

The recreation of the World in two short stories by dreaming islanders: Gaiman and Tóibín

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Abstract: *The aim of this essay is to analyze how Gaiman and Tóibín, two imaginative islanders, create a fantasy land where the elements of the real waking life are rearranged in a pleasing manner. In this sense, taking Freud into consideration, both writers would be filling their stories with real emotions separated from its original real sources, allowing readers to recognize stressing issues being displayed in harmless ways, repeating ancient rites performed by children.*

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All narrators share the same desire: not being taken for granted; it is their prerogative, their number-one goal. Although a comedian's secondary aim is to make his/her audience laugh, the process of telling a joke, as in every narrative, involves a series of techniques that would prove vain if the hearer did not believe the teller is the appropriate guide through the story.

Men and women were born storytellers; from the beginning of their existences, they are able to understand there are strong links between the teller and what is being told. Those special bonds might prove to be cloudy veils blurring the borders of the *real World* and the possible worlds in the wider territories of *Make-Believe*.

Up to today, many theoreticians have spent enormous amounts of effort in trying to extricate the tight fabric of effective narrative's construction. Not an easy task.

Cortázar was one of these courageous writers. As many fictionists before him, he designed some ideas on how a narrative should be thought, developed, edited and read, citing (1969) Edgar Allan Poe to explain as a short narrative accomplishes its mission of

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provoking the proper effect on the reader with the maximum economy of means. Cortázar adds that every short story would be a nightmare, a hallucination, neutralized by its transposition from the neurotic mind of the writer to the world outside, transformed into narrative; a cathartic process – related to exorcisms – that would free the narrator’s mind of his/her ghosts and demons, and fascinate the reader to take him/her away from the surrounding colorless reality.

Born in 1955, in Wexford, Ireland, Colm Tóibín emerged from the Irish news journalism environment of the 1980’s. Born five years later, in Portchester, England, Neil Gaiman also worked as journalist in the 1980’s, although he conducted interviews and wrote book reviews for fantasy magazines. Both lived abroad; Tóibín, in Barcelona, Gaiman, in the USA. Tóibín writes on social and personal identity issues. Gaiman works on fantasy and lore.

Gaiman, a prodigal contemporary fictionist, creates –with “The Sweeper of Dreams”– a powerful short narrative in which he seems to mirror Cortázar’s words. Gaiman deals with the description of a fictional character in a text that would perfectly illustrate Bader’s (1945) approach: it looks static, plotless, amorphous and fragmentary. The same could be said of the slightly longer “Taking my Time” written by Tóibín.

In Gaiman’s mentioned short fiction, the character is presented as a dictionary/encyclopedia entry. The sweeper of dreams is shown as a janitor of *Slumberland*; he is needed to preserve the sanity of the dreamers, cleaning, tidying, freeing room for new dreams to flourish. In few paragraphs, the reader becomes aware of his importance and learns, near the end of the narrative, that there are people the sweeper has left for good. That is when one gets to the second story of the text –the second hidden narrative as described by Piglia– the very key to the reason the story was told.

Those left by the sweeper “live in the wreckage of their dreams”. It is not hard to recognize in these abandoned poor creatures the features of those needed to exorcize their demons and ghosts, the features of writers: “They have mouths that twitch, and eyes that stare, and they babble and they mewl and they whimper”, always in need of transforming their hallucinations into scribbling, their neuroses into plots, their nightmares into narratives. The narrator uses the direct description of the sweeper in a quasi-encyclopedia

style as someone would describe an illness he/she solitarily suffers; he tells of his own doom, his eternal need to share his fate with his reader, a desperate struggle of making contact, an endless journey, a never-ending Sisyphus-like task.

The narrator cannot stop telling his story, asking for forgiveness in the last paragraph, he is enslaved by his creator, the writer. The writer cannot stop creating his characters, his plots, and his stories. The words are like narrow straws he uses to grasp tiny gulps of air, while eternally drowning in the sea of his dreams and nightmares.

Tóibín uses a structure that resembles a letter to a friend that might be his own self. From the beginning, his narrator keeps repeating he is back. Soon, the reader discovers this narrator is back to a dream-space filled with dream-sounds. He describes the place to someone who has already been there (to the place and through the feelings); the reader adds the joy of reading someone else's correspondence to the familiarity of things seen elsewhere, in another time, another reality, another existence (a dreamlike place like Gaiman's sweeper's *Slumberland?*).

The Irish writer uses the voice of his narrator to unfold layers of fragmentary memories, superimposed simultaneous stories filled with fear, anguish, death and solitude. The facts are sewn in an unclear-pattern fabric momentarily afloat in a sea of stories. The reader can see the waves fight to reach the shore, nevertheless nothing is ever clearly shown; everything seems to evanesce like the bubbles of the surf that pop on the sand.

The author uses –whether on purpose or subconsciously– psychoanalytical ideas to well the drops of the narrator's scrapes of facts that form the sea of chaos of his loneliness. The second story in Tóibín turns out to be a portrait of ultimate human solitude.

There are little of bodily features to be apprehended from the narrators in both stories. They are revealed as the reader recognize him/herself through the strangeness of what is told. Tóibín's story seems more down to earth while Gaiman's seems fantastic. Nonetheless, in many aspects, they deal with the same stuff.

Freud (1907) tried to elicit how writers would create worlds of fantasy, filling them with real emotions separated from its original real sources, allowing readers to recognize stressing issues being displayed in harmless ways; the process of catharsis would then free creative imagination from accommodating to the real world.

When Cortázar prepared his papers he surely had Freud's ideas in mind. He added Poe's economy principle and effect goal and stirred with his own experience as fictionist to get to the concepts impossible to be ignored by any serious contemporary writer.

Guided by these concepts, Gaiman and Tóibín, two imaginative islanders, would be repeating ancient rites performed by every child in the globe: the creation of a fantasy land where the elements of the real waking life would be rearranged in a pleasing manner. Like children, writers would invest these worlds with reality, taking them seriously, while inviting readers to participate in the fantastic dreamlike state in which the recreation of the World is really possible.

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