GREEK CULTURE IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S NOVEL OUT OF THIS WORLD AND SHORT STORY LEARNING TO SWIM

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Abstract: *In Swift's writings, Greek culture is not perceived as something different from his characters' culture. The Greek seaside is seen as similar to the seaside in Cornwall in Learning to Swim and Greece is not a cultural barrier in Out of This World. Harry, in Out of This World, while flying in his plane, notices that from up there one cannot see boundaries between nations. The paper will explore reasons for this perception of Greek culture. One of the reasons has to do with the fact that the influences of ancient Greek culture are still visible today on literature, culture, architecture, etc. and that today's world would not be the same without its influences. Virginia Woolf, in her essay On Not Knowing Greek, believed that we return to ancient Greek culture in order to avoid the confusion of the present day epoch. We can extend this analysis to the way the ancient Greeks tried to impose order on the world by scientific discoveries and to the way Swift's characters try to do the same by introspection. Swift's characters use in their introspection moments of revelation to impose order on their experiences.*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, seaside, moments of revelation.*

Motivation

Was there a time when writers did not go back to ancient Greek culture? Was there a time when we stopped our connection with it? Even Dante uses Homer as the guide in his *Inferno*. Romantic and Victorian writers have been referring to ancient Greek culture and critics have discussed both Romantic Hellenism and Victorian Hellenism. Modernists and Postmodernists also drew heavily from the themes of Ancient Greece.

Jennifer Wallace and Stefano Evangelista believe that writers return to ancient Greek themes because they consider this era to be perfect. Wallace draws our attention to the fact that "Again and again, the ancient Greeks are portrayed as an exemplary race" (Wallace and Evangelista 2001: 1). Wallace believes in the enduring and beneficial effects of ancient Greek culture on later cultures: "Without Greece, 'our civilization' becomes 'much thinner, more fragmentary, less thoughtful, more materialistic'. With Greece, civilization is 'renewed', made more 'valuable'." (Wallace and Evangelista 2001: 1)

Swift's characters think of contemporary Greece as a place that is not a cultural barrier to themselves, as a place that is part of themselves and of their dreams. Harry, in *Out of This World*, while flying in his plane, notices that from up there one cannot see boundaries between nations. The Greek seaside is seen as similar to the seaside in Cornwall in *Learning to Swim*. Contemporary Greece always associated with Ancient Greece and its culture in our minds and Swift draws on this understanding of Greece. Greece has always kept strong connections with its past: the ruins and other ancient monuments are still retaining the attention of tourists and they are emblematic of contemporary Greece. Greece has never broken its connection with its past history. Greece becomes a symbol of a strong connection between past and present, a

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connection which is always there for Swift's characters. Ancient Greece becomes a symbol of a rich culture, a culture which has given us heroes who continue to resonate, even with more modern themes. We owe much of our current culture to Ancient Greece; much of architecture and science, as we know them today, were built on foundations laid by the Ancient Greeks. Swift's characters owe much of what they are to the past incidents they have gone through. The past is part of themselves, just like Greek culture becomes part of themselves and they come to think of themselves in relation to it. Anna talks about herself in relation to Greek culture; she was, however, born in Greece, yet Sophie, another character, resonates with Greece in her analysis of her past. The past becomes like a dream, the past can be idealized in comparison with or judging from the perspective of the present. What was is no longer there, just the memory of it. Drama, the place of Anna's birth was ruined by the war; Greece itself was ruined by historical events for Sophie and that is why, for these characters, the Greece they knew is kept only as a dream, as a fantasy at the present moment. "Dear Harry. Dear husband Harry... I was born in Drama. But I was brought up in Paradise." (Swift 1988: 173) "I was brought up in Paradise. Though they say that it's all spoilt now. Even Thassos. The tourists have come and invaded, each one of them wanting their piece of paradise, and you wouldn't it recognize now, as you wouldn't recognize a thousand places in Greece, the little bay." (Swift 1988: 173) Anna shows her nostalgic feelings towards Greece, meaning towards her past life, in an attempt to gain her husband's and the reader's sympathy. For Sophie, at present, Greece is no longer a place "out of this world" (Swift 1988: 126), that is the place of her dreams. However, Greece retains the quality of an ideal place in her mind. Historical conflict has made it no longer a place of safety (Lea).

The female character in *Learning to Swim* has been to Greece with her husband and she reflects on her relationship with him in relation to Greek culture. Greek culture becomes part of herself, as she had loved Greece, while her husband did not. She believes this is why she shouldn't have married him. Like this, she describes the distance between herself and her husband and the foreshadowing of the communication problems in their marriage. Mrs. Singleton thus goes back to the past (symbolized by Greek culture), finding the beginning of the incompatibility between her husband and herself:

> Mrs Singleton had three times thought of leaving her husband. The first time was before they were married, on a charter place coming back from a holiday in Greece. […] In Greece they had stayed part of the time by a beach on an island. The island was dry and rocky with great hrey and vermilion coloured rocks and when you lay on the beach it seemed that you too became a hot, basking rock. Behind the beach there were eucalyptus trees like dry, leafy bones, old men with mules and gold teeth, a fragrance of thyme, and a café with melon pips on the floor and a jukebox which played bouzouki music and songs by Cliff Richard. All this Mr Singleton failed to appreciate. […] On the plane she'd thought: he hadn't enjoyed the holiday, hadn't liked Greece at all. All that sunshine. Then she'd thought she ought not to marry him.
>
> Though she had, a year later. (Swift 1982: 9-10)

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Greece here is coupled with the seaside, a place where Swift's characters manage to or at least attempt to reconcile and form good relationships to the others, while they also have moments of revelation. The Ancient Greeks tried to impose order on the world by means of scientific discoveries. These discoveries had the purpose to better explain what was happening in the world and how the world functioned. In a similar way, Swift's characters use in their introspection moments of revelation to impose order on their experiences. All in an attempt to reach a higher understanding of their present situation. It is at the seaside that Mrs Singleton understand, through a moment of revelation, the lack of emotional connection between herself and her husband. Despite this, she chooses not to listen to her intuition and makes the wrong decision, from what is suggested by the short story. Their son breaks free from his parents; to him, swimming in the sea means gaining his independence. The gesture is symbolic for what his parents should have done. Break free from one another, since they cannot resonate with one another. The results of forcing their relationship to go on are quite tragic. It is a failed relationship. The presence of Greece right from the beginning of the short story is not without symbolic value. The ancient Greek tragedies are known to us all.

The present paper aims at analyzing the tragic component associated with ancient Greek culture and its implications on Swift's writings.

A Perfect vs. a Violent World

Greece is seen alternatively as a perfect and as a violent world in Swift's writings. In a similar way, critics have noticed how writers portray ancient Greece, as a perfect place to dream of and as a place of violent wars and conflicts: "the interest in Greece during the Romantic and Victorian periods was far less questioning and far more adulatory than it is today" (Wallace 2001: 2). Some critics "depicted Greece as a violent and primitive world" (Wallace 2001: 2).

Swift, in showing his characters Anna and Sophie as portraying an idealistic image of the past related to Greek culture has a Romantic and Victorian component in his writings.

Getting the reader's sympathy – which is achieved through the use of the implied ancient and the explicit modern Greek culture – is an important aspect in the writings of the Romantic poets, such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, who influenced, intertextually speaking, some of Swift's novels. Wordsworth believed that the mind of the poet is not separated from the external world; the two are connected. Thus the poet creates the external world through his perceptions. The poet's mind is not merely a passive recorder of the external surroundings. Swift's narrators work in the same way as the poet in Wordsworth's vision. They offer to the reader their understanding of the world – in the writings analysed in the present paper, through the frame of mind associated with Greek culture –, not just a passive description of it. Just like Wordsworth's poet, Swift's narrators are gifted with stronger emotional reactions to incidents, are more sensitive than the usual man, and are also "affected by absent things as if they were present". The past image of the Greek paradise is very much alive, has a deep impact on the characters referring to it, Anna and Sophie. It is also part of the hopes and dreams of the past of Mrs Singleton – she would have wished for a good relationship with her husband. Swift's narrators are very much affected by the past. Wordsworth believed that the poet was "a man speaking to men", and this too is one of Swift's narrators' characteristics: they are ordinary, common people. Yet the way they

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tell their stories brings them close to the conception of the Romantic poet as described by Wordsworth.

Real-life aspects of characters make the reader sympathetic to them, keeping the reader interested in the story. In Swift, characters get the reader's sympathy by both everyday and extraordinary aspects. By commonplace details we may understand the usual lives of characters, with their relationships and memories. By extraordinary aspects we may understand the way such experiences are expressed in the lyrical mode, by means of moments of vision, or epiphanies.

Cooper has noticed the return to the "ancient Greek dramatists" (2002: 15), which is common to Thomas Hardy and Graham Swift and through which they deal with "the universal resonance of the human figure caught up with life and death" (2002: 15). Hardy, like Swift, looked "to the ancient Greek dramatists" when he "sought the grandeur of tragic emotion and experience in the quotidian life of his times" (Cooper 2002: 15). Swift deals with a tragic theme through the perspective of the ancient Greeks, just as his characters must in order to understand themselves and others.

The war is used in Swift's writing as a trigger of tragedy, both on personal and public levels. Our illusions about a heroic ancient Greek story are shattered. Anna has seen Greece destroyed in World War II and she talks about a place that has been ruined. Other themes in the poem that find their echo in Swift's novels are war and relationships. In Swift's novels, both war and the problems existing in relationships are occasions for change in the lives and personalities of the characters.

War and problematic relationships prompt reflections which lead the characters to analyse their own lives. In Swift's writings, conflictual relationships lead to his characters' isolation. The isolated characters talk to themselves or to the other characters, yet the others do not actually listen to them and do not connect with them. This isolation is a pretext for the characters to address their lyrical monologues directly to the reader. This allows Swift to structure his writings in order to clearly demonstrate that there is no real dialogue among most of the characters.

Swift connects war to the passage of time, as well as to change: changes in the larger historical context and changes in the relationships between characters, as well as changes in characters' personalities. That the war results from misunderstandings is symbolic of the tragedy characters feel due to misunderstandings and lack of true communication in their personal relationships. To personal relationships and wars, we can add the theme of history. Public history is interlinked with personal history in tragic terms. The war, a public event in history, has its roots in the private history of relationships. The personal conflict brings about a large scale conflict. Swift's characters go through conflictual personal relationships, which are magnified by going on in parallel with wars, events of public history. The connection between the two may not be there for the respective characters, but it has been noticed in history. Swift makes this point by suggesting this connection in his poem *Priam*. The narrator addresses the reader, and goes back to the past of ancient Greek myths. Priam the king becomes a symbol of personal tragedy and of the misunderstandings between fathers and sons, which is a recurrent theme in Swift's novels. With his line referring to Priam's son who "steals a wife and starts a war," (Swift 2009: 255). Swift invites his readers to go a bit further from the actual story of Priam, and implies a certain misunderstanding caused by his son's decision. The war that results from this misunderstanding is symbolic of the tragedy characters feel due to misunderstandings and lack of true communication. The personal conflict brings about a large scale conflict. From Priam the poem moves to the

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Trojan horse. Both are tragic symbols, yet the first is a symbol that stands for personal tragedy, while the other is a symbol of public tragedy and public history.

The alternative perspectives on Greek culture (which characters use to structure their experiences) shouldn't surprise us, since moments of happiness and moments of pain go hand in hand in Swift's writings, as Gutleben suggests:

> In Swift's novel, even the moments of happiness are told from the perspective of pain, so that any kind of lightness or playfulness can only be analeptic or anamnestic. The particular enunciative principle of this doubly traumatic narrative is based on a split temporality where the dystopian present of narration is entirely devoted to coming to terms with the events of the past: the present is the temporality of reflection, while the past is the temporality of experience. It is in these retro-active postures, in these perspectives of reappraisal, reconsideration and re-examination, in this logic of dejected projection in time that the novel most resembles its narrators and best embodies the neo-Victorian obsession with the need for constant reassessment and ceaseless investigation of the past. (Gutleben 2010: 146)

In Swift's novels, the root of the tragic incidents lies in the past, which characters analyse in their moments of introspection. The ancient Greek culture framework offers his characters an occasion to view reality from a different perspective and to reflect on it in the hope of finding a solution. They are looking for a moment of revelation. The present has, however, an aura of tragedy, since we know that the characters are going through moments of difficulty. There are some moments of hope and of revelation, yet the tragic mood is always there.

Part of the tragic mood comes from the fragmentariness associated with Postmodernism. The reader has access to a fragmented view of reality, since there is no one single perspective regarded as the correct one. The self is also described as fragmented, since the reader has access to fragments from various characters' lives. The character's vision of history is fragmented, chaotic, just like their vision of life. They make allusions to the cradle of civilization, the ancient Greek world as they try to find coherence for their view of the world through moments of vision and they also try to communicate with one another. The world becomes fragmented due to the characters' impressions of not feeling understood. They may feel imprisoned in their relationships, for instance, like Mrs Singleton does and her feelings are expressed through her son's breaking free from his parents.

Swift's characters go through feelings of happiness but also through violent feelings, as they judge their relationships with the other characters. They express their feelings by using the image of Greece and what is associated with it – tradition, perfection, violence, everything being part of themselves and of their world.

Conclusions: Why Ancient Greek Culture

In *Learning to Swim*, going back to Greek culture is a device for characters to express their dilemmas by reference to another culture. In *Out of this World*, these references to ancient Greece have to do with the characters' wish to avoid the confusion of the present world, the loss of stability in their world. Greek culture is close to them,

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even part of them, in the moments where they talk about their own experiences and dreams. It becomes quite foreign, though, when they use it to contrast Greece as part of themselves and Greece as not liked by or distant from, other characters they try to connect with. The later image of Greece has to do with highlighting distant and cold relationships, relationships that are doomed to fail and, after all, tragic, in the ancient Greek tradition. Greece is used to depict both the self and the other and, most of all, the relationship between the two. Ancient Greek culture is both something past and something present, very much relevant to us at some points.

As for the tragic mood in Swift's writings, Postmodernism is preoccupied with mourning and grief, as discussed in Tammy Clewell's *Mourning, Modernism and Postmodernism* (2009). War is an occasion to induce the mood of mourning and to express it poetically by analogy with the elegy. Going back to the past, to ancient Greek culture in this case, can be regarded as part of this context of preoccupation with the aesthetics of mourning. The mood is that of elegy, of mourning, and of grief, triggered by the loss of order and meaningfulness of the world.

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