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Formal Experimentation in Neil Gaiman's *Troll Bridge* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Dornicka and the St Martin's Day Goose*

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Neil Gaiman's *Troll Bridge* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Dornicka and the St Martin's Day Goose* are both contemporary adult re-tellings of traditional fairytales, resembling *Billy Goats Gruff* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. This is significant in an exploration of contemporary fiction thanks to such re-tellings' capacity to enable both covert reflections on obvious contemporary themes and stylistic hybridity - which is itself reflective of recent literary trends. In the context of this essay, an attempt to situate the remarkably versatile and imaginative construction of such re-tellings within a literary movement works in tandem with an examination of attitudes to the predominantly rural settings within the stories. This includes discourse into the decreasing importance of such rural, natural – and in this case, by association, magical – areas as Western societies delve further into late capitalism and its associated features, such as individualism and cosmopolitanism.

The title of Gaiman's fairytale re-telling directly alludes to the story on which it is based. Jack, the central character, meets a troll under a bridge near to where he grew up; he recalls meeting the troll twice before as a child, before he submits himself to the troll's desires, instead of outwitting the troll, as the third goat manages in the original tale. In a more subtle nod to the fairytale genre, Gaiman's decision to name the boy Jack is redolent of other widely known tales, including *Jack and Jill* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Meanwhile, Jack's recollection of his first meeting with the troll is foregrounded by his assessment of his hometown, in which

he immediately introduces themes of the gothic and the fantastic by highlighting his juvenile beliefs that the manor house was haunted and that "the night was full of ghosts and witches."[1] All these nuances provide direction to read the story as an imitation of a fairytale. Beyond these, though, the eponymous troll is still the most obvious way to situate the text in the realm of a fantasy fairytale. Jack details how the troll "was more or less translucent: I could see the bricks and trees behind him, dimmed but not lost", and yet simultaneously how "he was all my nightmares given flesh."[2] This description of the troll is significant in shaping our understanding of this re-telling. Gaiman portrays the physicality of the creature alongside its fantastic nature – from Jack's perspective and therefore to a reader, the presence of the troll seems undeniable, and yet Jack can still see the 'real' world. This corroborates with the use of the past tense narrative, creating an opposition in which Jack's childhood beliefs in ghosts and witches is dismissed as a "matter of faith to me […and] part of my young creed" while the present tense confrontation with the troll is unquestionably matter-of-fact, as Jack asserts "there was a troll waiting for me".[3] This subtle division between language denoting scepticism and language denoting fact conjoins with the very corporeal description of the troll in encouraging us to suspend our beliefs and accept the troll 'really' existed in our world. This is one of the ways we might consider *Troll Bridge* a story of magical realism, whereby the fantastical is written seamlessly into the real world as naturally occurring and unquestionable.

Oyeyemi's *Dornicka* is also reminiscent of a fairytale and a feature of the magical realist genre. In this re-telling of *Little Red Riding Hood*, our main character meets a 'wolf' as she retreats from her mountain walk in a hooded red cape. Like Gaiman, Oyeyemi is quick to introduce the fantastic in a way that suggests it is normal. Dornicka's first reaction to seeing the 'wolf' is to think "*ah, why?*"[4] Her indifference towards the wolf is humorous; she treats it

[1] Hensher, Philip. 2018. *The Penguin Book of the Contemporary British Short Story*. London: Penguin Books. p.107.
[2] Hensher, 2018. p.109.
[3] Hensher, 2018. p.107, p.109.
[4] Helen Oyeyemi. 2016. *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours*. Picador. p.210.

as a minor irritation rather than something to be shocked by or feared, talking to it with an unbridled attitude and keeping the exchange casual. Her apathetic reaction is reflective of her level-headed character – as is her pride in her parochial sense of self and her willingness to strike a selfless deal with the wolf to save an innocent strangers' life. Furthermore, she confesses that she fails to see the God of the mountain (a Czech legend) as anything other than hypothetical.

Through these subtle but integral character developments, Oyeyemi is successful in creating a character who seems reliable and trustworthy, who would not readily accept the existence of anything that opposes the laws of science and reason – and therefore, when Dornicka is faced with a supernatural talking wolf, we have no choice but to believe that it 'really' happened. Therefore, just as in *Troll Bridge*, we are encouraged to accept the supernatural as it is portrayed, in this case simply because the narrator seems too rational for her experience to be anything other than what she suggests. As previously mentioned, this magical realist synthesis of fantasy and reality is an avenue used by the authors to explore the contemporary fairytale re-telling. Like Gaiman, Oyeyemi includes further subtle nods to the folkloric nature of her story by both mentioning the mythic Pagan God of the mountain, and the inclusion of the epigraph, taken from Kerel Jaromir's Czech folk ballad, itself a popular fairytale story. The greater significance of the chosen lines from the ballad should be explored elsewhere; in this context, the focus is on the centrality and importance of the fairytale to Oyeyemi's narrative, which is impossible to ignore.

Regardless, both stories deviate from their original story and the conventions of the wider fairytale genre. Contrary to the often-elusive details of traditional tales, Gaiman and Oyeyemi give a strong presence to the phenomenal world by locating their stories spatially and temporally, allowing the authors to offer their critiques of the present-day. The narrator of *Troll Bridge* reveals that he was born in the sixties, living in a town near London, providing clarification of a 'real' world setting. Similarly, the first line of *Dornicka* situates the main

character in rural Czech Republic, and early within the story she recalls her negative experience on her last trip to Prague. The impact of Dornicka's musings on city life is two-fold: firstly, the recognition of the ubiquitous use of mobile phones and the metro allow the reader to temporally locate the story. Furthermore, it grants Oyeyemi an outlet to explore Marxist ideologies about contemporary cosmopolitanism - Oyeyemi is less subtle than Gaiman here - as Dornicka is expressly clear in her misgivings about city life. Her belief that the "city is fuelled by the listless agony of workers" uses the verb 'fuelled' to denote post-industrial imagery of the city as an impersonal machine, and "listless agony" to provoke evocative negative connotations of a capitalist mindset.[5] This is, of course, an obvious exercise of Oyeyemi's cultural criticisms, which subsequently reveals the inherent use of both setting and genre in exploring a chosen narrative.

The presence of these very realist settings alongside fantasy occurrences makes the story seem, as mentioned, a feature of magical realism - as does *Dornicka's* adherence to magical realism's commitment to give marginal voices and submerged traditions a greater platform.[6] From a feminist perspective, Dornicka is not a damsel in distress; she willingly gives herself the task of saving an innocent's life at her own risk. Meanwhile, Oyeyemi writes about underrated Czech culture, enforcing her exploration of non-dominant cultures and traditions. These allusions create heavy intertextuality, associated with both modernism and postmodernism. While T.S. Eliot and James Joyce were pioneering with their niche intertextual references, postmodern intertextuality encourages a playfulness with and awareness of the construction of text and embracing the ambiguity of reality. Oyeyemi's work melds these integral features, and therefore can come to be understood as metamodernist, a new literary mode that oscillates between postmodernism and earlier forms like modernism

[5] Oyeyemi, 2016. p.211.
[6] Faris, Wendy B. 2004. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative.* Nashvilleti Vanderbilt University Press.

or realism (or perhaps magical realism).[7] Her writing seems to align with David Foster Wallace's self-aware approach to metamodernism, in which he 'uses postmodern techniques […] to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would find very old-fashioned'.[8] The point here is that the formal and stylistic elements of Oyeyemi's story are significant, producing an overtly contemporary piece of fiction in its hybrid formulation of genres, but also in their capacity to explore contemporary themes, including capitalism, feminism and cosmopolitanism.

The accuracy of setting in *Troll Bridge* also promotes the magical realist genre, but like *Dornicka*, Gaiman uses formal experimentation to explore other modes of writing which build on the political messaging of the story. The temporal scale spans from Jack's "earliest reliable memory" into his middle-ages.[9] The development of plot in this way emulates that of a bildungsroman, yet Gaiman subverts the classic iteration of the style. In Lee's analysis of Gaiman's earlier works, he writes of the author's impulse to produce an 'anti-bildungsroman'. Instead of documenting Jack's smooth transition from child to adult in a positive and productive way, Gaiman re-conceptualises the narrative with the view that 'adulthood, while inevitable, is overrun by logic, science, and capitalism.'[10] As we follow Jack through three stages of his life, his penchant for exploring and believing in the magic of nature decreases in tandem with the loss of his rural childhood home. The narrator recalls how in his teen years the fields "started to go" as new housing estates multiplied. Later, Jack moves from London to his childhood village, but he is so unsatisfied by the lack of "fields, farms and flint lanes" that he moves away as soon as he can. Jack enters something of a mid-life crisis, and the shortcomings of an urbanised, capitalist lifestyle seem to contribute to this a great deal - Jack

[7] Robin Van der Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, 2017. *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism.* London ; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
[8] Wallace, quoted in Van der Akker et al, 2017. p.93.
[9] Hensher, 2018. p.107.
[10] Derek Lee. 2016. "The Politics of Fairyland: Neil Gaiman and the Enchantments of Anti-Bildungsroman." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57 (5)ti 552-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1138444.

is unable to reconnect with the enchantment he felt with his rural village as a child, despite his numerous attempts. In this way, the form of the anti-bildungsroman is evident as Jack finds himself increasingly alienated from his childhood happiness as he grows older. This subversion of a traditional folk/fairytale form creates a similar effect to Oyeyemi's *Dornicka* - it utilises postmodern playfulness and awareness of form as well as magical realism's honest deductions of the realities of life to produce a work of genre hybridity, as well as enabling a discussion of overwhelmingly contemporary tropes.

This essay has attempted to touch on what it perceives as 'contemporary tropes' - predominantly our disenchantment with the natural world, a result of the dominance of neoliberalism and late capitalism. In Vanessa Joosen's *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairytales*, she acknowledges the revival in fairytales in the late 1960s as a sign of the revaluation of imagination as a means to reject the establishment.[11] She includes James McGlathery's critical perspective that the fairytale renaissance was a 'longing for the simpler life of earlier times, in reaction to the tides that characterised the 1960s.'[12] The prolonged interest in fairytales into the present day suggests that this desire has not been satiated. It is interesting to consider Mark Fisher's concept of hauntology here, which recalls the failures of early 2000s cultural production in creating anything remotely innovative, and insists we instead are 'faced with the collapse into a time dominated by pastiche and reiteration,' whereby we lose the 'capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live'.[13] To be clear, Fisher also attributes this bleak worldview to the capitalist market system and neoliberalist ideologies.

Gaiman and Oyeyemi propose similar sentiment in their respective stories. In *Troll Bridge*, Jack desperately tries to reconnect with the pastoral lifestyle he had as a child, but finds himself unable to do so, due to the loss of the rural areas he once knew. Here, Gaiman

[11] Joosen, Vanessa. 2011. *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairytale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings*. Detroit, Miti Wayne State University Press.
[12] McGlathery 1991, quoted in Joosen, 2011. p.4
[13] Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

reflects on the spatial impermanence of the village. While the setting is still more specific than a conventional fairytale might be, the anonymity of Jack's village is interesting in the exploration of the contemporary themes, since it suggests that the homogenisation of all rural villages into new developments is a generic and widespread issue, at least in the UK. Jack's move away from London was supposed to be a productive step in his re-enchantment with nature, but the loss of the village and the capitalist practice of commuting with a part-time flat meant that time with his family was limited and his continuing urban lifestyle was one of alienation and disconnection, which pushed him to meaningless affairs with strangers, and the climax of his crisis when his wife leaves him, taking their toddler with her. This makes Jack's decision to let the troll "eat his life" strangely cathartic, as Jack finally renounces participation in the 'ailments' of capitalism and becomes one with nature, merely an observer of others' lives from under the bridge.

Gaiman's portrayal in this way is clearer than Oyeyemi's in his condemnation of urbanisation and cosmopolitanism. Oyeyemi presents contradictory portrayals of Dornicka's rural lifestyle. On the one hand, she writes that Dornicka "might have succumbed to the 'wolf' at once if it weren't for Alzbeta and Klaudie's visit"[14] – the implication being that Dornicka's solitary and simple life made her indifferent to her own existence, and that her single interaction with her family was the only thing preventing her from giving up on her life. Furthermore, the narrator notes that the miners warn Klaudie against marrying a fellow miner, pronounce that she should 'travel the world' instead of 'chaining' herself to a local.[15] This suggests that the other villages are aware of their lack of freedom and individual liberties at the hands of their traditional lifestyle. On the other hand, Oyeyemi writes Dornicka as a character with many admirable qualities and builds upon common discourse regarding concerns about issues such as urbanisation, technology and late-stage capitalism, so that the

[14] Oyeyemi, 2016. p.212.
[15] Oyeyemi, 2016. p.217.

reader feels aligned with the same objections that Dornicka herself feels, even if we all partake in the benefits that urbanisation and technology provide. Consequentially, Oyeyemi's discussion of the dichotomy between rural and urban and its associated facets is initially explicit, but upon analysis takes on a heavy nuance, which highlights the complexity of the issue as it stands now – it seems for Oyeyemi, neither a wholesale rejection nor embrace of urbanisation provides a suitable solution. Gaiman seems to more readily condemn a lifestyle alienated from the rural and pastoral.

Despite this, these novels are decidedly similar on many levels, especially when simply considering their surface level formulation as fairytale re-tellings. Further analysis reveals that they use many of the same techniques that place them equally in the realm of literary movements such as postmodernism and magical realism. Once these stories are situated in the literary canon, their motivations are more readily available - for example Oyeyemi uses magical realism to portray a feminist, rural perspective on the issues with capitalism, while Gaiman's focus is overwhelmingly on the anti-bildungsroman approach to detail our mistreatment of rural England.

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