

O. Henry and the *Arabian Nights*: The Case of "A Madison Square Arabian Night"

Assist. Instructor Khamees Odah Ali

Directorate General of Education in Anbar, Ramadi, Anbar

Email: khameesoda@gmail.com

Dr. Majeed U. Jadwe

Department of English Language, College of Arts, University of Anbar

Email: jadwe@uoanbar.edu.iq

Abstract:

This paper reads O. Henry's short story "A Madison Square Arabian Night" (1907) by re-conceptualizing the way the *Arabian Nights* is textually dialogized in the story. The *Arabian Nights* is not merely an intertext in the parodic discourse of "A Madison Square Arabian Night." It is rather a master narrative that is parodied, negotiated, and ultimately subverted in the textual process of self-fashioning an alternative master narrative with a different cultural idiom. The paper hypothesizes that O. Henry does not borrow a character type of narrative tropes from the *Arabian Nights* to build up his master narrative. He rather evokes and negotiates the underlying textual mechanism of cultural production, namely, the fantastic which gives the *Arabian Nights* its oriental idiom. O. Henry uses the simulacra to negotiate and refashion this aspect of the *Arabian Nights* to exit the anxiety of influence and builds up a culturally distinctive narrative closure.

Keywords: *Arabian Nights*, O. Henry, the Fantastic, Simulacra, Intertextuality, Dialogization

و. هنري والف ليلة وليلة: قراءة في قصة "ليالي ماديسون سكوير العربية"

المخلص:

يقدم البحث قراءة لقصة الكاتب و. هنري المعنون "ليالي ماديسون سكوير العربية" من خلال اعادة تفسير الكيفية التي قام بها الكاتب من انشاء محاورة نصية مع قصص الف ليلة وليلة. فالف ليله وليلة ليست مجرد تناص في هذه القصة وانما هي محاكاة نصية لسرد مسيطر من خلال تفاوض نصي للبنية الثقافية لهذا العمل. لذا ينطلق هذا البحث من افتراض ان الكاتب لم يكن مستعيرا لشخصيات او احداث من الف ليلة وليلة وانما اعادة صياغة الانتاج النصي لهذا العمل في سياق ثقافي مغاير من خلال مفاهيم العجائبية والمحاكاة لإنتاج سرد يوظف قلق التأثير في سبيل انتاج نسخة اميركية من الف ليلة وليلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الف ليلة وليلة، و. هنري، العجائبية، المحاكاة، التناص، الحوارية).

1. INTRODUCTION

The influence of the *Arabian Nights* on the short stories of the American writer O. Henry (1862-1910) is so prominent that he was popularly dubbed as the 'Caliph of Baghdad' and the New York of his stories as 'the Baghdad-on-the-Subway' by his readers and critics alike (Chiefly David & Maurice, 1936).

O. Henry himself acknowledged the formative influence of the *Arabian Nights* on his artistic development as a writer of short stories. C. Alphonso Smith, O. Henry's first biographer, reports him stating that:

"I did more reading," says O. Henry, "between my thirteenth and ninetieth years than I have done in all the years since, and that my taste at that time was much better than it is now, for I used to read nothing but the classics. Burton's 'Anatomy of melancholy' and Lane's translation of the 'Arabian Nights' were my favourites." (Smith, 1916 \ 2004, p.76)

It is possible to identify two bearings of this formative influence of the *Arabian Nights*. First, the magical world of the *Arabian Nights* must have contributed greatly to the magical fairy tale world of human warmth and wonder that is the trade mark of much of O. Henry's short stories. Second, Like Shahrazad's, O. Henry's tales betray a fascination with the very act of narrating. He must have conceived himself as a Shahrazad figure, a role which he transfers to his narrators, highly elated in conjuring up ingenious and surprising stories. This last aspect of O. Henry's art of the short story brings him in line with Shahrazad's narratological skill to keep the actual interlocutor of her tales distinctly separate from the narratee. Consequently, O. Henry's stories, like the narratives of the *Arabian Nights*, become expansive in form by allegorizing the narrated situations. This should account for the universal appeal of his stories, just like that of the *Arabian Nights* (O'Connor, 1970, p. 36). O. Henry sought to capture the magical reality of the *Arabian Nights* in his short stories by heavily drawing on the fantastic.

The fantastic here is less a genre of fiction than a textual strategy. Taveztan Todorov speaks of this kind of the fantastic as a moment of hesitation in the act of reading when the reader is stuck in a liminal space of ambivalence. This readerly hesitation takes the form of uncertainty on the part of the reader as what to make of something unfamiliarly odd that happens in the text. The fantastic, according to Todorov, "occupies the duration of this uncertainty" (Todorov, 1970 \ 1973, p.25).

Todorov posits three conditions for this 'uncertainty' to materialize into the fantastic: the reader should experience a willing suspension of disbelief in the credulity of the fictional events of the text, the reader should identify with a character simultaneously experiencing this same uncertainty, and ultimately this same reader should discard with allegorical and symbolic interpretations of the uncertainty-causing event or situation. Put in other words, the reader comes into the textual space of the fantastic when he/she stands momentarily at crossroad between a natural and supernatural explanation of an event of a situation. More important than this interpretive crossroad is the way the reader opts out of it. Todorov explains this:

Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (Todorov, 1970 \ 1973, p.25).

The uncanny, according to Todorov, means the supernatural rationalized whereas the marvelous denotes the opposite, i.e., the supernatural irrationalized.

This conception of the fantastic is most evident in O. Henry's short stories that explicitly refer in their titles to the *Arabian Nights*. These 'Arabian Nights' short stories comprise "A Maddison Square Arabian night," "A Bird of Baghdad," "A Night in New Arabia," and "The Caliph and the Cad" among others. In each of these stories the action takes place at night in a way reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights*. The central male character in each of these stories is identified/identifies with a figure from the fictional world of the *Arabian Nights*, notably, Haroun Alraschid and Shahryar. Moreover, each story is built on a climactic fantastic situation that leads to the characteristic O. Henry's surprise ending.

It is worth noting that almost all available literature (Chiefly Ali (2006), Al-Musawi (2021) & Mohammed (2021) on these Arabian Nights stories tends to showcase this fantastic element in an intertextual space but, unfortunately, it lapses in the error of giving precedence to the 'why' over the 'how'. They seek to 'politicize' the effects of this intertextuality rather than identifying the "internal dialogization"(Bakhtin, 1934-1935 \ 1981, p.327) the O. Henry text initiates with the intertext of the *Arabian Nights*. Such a dialogization can better be appreciated if the story is re-conceptualized as a parodic discourse on the Arabian Night in which the textual parameters of the fantastic and simulacra open to the fore the subversive power of O. Henry text to work its way out of what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence.

2. THE PARODIC, FANTASTIC & SIMULACRA IN "A MADISON SQUARE ARABIAN NIGHTS"

In "A Madison Square Arabian Night", for instance, a parodic discourse is maintained throughout as the story initiates a double coded narrative. The foreground is set in late nineteenth-century New York and the background nourishes from the *Arabian Nights*. The action starts in late evening that is deeply engulfed with Arabian Night atmosphere due to the rich web of intertextuality the writer employs in the opening part of the story. References to the magic carpet and the genie of the lamp frequent the story. It should be noted here that these intertextual references are showcased as semiotic rather than magical objects as signifiers of epistemic reality in the sense that O. Henry refashioned them to memetic realism of his fiction: "The rug was not an enchanted one. For sixteen feet he could travel along it; three thousand miles was beyond its power to aid" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.22). Whereas the genie of the lamp is mentioned in a physiognomic perspective: "Phillips appeared. He never entered; he invariably appeared, like a well-oiled genie" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.22). Similarly, the central character in this story Carson Chalmers is a Shahryar-like figure who is being consumed by his suspicion of his wife who is travelling far in Europe as a tourist. Once more O. Henry re-fashions the Shahryar of the *Arabian Nights* as a human and as an American at the dictates of social realism. This American Shahryar is historicized by decentering its cultural production as a social type of a late nineteenth-century New York. He is typically a rich American middle aged male who dwells in fashionable apartment in Madison Square. His suspicion of his wife infidelity is being fueled by another woman. His wife is typical of rich Americans making tours in Europe as part of their social prestige. So, by now the night is set for the American Shahryar to have his Shahrazad to postpone the awful fate of his wife. The homeless painter Sherrard Plumer plays the role of Shahrazad in this story: "I'm your Scheherezade all the way to the toothpicks. You're the first Caliph with a genuine Oriental flavor I've struck since frost" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.25). Now the stage is prepared for storytelling and the fantastic.

Studies of the fantastic in the *Arabian Nights* (chiefly Khrais, 2014 and Andreeva, 2020) confirm that the fantastic usually opts into the marvelous and, hence, the highly supernatural character of most of the tales of this work. O. Henry takes the other way round by making his fantastic opts into the uncanny. In both cases, the fantastic is used to confer magical atmosphere on a memetic fictional world of proto-realism but with important qualitative differences. the *Arabian Nights* is the product of oriental tradition of

oral storytelling whereas O. Henry's fiction is well steeped into the Western empirical notions of formal realism. In the former the fantastic is not alien to the textual worldview of the cultural production which normalizes the fantastic as the textual space to experience the sublime of the exotic and the supernatural whereas in the latter the fantastic is domesticated to ease the strictures of Western empiricism and material mimesis by adding a rationalized fairy tale atmosphere (if not magical) to the materiality of the text worldview. This is why the fantastic in O. Henry's 'Arabian Nights' short stories is hermeneutic rather than ontological as is the case with the *Arabian Nights* because the modern reader of O. Henry's would most likely perform a transactional reading that negotiates the fantastic aspect of the text as an interpretive crux that should be rationalized through human logic whereas the Oriental listener of the *Arabian Nights* is most likely to capitalize on the marvelous as something 'natural' because the supernatural is an organic part of his\her cultural worldview.

In "A Madison Square Arabian Night" the fantastic is framed in Plumer's tragic story only to see its bloom in the portrait he does for Chalmers' wife. He had a extraordinary gift of:

"bringing out in the face of a portrait the hidden character of the original. I don't know how I did it--I painted what I saw--but I know it did me. Some of my sitters were fearfully enraged and refused their pictures. I painted the portrait of a very beautiful and popular society dame. When it was finished her husband looked at it with a peculiar expression on his face, and the next week he sued for divorce" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.28).

This framing is meant to prepare the reader to experience the upcoming fantastic situation of the portrait. O. Henry rationalizes Plumer's gift as extraordinary rather than magical. In the world of the *Arabian Nights* such gifts are magical powers that wizards and magical objects do have. O. Henry is careful to distance\involve Plumer from\to his counterparts in the *Arabian Nights* by making him a masterful painter of personal portraits who is gifted with extraordinary physiognomic bent. Artists, highlights Martin S. Lindauer, "are especially attuned to the physiognomic nuances of colors, shapes, words, sounds, textures, and movements. In addition, they have the talent to translate, expand, and manipulate these sensitivities into works of art that transcend their literal subject matter and concrete meanings" (Lindauer, 2013, p.47). Thus, Plumer's art is practiced like a seer who has visionary powers. The man does not understand his gift as he paints as if in a trance. Thus, his ability to read and reveal human truth makes him partly human and partly visionary.

Consequently, this helps the reader fulfil the first condition for experiencing the fantastic which is to exercise a sense of a willing suspension of disbelieve. Furthermore, O. Henry deliberately shifts the focus from the unique nature of Plumer's gift to the misery and tragedy it causes him. He suffers a lot and in his suffering and confusion the reader finds a space of sympathy and identification. However, this identification is likely to violate the third condition for experiencing the fantastic on the part of the reader as it opens the door for rich symbolic and allegorical interpretations. The reader at this point is logically tempted to read an allegorical or symbolic meaning, particularly, that of reality and appearance which scores a point of social criticism. Had the story stopped here the fantastic would never materialize.

Chalmers' commissioning Plumer to make a portrait of his wife from a photograph and its extraordinary consequences turn Plumer's fantastic narrative into a threshold for the reader to fully experience the fantastic. The portrait ushers the reader into a deconstructive undecidability over what to make of Plumer's gift. Is it a magical gift or an extraordinary physiognomic gift? Is he a visionary seer or a profound artist?

When Plumer finishes the portrait of Chalmers' wife the latter is afraid to look at it lest his suspicions of his wife be confirmed. This means that he is really in deep love with his wife and he is being tormented at the moment.

Again Chalmers paced restlessly upon his rug. But his beat lay as far from the table whereon lay the pastel sketch as the room would permit. Twice, thrice, he tried to approach it, but failed. He could see the dun and gold and brown of the colors, but there was a wall about it built by his fears that kept him at a distance. He sat down and tried to calm himself (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.30).

This dread and anxiety is the peak of O. Henry's realism for his Chalmers is now more akin to the great tragic characters of nineteenth-century Russian novelists like Dostoevsky and Chekhov. This also ushers a move away from the world of the *Arabian Nights*. Chalmers is no longer a Shahryar or Haroun al Raschids figure in this story. The narrative registers a drastic shift from the light atmosphere of romance to the heavy tragic realism as Chalmers turns from a flat, one-dimensional character into a round, multi-dimensional character tormented with reticence. One important symptom of this shift is the change in the narrative voice. Throughout the story the narrator consistently and insistently fashions Chalmers and other characters into Arabian nights figures. But at this moment Chalmers in particular is suddenly a conscious human aware of his dilemma fashioned after the

conventions of tragic realism. Thus, the light comic tone of the story gives way to heavy, pensive, tragic and philosophical tone.

All this is calculated to make the reader opt into the uncanny, or the supernatural rationalized. Thus, Chalmers behaves in a very human way and hire a professional painter to look and judge the painting: "Mr. Reineman," said he, "there is a little pastel sketch on yonder table. I would be glad if you will give me your opinion of it as to its artistic merits and as a picture" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.31). O. Henry carefully structures the painter's judgement in such a way as to usher a new the reader in the liminal space of the fantastic. Mr. Reineman gives two responses; one is professionally aesthetic and the other one is purely personal: "As a drawing," said the artist, "I can't praise it enough. It's the work of a master--bold and fine and true. It puzzles me a little; I haven't seen any pastel work near as good in years" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.31). But when Chalmers asks insistently: "The face, man--the subject--the original--what would you say of that?" The painter peremptorily responds as if in a dream trance: "The face," said Reineman, "is the face of one of God's own angels. May I ask who "(Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.31).

These two responses stand for the two possible resolutions, in Todorov's model, of the fantastic; the marvelous and the uncanny. The reader is forced at this point to suspend his judgement as the chances of both ways of opting the fantastic are viable. Is the reader witnessing a miracle or this is an extraordinary moment of genuine creativity. Logically, the narrative as well as the reader are going to capitalize on the second judgement. The story focalizes the narrative functionality of this judgement at the expense of its miraculous nature. It is actually highlighted as an evidence of the wife's innocence and fidelity. This is why the painter never asks about the wizard who made this miracle. He is asking about the object of the painting rather than the agent of the supernatural agency:

"My wife!" shouted Chalmers, wheeling and pouncing upon the astonished artist, gripping his hand and pounding his back. "She is traveling in Europe. Take that sketch, boy, and paint the picture of your life from it and leave the price to me" (Henry, 1920 \ 2021, p.31).

The reader witness the miraculous, in Todorov's sense, but is forced to opt the other way, the uncanny, because the narrative signals it as such. With this final explanation the narrative recoils back to its very inception to put the reader in the full picture of Chalmers' dilemma. Such a narrative recoil fulfils two optings simultaneously: The moment the reader opts into the uncanny Chalmers opt out of the *Arabian Nights* role modelling. In a

sense, the fantastic humanizes him by deconstructing the Shahryar in him. He is back into human nature as an American individual. The potential parody reaches its ultimate limit and the narrative breaks loose of its grip. Reality, in a sense, is being restored to its mimetic logic.

However, this resolution of the fantastic into the uncanny might perfectly serve the ends of narrative closure but it problematizes at the same time the nature of representation and agency. The story closes with Chalmers requesting the painter to do a painting out of the miraculous pastel sketch, rather than out of the actual object, i.e., the wife. A Baudrillardian simulacra is at play here since Chalmers desires to immortalize in painting the copy rather than the origin. The copy replaces the origin and becomes itself. Baudrillard theorizes that simulacra is “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, the map precedes the territory – procession of simulacra – the map engenders the territory” (Baudrillard, 1981 \ 1983, p.1). So, the painting that Mr. Reineman is commissioned to paint is the fourth order of the simulacra because the wife as the object of Chalmers' suspicions does no longer exist.

Baudrillard theorizes that representation deteriorates into simulacra over four stages or orders. In the first order representation is basically “a reflection of a basic reality” (Baudrillard, 1981 \ 1983, p.6). In the second stage this representation masks and pervert “a basic reality” (Baudrillard, 1981 \ 1983, p.6). In the third order simulacra “masks the absence of a basic reality” (Baudrillard, 1981 \ 1983, p.6). In the fourth order, the original is irrevocably lost and the represented “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1981 \ 1983, p.6). "A Madison Square Arabian Night" narrates all four orders of simulacra: The real wife, the photo of the absent wife, Plumer's pastel drawing out of that photo, and Reineman's commissioned painting. It is significant to notice in this respect that the wife is absent from the narrative situation. She is narrated but never materialize. Her absence re-locates her to the imaginary as she exists only as an object of the husband's suspicion.

This is crucial to the reading of the fantastic in this story because this play of simulacra reasons out the possibility of the marvelous by turning the space of the fantastic into the psychoanalytical space of the wistful desires of self-deception. Is the husband then a delusional subject who willfully exercises self-deception about the innocence of his wife? Psychological literature tend to characterizes delusional and self-deceptive subjects as

promoting "pathologies of belief formation" by violating the norms of "epistemic rationality" because "the subject in question flouts the epistemic norm of believing only what one's evidence licenses" (Bayne & Fernandez, 2010, p.3). Chalmers is likely to be such psychic subject and his response to the pastel sketch of his wife may be a delusional fantasy kept in the world of make-believe. Such symptoms are not uncharacteristic of the delusional subject as L. Sass (1994, p.19 & p. 49) has confirmed. Chalmers easily and willingly accepts Plumer's fantastic account and ask him to practice his gift on his wife. Later, he is dreaded to look at it and, therefore, in need of somebody else to tell him. He insists that Heineman tell him about the face in the sketch. When the latter tells him how angelic that face is he is overjoyed and his psychosomatic condition betrays a hysterical response of ecstasy. Even then he never dare look at the sketch but quickly order Heineman to make a portrait out of it which in other words is to fix it as his accepted real.

3. CONCLUSION

Consequently, this framing of the fantastic with simulacra works to bracket the reader's negotiation of the meaning of the narrative. For the failure of representation is also a failure of agency because "A Madison Square Arabian Nights" and the marvelous it presents through the fantastic is, in the final reading, no more than a copy, a simulacrum, of the *Arabian Nights*. It becomes the new real, at least in terms of cultural production and dissemination, of what the marvelous is. The possibility of a cultural hybridization, as the title of the story promises, is no longer at stake for the new Arabian Night is no longer that Oriental work of the marvelous. There might be a Shahryar in the New World but he misses the sedative magic of storytelling. The new Shahryar prefers instead to recoil in a world of make-believe that is shaped by the delusional rhetoric of the fantastic and simulacra.

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