

THE USE OF THE FAIRY-TALE PATTERN IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE HERO IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S WRITINGS

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*"Maybe we all end up like Priam,
Not one of the heroes wreathed in glory"* (Swift, Priam)

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of Swift's use of the fairy-tale pattern of the evolution of the hero. Some characters in Swift's writings use the fairy-tale pattern to define some of their experiences. For instance, Tom Crick in Waterland talks about the Fens or about other characters as if they belonged to a fairy-tale world. When they are young, he and his future wife, Mary, interpret the world through a fairy-tale framework. Other writings examined in this paper are Swift's novels Ever After and Wish You Were Here, his short story Hoffmeier's Antelope, and his poems Chekhov at Melikhovo, The Virtuoso, and Borrowers. The theories of estrangement and metafiction will be used in this paper to explain such instances. These instances will also be considered within the context of the "feeling for magic" (Swift 2009: 93) which comes, as the author sees it, from the influence of writers such as Borges, Marquez, and Grass. They will also be considered in comparison with the reshaping of reality used in Romantic lyrical poetry: by applying the fairy-tale pattern to reality, characters make use of imagination, which shapes reality in a totally different way. Finally, the paper presents the use of the fairy-tale pattern in the context of Swift's theory of fiction, which is suggested by an incident he narrates in his autobiographical book. Once he made a wooden elephant to please his father, who was a good handyman. He painted it grey although his father told him he could have chosen any colour. The lesson from this incident is that some magic is needed, both in life and fiction. Swift's theorizes that fiction is a natural part of everyday life, just like imagination.

Keywords: *Romanticism, imagination, estrangement, magic realism, perception.*

Postmodernism distances itself from objective reality. According to Gerald Graff in *Literature Against Itself*, postmodernist fiction presents "a consciousness so estranged from objective reality that it does not even recognize its estrangement as such" (1995: 179-180).

Is there estrangement in Swift's novels? We can understand estrangement to mean an unfamiliar reality, especially if we think about the difference between imagination and objective reality or about the way the narrative shapes the story and its view of reality. The creation of a new and unfamiliar reality is a device common in poetry, where feelings are expressed figuratively by images. David Macey, in *Dictionary of Critical Theory* tells us the following about the presentation of the story and about the process he refers to as "making strange":

The phrase 'unrolling the subject' is used by Shklovsky to describe the way in which the whole narrative is presented to the reader. Unrolling the subject is often a matter of delaying or retarding the exposition of the series of motifs, and is a good instance of what Shklovsky calls 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarization' (ostranenie). The making strange or defamiliarization of the plot as the basic narrative is interrupted or delayed by the introduction of digressions and other devices is one of the sources of the pleasure in reading that Shklovsky illustrates by referring to the endless digressions of Sterne's Tristram Shandy. (Macey 2001: 364)

There are many such instances, where imagination becomes mixed with reality, or stories are imagined about certain characters, or where a character identifies with a fictional character, such as when Bill Unwin identifies with Hamlet and draws a parallel between scenes of his life and those in Shakespeare's play. Reality and imagination are sometimes mixed up in characters' perception. Elements of the fantastic, fairy-tales or magical realism cause the blurring of boundaries between reality and imagination. The sometimes blurry separation between fact and fiction appears as a theme in the stories imagined by characters about other characters.

In *Waterland*, the other characters see Martha Clay as a fairy-tale character, specifically a witch. She performs an abortion on Mary, an incident which has, according to Swift in *Making an Elephant*, "a fairy-tale feeling" (Swift 2009: 85) to it, judging by the way it is described in the novel and the way it feels to the main characters. Sarah Atkinson's ghost is another "magical or supernatural" (Swift 2009: 90) element in *Waterland*. Such characters are perceived as "magical", rather than as elements of "the real world" (Swift 2009: 92). This means that Swift's novels are not completely realistic, since they use elements from fairy-tales. However, such elements of fairy-tales are just part of the other characters' perception. It is suggested that Martha Clay is not actually a witch; she just makes use of archaic traditions and is perceived as a witch because of her behavior. Here characters' perceptions are influenced by local fairy-tales or legends. They describe those scenes as magical because their perceptions are based on what they have heard. Tom, Mary and other inhabitants of the Fens perceive certain characters as fantastic: as witches, as ghosts or as visionaries. Such a reality is subjective, since they are influenced by what others say about those characters; they do not try to detach from those legends or to perceive the respective characters in a different way.

The uncle in the short story *Hoffmeier's Antelope* confesses to his nephew that Hoffmeier has discovered a new species of antelope which is not mentioned in science books. "Science – only concerned with the known" says the uncle. The nephew reflects: "The notion that creatures of which we had no knowledge might inhabit the world was thrilling to me [...] The point is not what exists or doesn't, but that, even given the variety of known species, we like to dream up others. Think of the animals in myth – griffins, dragons, unicorns..." (Swift 1992: 36). The nephew creates parallels with a fairy-tale world when he talks about fantastic animals. His uncle Walter will mysteriously disappear at the end of the short story – his disappearance has something magic about it. The characters refer to fairy-tale elements to explain what is fascinating to them or what cannot be explained by science. In the short story *Chemistry*, the young narrator sees ghosts: that of his father and that of his grandfather. Chemistry itself is portrayed as something magic and mysterious by the young boy's grandfather. The short story *The Hypochondriac* borders on the fantastic since there are no scientific proofs for the patient's feeling of physical pain; yet he dies. Then the doctor sees his ghost. The characters create a magical aura around incidents they do not know how to explain otherwise. The narrator in the short story *The Watch* talks explicitly of magic when he begins his story: "Tell me, what is more magical, more sinister, more malign yet consoling, more expressive of the constancy – and fickleness – of fate than a clock?" (Swift 1992: 158) We find out later that, like a magic object, the clock in the story keeps its owner alive for over 100 years. To the narrator, this object is magic.

In *Waterland* there is a “feeling for magic” (Swift 2009: 93) which comes, as the author sees it, from the influence of writers such as Borges, Marquez, and Grass. Magic realism is not “a recognizable English tradition” (Swift 2009: 93). In *Waterland* we find ghosts, and the “term “fairy-tale” is repeated throughout the novel in a variety of contexts” (Malcolm 2003: 89). According to the *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, the term magic realism “originates in discussions of the Latin American novel” (Macey 2001: 238). It refers to “novels which combine realism with elements of fantasy” (Macey 2001: 238). Gabriel Garcia Marquez is an example of a writer who uses magic realism in his novels. “Angel Flores traces many of the characteristic features of magic realism – the blend of history, myth and fantasy – back to the sense of wonderment and exoticism experienced by the Europeans who first colonized Latin America, and suggests that it was also influenced by the modernism of writers like Kafka and artists like Chirico.” (Macey 2001: 238-239)

Both Martha and Bill Clay, who are wife and husband, “are figures from legend and fairy-tale. [...] Freddie Parr tells stories about Bill Clay – “How he ate water-rats; how he knew about the singing-swans” (55)” (Malcolm 2003: 89). Martha Clay appears in a chapter called *About the Witch* (Chapter 42), a title which is “amply justified by her appearance and the appearance of her cottage” (Malcolm 2003: 89). However, the image of Martha Clay as a witch appears to be more the result of imagination than something truly real. Tom Crick remembers the following:

*[...] we do get there. And we meet Martha Clay...
No pointed hat, no broomstick, no grinning black cat on shoulder (only a yapping, slavering, grizzled brute of a dog, straining at a rope tether [...]). I see a small woman with a large round head [...].” (Swift 2008: 299-300).*

Other aspects, however, remain those of “another world” (Swift 2008: 302). Martha’s house is “full of things people wouldn’t keep inside a home at all.” (Swift 2008: 302) She is different, her home is different, and her ritual is something Tom and Mary had never seen before.

Swift says about Sarah Atkinson that “she returns in supernatural form, and she dives, as Dick dives; she returns to the water.” (Swift 2009: 90). What is more, Sarah was also thought to be able, not only to see the future, but to influence it. Her husband, Thomas Atkinson, hit her during a fit of jealousy. She hit her head against a writing table and afterwards her mind was gone. She survived the attack but from then on she was insane. Malcolm points to the fact that her husband

*behaves like a fairytale king. “He will offer a fortune to the man who will give him back his wife,” the narrator tells his listeners [...]
The narrator warns his listeners: “So, children... these fairy-tales aren’t all sweet and cosy (just dip into the Brothers Grimm...” (298) (Malcolm 2003: 89).*

Malcolm goes on, mentioning “the echo of fairytale” (2003: 89). When Tom and Mary are reunited, “It is not a kiss which revives downright curiosity, which restores the girl who once lay in a ruined windmill” (2003: 121). Malcolm states that “the echoes are negative ones. This is not ‘Sleeping Beauty’ or ‘Snow White’, and the two lovers do not live happily ever after.” (2003: 90). Mary’s madness and her delusion that God offered her a child are seen in terms of

fairy-tale elements, which “almost always involve failure and destruction. The death of Tom’s mother is brought about by a biting East Wind that is personified in the manner of legend or fairytale [...]” (Malcolm 2003: 90). Angel Flores suggests that the characters in *Waterland*, as children or teenagers, view the world and the surrounding characters through a lens of fairy-tales and magic realism, just as European colonists viewed South America. As the characters enter adulthood, they lose this perception. The characters and their views mature in time. The world is still objectively the same. However, subjectively, for characters such as Tom, Mary and their friends, the world changes because of the difference in their perception between youth and adulthood.

Malcolm (2003: 87) points to the narrator in *Waterland* who tells us that the Fens are a “fairy tale place” (9). They lived “Far away from the wide world.” (9). Later, the narrator insists on the fairy-tale aspect of his story: “And since a fairy-tale must have a setting, a setting which, like the settings of all good fairy-tales, must be both palpable and unreal, let me tell you [...]” (15). In *Waterland* by Graham Swift, the word “fairy-tale” is repeated and together with it come the images of a special land, with its traditions, superstitions and special characters.

Fairy-tales mix with and influence characters’ perceptions of other characters and of various situations in their lives. Due to this mix, we can say that there is, to some extent, an estrangement of the imagination. Reality is not that of common everyday life when characters apply the point of view of fairy-tales and fantasy to life in the Fens. By applying the fairy-tale pattern to reality, characters make use of imagination, which reshapes reality. This reshaping of reality is similar to that which is presented by Romantic lyrical poetry. As Firat Karadas claims in *Imagination, Metaphor and Mythopeia in Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats*,

Paul de Man’s idea and Keats’s poem suggests how, in Romantic poetry, poetic imagination imbues objects of nature in the processes of perception with an ideational and mythical content and thus transforms objects of perception into unfamiliar and alien entities. Depending on the Kantian, Neo-Kantian and Romantic idea that symbolic language is an inherent character of the imagination, these quotations also show how metaphorical and mythical language is an indivisible aspect of the imagination. This function of poetic imagination and its working via metaphor and myth seem to be the most outstanding aspect of the major poems of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. As such, with the transformational function of metaphorical and mythical language, the act of perception becomes for the imagination an act in which natural phenomena are incarnated and imbued with spiritual and sometimes divine features. (Karadas 2008: 65)

Poetic imagination is at work in Swift’s novels when characters use parallels with fairy-tales to process the world around them. Then, the world around them suffers a transformation similar to the one in Romantic poetry as described by Karadas.

Another situation where characters perceive, at least for some time, a different kind of reality is when they live in a world of their own which they see as real. This is the case of Mary, Tom’s wife in *Waterland*. She tells Tom that she received a baby from God, when in fact she has stolen it from a supermarket. As she has become a very religious person, her first version of the event sounds almost like a religious vision. There are characters that, in their traumatic state, are portrayed as visionaries, such as Sarah Atkinson in *Waterland*. According to the other characters, Sarah has moments of vision. For instance, Swift tells us how her sons view her:

to [her sons] indeed she departed, perhaps in plain words, perhaps, perhaps by some other mystical process of communication, wisdom and exhortation. That it was from her, and not from their father, that they got their zeal and their peculiar sense of mission. Not only this, but the success that came to the Atkinson brothers came to them not from their own sterling efforts but from this wronged Martyr. In short, that that blow to the head had bestowed on Sarah that gift which is so desired and feared -- the gift to see and shape the future.” (Swift 2008: 83)

Other characters see her as being able to predict the future and even to influence it. Jack in *Wish You Were Here* wonders whether he is mad when he sees his dead brother next to him on his journey to his funeral. Afterwards, his wife Ellie asks him whether he is mad when he returns and tells her that she poisoned her father so that he would die immediately after his own father. Ellie thinks: “Everything is mad now, everything is off its hinges. He’d gone to bury Tom, but now all the things that had once been dead and buried had come back again, and there was only one way forward, he was sure of that. Even Tom himself hadn’t really been buried”. Here, however, ‘mad’ means beyond control, rather than a reference to an illness, although there are hints of suicidal thoughts. She thinks that if she “had come with him [...] then perhaps between the two of them they might have buried Tom properly” (2011: 300). Jack has suicidal thoughts. He wishes to reenact his father’s suicide by using his gun, yet Ellie’s presence stops him. We are told that Jack is aware of his illness when he accuses Ellie of having poisoned her father. Jack does not feel that his wife understands him. He has not taken part in the war, but he is affected by his brother’s death. At some point Ellie herself seems mad as she tells him she will go to the police and tell them her husband had murdered his father. She had been jealous of the relationship between Jack and his brother and she does not feel as if Jack understands her. In some cases we hear such characters’ thoughts and in other cases we only find out about them from other characters’ descriptions.

In *Waterland* and *Wish You Were Here*, the perception of reality of characters affected by trauma becomes very much removed not only from objective reality, but from other characters’ subjective views of reality. Such characters are isolated and their perceptions of reality are unique. However, later, Mary in *Waterland* and the husband and wife in *Wish You Were Here* will return to a perception of reality which, to a large extent, is shared by the other characters. Mary in *Waterland* finally admits to her husband that she stole a baby from the supermarket and that it was not a gift from God. The husband and wife in *Wish You Were Here* will finally reconcile.

The same parallel with fairy-tales is present in some of Swift’s poems. In *Chekhov at Melikhovo*, the second line says “He’d never grow old” (Swift 2009: 244). Everlasting youth is a recurring element in fairy-tales. It is also a belief we hold when we deny that anything could happen to us. In our unconscious, Freud claimed, we are immortal: we cannot fear our own death since we have never experienced it. Later, we learn from the poem that this must have all been a dream on a very hot day of June. In *The Virtuoso*, Swift suggests that there is something magical and fairy-tale-like about the act of creation:

*One of those mornings (it was still a dream)
When he’d climb those stone stairs,*

*Enter that tall, stern, merciless chamber,
Take up his instrument,
Take up his bow,
And (why this morning, what
Was magic about this morning?)
Everything sang. (Swift 2009: 238-239)*

In the poem *Borrowers*, we have other fairy-tale references: “Life was always over the rainbow then./ And some of them paid the highest price/ And never lived later at all,/ Lying where they do/ In Africa, Burma, Italy or France/ Or where all the dreamed-of treasure lies,/ If not over the rainbow, under the sea” (Swift 2009: 236). Contrary to the dreamy atmosphere of the artist’s work in the previous poem, in this poem we have the contrast between dreaming and a problematic reality.

The heroes in Swift’s works create a different reality for themselves by using fairy-tales because the world is mysterious and because they are afraid of incidents which they have difficulty understanding. These instances where reality becomes a little estranged often make use of embedded texts. They suggest to readers that they are reading a poem: using the fairy-tale world so that the characters can make readers understand how the characters interpret reality. They sometimes see the world as a very dark, gloomy place. It is not something that we tend to associate with fairy-tales. Swift’s explanation about the two opposing functions of the novel – to be magic but also to bring readers down to Earth – can offer insight into the role of the fairy-tales in the evolution of his heroes:

For writer and reader, fiction should always have that flicker of the magical, but it also does something that’s completely the opposite. Repeatedly, fiction tries to embrace, to capture, to confront – often grimly and unflinchingly – the real. This is one, of course, of its supreme functions too: to bring us down to earth. No better vehicle for this descending journey has been found than the novel. Indeed, from Don Quixote to Madame Bovary and onwards, fiction has been centrally concerned with the demolition of magic and dreams; with the way in which our airy notions come up against the hard facts or downright banality of experience. This is entirely healthy: fiction as a corrective to our evasions of an uncompromisingly concrete world. But the remarkable thing about fiction is that it can perform the two apparently contradictory tasks at the same time. It can be both magical and realistic. When we read Don Quixote or Madame Bovary we don’t feel coerced into bathos, we feel a thrill. (Swift 2009: 12)

On the one hand, his heroes dream, and on the other hand, they become aware that their lives are not pleasant fairy-tales: that problems do not lack in their lives. Sometimes we need some magic or fantasy in our lives, the way his characters do when they resort to fairy-tale elements to explain the world and their reactions to it. Swift confirms this with one of his childhood memories. Once he made a wooden elephant, to please his father, who was a good handyman:

*Then the time came to paint it. What colour, he asked. Yellow, pink?
I found these suggestions ridiculous. Grey, of course. Elephants were grey, weren’t they? He counter-argued, ready for me to choose from his impressive array of paint pots, but I just didn’t get it. Grey it was.
The strange reversal stays with me, as does the sad object of it all: that I should have been the realist, and he the fantasist. It’s not even a true elephant grey. [...]
I wish I’d painted it pink. (Swift 2009: 218)*

This incident shows us that some magic is needed in life and fiction. After all, Swift's father had seen real elephants in Africa, as he explains one page earlier. Fiction and imagination are natural parts of everyday life. Swift uses the pink and grey elephant as imagery in a poem. Kao (2011) mentions that the influence of the Imagist movement from the time of Ezra Pound continues to affect poetry: "Although the Imagist movement was cut short by World War I, Imagism has had a strong influence on Modernist poetry, or, in the case of Swift, on poetic prose (Perkins, 1987)." That good poetry uses concrete imagery (like Swift's pink and grey elephant) and that it is emotional (we can notice the emotional aspect attached to these images) is part of Kao's hypotheses (2011). Fairy-tale imagery plays the same part: it stands for something deeper in the characters' lives and shows how they feel about various life events. It shows how they feel about their memories of childhood and of persons, situations and habits they try to understand.

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