

## Fairy Psychology: The Development of Magic in Chris Adrian's *A Tiny Feast*

The short story by Chris Adrian tells the tragic tale of a Boy with leukaemia and the struggle of his parents finding their way to accept the illness and the eventual loss of their son. The narration starts with the statement that it “took them both a long time to understand that the Boy was sick” (para.1)<sup>1</sup>, so the problem is immediately introduced, and in fact, we only learn about the past from memories. The whole plot takes place in the hospital where we can witness the different stages of the Boy's illness, from receiving chemotherapy, through good and bad news, all the way to the end of his life.

All this is presented as if the parents were the famous fairy couple of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon and Titania. Although there are not many references to the plot of the Shakespearian play, I believe it is crucial that Adrian used these characters. By borrowing them, he imported several key elements: a marriage that proved strong enough to last for centuries, although the partners both have very complicated personalities and thus are constantly quarrelling. What is even more important is that they possess magical power. There is an illusionary background story created for the parents in which the Boy – as he is called throughout the story – was a gift from Oberon to placate Titania. He was meant to be a changeling to entertain and serve her, yet slowly he became more – first Titania, then Oberon grew to love him as a son, and as we will see, he brought with himself many changes. The purpose of this borrowing of characters is to show the juxtaposition of magic with the matter of fact environment of the hospital ward and the tragic reality of the illness.

During this sad tale, we can see a fairy world borrowed from Shakespeare that represents a magical universe, which is in a sharp contrast with the harsh reality of the illness, but how do the two worlds react to each other? What is the purpose of the involvement of magic?

I believe that the struggle between reality and the magical Shakespearian references function as a representation of a psychological process that the parents must go through. This process, as I will try to show, accurately reflects the phases, ranging from denial to acceptance, which have been described in psychological studies. To indicate this analogy I will use Knapp and Hansen's article about “anticipatory mourning” (71). The stages – denial,

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references to the text are to this edition: Adrian, Chris. “A Tiny Feast.” *The New Yorker*. Web. 26 Sept., 2014. <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/04/20/a-tiny-feast>>

anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – are all present in the short story, symbolised with the help of the contrast between the fairy world and reality. Magic signifies their denial and escape into an illusion, whereas later the gradual disappearance of the fairy world suggests their acceptance of reality. However, as I will also argue, for Adrian the story goes beyond the stage of acceptance: acknowledging reality is not the final phase because, in a transformed way, magic returns and by means of love wins over reality without reducing it to an illusion. This is possible, because the love of the parents as a magical power can be reconciled with the reality.

In this essay, I will argue that, based on the struggle between magic and reality, the story can be divided into three parts. Each of these three phases of the conflict correspond to one or two stages in what Knapp and Hansen call “anticipatory mourning” and – in the case of the last part – they suggest an extra step.

To begin with, the first phase of this struggle, where the fairy illusion is in domination, mostly corresponds to the stage of denial, but later on Knapp and Hansen’s second stage, anger appears too. This first period contains the first seventeen paragraphs. At the very beginning, the magic is used as a way of denial to escape pain, just as it is described in Knapp and Hansen’s article: “The first stage after hearing the diagnosis of leukaemia is that of *denial*. The parent is in a state of shock” (71). The news of a fatal illness turns the so far ideal reality into something unbearable. In Adrian’s work, the parents try to escape from this suddenly terrifying state by stepping into the imaginary world of fairies. Here, they are fairy king and queen, capable of magic, surrounded with obedient fairies, so this parallel universe seems perfect.

One instance of expressing the phase of denial in the story is the parents’ attempt at excluding reality, calling it a mortal world from which they distance themselves. A good example of this is Titania’s statement at the first meeting with the doctors: ““You will do your mortal thing,’ she said sadly. ‘I know all I need to know’” (para. 4). With these sentences, she declares that she belongs to another world and thus the details of the treatments are irrelevant to her. She rather focuses on how ugly the ward is and how “homely (...) [and] hideous” the hospital workers are (para. 7), again emphasising the differences and the superiority of the fairy world.

The denial manifests itself in the fact that the mother creates illusions and uses the magical world to escape the unbearable reality. Instead of dealing with the actual problems, Titania focuses on the decoration of the room, with the sole purpose to make it look as if everything was all right. This is also the first appearance of the Beastie, “a flat headless

creature of soft fur that loved him [the Boy] like a dog” (para. 7). The mother chooses to stay with this definitely magical creature in the illusion-filled, familiar room rather than go and see the Boy going through his treatments. She stays in a place where the control is to some extent in her hands and she can hide the problems, while going to see the medical procedures would need her to face the illness.

Titania’s attitude towards the doctors in this first phase of the story also demonstrates the second stage described in Knapp and Hansen’s article. There appear “feelings of anger and resentment as the parent wonders ‘Why my child?’” (Knapp and Hansen 71). This is partly realized by Titania’s frequent sentence “This place is so ugly” (para. 6) and also by her encounter with the social worker, Alice who is trying to ease her from a feeling of guilt she has not yet admitted (para. 6-14). According to Knapp and Hansen this stage is “extremely difficult ... for those trying to provide therapy for the parents because of their hostile behaviour and irrational anger” (71), so it should not be surprising that Titania tries to cast a spell on Alice, seemingly for no particular reason (para. 11). This social worker speaks bluntly about the stages of this psychological process and Titania obviously does not like the confrontation with reality. Her fantasy of turning Alice into a cat expresses a desire to silence the disturbing reasoning of reality.

In addition, magic also expresses the first psychological phase, denial, through the memories of a magical past. In the first third of the story, the magical memories are more frequent than later on anywhere – there are several flashbacks of a more ideal world, which, with a nostalgic feeling, serve as a means of denying and escaping from the present reality. The first such flashback, right in paragraph two, is the first introduction of the illusionary fairy world to separate the parents from reality by referring to other people as mortals. Next, we learn about how Titania got the Boy (para. 5), how she treated him at first (para. 15) and lastly, how he evoked a different attitude in her than the other changelings before him (para. 16). These memories show a perfect, harmonious past, where the world worked more or less in an ordinary manner. The frequent appearance of these recollections and the fact that the magical terms and functions are emphasized in them suggest that the parents are yearning to get back to this state, thus proving their denying and escaping attitude.

However, the last memory of this string, in paragraph seventeen, indicates a development, a change, thus leading the plot to the next stage. Here, we learn about the strengthening of the bond between mother and son as they spend some time together and then he suddenly says something “close enough to ‘Mommy’ to ruin everything” (para 17). This memory also takes place in the fairy world, there are “dancing faerie bodies leaping and

jumping all around them” (para. 17), but these are only in the background of the memory. Titania is sitting on the throne, but the word mommy, so out of context in this magical universe with such a strong emotional content, destroys the strict queen-changeling relation between them thus giving way to a real mother-child relation.

This memory can be interpreted as a first breakthrough of reality, allowing the story to continue in a different direction. In the illusion that the magical world has represented so far, the Boy should be just a changeling, an object for the queen but the mother cannot even imagine degrading their relationship so much, thus we see how he develops into a son even in this magical universe. The appearance of the real relation between mother and son allows reality to enter and the phrase “to ruin everything” gains an ambiguous meaning. The true relationship is a rift created by love on the perfect fairy world. Nevertheless, this perfection was an illusion, in contrast with love that is real. Therefore, Titania gains more than what she loses and the two universes are not so strictly separated anymore.

Thus, we reach the second phase of the story – extending from the eighteenth to the thirty-ninth paragraphs – where reality seems to outdo magic but also where the concept of love arises. In this part, the parents are starting to understand the unacceptable and so we can see how they are becoming more acquainted with reality, more specifically their own hospital-reality, paralleling the third stage of the psychological process, bargaining. This is expressed by the fact that the magical realm and the fairies barely appear in this second phase and even when they do, their role is different.

Instead of the fairy world, there is a growing emphasis on reality, one striking example of which is the description of several hospital situations. We can learn about the different medicines given to the Boy, how he reacts to them, there are several meetings and discussions with the doctors and Titania strolls in the ward with the Boy once he is getting better. None of this is sugar-coated with magical illusion here, which is a huge change compared to the previous phase. Another great change appears in Titania’s attitude, who preferred to escape reality by concentrating on anything else but the issues directly related to the illness. Now she is ready to accompany her son, wandering up and down in the hospital, and learns to deal with any kind of news, even tries to take the doctors’ advice “to take things one day at a time” (para. 27). She attempts to “take the long view of things,” suggesting that she is on her way to process the situation (para. 28).

With reality in the focus, very few references to the magical illusion are to be found in this part. The parents are acting as any mortal would, Titania “pushing the pole” when taking a walk with the Boy and “adjust[ing] his mask” (para. 29), Oberon “playing a video game”

(para. 32) and the two of them quarrelling “very softly, since the Boy was sleeping” (para. 28). Consequently, the fairies are not mentioned too often and even when they do appear, it is not for magical purposes. Oberon asks one of them to taste the chemotherapy medicine (para. 19), and Titania “ordered them with a sweep of her arm out the door” for cheese sandwiches when the Boy was hungry (para. 22). They are supposed to fulfil a double role here: obviously, they are small indications that magic has not vanished completely, but more importantly, they represent friends or relatives, helping the family in any possible way. They are distantly involved in the tragedy and try to aid, comfort the parents with small favours.

This small presence of magic, however, actually helps the parents in the rationalisation of their situation and also mirrors the third stage of “anticipatory mourning”, that is, bargaining, as they try to find a compromise, and the mother produces another sign of this stage as “some [parents] overindulge the child” (71). They take small steps towards acceptance but do it with keeping the helpful parts of the illusion. Searching for the reasons for the illness is unavoidable and one possible explanation Oberon proposes is that “the Boy was sick for human things, that (...) he was homesick unto death” (para. 20). Titania’s reaction to this theory is imagining that the medicine that is given to the Boy is “a sort of liquid mortal sadness, a corrective against a dangerous abundance of faerie joy” (para. 20). As far as I am concerned, this expresses a feeling of resignation that reality is after all necessary, while keeping some magical elements in the process. As mentioned above, overindulging the child is another sign of bargaining. What would be a better example of this than a room filled with cheese sandwiches from all over the city, because the Boy finally felt hungry (para. 22)?

Another significant alteration in this second phase is the notable lack of memory flashbacks, which used to express the parents’ escape into an idealised past. This again suggests that the parent’s focus is now on the reality. Although the only memory that occurs here is clearly of a nostalgic nature, it is not connected to the fairy illusion. This memory shows us how the Boy changed Titania and her attitude (para. 24) and, in spite of her fears, how he managed to change Oberon, too. The father, who was first indifferent, then jealous and angry, ends up on all fours playing with his son, warming his wife’s heart as “she thought, *My men*” (para. 26). I believe that this memory should not be considered as an escapist act, but instead as an evidence of love and an indication of the changes to be introduced by love.

Finally, the last part of the story – from paragraph forty – sees the completion of the psychological process, dissolves the struggle between reality and magic, as the latter returns, and wins; however, it is a different kind of magic being transmitted by love. In the beginning,

the magical world meant a way to escape reality and served the sole purpose to help the parents avoid the truth about the illness, whereas at the end it is all about helping the Boy. Different stages of his condition evoke different purposes for the use of magic, yet they all share one common feature, namely that none of them is selfish anymore.

In order to reach this more mature stage of magic it is crucial that the parents complete the psychological process first. According to Knapp and Hansen, the fourth stage is depression, which “comes as the illness progresses (...) and the parents begin to realise that death is inevitable” then they reach acceptance, where “the parent accepts the inevitable with resignation and sadness” (Knapp and Hansen 71). It appears that in this story the two stages are present at the same time. Both parents still demand that the doctors do everything “mortally possible to save him” (para. 51), but their sadness and acceptance is obvious in Titania’s fears of losing all the love in her heart with the Boy, which is also the first time she thinks about life “when the Boy died” (para. 47). Consequently, the process is accomplished, but the story moves beyond that when they obtain the new magic.

This last phase of the story presents the return of magic in a different function, triggered by love and with the inclusion of reality. The return of the fairy world is fuelled by the love felt for the Boy – first, to make him feel better. The tiny feast emphasises this transformation of magic and the new supportive attitude of the parents, that is, putting the Boy’s needs first. He is endlessly hungry begging for “just one little feast” but cannot consume food anymore (para. 38). So Oberon eventually comes up with the idea of a literally tiny feast with miniature food which they prepare together taking “a long time (...), though they had more and more help” (para. 41). The small food is not really more tangible or filling than an imagined dinner and probably it would be just that in reality. The emphasis, nonetheless, is not on the food itself – it is on the time spent together, caring for each other and finding the way to help. So in short, it is on love.

The return of the fairy world also serves the purpose to mourn the Boy properly and ensure that he will be remembered. After Titania decides that they “should bring him home”, the fairies start to work: they “build a bier” from the appointments, in the meantime wrecking the room, destroying the last pieces of the illusion (para. 53). No funeral is a celebration. Still, parents always want the best for their child, and what could be more amazing than the clearly unforgettable sight of “a hundred and two faeries” in the hallways? As there is “no disguise left to cover them” when leaving the hospital, it must have been a memorable departure. This also brings up the case of remembrance. Being immortals, the parents have the ability to assure that the memory of the Boy will live forever. From the point of reality, it obviously

expresses that they will miss him for the rest of their lives and the ideal universe is only possible as long as he is with them.

The primary purpose of the fairy world in the first phase was to exclude reality, but after its return, the fairy world includes reality and causes real changes to take place. Immediately after the Boy passes away, we see how the separation between the two worlds vanishes, when magic seems to affect reality. That night “there were a number of miraculous recoveries on the ward.” As it is explained, Titania’s “indifference was the key to her magic” because “all the desperate hope she directed at the Boy was made manifest around her in rising blood counts and broken fevers and unlikely remissions” (para. 52). This, of course, could be interpreted as a jealous sting in the parents’ heart: a mother has just lost his son, so all the other children seem to be better in her eyes. However, I would prefer the explanation that magic – especially by means of love – can indeed appear in our reality, it just might not work the way we imagine it.

Thus, we reach the last step in the transformation of the magic, which is materialised by the death of the Beastie. As K. M. Briggs points out, “fairies are said to be immortal, always very long-lived” (273). Therefore, it is very strange that the Beastie “died of its grief” (para. 55), yet it makes perfect sense. This unlikely tragedy – the death of a magical creature – destroys the remains of the illusion and the separation of spheres. The Beastie dies because of grief, that is, because it loved the Boy so much – which illustrates the parents’ emotions, who feel that something also died within them and their life will never be the same again – neither in the fairy world, nor in reality.

In conclusion, we can observe in Adrian’s work how magic transforms as its function changes, dividing the story into three phases. There is an emphatic presence, then occurs a disappearance and finally a return in a new form. This development also represents the stages of the psychological process described by Knapp and Hansen. However, Chris Adrian oversteps the five stages that the psychologists identify, with the introduction of love as a power that can restore magic at the end. First, the fairy world is part of the denial, a hideaway from the incomprehensible pain in the reality. In the second stage of the story, it seems that reality wins, as eventually, one always has to face it. Then, however, the supernatural returns, and another kind of magic also emerges – love. At the end, it will defuse the struggle between reality and illusion and actually, this kind of magic is the one that wins over reality. It is love that links and slowly fuses the two universes. Thus, magic becomes a tool to cope with reality not one to escape or deny it. This revolution can only take place as the parents reach acceptance. Then, the magic that is love can fully enter reality and so they become capable of

helping their son in his last days and handling their own feelings. Consequently, both magic and reality cease to exist as they were and the world becomes a reality made magical by love.

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