Look Twice: Narrative Uses of Twins

At first glance: a profusion of twin tales, a multitude of meanings

Twin tales are told and retold with astonishing frequency in contemporary culture. Newspapers give front-page prominence to accounts of the birth or surgical separation of conjoined babies, to twins dying of simultaneous heart attacks or bicycle accidents, to twins in crime and twins in sport. The reunion of twins separated at birth and the coincidences that mark their lives are the subject of feature articles and television documentaries. Scientific journals tell stories of twins raised apart and twins raised together. And these are only the tales that claim factual status. Narratives of twins also abound in all manner of imaginative creations. They populate short and feature films in the genres of comedy, drama, thriller, horror, sci-fi, porn, film noir, children’s films, action and auteur cinema, and appear regularly in fiction ranging from police procedural novels to picaresque historical volumes, from the Bildungsroman to lesbian satire, from Booker Prize winners to supermarket romance novels.

In addition to these public genres of story-telling, twin tales are recounted in conversation. As a frantic mother of new-born twins, venturing out with the double stroller, I was constantly treated to anecdotes and life histories of twins from complete strangers. The author Michel Tournier recounts similar experiences and puts them down to the mythic nature of twin tales:

A myth is a story that everyone already knows. When I was writing Gemini I replied to those who enquired about the subject of my next novel: it’s the adventures of two absolutely identical twin brothers.
At once my interlocutor’s face would light up. Twin brothers? As a matter of fact, he knew some! Two identical brothers. When one caught a cold in London, the other sneezed in Rome. How many times did I hear that kind of anecdote! It was pointless for me to go into the details of my project. People knew them already, and recited them to me in advance. I congratulated myself: it was proof that my subject was of a mythological nature. (Tournier, 1977: 189, original italics, my translation)

If Tournier’s point is that a myth is a story that is always already known, he demonstrates that it is also a story that demands constant retelling. What is it about twins that fascinates us to the point that we are prepared endlessly to rehearse tales of intertwined lives? Are we merely repetitive, even compulsively so? Twins in Contemporary Literature and Culture examines recent novels and films featuring twins. It takes a second look at stories that at first seem familiar, that appear to be already known (evil twin steals lover; stranglehold of brotherly love, and so on), and asks why they need to be retold and how they are transformed in recent retellings.

It would be convenient to find a single answer to these questions, to find that these stories all ultimately come down to the same underlying issue. Indeed over the years several critics have done so, regarding twins as a subset of the figure of the double which they see as representing either the narcissistic defense of the ego (Rank, first published 1914), the projection of the unconscious (Tymms, 1949), an attempt to cope with mental conflict (Rogers, 1970), the second self embodying the quest for self-realisation (Keppler, 1972), the refusal of the real (Rosset, 1976) or the incomplete self (Hallam, 1982).

It is not by chance that these studies of literary doubles are predominantly psychoanalytical: the topic of twins and doubles appears made to order for a psychoanalytical reading, with its easy links to the mirror stage, narcissism, the uncanny, separation anxiety, sibling rivalry, the false self, projection of the unconscious, and exteriorisation of inner conflict. Yet, too often, relying on the explanatory power of psychoanalysis allows the reader to ignore its story-telling side, to overlook the following kind of yarn – exemplary in its modelling of aspects of the fairy-tale:

I once knew two twin brothers, both of whom were endowed with strong libidinal impulses. One of them was very successful with women, and had innumerable affairs with women and girls.