

E.M. Forster's Short Stories as Emotive Fantasies

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ABSTRACT

Research Article

As an Edwardian author and a 'reluctant modernist' E.M. Forster penned several short stories as well as great novels. In the three selected short stories titled "The Story of a Panic", "The Story of a Siren", and "The Celestial Omnibus", Forster makes use of fantasy fiction based on the feeling of *desire*. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Forster's *emotive fantasies* are constructed through features of "longing for another world or a lost world" and/or "finding our own world enchanted". Some of the underlying motifs such as mythological figures, pastoral images, beauty and individualism are also part of the discussion. Using the theory of Todorov's *fantasy* and Manlove's arguments regarding *fantasy fiction* as a springboard for discussion, this study argues that even though the selected short stories by Forster are shaped by *desire* as *emotive fantasies*, the feeling of desire does not lead to a satisfaction; in other words, desire is an inconclusive and discontinuous feeling which contributes to the formation of the stories.

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Introduction

E.M. Forster's short stories titled "The Story of a Panic", "The Story of the Siren", and "The Celestial Omnibus" are illustrative of emotive fantasy which foregrounds emotion as a central concern. Furthermore, the distinctive feature of this type of fantasy fiction is that enchantment and desire are of pivotal significance. The underlying pattern behind these two features is mostly "longing for another world or a lost world" and/or "finding our own world enchanted (Manlove, 1999, p. 91). Portrayal of pastoral images and animals; making use of elements such as order, individualism, spirituality, beauty; overt or covert allusions to mythological characters are some of the characteristics of Forster's selected short stories as emotive fantasy.

In "The Story of a Panic", "finding one's own world enchanted" is depicted through the transformation of the major character named Eustace thanks to his encounter with Pan, god of the wild, shepherds and flocks in the Ancient Greek mythology. In the next story titled "The Story of the Siren" where the thin wall between the reality and magic is displayed, an alluring story of a sea nymph is told in relation with "longing for a lost world". In the last story called "The Celestial Omnibus" where an unnamed little boy's magical ascent to Heaven by bus is narrated, "longing for another world" becomes the focal point with a clear reference to Hermes. In this study, therefore, the characteristics of Forster's three selected short stories will be discussed under the subcategory of emotive fantasy as part of modern fantasy with reference to Manlove and Todorov's descriptions of fantasy fiction. This will ultimately reveal how Forster's selected stories are constructed as part of modern fantasy fiction in the beginning of the 20th century.

E.M. Forster's Brief Biography

Born in London in 1901, Forster had to witness turbulences and massive transformations at an unprecedented level in his ninety-one year lifetime. The two devastating world wars, the beginning of the atomic age, the predicaments of the post-war British society and India's gaining independence from the empire are some of the most influential events that have shaped modern history. However, neither the decades of upheavals nor his longevity found significant echo in his oeuvre (Page, 1987, p. 1). By the time he turned forty-five, he had already completed his six novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *A Passage to India* (1924) and *Maurice* (written in 1913-14, published posthumously in 1971). Although he continued to write short stories, biographies and literary criticism until his later years, he would not be able to add any novels to his corpus. Having experienced such disorder and emerging literary developments at the beginning of the 20th century, Forster was expected to write in line with other modernists of the period such as Woolf, Joyce or Eliot; nevertheless, he chose to stay away from that line as a 'reluctant modernist' (Head, 2007, p. 75). Instead, his fiction was based on more Edwardian undertones. Yet, it is possible to see his liberal humanist viewpoint at the center of his works, which portray irreconcilable class differences, desire and sexuality, and motifs of cosmopolitanism.

Discussion

Although fantasy fiction has been recognised as a literary genre for the last couple of decades, it is possible to trace its roots to myths, legends, and fairy tales. Magic, mystery and supernatural elements have always been a common and indispensable features of these pioneering forms, which ultimately led to the emergence of modern fantasy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, the growing popularity of realist fiction as the mainstream focus in the 19th century helped to form "a clear dialectical pole against which the fantasy genre could counterthrust as a specialized mode of fiction" (Mathews, 2002, p. 3).

Fantasy fiction displays characteristics which are in quite contrast with realist fiction. To begin with, it embraces a 'free-floating' quality which can easily cancel out any logic or

rationality against an action or twist in the plot. Furthermore, it does not necessarily follow many of the conventions and restraints of realistic narrations. For instance, they may refuse “unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death (Jackson, 2009, p. 1).

Through the use of magic, wonder and mystery, most fantasy fiction lays the groundwork for escapist motifs or radical departure from real life. They manage to create other worlds of finite possibilities with the help of imagination and emancipation of the mind. As Britain and the United States were at the forefront of the industrial revolution and scientific inventions, it created the most influential counter effect for the hunger for awe, wonder and supernatural in these countries (Mathews, 2002, p 20). Therefore, it would not be wrong to call Britain the home and origin of modern fantasy fiction. Some of the prominent fantasy authors such as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, William Morris contributed immensely to the establishment of fantasy fiction as a genre in Britain.

In contrast to few volumes of his novels, Forster had always been busy with writing other forms of literature and being productive until his old age. Penning his short stories was one of these forms, which were published during his lifetime under the title of *The Celestial Omnibus* (1911) and *The Eternal Moment* (1928). Although his short stories have been believed to be less sophisticated by some critics when compared to his novels, they “reveal some affinities with the work of other modernist writers” and display distinctive literary and artistic features in relation to fantasy fiction (Head, 2007, p. 77).

The first short story to be discussed as an example of emotive fantasy is “The Story of a Panic” which narrates a tale about a boy named Eustace who undergoes a transformation of sexual awakening by the visit of Pan. The story is set in Ravello, a town in Southern Italy, where a group of English tourists spend their summer holiday. Among the visitors, there are spinster sisters and their nephew Eustace, the sentimental aesthete Leyland, the Reverend Mr. Sandbach, the narrator Mr. Tytler, Mr. Pembroke and Gennaro, the young waiter.

On a day when the English tourist group decides to have a picnic in the woods, everything starts as a typical day for the visitors. All of a sudden, the “delightful place” turns into a chaotic and terrifying atmosphere; all the impression of “prosperity, beauty and peace” is replaced with “expressionless fear” and the group starts to run away from a mysterious fear. When they find out that Eustace is left behind, the group decides to go back in order to look for the boy and to their surprise, he lies on the ground motionless but alive. He is mocked by the narrator on the idea that he is visited by goats because of the footmarks they leave in the area. Interestingly, there seems to be sudden changes in the overall behaviour of the young boy; that is, the bad-tempered and confrontational manner of Eustace appears to be replaced with a merry and pleased person.

The explanation for the enigmatic incident comes from Mr. Sandbach. He believes that “the Evil One has been very near us in bodily form” (Forster, 1988, p. 21). The mysterious experience the group had evokes the elements of fantasy Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017) puts forward in his definition of the genre. According to the Bulgarian-French philosopher and historian, fantastic occurs when there is a hesitation on the part of the reader regarding the authenticity of the events they read (Todorov, 1973, p. 25). The question of whether the incidents are part of reality or they belong to a realm of total illusion stands as a gray area between which the reader oscillates while reading. If the mysterious incident can be resolved with the help of the laws of reality, it falls under the category of uncanny; whereas, if the reader decides that the new law of nature must be formed in order to account for the mystery, it belongs to the genre of marvelous (Todorov, 1973, p. 41).

When the enigmatic experience of the tourist group is taken into account, it is possible to put forward the idea that it seems like a fear of tangible origin has surrounded the English

tourists in an isolated and uninhabited place; for instance, a natural phenomenon such as a sudden storm or seeing a wild animal are some of the things that come to the reader's mind. However, the fact that the origin and the reason of the "expressionless fear" remains blurry paves the way for building the feeling that it can be an illusion of the tourists which cannot be described easily. One cannot help but wonder what could be the definite meaning of this fearful experience. In this sense, this story fits the definition of Todorov's fantastic by making the reader feel hesitated between two feelings. Furthermore, the cause of the change in Eustace's behaviour also remains unresolved although it is hinted that he has been touched by a supernatural being (Pan) during the picnic. This also contributes to the feeling of hesitation created on the part of the reader.

Another significant factor in the transformation of Eustace is the Italian waiter, Gennaro. He is the only person with whom Eustace establishes a close bond. Gennaro also seems to be the only person who truly understands the boy's needs and feelings. When others struggle to keep the boy in his room, it is the Italian waiter who insists that he should be freed and when the boy finds a way to escape from his room, it will be again Gennaro who truly appreciates what he has done. The escape of Eustace, which can be interpreted as a "salvation" from his attachments seems to be a concrete illustration of his transformation. Gennaro character can be taken as a metaphor of the sexual energy in Eustace and the Hermetic presence which symbolizes "a promise of freedom, a vision of the enlarged male self, the rough woodsman" in this story (Herz, 1988, p. 29-32).

Forster makes use of the device of "unimaginative and prejudiced narrator" in order to better emphasize the supernatural side of his fantastical stories (Head, 2007, p. 82). The narrator Mr. Tytler is a typical example of an ordinary mind who never seems to grasp what lies beneath the surface. His bias towards Eustace and Gennaro helps to create a sharp contrast between what how events seem in the eyes of the mediocre and what they actually mean beyond the average comprehension.

Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in his book titled *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) can also present an explanation about what makes Foster's short stories emotive fantasies. According to the philosopher, the Dionysian is "the spirit that feels the oneness of all things" and which "shares in all the pain and ecstasy in the universe; whereas, the Apollonian principle puts forward "measure and morality" and "imposes the image of finite humanity upon the disorder of experience" (Nietzsche in Crews, 1962, p. 124-125). Instead of forming a balance between these two principles, Forster chooses to favor the Dionysian tone over the other one, which ultimately results in constructing an emotive fantasy tale.

In short, the feeling of desire is illustrated through the use of an encounter with Pan, a mythological character. It is further developed with Gennaro, the Italian waiter who helps Eustace experience freedom from his attachments. With the touch of Pan and the help of the waiter, the young boy is able to see his world enchanted. The pessimistic and grumpy Eustace ends up being free and ecstatic in his new world where he keeps laughing and shouting at the end of the story.

The second short story to be discussed is "The Story of the Siren" which is written in the format of a story-within-story about a group of tourists who listen to a strange and magical tale regarding a sea nymph from their boatman and tour guide. When the narrator accidentally drops his notebook in the sea, the boatman offers him to get it back by diving into the sea and when they get nearer to a cave, the boatman starts to mention the Siren and the related story about it.

Even though the story centralizes a supernatural character from the Greek mythology (a Siren) and creates a magical atmosphere in the embedded story told by the tour guide, the details about a man (Giuseppe) who actually saw the sea nymph and the incidents happened afterwards

leave an intense impact on the narrator: "I too was moved. The story of Giuseppe, for all its absurdity and superstition, came nearer to reality than anything I had known before" (Forster, 1988, p. 203). The feeling of hesitation about what happened to Giuseppe was whether or not true is accomplished and the reader is left with the question if these incidents are authentic or just an illusion. In that sense, the second story fits Todorov's fantastic description as well because it belongs to neither the extraordinary nor the uncanny alone, but it rather oscillates between the two.

Similar motifs such as "a group of tourists", "people in nature", "an ignorant or unimaginative narrator", "beauty and spirituality", "a mythological character" can also be easily observed in this story. The element of mystery remains to be an important part of it until the end. On the other hand, it can be described as "an elusive tale...very moving in its evocation of a way of life that is at once idealistic and robustly sane" (Cavaliero, 1979, p. 50).

The element of desire which turns Forster's story into an emotive fantasy happens to be "longing for a lost world". The boatman portrays an enigmatic tale of a sea nymph and leaves the narrator mesmerized. "As a rule only good people see the Siren" is the sentence which refers to an unknown world where good-hearted people have the chance to see unique phenomena (Forster, 1988, p. 206). Towards the end of the story, the boatman and the narrator talk about saving the world, a sort of salvation which is also seen in the previous story, a time when someone "will fetch up the Siren from the sea, and destroy silence and save the world" (Forster, 1988, p. 212). The theme of "longing for a lost world" becomes clear and transparent through the last words of the boatman when he says "Silence and loneliness cannot last for ever. It may be a hundred or a thousand years, but the sea lasts longer, and she shall come out of it and sing" (Forster, 1988, p. 212).

Similar to the previous story in which the Pan, the deity of fertility, natural life, pleasure and sexuality, causes panic among adults (Pan-ic) and contributes to the sexual awakening of the young boy Eustace, the Siren in the second story becomes another embodiment for desire as the figure lures sailors with her enchanting music. Even though both the Pan and the Siren instill fear among the majority in both narratives, it continues to help create "high spirits, caustic with and a rebellious impishness" in line with the Dionysian principle, which ultimately generates the essence of Forster's aforementioned stories, that is, desire (Cavaliero, 1979, p. 41).

The last short story to be discussed is "The Celestial Omnibus" where a little boy's magical ascent to Heaven by bus is narrated. As opposed to the previous two stories set in nature, this one takes place in London. The main character whose name is not given notices a bizarre signpost in his neighbourhood that says "To Heaven". Having been exposed to the mocks and laughs of his parents, the boy sees the advertisement of "sunset and sunrise omnibuses" and ticket information about the bus.

The story narrates a double journey through the bus. One of them is the boy's magical journey which takes place when he finally decides to get to the bus stop at sunrise. A bus drawn by two horses and its driver Sir Thomas Browne, 17th century English author who was interested in science, medicine, religion and the esoteric, take him high above the clouds in a magical ride, which is in a sense, a journey of enlightenment and vision, for the young boy. On the other hand, when Mr. Bons, a friend of his parents, agrees to join the boy for the bus and starts the journey, goes through a quite different experience, in other words, he has a journey through darkness into death.

Thanks to a blurring boundary between reality and supernatural, Forster once again manages to create an ambivalence by referring to enigmatic features such as an omnibus drawn by a 17th century author and figures such as Dante and Achilles; and realistic modern day setting and characters. No matter how magical and unbelievable the journey of the young boy and Mr. Bons sounds, the death of Mr Bons in real life succeeds in conveying a sense of

hesitation on the part of the reader, which ultimately gives way to the fantastic. The death news of Mr. Bons in several newspaper comes as a shock at the end of the story:

From the Kingston Gazette, Surbiton Times, and Park Observer: The body of Mr. Septimus Bons has been found in a shockingly mutilated condition in the vicinity of the Bermondsey gas-works. The deceased's pockets contained a sovereign-purse, a silver cigar-case, a bijou pronouncing dictionary, and a couple of omnibus tickets. The unfortunate gentleman had apparently been hurled from a considerable height. (Forster, 1988, p. 68)

Similar to the previous stories, "The Celestial Omnibus" is shaped by a mythological figure who contributes to the transformation of the main character in the end. The unnamed young boy in the last story is accompanied by Hermes, messenger of the gods and protector of the travellers. As the story unfolds, Hermes is presented under different names such as Sir Thomas Browne, Jane Austen or Dante. While taking the role of conductors, these characters bear witness to the transforming power of imagination. Thanks to the omnibus and its ride, the reader is able to be engaged in a mysterious journey between two worlds and in them "Hermes functions as the mythic analogue of the authorial presence, a device that diminishes the necessity for direct intervention, or rather, turns such intervention into a species of masquerade, where, in the person of the god, the narrator can manifest truths and reshape reality" (Herz, 1988, p. 35).

When it comes to the central emotion of the story, which is desire, it is indisputably clear that "longing for another world" dominates the narration. The unnamed boy's imaginative flight and his desire to go through the imaginative experience is a robust proof for the emotive theme of the story, particularly when it is contrasted with Mr. Bons's ('snob' backwards) failing response and unwillingness for such a journey and his symbolic death.

Result and Discussion

The selected three short stories by Forster fit Todorov's description of fantastic and are illustrative of emotive fantasy which foregrounds the emotion of desire at the center of their narratives. These stories create a sense of hesitation on the part of the reader as they go back and forth between realistic and supernatural features. The reader is left undecided whether the tale is believable or imaginary. The central emotion of desire in the stories is another recurring motif which is supported by themes such as "longing for another world or a lost world" and "finding your own world enchanted". While forming these underlying themes and patterns, Forster makes use of pastoral images, allusions to mythological characters and motifs such as individuality, beauty, imagination and sexual awakening. The central emotion of desire is materialized with the transformation of the main character in each story. The change in the protagonist can be in the form of sexual awakening or imaginative awakening; however, what these stories have in common are the feeling of epiphany the main character experiences in the end.

Even though the selected stories can be categorised as emotive fantasies, having the feeling of desire in the center, there is no room for the desire to accomplish its target or mission. In other words, the feeling desire has an interruptive end which does not lead to satisfaction. The sudden death of Gennaro in the first story, for example, allows the author "to swerve away from one erotic conclusion" (Lane, 2007, p. 106). Similarly, the death of Mr. Bons in the last story brings a feeling of evasion from accomplishing the young boy's dreams and imaginative powers. The discontinuous or inconclusive nature of desire motif in Forster's selected short stories might have to do with his personal life and political views. His being a "confirmed bachelor" as a latent homosexual and being a "reluctant modernist" might have played a role in his choice of portraying desire in his writing (Medalie, 2002, p. 1). Whether its being incomplete or inconclusive, it is clear that the feeling of desire centralizes and shapes the construction of the aforementioned stories in a significant way.

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