – at least in death. Kitty resembles Tennyson's Lady of Shalott and Laura in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. Like the Lady of Shalott, Kitty is depicted as feeling trapped and cursed. Kitty describes her feeling of being trapped as follows:

[This] trapped feeling [...] I first felt it one morning when Richard and I were just back from our honeymoon and newly installed in our London house. ... [I was in the] morning room – which I had chosen to be at the front of the house, overlooking the street rather than the garden, so that I could keep an eye on the world outside” (Chevalier, 2002, pp. 69, 70).

When Kitty mentions to Mr. Jackson that she feels trapped and thinks that her actions in life are insignificant, he looks at her “shocked, like she's just cursed.” (Chevalier, 2002, p. 102) Kitty's relationship with Mr. Jackson leaves her pregnant. After an abortion, Kitty's physical and mental health suffers a sharp decline. Her physical and mental decline following the abortion is reminiscent of Laura's physical and mental decline in *Goblin Market*. After Laura has eaten the goblin men's fruit, her hair turns white, her eyes lose their lustre and she loses all interest in life. Kitty falls into a similar state after the abortion.

Bakhtin has accorded the highest possible value to the novel, especially the dialogic novel, because it does not attempt to speak with one voice of absolute, uncontested authority, as, for example, lyric poetry does. According to Bakhtin, lyric poetry aims at conveying direct meanings and expressions, but, as he has claimed, “all direct meanings and expressions are false” (Dentith, 1995, pp. 47, 48). This statement appears paradoxical, but it makes sense if we take into consideration Freud's claim that our thoughts and actions are based on unconscious desires and fears rather than on conscious decisions and principles. We do not know ourselves and are incapable of seeing ourselves as we really are. Bakhtin's claim that direct meanings and expressions are false appears to be analogous to his view of the dialogic novel: In a dialogic novel, characters convey direct meanings and expressions, but other characters and the narrator do the same. Therefore dialogic novels contain multiple and contradictory descriptions and value judgments of persons and events. The narrator of a

dialogic novel does not guide the reader to a safe and final judgment because the narrator refrains from judging the characters and their actions from a standpoint of absolute authority or knowledge. By claiming that all direct meanings and expressions are false, Bakhtin not only criticizes lyric poetry but also calls attention to the fact that there is no absolute truth in literary texts. In a dialogic novel, readers must take into consideration different accounts and interpretations of characters and events and try to come to terms with unresolved tensions and contradictions which persist beyond the end of the novel. In *Falling Angels*, such unresolved tensions attach, for example, to the question of how one should evaluate Kitty's involvement with the Suffragette movement: Is it her salvation or her death? Does it constitute a worthy purpose in her life or does it destroy her relationship with her daughter and husband? Kitty voices her conviction that the Suffragette movement has given her a worthy purpose in life. In fact, she believes that her involvement with the Suffragette movement is the first and only meaningful event in her life. But this view is contested by other characters in the novel. For example, when Kitty says to her husband that "nothing I've done in my little life has had any significance whatsoever before I joined the WSPU", her husband unbelievably asks her whether she means to say that "having a child has not been significant?" (Chevalier, p. 268) It is left to the reader to evaluate the conflicting views expressed by Kitty and her husband described above.

### **Carnival in *Falling Angels***

Bakhtin has famously argued that the genre of the novel is inextricably linked to the cultural phenomenon of Carnival. Although the novel emerged and began its rise to supremacy at a time when the importance of Carnival was already waning, Bakhtin has claimed that Carnival is an epochal force which has enabled the emergence and rise of the novel as a genre. Novels, in particular dialogic novels, are physical manifestations of the spirit of Carnival. According to Bakhtin, Carnival is subversive of dominant ideologies and centralized authority. Thus, both Carnival and the novel can be characterized as anti-authoritarian, pluralist and subversive. They both challenge and subvert oppressive ideologies and totalitarian authority. Bakhtin's account of Carnival as a socio-historical phenomenon is overwhelmingly positive: In his work, the festive life of the medieval period and the Renaissance serves as a foil against which modernity and its appendix rationalism are visible in stark contrast – as bleak and

lifeless. The roots of Carnival allegedly lie in the Roman Saturnalia which celebrated “the temporary return of Saturn’s golden age upon earth” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 198). According to Bakhtin, Carnival is most of all characterized by a festive spirit. Carnival is joyful and affirmative of life. It accepts life in all its aspects, most importantly the corporeality of human existence and of the world. For Bakhtin, Carnival signifies an all-embracing attitude toward life and the world. It embraces not only birth and growth but also decay and death. Carnival acknowledges and celebrates becoming and change. It defies and mocks official ideologies, and it challenges and subverts official authority. Bakhtin has depicted Carnival as affirmative, anti-authoritarian and liberatory. During the medieval period and the Renaissance Carnival provided a temporary escape from everyday life and the pressure of dominant ideology and official authority. It allowed for the temporary turning upside-down of the power hierarchies which governed most of the Church year. This temporary reversal of power hierarchies was, for example, expressed through cross-dressing.

Bakhtin has claimed that the characteristic festive spirit of Carnival can only emerge if it is grounded in utopian ideas, values and goals:

The feast (every feast) is an important primary form of human culture. It cannot be explained merely by the practical conditions of the community’s work, and it would be even more superficial to attribute it to the physiological demand for periodic rest. The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 198)

Bakhtin’s Carnival is in opposition to the mechanical, bloodless rationalist utopias of the Enlightenment period. Bakhtin’s notion of utopia is closer to the Land of Cockaigne than to, for example, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*. In the Land of Cockaigne, drink and food are abundant. Because of this material abundance there is a spirit of goodwill and fraternity - a communal spirit. Carnival is characterized by a festive, communal spirit, by the abundance of food and drink, and by gaiety and laughter. Carnival laughter is both gay and mocking. It has the power

to ridicule and diminish those wielding power. According to Bakhtin (1999, p. 198), Carnival celebrates “the world’s revival and renewal”. It is regenerative, i.e. linked to sexuality and procreation. However, it is also linked to violence and death. Whereas Bakhtin has emphasized the utopian, liberatory potential of Carnival, critics such as Simon Dentith (1995, p. 72) have argued that, historically, Carnival was often the scene of violence, rape and murder. It can be argued that, in *Falling Angels*, the Suffragette march to Hyde Park corresponds to Bakhtin’s notion of Carnival. It takes place in an atmosphere of joy and excitement, and it is inspired by the utopian goals and values of the Suffragette movement: Liberty and equality for women. It is important to note that during the march Kitty is dressed as Robin Hood. She wears a man’s costume which exposes her naked legs up to her thighs. Kitty’s costume temporarily turns patriarchy on its head and affirms the female body. Kitty experiences the wearing of this costume as immensely liberating. In general, she and the other participants of the march feel excited and exhilarated, almost ecstatic. Kitty describes her feelings during the march as follows:

For most of the march I felt as if I were walking through a dream. I was so excited that I hardly heard a thing. The buzz of spectators, the jangling and creaking of the bridle, the clanking of Caroline’s armour – they were all there, but distant. The horse’s hooves sounded as if they were muffled by blankets, or as if sawdust had been strewn along the route, as it sometimes is for funerals. (Chevalier, 2001, p. 301)

The second part of the statement quoted above contains a foreshadowing of Kitty’s death. It points to the dark side of Carnival. As mentioned earlier, Carnival is linked to joy and violence, to Eros and Thanatos. This is demonstrated not only through Kitty’s death caused by an accident during the march but also through the rape and murder of Lavinia’s little sister Ivy May during the Suffragette convention in Hyde Park.

An important Bakhtinian concept, which is related to Carnival, is the grotesque body. Bakhtin has made a distinction between, on the one hand, the grotesque body and, on the other hand, the classical body. Whereas the classical body is dignified, self-contained and autonomous, the grotesque body is shown as dependent on its physical desires and instinctual drives. The classical body is closed toward the world. The grotesque body is open to the

world. The former is fixed and finished. The latter is changing and unfinished. The grotesque body is the degraded human body. It is the manifestation of the obvious but usually politely ignored fact that “we are all creatures of flesh and blood and thus of food and faeces also” (Dentith, 1995, p. 65). However, the degradation of the grotesque body also implies an affirmation of life: of life as a cycle of birth and death and as a process of becoming. Whereas the classical body is associated with the ideal and heavenly, the grotesque body is associated with the real and the earthly. Life is earth-bound and encompasses death: “Earth is an element that devours and swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth.” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 206) The contrast between upward and downward, the ideal and the real, the heavenly and the earthly is a recurring theme in *Falling Angels*. In one scene in the novel, Simon is lying on his back in a freshly-dug grave and looks up at the night sky. His description of the sky can be interpreted as echoing Bakhtin’s notion of the corporeality of human life and the world:

The sky goes clear of clouds and I start to see little pricks of stars, more and more appearing till the patch of sky above me is full, like someone’s sprinkled flour on the sky and is about to roll out dough on it. (Chevalier, 2001, pp. 30, 31)

This quotation also draws attention to the necessity of eating. Simon is constantly hungry and habitually asks Jenny and Mrs. Baker, the cook, for food. Jenny generously feeds Simon bread and hard-boiled eggs. She sympathizes with him, especially during her pregnancy, a time in which she is constantly hungry and eats more than usually. Bakhtin’s grotesque body is implicitly gendered as female. It often takes the form of the protruding belly of a pregnant woman. In Chevalier’s novel, Jenny is represented as a grotesque body, especially while she is pregnant and breast-feeding. Besides, Jenny is associated with Carnival laughter. According to Bakhtin, Carnival laughter is gay and mocking, cheerful and subversive of official authority. In *Falling Angels*, official authority is personified by Edith Coleman, Kitty’s mother-in-law. “‘*Rubbish*’, Jenny repeated when we were in the kitchen [...] She sounded so much like Grandmother that I laughed till my stomach hurt.” (Chevalier, 2001, p. 79) The statement quoted above is uttered by Maude, who clearly enjoys Jenny’s disrespectful imitation of her oppressive and totalitarian grandmother. Kitty also perceives her mother-in-

law as oppressive and totalitarian. By contrast, Jenny is perceived by Kitty as likeable, even admirable:

Jenny has a big mouth and wide cheeks – a face made for laughing. She is always going about her work with a smirk on her face, as if she is about to burst with some great joke. And she does, too – I can hear her laugh all the way up from the kitchen. (Chevalier, 2001, p. 83)

In *Falling Angels*, Carnival laughter is also associated with Caroline Black, at least in Kitty's eyes. As mentioned earlier, after her abortion Kitty loses all interest in life and starts to seriously deteriorate physically and mentally. But when she hears Caroline's laugh for the first time, she is suddenly jolted out of her depression:

Her laughter rang out like a clarion call, sending a jolt up my spine that made me open my eyes wide. I had thought it was another foggy, muffled day, but when I looked around for the source of laughter, I discovered it was one of those crisp, windy autumn days I love, when as a girl I wanted to eat apples and kick at dead leaves. (Chevalier, 2001, p. 195)

### **The Semiotic in *Falling Angels***

Kristeva has written widely on depression and on women's relationship to patriarchal language and culture. With regard to language, she has distinguished between a symbolic and a semiotic aspect. The Symbolic is the language of the Father. It manifests itself as structure and grammar. It is tied to the dominant social order, i.e. patriarchy. The Symbolic depends on the assumption that subject and object are distinguishable. The term semiotic can be translated as "distinctive mark [or] trace" (Kristeva, 2001, p. 2169). The semiotic aspect of language bears the traces of the individual's body and of the maternal body. Such traces are tangible, for example, as memories of pre-verbal experiences. According to Kristeva, the Semiotic and the Symbolic are two competing forces, which vie for expression in language, particularly in literary language. Similarly, Bakhtin (2001, p. 1199) has argued that there are two forces in language: "centripetal forces" and "centrifugal forces". While Bakhtin has used the terms dialogic, polyphonic and heteroglossic for the kind of literary language he has valued most highly, Kristeva has used the term poetic. According to Kristeva, poetic language is rooted in

the semiotic dimension of language. Poetic language is only possible because of the Semiotic. However, language could neither exist without the Semiotic nor without the Symbolic. Without the Semiotic language would be lifeless and mechanical: “Without the semiotic, our language would have no force in it; it would be devoid of meaning. Without semiotic force, we would be like bad actors when we spoke, as if we were merely reading words off a page.” (McAfee, 2004, p. 41) The Semiotic leaves its traces in the Symbolic. The Semiotic becomes only perceptible in the moment in which it breaks through the Symbolic. Whereas symbolic language is characterized by “the grammar and logic of discourse”, semiotic language is characterized by “displacement, condensation, alliterations, vocal and gestural rhythms” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 65). Therefore, the Semiotic can be associated with dream logic and the Unconscious. The Semiotic is further related to music. Like Bakhtin, Kristeva has associated poetic language (the kind of language which Bakhtin has termed dialogic or polyphonic) with music. She has characterized music as “the ultimate sublimation of the unsignifiable” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 23), thus indicating the close relationship between poetic language, the Semiotic and woman. Kristeva has argued that the semiotic dimension of language gives a creative and innovative impetus to language, especially literary language. The Semiotic is a life-enhancing force and creative energy.

It is important to note that Kristeva’s account of the Semiotic is not unequivocally positive. Likewise, her account of the Symbolic is not unequivocally negative. The Symbolic is a product and expression of patriarchy. However, it is not only oppressive but also protective. The Symbolic makes possible civilization and meaning. Kristeva (1982, p. 46) has described the Symbolic as a “strongly structuring power”. She has likened symbolic language to a fortified castle, which offers protection to the subject. But there is a danger that the castle of symbolic language turns into a prison. In this prison, language and the subject can become petrified. This can happen when we lose touch with the Semiotic. Kristeva has referred to the Semiotic as a “flow which causes desire to rise” (ibid). In order to feel alive, human beings must feel desire toward somebody or something (an object of desire or a discourse arousing one’s interest). It can be argued that Kitty is out of touch with the Semiotic during certain phases in her life, for example, when she has an abortion and falls into a depression. Losing touch with the Semiotic is equivalent to losing touch with the wellspring of energy, vitality and joy. During her depression, Kitty resembles a ghost or a withered plant that had all its

vital juices sucked out of it: She “is so thin, and her hair suddenly has grey in it, and her skin looks like ditch-water. [...] Mrs. Coleman does not sparkle as she used to” (Chevalier, 2001, pp. 181, 182), Lavinia thinks to herself, when she sees Kitty for the first time after her abortion. Gertrude Waterhouse also notices Kitty’s physical and emotional transformation, thinking to herself that it is pitiful to see “the lifeblood sapped from someone once so vital” (Chevalier, 2001, p. 184). Kristeva (1989, p. 4) has described depression as a kind of death-in-life: “I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted”. While Kitty is in depression, she resembles a dead person. Kristeva (1989, p. 24) has further argued that for a depressed person language is dead. The speech of a depressed person is “repetitive and monotonous” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 33). People suffering from depression “utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate” (ibid). Kitty exhibits the symptoms enumerated above in a conversation with Gertrude Waterhouse (see Chevalier, 2001, pp. 185-187). Kristeva has pointed out that depression often goes hand in hand with manic episodes, which means that phases of almost-silence, numbness and inactivity can alternate with phases of frantic expression and activity, accompanied by excitement and exhilaration:

[T]he institutional symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that becomes established now and then or chronically in a person, alternating more often than not with the so-called manic phase of exaltation (Kristeva, 1989, p. 9)

It can be argued that Kitty’s enthusiasm for Women’s Suffrage in the second half of the novel is a manifestation of a manic phase in her depression. Kristeva has claimed that people who feel empty and devitalized perceive their selves and language as insignificant and are in dire need of an object of desire or a discourse which arouses their interest. In the first half of the novel, Mr. Jackson serves as an object of desire for Kitty. In the second half of the novel, Kitty exchanges Mr. Jackson for Caroline Black and Women’s Suffrage. But it is not clear whether these objects of desire and this discourse (Women’s Suffrage) save or kill Kitty.

Kitty depression in the middle of the novel is triggered by her abortion. However, it can be argued that the roots of this depression lie in Kitty’s more distant past. Kristeva (1989, pp. 4, 5) has pointed out that a current depression can “awaken echoes of old traumas” and that there

are usually “antecedents to [a] current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something [...] once loved.” In Kitty’s case, such antecedents are the deaths of her mother, father and brother, indicated at the beginning of the novel. Through large parts of her life, Kitty feels empty and unfulfilled. She is not content with her life and is continuously looking for something, but she does not exactly know what she is looking for. Kristeva has argued that an unnameable lack or want can manifest itself in a phobia. According to Kristeva (1982, p. 35), any phobia, for example, a horse phobia, can be considered as “abortive metaphor of want”:

The statement, ‘to be afraid of horses,’ is a hieroglyph having the logic of metaphor and hallucination. By means of the signifier of the phobic object, the ‘horse,’ it calls attention to a *drive economy in want of an object* – that conglomerate of fear, deprivation, and nameless frustration, which, properly speaking, belongs to the unnameable. (ibid)

Kristeva (1982, p. 40) has further argued that the metaphor of horse phobia conveys the idea of “speed, racing, flight, motion, the street, traffic, cars, walking – an entire world of others towards which they escape and where, in order to save myself, I try to escape”. Like Freud’s Little Hans, Kitty is afraid of horses. It can be argued that her fear of horses expresses Kitty’s unnameable lack or want. Besides, Kristeva (1982, p. 37) has argued that in the unfolding of a phobia there sometimes is a “fetishist episode”, during which the phobic individual clings to somebody or something: “[T]he fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable” (ibid). It can be argued that the Suffragette movement serves as a fetish for Kitty. It is important to note that Kristeva has been critical of Feminism because she has regarded mass movements as inevitably totalitarian. The Suffragette movement sought to win for women the right to actively participate in history, i. e. to insert their selves into linear time. But, according to Kristeva, history or linear time is the product of patriarchal ideology and complicit with it: According to Kristeva (1986, p. 193), “linear temporality” is “masculine” and “both civilizational and obsessional”. Kitty appears to be obsessed by “the cause” (winning the vote for women). Kitty’s obsession puts her into a dilemma: While she invests all her time and energy into winning the vote for women, she is losing the one female being she loves more than any other person in the world – her daughter. The following

episode in the novel is emblematic of the dilemma which arises for Kitty out of her obsessive efforts to win the vote for women: Because Kitty is busy with preparations for a Suffragist march to Hyde Park, she delegates one of her many duties, the sewing of Suffragist slogans onto banners, to Maude. But Maude is a bad seamstress and sewing makes her fingers become pricked and bloody<sup>1</sup>. In the episode described above, her best friend Lavinia takes pity on Maude and helps her sewing. At some point, Lavinia decides to create deliberate mistakes: “Deeds not words” becomes “Words not deeds” or “Weeds not rods”, and Byron’s “Who would be free themselves must strike the blow” becomes “Who would flee themselves must strike the brow”. When Maude notices some of these mistakes and draws her friend’s attention to them, Lavinia mockingly exclaims: “‘Oh dear, I’d best flee.’ It was silly but it made Maude laugh. Soon we were laughing so hard we were crying.” (Chevalier, 2001, p. 287) It is evident that the girls perceive Women’s Suffrage as an oppressive totalitarian discourse, which they try to undermine with Carnival laughter. By contrast, Kitty perceives patriarchy as oppressive and the Suffragette Movement as a liberatory discourse.

As pointed out in Part Two, Carnival possesses a positive and a negative side. Similarly, the Semiotic possesses a positive and a negative side. The negative side of the Semiotic becomes evident in the connection between the Semiotic and desire or drive. The Semiotic is a life-enhancing force and thus bound-up with desire or drive. In order to feel alive, we need to stay in touch with the Semiotic, i. e. we must feel desire or drive toward somebody or something. Following Freud, Kristeva has argued that drive is ambiguous: “[D]rives are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive” (Kristeva, 2001, p. 2172). The Semiotic is nourishing and encompassing, but it also augurs “fear and indifferenciation” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 58). The Semiotic is rooted in “the non-separation of subject/object” (ibid) and related to what Freud has called the oceanic feeling and primary narcissism, the phase in early childhood during which the infant has not yet achieved separation from the mother. Both the oceanic feeling and primary narcissism revolve around the desire for being one with oneself and one’s environment. This desire is probably rooted in the unconscious memory of prenatal existence. It cannot be relived outside the womb. At the most, one might experience flashes of prenatal memories which are reminiscent of the prenatal experience. We yearn for

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that bodily fluids play a prominent role in the novel. This emphasis on bodily fluids in connection with women’s bodies in the novel emphasizes the fact that women are creatures made of flesh and blood, not angels of white marble, like the statues of angels in the cemetery, which constitutes one of the main settings of the novel.

this feeling of being one with the mother, but giving in to this yearning would be lethal or at least harmful to our physical and mental health. In order to lead a comparatively healthy and normal life we must strive for autonomous subjectivity. As Susan Sellers (1991, p. 105) has pointed out, a return to the Semiotic is dangerous, especially for women: “[F]or women reactivating these rhythms threatens the tenuous nature of our symbolic construction, rendering us ‘ecstatic, nostalgic or mad’”. She has argued that Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Marina Tsvetayeva should be regarded as “examples of women who have attempted to disentangle this ‘impossible dialectic’ between language and the semiotic at great personal cost: all three writers committed suicide” (ibid). Being in touch with the Semiotic is indispensable for any human being and especially for those involved in artistic creativity. But letting go of the Symbolic completely augurs madness and death, especially for women and female artists. In *Falling Angels*, Lavinia is portrayed as a potential writer: “Lavinia tells stories about the people buried in the cemetery” (Chevalier, 2001, p. 117), and she is the author of *The Complete Guide to Mourning Etiquette* by Miss Lavinia Ermytrude Waterhouse (Chevalier, 2001, p. 126). Most importantly, she looks at the world through the eyes of a poet:

I went star-gazing on the Heath with Maude and her father tonight. [...] I much preferred looking at the moon without the telescope – I could see it so much better. It was lovely to look at, a half-moon hanging all pale orange just above the horizon. [...] I saw a falling angel, and then another! [...] [T]hey are angels stumbling as they take messages from God to us. Their wings make streaks across the sky until they are able to find their footing again. [...] Maud and her father looked at me as if I were mad. (Chevalier, 2001, pp. 140, 141)

Lavinia looks at the world through the eyes of a poet, but she does not appear to be in danger of forfeiting the Symbolic. Although poetic discourse is dependent on the Semiotic, it is after all a male discourse. In fact, in a patriarchal society all officially acknowledged types of discourse are male. As a young woman who grows up in a patriarchal society, Lavinia is inexorably male-identified. She looks up to men and mildly despises women (for example, Kitty and her mother). Maude also looks up to men, especially her father. In order to spend more time with him, Maude becomes interested in astronomy, her father’s hobby. Maude

identifies with her father and rejects her mother – at times even violently. But she also longs for her mother. According to Kristeva, the rejection of the mother is a necessary element in the constitution of subjectivity. She has termed this element in the constitution of subjectivity abjection.

### **Abjection in *Falling Angels***

Like the Semiotic, abjection is related to the mother. She is the primary abject. The infant usually perceives the mother as positive and negative: As loving and giving and as withholding and denying. Both infants and adults intermittently perceive the mother as hostile and dangerous. They then fear, hate and despise the mother. But they also unconsciously desire the mother. Therefore, the unconsciously desired mother is transformed into a scary, hateful and despicable “other”, an abject. As Noelle McAfee (2004, p. 48) has pointed out, the abject can be likened to Freud’s Uncanny. The primary manifestation of the Uncanny is the maternal body: It is both familiar and unfamiliar, both *heimlich* (homelike) and *unheimlich* (frightening). Similarly, as pointed out above, the maternal body is the primary manifestation of the abject. Kristeva (1989, pp. 27, 28) has claimed that the infant must abject the mother in order to become an autonomous subject: “Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation”. According to Kristeva, the abject is different from the subject and from the object. But what the object and the abject have in common is that both are opposed to the subject. According to Kristeva, the abject is as important for the constitution of the subject as the object. She has argued that abjection is a universal phenomenon:

[A]bjection, just like *prohibition of incest*, is a universal phenomenon; one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted, and this throughout the course of civilization. But abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various ‘symbolic systems’. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 68)

Abjection is never finished but occurs throughout our lives. The abject cannot be repressed but continually haunts our consciousness: “The abject [...] is [...] a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8). Similarly and in connection with this, Kristeva has argued that becoming a subject is a process which is never finished. This is indicated by the term *sujet-en-procès*, which Kristeva has used to characterize the constitution of the

subject. The term *sujet-en-procès* is ambiguous: It can be translated as “subject-in-process” and as “subject-on-trial”. According to Kristeva, a subject is never finished, but always in the process of becoming. This implies that we can never arrive at a point of secure subjectivity. There is no rest or fulfilment, only striving and conflict. The translation of *sujet-en-procès* as “subject-on-trial” points toward the fact that human beings are continuously subjected to judgment: The judgments of others and their own judgments. This situation can be likened to Bakhtin’s notion of language as conflict-ridden. As pointed out in Part One, according to Bakhtin, every utterance, even every single word, exists in an atmosphere in which conflicting, sometimes even hostile meanings, compete with each other for predominance. Similarly, in a dialogic novel, conflicting and sometimes hostile world views and value judgment are expressed in close proximity to each other. Bakhtin and Kristeva have viewed conflict and tension not as negative but as positive. In order to become subjects we must encounter “others”. Such encounters are sometimes affirmative, sometimes conflict-ridden. Human beings become subjects – tentative subjects, to be more precise – through the encounter with “others”. The subject cannot come into being without the “other”. Similarly, as pointed out in Part Three, the Semiotic cannot exist without the Symbolic. The subject and its relationship to the “other” can be viewed as analogous to the relationship between the Semiotic and the Symbolic. Kristeva (1986, p. 40) has put forward the argument that “the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather in terms of *one and other*.” As indicated in Part Three, the Semiotic and the Symbolic possess positive and negative aspects. Similarly, abjection has a positive side as well as a negative one, which will be elaborated upon later.

As pointed out earlier, neither the formation of subjects nor abjection are ever finished but occur throughout our lives. Abjection is a part of and shapes the formation of the subject from the cradle to the grave. Abjection thus occurs between birth and death. Very aptly, the major manifestations of the abject are the mother and the corpse (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The word corpse is derived from the Latin verb *cadere* which can be translated as “to fall”. Thus the corpse is linked to the notion of collapse. It is important to note that Kristeva has argued that the corpse is related not only to death but also to the mother (via the notion of “falling” or “collapse”): According to Kristeva (1982, p. 64), the corpse evokes and symbolizes “the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking [i. e., falling] irretrievably into the mother”. As

pointed out above, the corpse is linked to the notion of collapse. With regard to the formation of the subject in connection with the abject, it is important to note that, according to Kristeva, the constitution of subjectivity is continually threatened by the collapse of identity because identity can never be achieved and maintained securely. There is always a danger of the collapse of the borders by which the subject has been – only provisionally and precariously - constituted. In Chevalier's novel, there are several instances of collapse, which point toward the collapse of identity and the dissolution of subjectivity: The angel statue on the Waterhouse grave falls down and almost kills Mr. Jackson, leading to the sexual encounter between Mr. Jackson and Kitty which makes her forget herself and everything around her, leading to her pregnancy; after having undergone an abortion, Kitty falls into a depression; when Ivy May dies, she has a vision of herself as a falling star; a few hours before Kitty's burial, her grave collapses and almost kills Simon's father; he survives the accident but his mental capacities are severely diminished: He has lost his sense of self.

Kristeva has associated abjection with the disgusting, hateful, despicable and scary. But, like Carnival, the Symbolic and the Semiotic, abjection possesses a positive and a negative side: Abjection is "above all ambiguity" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). It is at least two-sided: "The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (ibid). Abjection involves forgetting, but also remembering and recognition. In fact, the term "revelation" in the statement quoted above implies that Kristeva has associated abjection with epiphany, a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization. The term epiphany further carries connotations of the supernatural and divine. Moreover, Kristeva (1982, p. 9, 11) has associated the abject with *jouissance* and the Sublime. For Kristeva, *jouissance* signifies "both erotic and psychic pleasure" (McAfee, 2004, p. 16). It is related to epiphany in the sense that it can be read as *j'ouis sens*, which can be translated as "I heard meaning" (Roudiez, p. 16). The Sublime has been associated with transport and ecstasy (Longinus), greatness and terror, in particular the fear of death (Edmund Burke), and with what keeps language from ever achieving a fixed meaning (Jacques Derrida). In the following, Kristeva has described an experience which is characterized by epiphany, *jouissance* and the Sublime:

When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 12)

In *Falling Angels*, Kitty has several experiences which resemble the one described above, such as her sexual union with Mr. Jackson, which she describes as follows:

[A]t last the heaviness that has resided inside me since I married – perhaps even since I was born – lifted, boiling up slowly in a growing bubble. The angel watched, its gaze blank, and for once I was glad its eyes could not judge me, not even when I cried out as the bubble burst. (Chevalier, 2001, p. 143)

When Kitty meets Caroline Black for the first time, she suddenly remembers very vividly being a girl eating apples and kicking at dead leaves. This flash of memory is very pleasurable for Kitty and can be regarded as an instance of *jouissance*. Kitty again experiences *jouissance* while she is wearing a Robin Hood costume which leaves her legs naked: “[T]he sun and air on my legs [...] it was an incredible sensation” (Chevalier 2001, p. 301). Shortly before she dies, Kitty experiences a moment of epiphany regarding her relationship with her daughter: “All her life Maude was a presence at my side” (Chevalier, 2001, p. 330). When Maude realizes that her mother is dying, Maude has a similar insight into her relationship with her mother: “I had been waiting for her all my life, and now I preferred to be waiting for her always, if that was the only alternative.” (Chevalier, 2001, p. 327) Kitty’s death at the end of the novel appears to be in tune with Kristeva’s (1982, p. 15) suggestion that “[a]bjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)” and “an alchemy that transforms death drive into a state of life, a new significance.”

## Conclusion

It has been argued in the first part of this article that *Falling Angels* is a dialogic novel because it exhibits the following characteristics which are in congruence with Bakhtin’s definition of the dialogic novel: *Falling Angels* orchestrates its themes through multiple heteroglossic voices. These voices are engaged in a dialogue with each other and with the

reader. The characters in Chevalier's novel are neither judged nor interpreted by a narrator. The voices of women, children and working-class people are accorded prominence. Women, children and working-class people are portrayed as subjects not objects. Chevalier's novel is engaged in a dialogue with multiple literary texts and non-literary discourses, such as *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott", Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and Women's Suffrage. The novel contains numerous unresolved tensions and contradictions. In the second part of this article it has been argued that Carnival is a central theme in *Falling Angels*. The theme of Carnival most notably manifests itself in the Suffragette march to Hyde Park and Kitty's cross-dressing as Robin Hood. Both these manifestations are expressions of the utopian, i.e. egalitarian and liberatory content of Carnival. The dark side of Carnival is brought to the surface in Chevalier's novel in the rape and murder of Ivy May at the Suffragette convention in Hyde Park and in Kitty's accident during the Suffragette march, which leads to her death at the end of the novel. It has further been argued that Jenny can be considered as embodying Bakhtin's concepts of the grotesque body and Carnival laughter. In the third part of this article it has been argued that Kitty's depression is the result of having lost touch with the Semiotic in different phases of her life. It has further been argued that Kitty's fear of horses can be interpreted as abortive metaphor of an unnameable want or lack. Besides, it has been argued that Women's Suffrage is portrayed in Chevalier's novel both as liberatory (from Kitty's perspective) and as totalitarian (from the perspectives of Maude and Lavinia). Moreover, it has been argued that Lavinia is portrayed as a potential writer, who is in touch with the Semiotic without defying the Symbolic, thus shielding herself against the dangers of the Semiotic, such as madness and suicide. It has been argued in the fourth part of this article that Maude experiences her mother as primary abject. Besides, it has been argued that, in the novel, abjection additionally manifests itself via the notion of collapse, which is related to the corpse as abject. Examples of collapse in the novel are: The collapse of the statue of the angel on the Waterhouse grave, which almost kills Mr. Jackson, the death of Ivy May during which she sees herself as a falling star and the collapse of Kitty's grave, which almost kills Simon's father and results in the collapse of his self. Finally, it has been argued that abjection in *Falling Angels* is not only related to disgust, fear and rejection but also to the Sublime, *jouissance* and epiphany. Examples of the latter are Kitty's sexual union with Mr. Jackson, Kitty's encounter with Caroline Black, Kitty's dressing as Robin Hood and Kitty's

and Maude's realization of how much they mean to each other despite their ambivalent feelings for each other. Notably, all these experiences of joy, ecstasy and insight are inextricably intertwined with death. In the novel, this duality is aptly and vividly symbolized in its primary setting, a cemetery modelled on the London Highgate Cemetery, which is famous for his angel statues. All in all, this article has tried to demonstrate that Tracy Chevalier's novel *Falling Angels* lends itself well to and benefits considerably from a Bakhtinian-Kristevan reading.

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