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When Darkness Takes Over: *The Waking Forest* as a Postmodernist Fairy Tale

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ABSTRACT

The fairy tale has undergone great changes over time, especially accentuated by postmodernism, which disrupts literary rules and universal truths, and encourages the active participation of the reader in the work. One of the major changes produced by this movement has been the current romanticisation of horror and incorporation of Gothic elements in magic stories. With the aim of explaining the reasons for so substantial a change, this paper analyses Alyssa Wees's *The Waking Forest* as an example of a postmodern fairy tale. After an overview of its general postmodern features, it focuses on the subversion of the traditional characteristics of fairy tales placing special emphasis on the darkness present in both its themes and characters.

Key words: Fairy tale, Postmodernism, Romanticisation of horror, Gothic, Subversion, Darkness.

RESUMEN

Los cuentos de hadas han sufrido numerosos cambios a lo largo del tiempo, especialmente como consecuencia del postmodernismo, corriente que altera las reglas literarias y las verdades universales y fomenta además la participación del lector. Uno de los cambios más grandes de esta corriente ha sido la romantización del horror y la incorporación de elementos de la literatura Gótica a los cuentos de magia. El presente trabajo analiza el libro de Alyssa Wees, *El Bosque*, como ejemplo de cuento de hadas postmodernista. Tras realizar un análisis general de las características postmodernas, se centra en la subversión de los elementos de los cuentos de hadas tradicionales haciendo especial hincapié en la oscuridad de sus temas y personajes, todo ello con el fin de aportar una explicación coherente para el significativo cambio de los cuentos de hadas.

Palabras clave: Cuentos de hadas, Postmodernismo, Romantización del horror, Literatura Gótica, Subversión, Oscuridad.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

The fairy tale is a literary genre characterised mainly by the presence of magic which has been popular since its origin in medieval times. It is specifically defined as “a children's story about magical and imaginary beings and lands; a fairy story” and beyond, “a fabricated story, especially one intended to deceive” (“Fairy tale”). Although magical events and creatures are not real whatsoever and monsters are used to scare children and accomplish a good behaviour, fairy tales, even unconsciously, have an inherent connexion with reality. They reflect the fights and lifestyle of a particular time, and more concretely, the desires or fears of the author. Over time, the fairy tale has experimented a large number of changes owing to its intrinsic socio-political ideas, which correspond to the events taken place at the moment of its composition.

With the arrival of postmodernism during the 1960s, new ideas arose in opposition to the rationalistic modernist mindset. Postmodernism defends contradiction, playfulness, and multiplicity of possibilities. Literature of this type therefore uses a wide range of techniques that tests readers and make them reflect and question the compilation of literary works, in this case of fairy tales. Shifts in focalization, multiplicity of the self and the incorporation of the author in the work are just some of the features of postmodernism, which intend not only to innovate and transform literature, but also to create scepticism towards assimilated truths.

The postmodern fairy tale presents a subversion of the typical features of the fairy tale, since they no longer represent reality. For this reason, instead of traditional heroes fighting against monsters and saving damsels in distress, postmodern fairy tales depict a fairer and more loyal version of the truth, one which seeks to combat misogynistic stereotypes and supports diversity and tolerance. Confusing as though may seem, Gothic subversions have been incorporated as a result of this search for change, which is reminiscent of Aristotle’s ‘Paradox of Tragedy’: monsters and dreadful situations are conceived as something positive, so especially the former have a different purpose than the monsters in traditional fairy tales. *The Waking Forest* is a fiction book by Alyssa Wees published in 2019 which fits in this metamorphosed fairy tale.

This paper presents a theoretical framework for the above concepts – fairy tales, postmodernism, and postmodern fairy tales – that later gives rise to a detailed analysis of Wees's work. This analysis is divided into a brief overview of its postmodernist features, an account of its themes and elements, and a description of its main characters. Its main aim is to exemplify what a postmodern fairy tale looks like and to offer a thorough explanation for the subversive changes, most of which are correlated with the romanticisation of horror.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 FAIRY TALES

The term fairy tale evokes a magic story featuring a hero or a princess accompanied by magical creatures in their fight against a great evil, whether it is a monster, a witch, or a villain. The fact that it is often the genre of choice for children is no coincidence; magical events with guaranteed happy endings are far more appealing than true stories at a stage in their lives when their imagination is heightened. Consequently, the fairy tale has been used since its origins not only as an amusement source, but also as a tool to promote values and help to differentiate between good and bad.

Influenced by other genres such as romances, fables and magic oral tales, the fairy tale emerged in Florence, Italy, during the 14th century, starring a male hero in his struggle to succeed, i.e. to achieve wealth and power (Zipes 15). Bacchilega (3) defines the fairy tale as a "transitional genre", arguing that there has been made an "appropriation" of the classical folk tale and a subsequent addition of social and political elements. As a combination of both parts, the fairy tale is then a mixture of tradition, magic, and socio-politics. Nevertheless, according to Bacchilega, it is the naturalization of that magic that draws a distinction between fairy tales and other literary genres: "Its effort to conceal its "work" systematically—to naturalize its artifice, to make everything so clear that it works magic, no questions asked" (8). Hadn't magic been done this congruently, readers would probably feel confused by so implausible a story. Therefore, the success of fairy tales is explained by the concealment of both their artifice and their social values and intentions, resulting in apparent pure cautionary tales for children resembling mythology rather than fantasy.

However magical, the events and inconveniences addressed echo those in everyday life. For example, the many stories of girls or princesses marrying at a very young age, or the background of an outdated government system do not take place so often in current stories, since the configuration of tales changes as social changes take place. Tales are, even unconsciously, reflections of the ideologies and social norms and expectations of the people who tell or write them. Bacchilega rightly claims that "the workings of this magic, however benevolent, rely on privilege and repression" (6). All the classical princesses are trapped somehow, either physically in a tower or spell; or metaphorically

by patriarchy or tyranny. As protest movements move forward in society, literature of protest arises too. Thus, the different literary works mirror the ongoing problems and fights of the time, usually in favour of the underprivileged, as it is the case of Robin Hood and his help to the poor citizens against the authoritarian monarchy.

Fairy tales reflect our desires, but since most of traditional tales were written by men, many of them were only a response to masculine desires. The most evident proof is the representation of women, who were always characterised by an outstanding beauty, innocence, purity, and a connection to nature as a consequence of that purity. In fact, these virtues are often the element of major importance in many tales: Snow White's beauty, Rapunzel's hair, or the name itself of the protagonist in both *Beauty and the Beast* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In addition, traditional princesses usually have domestic chores as their only duty, like the obvious example of Cinderella, and fit in the figure of damsel in distress, which makes them dependant on a man. Oppositely, the figure of the witch cannot be other thing than the antithesis of the princess: old, ugly and repugnant, and a symbol of cruelty, jealousy, and manipulation. Unsurprisingly, the witch is not spared either from sexist stereotypes. This latter representation of women – the *femme fatale* – arose already in the first interpretations of the Bible, which depicted Eve as a manipulative and evil being. It is interesting to note the parallel between the witch's manipulation of Snow white, and the snake's to Eve (and Eve's to Adam later), since both actions were carried out using an apple, suggesting little coincidence.

Whether we are talking about witches, monsters, or other types of villains, it is clear that they constitute the enemy of the story, or at least they do in traditional tales. They were used as a tool to promote values to children and help them differentiate between good and evil, and in many cases, also to frighten them and achieve good behaviour. However, in line with social changes, these horrific characters have different positions and purposes in postmodern literature.

2.2 POSTMODERNISM

As stated by Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* (4), postmodernism is not an equivalent for 'contemporary' or 'new', just because it arose in the mid-20th century. It is a cultural movement that entails a specific set of revolutionary characteristics and an

underlying principle which binds together all these features. Postmodernism reacts against modernism, and therefore it breaks with objective knowledge, reason and evidence, and the need of learning about the fundamentals of the world. Conversely, postmodernism proposes a multiple reality where everything is possible, and nothing is deterred by rationalistic boundaries. Thus, Brian McHale (10) suggests a shift from an epistemological approach to an ontological one, being ontology the study of existence. I will therefore proceed to briefly review those characteristics applied to literature, as argued by McHale, in an attempt to further clarify the transformation of contemporary fairy tales.

Postmodernist literature plays with traditional styles: imitating or mocking genres, creating hybrid genres by mixing two or more in a single work, or simply mentioning and referencing other works or authors (what is called intertextuality). For example, Paul Auster's *City of Glass* is a parody of a detective novel on the grounds that the many clues given conduct nowhere in the end. And regarding intertextuality, not only does it mention *Don Quixote*, but Cervantes' work has great importance in the interpretation of the novel. This "indecorous" style, as McHale describes it (172), undoubtedly breaks literary uniformity and moves literature, especially fiction, in a wholly new direction. In addition, McHale speaks of metafiction to refer to the text's acknowledgement of its own artificiality; this means that the writer may incorporate himself in the narrative to test us and make us reflect about the actual author.

In its attempt to blur the line between what is real and what is not, postmodern literature often plays with narrative layers, which is known as *mise-en-abyme*, or "a world within a world" (14). A contradictory and paradoxical reality with multiple worlds opens the door to endless possibilities, including the same individual being in different worlds at the same time, which leads us to the question of the "multiplicity of the self" (15). Postmodernist critics defend the idea that reality is constructed, and so are humans: we are composed of multiple identities, copies of ourselves, following a mimetic theory (28). In literature, this takes the form of multiple perspective accounts and shifts in focalization, resulting in an "unreliable narrator" (12), which suggests subjectivity in the telling of accepted truths. Additionally, postmodernist works might have a non-linear structure, or a playful language with hidden meaning, inviting the reader to actively participate in its interpretation.

All these features serve not only an artistic purpose, but also a social and philosophical one. It is scepticism about the truth, government, or institutions that postmodernism aims to achieve. It questions the rules of narrativity and seeks to make readers reflect about certain controversial topics and the veracity of history and systems by defying established norms in literature. Since postmodernism is relatively new, it takes a more contemporary approach in the mirroring of social issues such as diversity, feminism, or animalism. Consequently, postmodernist works often give voice to minorities or others historically affected by retelling their stories from their point of view and thus dismantle assimilated verities.

2.3 POSTMODERN FAIRY TALES

The standardized structure, plot and characters of traditional fairy tales – including sexist stereotypes – no longer mirror social reality. Therefore, adopting the postmodern style, contemporary fairy tales have been shaped with the aim of making us reflect on the ideological and social ramifications and interpretations of the tale, including narrative and gender ideologies. In order to achieve this, there has been a subversion of the typical features of fairy tales and an insertion of Gothic elements.

Firstly, classical plots have changed and are much deeper now, not necessarily with an idyllic happy ending: "Life is depicted as an ongoing struggle and process so that the happy end is not an illusion; that is, depicted not as an end in itself but as the actual beginning of a development" (Zipes 180). Postmodernist tales do not give us the solution to a problem but an opportunity to question said problem. However, this does not mean that 'perfect stories' are no longer written. New idealised worlds or utopias are being created, in continuation with what Thomas More initiated with his *Utopia*, but which have been shifting in accordance to the current events of the century: "… the utopian tendency has turned dystopian, many writers still envision the fairy tale as a means to critique the barbarian turns of the civilizing process—and they do this with the belief that social change is still possible" (Zipes 171). There is indeed no shortage of literary works that recreate a new social order as a consequence of a global disaster such as virus pandemics, nuclear wars, the destruction of the environment, or AI control.

On the other side, an increasing number of fairy tales have a woman as the heroine of the story, and this, together with the re-writings of the classics from the female's perspective, has contributed to a deconstruction of stereotypes. For example, female characters are no longer in need of a prince or male companion to save them or make them truly happy. Moreover, fairy tales have adapted in terms of inclusiveness so as to give the opportunity to discriminated minorities to feel identified with the main characters. Examples of this include the remaking of the classical Disney movies with black or homosexual characters. This postmodern turn helps to promote new values among younger generations, which has always been the aim of fairy tales.

Postmodern literature, as stated in the previous section, likes to play with traditional styles, which in the last century has taken the form of works that are at the same time fantasy and horror, sometimes pre-existing fairy tales which have been retold in gothic form. John Connolly's *The Book of Lost Things* perfectly fits in this description: a classic fairytale storyline beginning with 'once upon a time', but whose main theme is inner darkness, is perfectly balanced with a subversive version of *Little Red Riding Hood,* in which she is the sexual aggressor, and the wolf is the victim (Weber 184). The novel tells the story of a boy who lives in an unhappy situation due to his family, for whom fairy tale books offer comfort. After experiencing "waking dreams" (180) of another reality, he is transported to a fairy-tale world with intertextual elements such as the presence of Snow White or the name-guessing game of *Rumpelstiltskin*. Additionally, one of the main features of Gothic literature is the reflection of the darkest parts of society or one-self; and, since fairy tales have an intrinsic social critique, or at least background, postmodern fairy tales often use those gothic elements with the purpose of arising questions in the reader regarding social facts and events, or even about us. According to Weber in his analysis of *The Book of Lost Things*, the protagonist's repressed and unconscious desires, and dark parts of his personality take the form of monsters he must fight in this parallel world (182).

Upon so widespread a tendency, one cannot help but to wonder why supernatural horror is now included in fairy tales. The attraction to dreadful situations in literature we would avoid in real life constitutes a contradiction which had already been studied in Aristotelian times as 'the Paradox of Tragedy' and later called 'The Paradox of Negative Emotions'.

Aristotle argued in his *Poetica* that emotions of pity and fear are what make the audience feel pleasure when watching or reading a tragedy, because we experiment a cathartic feeling (Destrée 5). Since then, many theories and explanations of different kind have been put forward, although with unconclusive results. Yet, following both the postmodernist characteristics and the analysis of some contemporary critics in their attempt to shed some light on the study of the paradox, it is possible to give some coherent explanations for the use of the Gothic and horror in fairy tales.

To start with, it is worth bearing in mind that no matter what the physical appearance of the monster is, what really provokes a sense of fear in the public is whether such monster is presented as a "violation of nature" (Carroll 54), something which only happens in horror tales. Thus, readers will not dread the presence of a strange creature in a fairy tale, because, as it was already stated, every supernatural force is perfectly plausible in the context of a magic tale. Oppositely, the romanticisation of horror is taking over the popular culture and in the last few years, there has been an increasing number of literary works with a monster or villain as the protagonist. Far from being hated, audiences are wishing to find themselves in a situation similar to a vampire romance, for example. Rather than a masochist tendency, Claudia Schwabe uses the term "the beauty of Otherness" (130) to explain this phenomenon. According to her, current media tries to put up with diversity and tolerance values by creating or adapting stories in which all sort of creatures are not feared, but respected and treated as equals. A shift in focalization allows traditional horrific characters to tell their stories, making them friendly and easy to identify with, and transforming them into the actual hero of the tale. As it happens in retellings like *Maleficent*, the change in focalization also allows to understand and sympathise with the enemy, justifying their motives on the grounds that there is always a rational and human explanation behind their cruel behaviour, in this case, a heart break.

The role of the witch might be the most obvious subversion, with the postmodern twist to an empowered woman rather than a manipulative and cruel being, who, together with vampires and werewolves, stars in many literary sagas for young readers such as *Vampire Diaries, Twilight,* or *Shadow Hunters*. In these novels, all sort of creatures are presented not only as heroes, but also as attractive beings with a lifestyle and problems not so different from our own. In addition, the werewolf is analysed by Nerea Riobó-Pérez (159)

as a hybrid identity which connects humans and animals, promoting animalist views as well as subverting the enemy by placing the latter as the real victim in human's trait. In view of this new perception, if monsters are no longer seen as a jeopardy, the paradox can be concluded as null and void, at least in some fairy tales.

Obviously, this does not mean that there is no more horror literature. There are still monsters that instil fear among the public; however, they sometimes represent deeper or abstract issues, like illnesses, the past, or the fear itself, as it is the case in Connolly's book, where since the monsters are reflections of a character's fears, they disappear when he dies (Weber 185). Current literature of this genre tends to provoke a much more psychological terror, not so much towards a particular creature, but to a dreaded future or event. *Don't Worry, Darling* (2019) is a postmodernist thriller about a perfect community which turns out to be a fake reality, which makes us reflect if we too are in the reality we think we are or otherwise we should not trust the system and authorities.

Horror fairy tales still arise the question of why we are interested in reading scary adaptations or new creation stories that stir our deepest fears. Although addressing the multiple existing theories would be an exhaustive work, I would like to focus on the concept of *mimesis*, also proposed by Aristotle, who believed that we find pleasure in identification (Destrée 6). The postmodernist change in focalization plays a key role here: the closer the villain is to us, the easier it is for us to identify with them and therefore, to like it. As it is the case in Disney adaptations, the dreadful enemy might also have a traumatic past responsible for his behaviour. Once again, postmodernist tales shift their position as a villain into a society's victim, which may even remind us of a part of ourselves. In fact, Fileva asserts that "by confronting what we find scariest, we tame the fears and, as it were, domesticate them" (181), reiterating *The Book of Lost Things*' outcome. Consequently, those deeper fears are addressed in a safe place where we can not only feel identified but also heal our wounds.

3. *THE WAKING FOREST* BY ALYSSA WEES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 SUMMARY

Rhea lives a normal life with her fox pet, her three sisters, and her parents. However, she often experiences terrifying visions including that of some inexistent woods, and a recurrent dream in which she climbs a staircase and arrives at an enigmatic door. One day, she finally opens the door in her dreams and sees a corpse, but when she wakes up, she finds herself opening the actual attic door of her house. She decides to sleep there one night to see what happens, and in the dark, she discovers a mysterious boy she cannot see, whom she calls 'the Darkness'. From that moment onwards, her family starts disappearing one by one as if they had never existed, and the only way to stop her nightmare is to guess the Darkness's name, who assures that they already knew each other.

In parallel, the Witch in the Woods, who lives in an eerie castle guarded by foxes, makes the children's wishes come true by plucking a petal from her heart for the children to eat it. A strange fox who shifts into a boy arrives to the castle one day, and tells the Witch a story about a kingdom populated by *maculae*: humans with prohibited powers that have the choice of either getting rid of them forever or being able to use them only at the king's service, who has no powers of his own and wants to take advantage of them. Her granddaughter, the princess, secretly has powers and likes going to visit the creatures of the forest – sphynxes, sylphs, gorgons, and manticores among others. When the king discovers her secret, she falls into a sleeping spell to escape her dreadful fate.

As the story progresses, it is revealed that Rhea, the Witch, and the princess are the same person in different realities: when the princess escaped through the sleeping spell, she created a first dream in which she was the Witch in the Woods. But after a boy called Varon followed her trying to wake her up, she was forced to create a second dream in which she unconsciously lived with her best friends from the forest transformed into her sisters, and with her real parents: the prince and his wife. Rhea discovers that she indeed knew the Darkness: not only as Varon, but also as the boy who tells the story of maculae to her witch-self. When the princess finally wakes up, she goes on a journey to rescue Varon and her sisters from the king's clutches. In the castle, she discovers that the

forbidden left-wing hides a horrendous secret: captured maculae drained of their blood to death for the king to use their magic. Rhea and Varon fight and defeat together the king, returning the peace and justice to the kingdom.

3.1.2 *THE WAKING FOREST* AS A POSTMODERNIST FAIRY TALE

Alyssa Wees's book is undoubtedly a perfectly accurate illustration of what is understood by 'postmodernist fairy tale'. Besides the classic fairy tales' elements – fantastical and mythological creatures, heroes and heroines, villains, magic, and the hero's journey structure – there is no shortage of postmodernist features in the course of its reading. For example, Rhea's and the Witch's storylines are both alternated and intermingled to the point of rising doubts in the reader regarding their connection. Similarly, a constant confusion between reality and the dream world takes over the plot and is reinforced by the *mise-en-abyme* phenomenon: three realities, three worlds, one inside each other. The story does not disregard intertextuality either, with the obvious example of the *Sleeping Beauty's* sleeping spell, and not so obvious ones like *Snow White* or *Tales of the Arabian Nights.*

On the other hand, it is evident that the role of the witch has been subverted in relation with the aforementioned postmodern rewriting of fairy tales. Indeed, the 'Witch in the Woods' is described nowhere near as repulsive and wicked as it used to be. Conversely, the monster in this story is the personification of the darkness, firstly in the form of the boy and eventually exemplified with the king. However, several instances of the romanticisation of horror can be found. Following the postmodern model, there is a mixture of the fantastic and the Gothic: in the context of a fairy tale in which the protagonist's main duty is to save her kingdom, the main themes are the darkness, the subconscious, and the dark parts of oneself. But it is in that mysterious darkness that Rhea feels something similar to comfort, and which later transforms into love.

3.2 GENERAL FEATURES

To start with, *The Waking Forest* presents a non-linear structure with jumps both in space and time: the 'In the Woods' and 'In the Dark' chapters, corresponding to the Witch's and Rhea's storylines respectively, are alternated in the first part of the book. That the former takes place before the latter does not become clear until the moment when Rhea

remembers the situation, coinciding with the 'In the Kingdom' chapters and the second part of the book. Nevertheless, the tense change could have given us a clue, since just the 'In the Woods' chapters are written in past tense, instead of in the present. It is also interesting to note the change in focalization: While Rhea's storyline is narrated in the first person, the Witch's is narrated by a third-person omniscient voice. In addition, the story of the kingdom firstly appears in tale format told by the Fox Who Is No Fox, and it is then continued in present tense from Rhea's perspective.

The three storylines explained above constitute different narrative levels. Recalling the *myse-en-abyme* phenomenon, each level is a world inside another one, a dream within a dream, as if they were a matryoshka, although inverted, i.e., Rhea's second dream is the furthest from their reality but the nearest to ours. These worlds are separated by a blurry line, though. They converge at certain points during the novel; for example, the woods are a predominant element of Rhea's visions, and later, she is able to perceive the castle and the Witch's screams. The Witch likewise gets familiarized with the story of the kingdom during her meetings with the Fow Who Is No Fox. And Renata talks about inexistent creatures in that reality, but who are friends of theirs back in the kingdom. Hence there is a permanent confusion between reality and dreams, which misleads even the characters. Rhea herself is confused about her own nature. She confesses that "I have never felt so strange. Like I'm not real" (152), and wonders whether the mysterious boy in the attic is part of her imagination; however, she soon rejects its relevance with a postmodernist attitude: "If he's even real and not just in my head—I'm not sure that that's important anymore" (149). What is more, she is able to draw a connection between her recurrent nightmare and her reality in the kingdom: "If my reality before was a dream, then maybe my dream there was real" (177). Thus, she discovers that the door of her dreams was only a representation of the forbidden door in the royal castle.

The multiple worlds lead to the multiplicity of the self issue, also included in the postmodernist features: the main characters are present in at least two of the three realities, even if it is with different names or physique. Following the Rhea/Witch/Princess identity, the Darkness is at the same time the shape-shifter Fox Who Is No Fox and the necromancer Varon. The orphan children of the forest, 'the Forest Forgotten', followed her Princess into the Castle in the Woods as the children to whom she would grant wishes.

One of them, Gabrielle, instead, got to be her guardian red-furred fox in both her dreams. Rhea's mundane parents are indeed the prince of maculae and her wife, although Rose, Renata, and Raisa are not their real daughters: Rose – whose real name is Vittoria – is Varon's sister, and together with him she visits the Witch in the Woods in the first chapter to ask her for permission to stay. Lastly, Renata and Raisa are a nymph and a grey gorgon, creatures of the forest, friends of Rhea. As it was the case with the multiple worlds, a fuzzy border separates the identities of one-self, which means they might collide in a single world. Thereby, when Rhea remembers everything, she finds herself inside the Witch's body, unable to control her talk. Renata, on the other hand, takes advantage of her distinctive double identity effect: her nymph magic allows her to be seen either as a monster or as a charming girl: "It doesn't matter which one you see … because both girls are me" (143). Like her, Rhea embraces her nature with pride and satisfaction: "I am a princess. I am a witch. I am Rhea. I have many faces, and I want to wear them all" (172).

Regarding intertextuality, the whole novel revolves around a sleeping spell and a curse, although provoked by the princess herself and not by the antagonist, unlike in the *Sleeping Beauty*. This tale is also not-directly referred to in a conversation between Renata and Raisa: ""If you don't go to sleep, I'll prick your finger until you do," … "That won't work on me," Renata says, her voice back to low tide. "I am not the princess in this story" (30). Besides, the sleeping spell is also broken with a kiss, with the disturbing difference that the one who gives it to Rhea dies, as well as their dear ones. In addition to this, Rose's obsession with beauty and her hiding in a mirror are close to *Snow White*, and the wish-granting reminds us of the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. Mimicking John Connolly's *The Book of Lost Things*, the tale of *Rumpelstiltskin* makes its appearance both with the Darkness and the king's name-guessing game and through direct reference along with *Alice in Wonderland* (73). Besides traditional tales, myths form part of the plot too, in the form of creatures such as sphinxes, which retain their original riddle-asking function.

The playful character of postmodern literature also involves fiddling with language, like the narrator's constant triple repetition of words, the unresolved riddles, or the ironic comments that only make sense once the reader moves forward in the plot: "Wishing that falling asleep were that easy, like a spell: a prick and a sigh and then nothing but dreams" (30). Furthermore, the book likes to play with the reader offering clues of the intermingled

worlds; similitudes between the stories such as the red fox guarding both Rhea and the Witch, or the definition of 'calenture' explained by both Renata and the nymph in the Fox Who Is No Fox's tale. However, the image of the castle shown by the girls' mother and the different versions suggested by them correspond to the story of four sisters, only to confuse the reader about their similarities.

3.3 THEMES AND ELEMENTS

3.3.1 DARKNESS

Unarguably, darkness is both the main and the broadest topic in the story, which encompasses the rest of themes and elements. It permeates the whole book not only by giving name both to the chapters dealing with Rhea's mundane life and to the boy in the attic, but also as a pervasive driving force which causes most events in the story. In great measure, the darkness is treated as the enemy, in representation of the king's hateful tyranny, Rhea's visions, or simply the concept of monsters. In fact, the 'monster' of the story is the darkness in conjunction with fear. As Rhea says to the king in his final moments, the monster is a diffused and abstract entity with no life of his own: "The child can exist without the monster. But the monster is nothing, nowhere, no one, without the child who dreams it into being" (248).

The term 'darkness' is mentioned in countless instances in a metaphorical way, sometimes in opposition to light – "What if my light is not bright enough to sever this darkness?" (100) – and in connection to ugliness in Rose's recurrent statement "ugliness doesn't need light to exist" (28). Although her obsession with beauty shown along the plot coincides with that of the characters of traditional fairy tales, it probably has a deeper meaning: considering the monsters and the darkness as 'the ugly', her seeking the beauty may only be her escaping from that darkness. However, as it happens in Gothic literature, the darkness that really frightens the characters is no other than their own, the hidden parts of their mind, the subconscious:

> *That* is why Rose despairs of the dark: she would rather look her monsters full in the face, would rather know their exact size and shape, than to acquiesce to the wildness of her imagination, caught in that shadow swathed place where her mind can conjure the very worst things, where her fear can fester and distort. (28)

Indeed, Rhea's vision of her distorted, *ugly* reflection in the mirror is a representation of the ugliness, the darkness in herself, which she needs to confront, as well as her grandfather's. In other words, the classic hero's journey structure, in which the hero goes through different stages which test his personality and skills in order to achieve a goal, revolves not so much around the liberation of a kingdom, but the confrontation with darkness.

The concept of darkness goes together with that of consciousness and self-knowledge. The fear of really knowing about oneself is time and again manifested throughout the plot: "Sometimes secrets are secret for a reason, because to know them will hurt us more than to keep them hidden" (108). The three storylines constitute a journey forward and backwards exploring Rhea's awareness of her true self. During her mundane life, the darkness that surrounds her represents her ignorance of the situation, exemplified with questions like "Who am I, really?" (156), and her fear of losing her comfortable reality, which is altered by the disappearance of her family members. Meanwhile, the Witch's fear of knowing herself takes the form of her denial to listen to fairy tales, as if one part of herself remembered her identity but wanted to forget about it. On the other hand, the Darkness' name-guessing game is another metaphor for knowing her truth, since when she utters his name, she is taken back to the kingdom, where she finally remembers everything. There, Rhea does not feel pain anymore, since her true self has come to light and has a second opportunity to make things right and save her people. Besides her identity, the reality from which she actually comes is also uncovered, which matches postmodernism's aim. Additionally, at the point of Rhea's reaching the kingdom, it is as though darkness disappears in favour of light: "They shrink to the size of a needle-tip as they come, hot and glittering, stitching the darkness with silvery threads of light" (170).

3.3.2 DREAMS

The other great theme is the dream world, being the cause of the different narrative layers in the first place. It is not unrelated to the previous one, though: "It's the same in the dark, most likely. Complete darkness, I mean, a form of calenture. If you stay in it too long, you become delirious … It's almost like dreaming" (85). In the same way that the journey from 'in the dark' through 'in the woods' to 'in the kingdom' is a voyage of ascending consciousness, the opposite direction pursues unreality: dreams and imagination.

However, in her second dream, a new narrative layer opens giving rise to Rhea's recurrent nightmare, in which she reaches a door at the end of a staircase. Rather than being the furthest reality from her waking world, it is a clue to what she must pursue there.

As it happens in real life, our subconscious tends to manifest through dreams, thus revelling our deepest fears and wishes. In Rhea's first dream she is able to help children, which coincides with her objective in her waking world: "Her world, her castle—it had not wanted to be created. It had been pulled out of her sleeping heart, and it had *hurt*" (9). In the second dream, her wish of all being together comes true in the form of a peaceful family which, in accordance with her fears, starts disappearing. Despite the romantic notion of dreams, it seems like the deeper we go into them, the closer we are to darkness. Indeed, Rhea asks herself more than once whether it is possible for the imaginary to harm us, before her dreaming-reality starts resembling a torture. She also comments about Rose that "the only time she feels truly awake is when she dances" (88), suggesting that her hobby pushes her fears away.

The fact that Rhea creates two dreams in order to escape from her reality obliges to make several appreciations. Firstly, her objective reminds us of the actual origin of Gothic literature, used as a form of escapism from an unsatisfied reality, and of the reason why the protagonist of the *Book of the Lost Things* reaches the fairy-tale world. Secondly, the fact that it is the princess that puts herself in a dream on her own free will instead of being the result of a villain's wish is one of the many features that distinguishes *The Waking Forest* as a postmodern fairy tale; that is, an exemplification of a subversive retelling of a traditional fairy tale.

3.3.3 WISHES

In this tale, wishes take a more realistic approach; they are directly associated with dreams on the grounds that they often remain inside the subconscious incapable of coming out and resulting in dissatisfaction with current reality. Or conversely, it is the subconscious that manifests, for example, by creating a reality where Rhea does help the children. Therefore, little do they have in common with the wishes in traditional fairy tales, which always come true giving way to the 'happily ever after'. Even the job of granting wishes to the children is nowhere near as charming as that of the classic tales, for the task is

carried out through dark actions such as plucking petals from the Witch's heart or the children giving her something bizarre of their own in return, such as a hair or a drop of blood.

Wishes are a relevant force in this story since despite the Witch being 'The Witch of Wishes', she does not know what her wish is. It is not until the boy comes with her sister into her castle asking "what do *you* wish? … do you truly have everything?" (11) that she considers the question. Similarly, Rhea asks herself "I wish I knew exactly what to wish for" (152), feeling lost in her reality. In parallel with the name-guessing game, being conscious of your wishes metaphorically means knowing your true self to later get rid of your darkness. The Witch eventually discovers her desire, which is to scream out her agony and pain. Rhea later figures out too the anguish in wishing after realizing that what has always wished is for her family to be reunited again: "that's what it is to wish, to sacrifice breath for possibility. Waiting for a wish to come true—it hurts" (170).

3.3.4 THE FOREST

In traditional fairy tales, the forest is usually a magical place where all sort of supernatural creatures live, whether they are unicorns and fairies, or maleficent witches and other monsters hidden from the bustle of towns. In Rhea's world, however, the woods are a symbol of darkness, a representation of her subconscious with her deepest fears, so it makes sense she is the only one who can see it. Recalling the title of the book, the forest is always awake, suggesting once more the constant presence of the darkness. The woods are also a straightforward link to the Witch's world, acting like a reminder of her former life, waiting for Rhea's remembering that she is living in a spell within a spell.

On the other hand, in the maculae's world, the forest represents freedom instead of fear. It is the place where the princess Rhea wanted to live in, instead of being trapped in the castle, and that is the reason why her subconscious created a dream in which she could live in the woods without anything else to wish for, or at least that is what she thought. As it is presented in the Fox Who Is No Fox's tale, the princess used to flee to the forest "*where the monsters lived. Where she could be a monster too*" (95). Coinciding with the description of postmodern fairy tales, there is a romanticisation of horror and closeness

with monsters as if they were one of our own. Not only does Rhea find comfort in the dangerous forest, but she also identifies more with the creatures than with her own family.

3.3.5 THE ATTIC

Being a cold and dark place with no windows, the attic can be accurately considered a metaphor for the obscure part of the subconscious, inhabited by fears. Rhea reaches the attic firstly through her dreams, and sees herself dead in there, representing those fears, as she herself is able to decrypt: "Possibly it was a latent fear manifesting itself, a constant worry that something bad might happen, to me or to my family. I want us all to be safe and together and happy, always" (23). However, she takes a step forward and faces her anguish by opening the door and later sleeping there. In addition, the attic is where the Darkness lives, who, in spite of actually being a real person, in this storyline represents Rhea's darkness, which she needs to confront by recognizing it, that is, uttering his name.

The subconscious is also packed with hidden secrets, as Rhea states once: "I must not open it—there are secrets behind it and to know them would be to live forever after with a terrible burden" (20). However, it is later known that those secrets were actually the king's, since that door referred to the one in the castle's left wing, where the king hid his horrendous secret. It was forbidden to the princess to go there but, even if paradoxically, its gloom attracted her: "The king had told her never to go there, but she often did anyway, drawn to the dark and the damp" (99).

In the maculae's world, the attic represents a shelter, where Rose was hidden so that no one would discover her magic. Nevertheless, instead of having positive connotations of safety and comfort, it is regarded as an extremely lonely and hopeless place, where unlike Rhea's, her fears and problems were averted rather than confronted: ""What kind of a life is that? I can't go back. I won't"" (166). Accordingly, at the end of the story the attic no longer plays part in the lives of any character: "He's been spending every morning working on a secret surprise project in an undisclosed location somewhere nearby. I have a hunch it might be this: a house with no attic" (257).

3.3.6 MAGIC

Magic is one of the unexceptionable, but not defining, elements in fairy tales. Traditionally, it is linked to childhood and innocence; and indeed, in the Woods, only children could find the Witch. Likewise, it is often related with nature, which does not change in this tale either, with elements like the forest, the rose in Rhea's heart, or the stars being the ones that finally burn the king. However, there is a subversion in the magic's function and in the way it is regarded.

In classic fairy tales, magic is a major force used by the hero to accomplish a particular goal, usually to save the village or the entire world from a greater evil, or by the villain for the opposite objective. On the contrary, Rhea uses her powers selfishly to escape and protect herself. In a postmodern turn, by using magic she reaches a non-magic reality like ours, which is the opposite of what would happen in a traditional fairy tale.

What is more, in *The Waking Forest,* magic is something forbidden, the reason why the maculae and the creatures have to hide, which might remind us of the witch-hunts of the Early Modern period. Magic is equally feared and desired by the king, because it constitutes a strain in his absolute power. It is therefore something that unites all the magical beings and makes them lethal against the king. And yet, it is something somehow dangerous and dark, which Rose is terrified of and cannot control, and which takes the form of gothic elements in the other realities.

3.4 CHARACTERS

3.4.1 THE WITCH/ RHEA

Unlike traditional tales, the story revolves around the obstacles and experiences of a female character, although accompanied by magical creatures in her journey as well. Rhea is a princess and a heroine at the same time, who is eventually capable of saving both herself and the entire kingdom. Although she is not restricted by a patriarchal system as princesses used to be, for most of the story she is trapped, but not so much in a spell as in fear and darkness, resulting in her triple identity.

The Witch is described as a captivatingly beautiful, young and feminine woman, in contrast to the classic ugly, dirty, and ageing witch. She is in fact more similar to a queen, since she lives in a castle furnished with a throne and has good intentions of helping

others. However, a darkness surrounds her, shown not only in her gothic surroundings and in her murky way of granting wishes, but also in her inner weakness. The stitches in her heart are a metaphor for pain, and on many occasions, her struggle is expressed by choking back her screams and her burning desire to let out all that pain: “They howled, because she could not. The Witch of Wishes alone in the Woods could not” (106).

She is neither the enemy nor the antithesis of the princess, but the very person she is. The fact that Rhea is a normal girl with the same life that we could have, except for her visions, makes it possible to identify with her, and even feel close to the Witch is relatively easy: Despite her magical surroundings, she has so mundane a problem as not being able to know what she truly wants, with which the reader might identify and consequently feel pleasure, recalling Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis*.

3.4.2 THE FOX

Gabrielle is the red-furred fox that accompanies and looks after Rhea in both her dreams. In the world of The Woods, she acts as the Witch’s familiar, a loyal guardian always around her, which coincides with the description of the traditional witch. However, this fantastical pet, which could have any animal shape, centuries ago was considered a demonic creature given to the witch by the devil (Rodriguez 2016). In line with social changes, animals are much closer to humans, and pets like cats and dogs have become part of our family. Therefore, Rhea’s fox is very much regarded as a family member rather than a devilish creature.

On the other side, Gabrielle came into Rhea’s world directly from the inexistent forest, which makes her a symbol of the woods. Gabrielle is a connection to her visions, an intermediary between the ‘real’ and imaginary world, or, from another perspective, a constant reminder of her true self and waking reality. Rhea in fact considers her pet part of herself: “sometimes I can’t discern the difference between us” (31), which could mean that, given her origin, Gabrielle is the representation of the dark parts of herself. However, far from producing her fear, she provides her with comfort and safety during her most terrifying moments.

3.4.3 MACULAE AND MAGICAL CREATURES

The fantastical and mythological creatures of the woods are an intertextual element extracted from legends and traditional fairy tales. However, some of them have been modified to better fit in the gothic context of darkness. For example, the gorgons in the tale turn those who look into their eyes into a shadow, instead of stone.

On the other hand, the maculae are a clear representation of the persecuted minorities, which are either controlled or exiled. They differ from what is considered 'normal' and even their name itself means 'flaw'. Nevertheless, the mere narration of the story empowers those differences, which are in fact compared to light in opposition to darkness: "Here with them the macula was not royalty but just another bright creature trying to hide in a dark world, where their light made them suspect and easy to find" (96-97).

Recalling Claudia Schwabe with her term "the beauty of Otherness" (130), the creatures of the forest are considered to be of the same kind as maculae or humans, rather than monsters. Their hybridity meets with that of the maculae, being half human – half magic creature, thus reaching an animalistic outlook too. With a postmodern mentality that supports diversity and tolerance values, both maculae and creatures dominate the plot and their different powers and nature working in unison make them heroes rather than outsiders.

3.4.4 DARKNESS/ THE FOX WHO IS NO FOX

Being the attic the subconscious, the Darkness trapped there must be Rhea's fears and obscure parts of her personality. He is a symbol of the unknown, of the scary, and given that he cannot exist in the light, of the world of shadows too. The Darkness is the primary force that makes *The Waking Forest* a Gothic work, because, in addition to one of the main characters in the story, he constitutes the personification of Rhea's darkness, as if he had emanated from her. He is therefore part of her: "He has to obey, doesn't he? For some reason I cannot yet understand, he is mine, mine to command. He is a part of me, he said" (154), as he explains to Rhea when she asks him when he is at her side. In the same way, the Fox Who Is No Fox is obliged to obey the Witch's commands.

Both Varon's dreaming identities play a crucial role in Rhea's self-awareness. They appear in Rhea's and the Witch's lives respectively attempting to make her remember.

The Fox Who Is No Fox sneaks into the Witch's castle to tell her the story of the maculae, avoiding the fact that it is their actual story, and the same thing attempts the Darkness to do with Rhea, but it turns unsuccessful. They are intruders, outsiders, but also knowledgeable about Rhea's truth, symbolising her conscience. As it was explained above, the Darkness' name-guessing game goes beyond a childish riddle, but it is part of Rhea's process of self-consciousness, the key to know the real reason of her curse: she was the cause of her current situation and the one who cursed Varon to darkness just because he tried to wake her up. He also uncovers her true fear: "He showed me what real fear looks like. His fear was that life would always be misery. My fear was that I could not truly help him, and had no real power to change anything" (170-171). Consequently, when Rhea is prepared to get out from darkness; even if paradoxically, she needed the Darkness to acknowledge her truth.

The Darkness is a vivid illustration of the postmodern phenomenon of romanticization of horror. In Rhea's case, this romanticization goes through stages: firstly, despite being frightened by him, she keeps on going to the attic driven by curiosity and even rejects Gabrielle's security. Then, she stops considering the Darkness a 'something' and thinks of him as a boy: "… the room inhabited, infected, infested by the Darkness, far enough down the beach that it—*he*—can't crawl out and get me" (37). He thus stops being a monster for Rhea and starts resembling a human. Besides, provoked by her sisters with questions like "Was he cute, at least?" (46), Rhea even wonders what it would be like to kiss him. But it is through her witch-self that she eventually discovers the feeling, after her multiple intimate encounters with the Fox Who Is No Fox. Drawing on the paradox of negative emotions and the conundrum of finding comfort in horror explained in the previous chapter, Rhea comes to feel a certain sense of tranquillity when she knows the Darkness is near her. In fact, it is in total darkness that Rhea would find peace of mind.

3.4.5 THE KING

As far as the king is concerned, we are not dealing with the type of monster that we can identify with, romanticize, or which arises from diversity and tolerance towards all kinds of people. Conversely, the king is an abstract monster, a new and darker personification of the darkness. This time it is not Rhea's, though. When she enters the castle and darkness calls her, she rightly says: "I long for my attic, for *my* Darkness, because this is

someone else's Darkness" (223). As a perfect illustration of the king's darkness, the left wing, where his sinister secret is, is dark all the time. What is more, even he himself proudly admits that he is transforming into darkness by consuming maculae magic, that is, as a result of his terrible acts: "Soon I'll be nothing but darkness, a roiling mass of it. Glorious and unbounded" (231).

Returning to the guessing-name game as a metaphor of knowing oneself, the king also proposes the game to his grand-daughter so that she can save Varon. But Rhea knows the value of apparently so simple an action: having a name means being someone:

> "You don't *have* a name," I tell the king. "Maybe you did once, but not anymore. You're just a pit of blackness, where all the crushed things live. Where all the gutted things go when they are not beautiful anymore, and will never be beautiful again. The things that can't be redeemed." … I think you are afraid of your darkness. I think you are afraid of what you will become. You don't want my heart—you just want your name back. You offer me your crown only because you want someone else to bear your burden … (244-245)

Once again, darkness is equated to ugliness, fear, and lack of self-awareness. The difference here is that Rhea does know herself now, and after her character evolution she is able to recognize the darkness and its meaning in the king.

Eventually, the king is also a figure of authority, abuse of power, cruelty, greed and secrets. Bearing in mind that social criticism is often present in fairy tales and even more so in postmodernist literature, it can be concluded that *The Waking Forest* takes no exception to this tendency, albeit under the guise of a magical tale.

4. CONCLUSION

While traditional fairy tales mirror society or the author's values, postmodernist literary works aim to dismantle long-standing beliefs which no longer correspond to reality. However, instead of stating an unarguable fact or critique, postmodernism seeks reflection. Being a fiction work that mixes fantasy and horror, *The Waking Forest* exemplifies the impact of postmodernism in fairy tales. As a result of phenomena like the *mise-en-abyme* and the multiplicity of identity, it keeps the reader active and confused throughout the story, inviting them to reflect on the meaning hidden within its pages. In the case of Wees' book, the struggle with identity and awareness of both one-self and the surrounding reality is indeed metaphorically represented by the personification of darkness. The paradoxical romanticisation of horror is more than evident, adding to the fact that the plot constitutes somehow a paradox in itself. Darkness takes over the plot replacing the classic monster so as to expose readers' and society's dark side, represented by Rhea's and the king's respectively. Besides the figure of the monster, other traditional features of fairy tales, such as magic and wishes, have been subverted in an attempt to remain faithful to social changes. Thus, the witch has evolved into an empowered woman with mundane difficulties, her 'familiar' resembles a family member in accordance with pet's current significance, and peculiarities are embraced rather than rejected. In addition to diversity values, maculae could represent the persecution of minorities embedded within the critic of power. It is therefore a foregone conclusion that the implementation of gothic elements in contemporary fairy tales is nothing but another postmodernist technique to play with the reader's rationale and facilitate their understanding of things from a different point of view.

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