

FANTASY ELEMENTS IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S WORKS

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the way fantasy elements are introduced in Graham Swift's works. His short story *The Watch* and his novel *Here We Are* may offer examples of genuine magical realist worlds, while *Waterland* can offer a mixture of magical realism and postmodernism (Ilina and Kurnikova 2019: 62). *Out of This World*, *The Sweetshop Owner* and *Last Orders* show examples of monologues belonging to characters dead at the time the story is told. *Wish You Were Here* shows an example of retreating in the characters' inner world. However, in the latter examples, psychological issues take center stage and shape the world of the characters in a certain way.*

Keywords: magic realism; monologue; imagination; mourning; fairy-tales.

The question addressed by this paper is the following: Are the situations in Swift's novels truly part of a fantasy or magical realist world, or are they rather the product of what is suggested, psychologically, for the characters and for the reader, to imagine?

The two worlds, of fantasy and reality, pose, first of all, the question of borders and boundaries between them. In some of Swift's works, the two worlds are combined (such as in the short story *The Watch* and in the novel *Here We Are*), and fantasy elements are integrated in the real world, while in some of his other works, the boundaries become more clearly set up, through doubt regarding the fantasy elements, through possible explanations using the character's imagination (the novel *Waterland*), as well as through psychological and psychoanalytical explanations for the phenomenon (like in the case of the novels *Last Orders*, *The Sweetshop Owner* and *Out of This World*, where characters that should be dead by the time of the narration are holding their own monologues). The analysis that follows in this paper will clarify these situations.

Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* has been analysed as magic realist (Hegerfeldt 2005: 86, Todd 1995, Benyei 1997: 150). However, "magical realism is different from the narrative aim or focus of novels such as *Waterland* [...]. Magical realism implies, narratologically, that the real is invested with the strange in order to reinvest the familiar with meaning through the act of defamiliarization: magical realism defamiliarizes the real." (Elias in D'haen and Bertens, eds. 1993: 26) Ilina and Kurnikova (2019: 62) claim that "Graham Swift's 1983 novel *Waterland* is a wonderful amalgam of postmodernism and magical realism." Graham Swift (2009: 93) believes that in this novel there is a "feeling for magic", which was influenced by magic realist writers like Borges, Marquez, and Grass. The term magic realism refers to "novels which combine realism with elements of fantasy" (Macey 2001: 238).

Regarding the term magic realism, its origins lie in Novalis' theory, then in visual arts. It started by being

applied to the visual arts in 1925, when the German art critic Franz Roh used it to describe a group of painters whom we now categorize generally as Post-Expressionists. The term had been coined more than a century earlier by the German Romantic philosopher Novalis to describe an idealized philosophical protagonist capable of integrating ordinary phenomena and magical meanings. (Hart and Ouyang 2005: 28)

The two terms, magic and realism, are explained as follows:

Magic can mean anything that defies empiricism, including religious beliefs, superstitions, myths, legends, voodoo, or simply what Todorov terms the 'uncanny' and 'marvellous' fantastic. Realism, seen from the perspective of magic, is one or any way of grasping reality outside the matrix of what is by now disdained conventional realism. (Hart and Ouyang 2005: 14)

In *Waterland* we notice plenty of legends, beliefs and superstitions, which make up the fairy-tale world of the characters.

Graham Swift takes a critical position towards the term magic realism, while admitting he was influenced by it while writing his novel *Waterland*:

Back in the 1980s, when my first novels were published, a literary term had for some while been enjoying a vogue: 'magical realism'. I admit that when I wrote *Waterland* I even thought I was being a bit of a magical realist myself. The term has now long passed its sell-by date, and was fairly bogus in the first place. It seemed to encapsulate perfectly that twofold and paradoxical nature of fiction; but if that were so, it was really saying nothing new or revelatory and, in practice, it reeked of a rather programmatic specialism. It owed a lot to some then-popular Latin American writing in which surreal or supernatural events might be 'realistically' injected into the naturalistic tissue of a novel, or real events might acquire a magical flavour. Writers had been doing this sort of thing for centuries, but 'magical realism' implied that by the mixing in of such fantastical stuff, some much-needed magic could be put *back* into fiction. As if it had ever gone. (Swift 2009: 18)

Tom Crick, the narrator in *Waterland* states: "we lived in a fairy-tale place", referring to his and his wife's childhood in the Fens. He believed that, together with Mary, his future wife, they lived "Far away from the wide world." (Swift 2008: 9). He creates a fairy-tale setting for 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 [...]" (Swift 2008: 15). However, all elements of fantasy in this novel are rooted in the perception of the characters. They view other characters like fairy-tale characters (witches, ghosts, and visionaries), sometimes as they are under the influence of what others say about them. For example, Martha Clay, the one who performs the

abortion on Mary, is seen as a witch. This incident has “a fairy-tale feeling” (Swift 2009: 85) to it. However, eventually, Martha Clay, in spite of her reputation from the others’ descriptions, proves to be a normal person, not a witch. Tom Crick remembers the stories about her and about her husband Bill Clay, describing them as “figures from legend and fairy-tale” (Swift 2008: 55). What is more, “Freddie Parr tells stories about Bill Clay (Malcolm 2003: 89): “How he ate water-rats; how he knew about the singing-swans” (Swift 2008: 55)” Symbolically, the readers can meet Martha Clay in Chapter 42, entitled *About the Witch*, a title which is “amply justified by her appearance and the appearance of her cottage” (Malcolm 2003: 89). However, Tom Crick tells readers about their meeting with Martha Clay as he discovers a person contradicting all those previous fairy-tale images:

[...] 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).

Yet, there are still elements belonging to “another world” (Swift 2008: 302), as Martha Clay’s house is “full of things people wouldn’t keep inside a home at all.” (Swift 2008: 302)

The ghost of Sarah Atkinson is a “magical or supernatural” (Swift 2009: 90) element. It is believed that this character “returns in supernatural form, and she dives, as Dick dives; she returns to the water.” (Swift 2009: 90). She can also predict and influence the future:

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)

The reality behind the story of Sarah Atkinson is that, after being hit by her husband as he was jealous, her head went against a table, which made her lose her mind. Afterwards, 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).

The characters are very young as they have the perception of the Fens as a fairy-tale world. However, gradually, their fairy-tale world allows reality to enter, leaving

room for doubt. It is suggested that the fairy-tale world did not exist as such within the fictional world constructed by Swift, but was instead the creation of some of the characters' imagination, for some time. Gradually, explanations about Martha Clay and Sarah Atkinson make the fantasy world disappear. Since explanations belonging to the real world appear, they leave space for doubt and later make the fantasy world deteriorate.

Malcolm believes that there is an "echo of fairytale" (2003: 89) in Tom and Mary's story. However, "It is not a kiss which revives downright curiosity, which restores the girl who once lay in a ruined windmill" (2003: 121). He claims 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). Here, the fairy-tale goes wrong, as the awareness of reality sinks in. The readers also become more and more aware of reality as Mary ends up believing that God has offered her a child, after she steals a baby from the supermarket. However, Mary ends up accepting the reality as she confesses to her husband that she was aware it was not a gift from God.

The fairy-tale references are just a means of suggesting the way Tom and Mary see the world as they are growing up and discovering new experiences, as well as interacting with different people. During their childhood and teenage years, the references to fairy-tales suggest a fabulous world, full of thrilling adventures, while during their mature years, the fairy-tale world is a way of denying reality, such as in the example where Mary steals the baby from the supermarket and then says that it was her gift from God. The fairy-tale elements were never real. The magical realist universe in this novel is only temporary, or even only an illusion. It can also be a usual part of growing up in the life of anyone. As children, the characters need their make-believe universe. Mary later tries to reconstruct the make-believe universe, but it never reaches the power it had in their childhood and youth. On the contrary, in their mature years, the fairy-tale universe comes in sharp contrast with the real world. The fairy-tale universe and elements during their mature years show the characters' disappointments and illusions. They become the symbol of what is missing from their lives: for Mary, it is a child, and for both Mary and Tom, it is hope.

Hegerfeldt (2005: 315) proposes the term of "meta-magic realism" to describe *Waterland*. The explanations offered for this term are the following:

[...] while pursuing essentially the same questions as magic realist fiction, and even suggesting similar answers, *Waterland* differs in the literary technique it employs. Like magic realist fiction, *Waterland* inquires into the human desire for meaning and the ways in which narrative and belief can become reality. Unlike magic realist fiction, however, *Waterland* does not actually present its fantastic elements as real on the level of the text; in the end, the reader is always able to recontextualize them as fantasies, dreams, superstitions, or rumours.

The key explanation is that the "fantastic elements" are not seen "as real on the level of the text" and that the reader can "recontextualize them as fantasies, dreams,

superstitions, or rumours” (Hegerfeldt 2005: 315). This explanation can be applied to the situation in other novels, where the characters which are supposed to be dead by the time the story is completed can be found holding their monologues in their separate chapters (*Last Orders*, *The Sweetshop Owner* and *Out of This World*). The explanation can also work for the novel *Wish You Were Here*, where the couple in the story deals with seeing the ghost of a dead brother.

Novels which contain situations that are not realistic include *Last Orders*, *Out of This World*, and *The Sweetshop Owner*. Here certain characters hold their monologues at times when, judging by the story’s chronology, they should have been dead. According to Malcolm, in this situation it seems as if “the dead speak” (2003: 14). The first idea that comes to mind could be a fantasy element, yet it could be explained by using Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory of mourning, since the death of the dear ones cannot be accepted. “Profound mourning” is defined as “the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved”, and it means “loss of interest in the outside world – in so far as it does not recall him”, the “loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him)”, as well as “turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him”. The demand to withdraw all libido from the attachment to the object of love that is no longer there will lead to an opposition, which “can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (Freud 1914-1916: 244). The structure of Swift’s novels *Last Orders*, *Out of This World*, and *The Sweetshop Owner* is used to express this idea. Its lack of logic and coherence mirrors the feelings that the ones left behind deal with when someone close to them dies.

In *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, Irene presents to the reader her life story in Chapter 7. According to Malcolm (2003), Irene is dead by the time she holds her monologue, since her husband William had begun the story while on the last day of his life. What is more, William is dead by the time he finishes his story. The characters Anna in *Out of This World* and Jack in *Last Orders* both hold her monologue after their death, towards the end of the novels. Irene and Anna talk to their husbands in their monologues, while Jack does not address any character in particular, according to Malcolm (2003). Irene tells William: “Sit back, Willy; drink your tea, rest your head, if you like on my lap...” (Swift 1993: 49). As if to show that his wife’s monologue is part of his not accepting or denying her death, as a stage of grief work, William wakes up after his wife hold her monologue regarding her past life:

Had he slept? He woke out of a dream in which the objects in the room seemed to loom triumphantly – the chintz chairs, the clock on the mantelpiece, the pink and blue bordered cups in one of which there was tea he had forgotten to drink, the standard lamp with its spiralled stem. As if time had passed, years, and it was long after, and they seemed to be saying, those familiar objects, ‘See, we endured; things remain.’ (Swift 1993: 55)

The readers can interpret it as a moment where William remembers his wife, and daydreams about her, as if to compensate for her loss. Anna, the character who dies in a plane crash, holds a monologue where she explains to her husband her side of the story: "Dear Harry. Dear husband Harry... I was born in Drama. But I was brought up in Paradise." (Swift 1988: 173). Her monologue also serves as a compensation, by offering her husband a totally different perspective on things, and making him sympathize with another point of view than his own. It is as if her husband was trying to understand what had happened, and imagining her side of the story. Anna brings the subject of loss in her monologue, by talking about the loss of Paradise, symbolically:

I was brought up in Paradise. Though they say that it's all spoilt now. Even Thassos. The tourists have come and invaded, each one of them wanting their piece of paradise, and you wouldn't it recognize now, as you wouldn't recognize a thousand places in Greece, the little bay. (Swift 1988: 173)

The Paradise that was lost stands for feeling that nothing can change and that you cannot lose anything until something tragic happens. The same topic of loss appears in Jack's monologue, from the novel *Last Orders*: "You got to keep a constant eye on the wastage, constant. What you've got to understand is the nature of the goods. Which is perishable." (Swift 1993: 285).

Another symbol of loss is the ghost. Swift introduces it, for a while, literally, in the novel *Wish You Were Here*, to illustrate the power of grief. As a compensation for loss, Jack and Ellie both see for some time the ghost of Jack's brother. Yet they only see it as a result of not accepting the fact that Jack's brother is dead and they can no longer be together. Their psychological reaction can be explained by Freud's theory of mourning where the characters cannot accept the loss of the person they love. Not accepting the loss leads to the appearance of a supernatural creature, the ghost, which, in this case, is not related to a magic phenomenon, but to a more down-to-earth one, to a psychological one.

Here, the fantasy elements are only part of the characters' inner world. While on a journey to his brother's funeral, Jack can see his dead brother right next to him. However, he asks himself questions about this situation, wondering if he is mad. The fantasy situation is broken by the doubts of Jack, and also of those of his wife Ellie. She thinks the following, and the reader can hear her thoughts: "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". She thinks that if she "had come with him [...] then perhaps between the two of them they might have buried Tom properly" (Swift 2011: 300). Burying Tom "properly" could mean, in this case, accepting his death, from a psychological perspective, as mechanisms of denial and mourning are at work here. The figurative becomes literal: "all the things that had once been dead and buried had come back again" and blurs the boundaries between inner reality and outer reality, between fantasy world and real world. In this case, however, the reader is aware

of the boundaries, only noticing the wordplay which turns figurative to literal when it comes to Jack's hallucinations. Jack accuses Ellie of poisoning her father so that he would die after his own father, while at the same time he is aware of his psychological issues that make him say such things and make up this fantasy world. Ellie also has psychological issues when she tells her husband that she would go to the police and accuse her husband of murdering her father. All these hallucinations were due to psychological defense mechanisms, which were turned temporarily into reality by these characters. Jack and Ellie behave like Mary in *Waterland*, denying reality, while also being able eventually to become aware of their problems and the reality which they made up.

Graham Swift's short story *The Watch* from the short story collection volume *Learning to Swim* introduces the readers into a fantasy fictional world, where reality coexists with fantasy, just like in magical realism. The fantasy elements are not, in this case, part of the characters' imagination, as in Swift's novel *Waterland*. The short story is about a watch that can offer the one wearing it more time to live:

I write now in the 1970s. In 1809 my greatgrandfather was forty-two. Simple arithmetic will indicate that we are dealing here with extraordinary longevity. My great-grandfather died in 1900—a man of one hundred and thirty-three, by this time an established and industrious clockmaker in one of the immigrant quarters of London. He was then, as a faded daguerrotype testifies, a man certainly old in appearance but not decrepit (you would have judged him perhaps a hale seventy), still on his feet and still busy at his trade; and he died not from senility but from being struck by an ill-managed horse-drawn omnibus while attempting one July day to cross Ludgate Hill. From this it will be seen that my great-grandfather's watch did not confer immortality. It gave to those who had access to it a perhaps indefinite store of years; it was proof against age and against all those processes by which we are able to say that a man's time runs out, but it was not proof against external accident. Witness the death of Juliusz, my great-grandfather's first-born, killed by a Russian musket-ball in 1807. And Josef, the second-born, who came to a violent end in the troubles which forced my great-grandfather to flee his country. (Swift 1992: 127)

The watch becomes, thus, a magical object which is present in an otherwise everyday life: "objects in magical-realist texts operate with symbolic energies that are distinct from those in realistic texts" (Hart and Ouyang 2005: 31)

Swift suggests for the readers a fantasy situation in his most recent novel, *Here We Are*: Ronnie the magician disappears not only in his last act on stage, but also from the lives of everyone who has known him. Ronnie's disappearance seems all the more troubling as he has deliberately staged all this, and his act extends to the world outside the show. It is also a symbolic act, since it follows the break-up with his girlfriend and assistant in his magic acts. In the case of this novel, Ronnie's disappearance remains a mystery, and it is not part of the characters' imagination. Ronnie disappears for good, and nobody knows where he is. This incident strongly suggests a magical realist element, as the disappearance of Ronnie, both the magician on stage, and the man in real

life, coincide in a striking way. Next to the short story *The Watch*, the novel *Here We Are* is another example where magical elements intrude in an otherwise real world, and they are not the result of the characters' imagination or psychological mechanisms.

The fantasy elements in Swift's work can be correlated with magic realism, psychological issues, as well as imagination. *Waterland* deals with the work of imagination of two young persons whose growing up means accepting fairy-tales and then moving away from them. The characters that hold their monologues when they should be dead suggest the fact that they are kept alive by the other characters, who cannot accept their loss. The illusion of the characters being still there is achieved through the novel's structure, by placing their monologues in the book similarly to those of the living characters. The short story *The Watch* deals specifically with a fantasy element, the object that gives the title, a watch, that can do unrealistic work with time. The novel *Here We Are* deals with magic as an illusory act, but which later extends as a fantasy element into the characters' everyday life, with the disappearance act of the magician extended to his disappearance for good from the lives of everyone who knew him. In *Waterland*, we could say that we deal with a temporary magic realism, during the main characters' childhood, when fairy-tales, legends, and fantasy characters are for them a reality. For the characters who are dead by the time they hold their monologues there is also a temporary element of fantasy, but it is clear to everyone, readers included, that these characters' presence is just make-believe. The novel *Wish You Were Here* also includes a moment of make-believe, when the ghost of the dead brother is seen by both husband and wife. The husband and the wife are aware to some extent that the ghost is not the real person they had lost. Swift plays with fiction and magic in the novels which prove not to have actual fantasy elements in them, after all, as he believes in the "magic of the fiction" (Swift 2009: 16). For a limited amount of time, the stories in those novels feel like magic, even though there is no genuine magic realist world in them. In these novels, for a while, readers feel under the spell of the story, and afterwards return back to reality, mirroring the process of reading any story or fictional work. This does not happen in *The Watch* and in *Here We Are*, where the magic elements are believably blended into the realistic world of the characters' everyday lives.

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