

Dreams and Liminality in the Mary Poppins Books

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Abstract:

This paper approaches Pamela Travers' use of dreams and dream-like states in her Mary Poppins collection –in particular *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back*– from the standpoint of their function as liminal thresholds through which the child protagonists gain access to a suprasensual reality. In such episodes, well-known mystic motifs and foci are woven into the fabric of the texts. Such motifs will be analyzed in the context of the author's relationships with the Irish mystic circle and her studies in theosophy. Likewise, the books are contemplated in the light of the trend of fantastic literature for children inaugurated in the second half of the 19th century by writers such as George MacDonald. Travers' theories about the potential of folklore material tally with those of MacDonald, since both of them believed in the evocative quality of myths and fairy tales and in their power to conjure up ideas that lay dormant in the unconscious.

Mary Poppins is one of the most popular characters in children's literature. Its very name conjures up, in children and adults alike, memories of flying umbrellas, fancy hats, anthropomorphic objects, and magic sidewalk paintings. The Disney industry is largely responsible for these associations. In 1964, after years of negotiation with the writer, the film version of Pamela Travers' stories was finally issued. The movie popularized the fanciful character of the eccentric nanny gifted with magic powers, whose approach to education was very much in accordance with the motto "to instruct and amuse". However, the charming character played by Julie Andrew does not bear much more than a slight resemblance to the grumpy figure portrayed in the collection¹. Not only does the film offer a much more sugary version of Mary herself, but it also takes a rather lighter approach to magic, which is one of the topics addressed here. Thus, this essay reflects on the nature of the fantastic ingredients prevalent in the texts². Should they be regarded as superficial, nonsensical inventions devoid of ulterior significance, or is there a deep meaning embedded in the many extraordinary passages found in each of the novels? Furthermore, it analyzes the role of dreams and dream-like states in the presentation of the magic episodes. As shall be illustrated, dreaming functions as the liminal sphere in which the barriers between the everyday reality and the suprasensual become diffuse. That is, sleeping periods become the passageway between the ordinary world and the extraordinary experiences undergone by the child protagonists. (The term 'liminal' is used here in its etymological sense: *limin* (threshold), namely as a metaphorical doorway giving access to the passage or journey between worlds or to visionary experience).

¹ According to J. Koralek (1999: 39), "There is absolutely nothing jolly, funny, or cozy about Mary Poppins. Not given to unnecessary chatter or kissing and cuddling, she does have occasional moments of tenderness; but above all, she is *always there*, strong, calm, reliable."

² Apart from the first novel, namely the original *Mary Poppins* (1934), Travers wrote seven more books between 1934 and 1988 that were illustrated by Mary Shepard: *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1944), *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1982), *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane* (1982), *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1988), *Mary Poppins from A to Z*, and *Mary Poppins in the Kitchen: A Cookery Book with a Story* (1975).

A double sense of wonder is indeed likely to assail the readers of the Mary Poppins collection. What is it –they may ask themselves– that lurks beneath the surface of this delicious sea of incongruities? Alongside the ‘wonderful’ experience of being wrapped up in the amazing events presented, there is the surprising finding of a rich body of symbolism wrought in these narratives. Particularly those familiarized with the conventions of esoteric literature will easily recognize the numerous allusions to occult motifs. For instance, there are references to ritual dances and echoes of theosophical theories about human origin and evolution, something one would not expect in a collection of books for children popularly associated to innocent mirth and bubbly cheerfulness. But were the books really intended specifically for the young? As indicated in the very title of Travers’ article “I Never Wrote for Children”, the author did not have in mind a particular audience while writing her books:

You do not chop off a section of your imaginative substance and make a book specifically for children for –if you are honest– you have, in fact, no idea where childhood ends and where maturity begins. It is all endless and all one. And from time to time, without intention or invention, this whole body of stuff, each part constantly cross-fertilizing every other, send up –what is the right word?– intimations. And the best you can do, if you are lucky, is to be there to jot them down. [...] Your role is that of the lunatic who remains attentive and in readiness, unself-conscious, unconcerned, all disbelief suspended, even when frogs turn into princes and when nursemaids, against all gravity, slide up the banisters.” (Travers 1999a: 182-83)

Travers envisaged the creative task as a sort of revelation or visionary experience. Stories, she believed, were not just made up by the individual mind; somehow, they had a pre-existence of their own. It was the writer’s task to capture them out of the rich store of the imagination. Accordingly, she considered her creation of Mary not so much as a personal fabrication but rather as a sort of discovery. Myths and legends were her sources of inspiration, as becomes evident in the Mary Poppins collection.

Both her interest in mythology and her involvements with occultism are well-known facts that left their imprint on her work. It is no secret, for instance, that she was a devotee of the Russian-Armenian philosopher Gurdjieff, or that for many years she was editor of the new age journal *Parabola*, where she published more than fifty articles about mystical and mythological themes. Given the width of her esoteric studies, in terms of influences and intertextual links we will concentrate on her relations with the Irish mystic circle³, to which she belonged for a considerable period of her life. In her early twenties, when she left Australia for England, Travers became a close friend of A.E. (George Russell), who introduced her to the Nobel Prize poet, dramatist and Golden Dawn initiate W.B. Yeats. Both men fostered her interest in world mythology and mysticism. Influenced by them, she also embarked upon the study of theosophy. Thus, echoes of H.P. Blavatsky’s theories reverberate in her books.

If the above fields of interest permeate the Mary Poppins books, in terms of literary trends the collection can be located in the tradition of fantastic fiction inaugurated by George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, and Lewis Carroll in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ The so-called Golden Age of children’s literature saw an upsurge of texts based on the conventions of the fairy tale. In such productions, the supernatural or magic elements acquired a major role. The fantastic genre continued flourishing in the twentieth century, particularly so in the period between wars, to which the first two books of the collection belong, and was greatly influenced by the works and theories of the mystic and visionary George MacDonald. MacDonald explored the possibilities of myth and folklore to awake the creative imagination of children. Myths, he considered, were projections of a transcendent reality; hence, his creation of magic lands through which readers may explore their inner

³ When she left Australia for Ireland, she befriended a group composed by the Irish poet and theosophist A.E. (George Russell) and the Nobel Prize W.B. Yeats, among others. Both Yeats and Russell belonged to the Dublin Theosophical Society and were followers of the Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), founder of the Theosophical Society.

⁴ These Victorians were responsible for the occurrence of a radical change in the development of children’s literature. They heralded a literary revolution, which pivoted on the adoption of a popular genre, the fairy tale, and its conversion into a discourse that aimed at awakening the creative imagination of readers. (See H. Carpenter 1985)

world and develop a spiritual response. His absorption in metaphysical speculation led to the creation of a body of narratives fraught with Christian as well as esoteric symbols (Pérez Valverde 2001:276). In our estimation, Travers can be regarded as an inheritor of this tradition, for she also envisaged myths as a constant source of inspiration and nourishment for our lives. In this respect, it is worthwhile to pay attention to her words:

And who else, other than Old Wives, has preserved for us all the myth and folklore, all the fairy tales, and all the legends that are wound about the great traditions as thread is wound round a spindle; those records that, far from being out of date and unscientific, are the true facts of that inner world, unseen but nearer than a man's neck vein, that interpenetrates our lives at every level and fructifies our dreams (Travers 1999b:186-67)

Next, we shall analyze some of the motifs woven into the textual fabric of the *Mary Poppins* books. The most intriguing element is perhaps the figure of Mary herself, a projection of the goddess archetype in her positive aspect.⁵ Following E. Neumann's categories, J. Koralek (1999:49) regards her as an embodiment of the "Virgin Mother", that is, an aspect of the goddess archetype possessing the qualities of transformation, inspiration, vision and ecstasy. MacDonald's novel *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) provides a precursory model for the magic feminine figure functioning as a link between the mortal world and the land beyond death. Lady North Wind, a supernatural, fairy-like being, takes the young protagonist to a region where he experiences a deep transformation. This liminal condition or encounter between worlds is a common theme in the Golden Age works. There are many paradises or alternative abodes portrayed in the period, such as The Never Land of Peter Pan, the Wonderland of Alice, the Land of Nowhere in Christina Rossetti, all of them edenic places free from the categories of the rational order of the everyday reality. It is noteworthy that, although the *Mary Poppins* books share the magical ingredient prevalent in these works, they do not establish a physical demarcation between reality and fantasy. While the Golden Age fictions associate magic events to a particular dwelling, in *Mary Poppins* and its sequels magic operates in the in-between, since the everyday world turns magical at special moments. Any ordinary place can suddenly turn into fairyland, for fairyland is ultimately in our minds. As Mary says to the children, "we each have a fairyland of our own" (Travers 1998a:31).

Another interesting particularity of the collection is that, as stated in the first book, Mary is not a fairy or supernatural type of being, but a very special human, called the Great Exception, one that has managed to transcend the limited nature of humans. The idea of progressing from lower states of being to higher ones implicit here echoes Blavatsky's theory regarding human evolution, according to which the human race must pass through a number of stages, before ascending to totally superhuman and cosmic states of existence (Blavatsky 1888b: 86-88). In like manner, the Golden Dawn –the secret society that had Yeats as one of his most prominent members– envisaged evolution in terms of different grades, the highest ones being almost impossible to attain in life. The text suggests that Mary has reached this superior state. Accordingly, the sky is her natural element, and is often associated to birds, which traditionally symbolize the culmination of spiritual development. Special attention deserves chapter nine of *Mary Poppins*. The chapter presents John and Barbara, the baby twins, nicely talking to a starling (the bird visits the nursery whenever the elder children, Jane and Michael, are not present). The twins are able to speak the language of birds and understand the wind and the elements, and therefore wonder why adults are unable to do so. Both Mary and the starling hasten to explain that they, too, will forget all they know after their first birthday. The starling reveals why Mary did not forget, declaring that she is different, especial: "There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one –at the very latest– except, of course, Her" (*Mary Poppins* 118). Implicit in this passage is the idea that humans are born with a natural wisdom and intimate communion with the mysteries of the universe of which they are soon dispossessed. This is very much in accordance with the Romantic

⁵ According to Marie-Louise Von Franz (1970:105), in fairy tales the archetype of the Great Mother or the goddess appears split into two opposed manifestations: the wicked feminine character (witch, stepmother), and the idealized woman (good fairy, princess).

conception of childhood as a period of purity, characterized by a spiritual perception later erased by experience and objective knowledge.

If the previous episode subtly hints at the idea of rebirth, the allusion to this concept becomes evident in chapter five of book two, *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, which replicates chapter nine of *Mary Poppins* –each chapter in book two corresponds symmetrically to one in the original *Mary Poppins*. Here, the starling talks to Annabel, a newborn girl, the fifth child in the family. When asked about her origin, she pronounces a discourse laden with esoteric allusions:

“I am earth and air and fire and water”, she said softly. “I come from the Dark were all the things have their beginning.” [...]

“I come from the sea and its tides [...] I come from the sun and its brightness [...] And I come from the forests of earth. [...]

Slowly I moved at first [...] always sleeping and dreaming. I remembered all I had been, and I thought of all I shall be. And when I had dreamed my dream, I awoke and came swiftly.

I heard the stars singing as I came and I felt warm wings about me. I passed the beasts of the jungle and came through the dark, deep waters. It was a long journey.” (*Mary Poppins Comes Back* 118-19)

It is interesting to note that, while Annabel tells her tale, “[a]s if in a dream, Mary Poppins rocked the cradle- to-and-fro, to-and-fro with a steady swinging movement” (*ibid.*) As stated in her speech, in a dream-like state Annabel remembers past lives and foresees future ones before the moment of birth; dreaming is thus the channel from one life to the next. Her monologue harks back to Yeats’ poem “He Thinks of his Past Greatness when a Part of the Constellations of Heaven” (1898). Here, the wizard Mongan remembers his past lives: “I have drunk ale from the Country of the Young / And weep because I know all things now: /I have been a hazel-tree, and they hung / The Pilot Star and the Crooked Plough /Among my leaves in time out of mind: / I became a rush that horses tread: /I became a man, a hater of the wind [...]” The poem illustrates the passage through different lives or incarnations of the *daimon*, which in the Yeatsian system –as codified in his volume *A Vision* (1925)– is defined as the ultimate component of human identity, that part of the being that goes from one reincarnation to another (Albright 1990:474).

In the previous episode, dreaming appears as the liminal state ushering in the coming into this world. It is clearly associated to the idea of transition, or passage from one condition to another. Therefore, dreaming acquires a metaphysical quality. However, more frequently dreams function in the books as the state through which children can get a glimpse of the extra-ordinary. For instance, in chapter ten of *Mary Poppins*, Michael questions Mary as to what might happen at the zoo when everybody goes home, without getting anything more than a little rebuke for being curious. However, that night she puts the children to bed earlier than usual; once in bed, they hear a mysterious voice that leads them to the zoo, where they discover that the visitors are kept in cages by animals; that is, there is a reversal of roles with respect to the ordinary world. There the children witness the celebration of a ritual, the dance of the “Great Chain”, led by the “Hamadryad” and Mary Poppins herself. The words addressed to the children hint at the essential unity of all beings:

“Tonight the small are free from the great and the great protect the small. [...] And after all, [...] it may be that to eat and be eaten are the same thing in the end. [...] We are all made of the same stuff... The same substance composes us –the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star– we are all one, all moving to the same end. Remember that when you no longer remember me, my child. [...] Bird and beast and stone and star –“we are all one, all one–” (Travers 1998a:144).

This passage refers to the principle of the “great chain of being” or *scala naturae*, one of the central themes in philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to the eighteenth century thinkers. According to this concept, the universe is ordered according to a hierarchical system, from the most basic elements to the higher ones. The ontological gradation included rocks, plants, fish, beasts, men, humans, angels, and perfection: God. This essentially static worldview was modified in the 18th century, when the

evolutionary theory of the soul progressing spiritually through the different states and evolving closer to God came into play (Lovejoy 1936). In the late 19th century, the theory was revived by theosophy. In that sense, one of the key theosophical ideas is that of the underlying unity of all beings, as pointed out by Blavatsky “[t]here is but One Universal Element, which is infinite, unborn, and undying, and [...] all the rest –as in the world of phenomena– are but so many various differentiated aspects and transformations [...] of that One, from Cosmical down to microcosmical effects, from super-human down to human and sub-human beings, the totality, in short, of objective existence” (Blavatsky 1888a:75). Likewise, she refers to the “radical unity of the ultimate essence of each constituent part of compounds in Nature –from Star to mineral Atom”, which is “the one fundamental law in Occult science” (Blavatsky 1888a:120).

At the end of the episode, the Hamadryad hissing voice grows softer and softer. The children felt as if they were being rocked, and heard a voice say: “Asleep and dreaming – both of them”. And the text continues: “Was it the voice of the Hamadryad, or their mother’s voice... Jane and Michael, rocking and swaying, could not tell, could not tell...” (Travers 1998a:145) The next morning, the children wonder whether they had actually dreamt or lived the event, while –as usual– Mary Poppins re-acts as she did not have anything to do with the matter.

In a similar fashion, the children are unable to tell whether they are awake or dreaming when, aided by her magic compass, Mary takes them round the world to the four points: north, south, east, and west in chapter six of the first book. The mystic allusions of the passage are clear, since the journey through the compass is a well known motif, as is also the case with the symbol of the dance, a key theme in the Yeatsian work that also makes its way into the collection. Especially significant is chapter seven of book two, in which children are witness to a dance of the constellations round the couple composed by Mary and the flaming figure of the sun. Once more, the following morning Mary pretends she does not know anything about the matter.

In line with Travers’ ideas regarding the value of personal discovery, Mary allows children to see beyond by subtly drawing back the curtains. Accordingly, she eludes any type of explanation about whatever lies outside the boundaries of the ordinary world of the Banks. In a way, she comes to subvert the established order, although in a concealed manner. The nursery, being a part of the house, is subject to the rules and rigid schemes of the family and their sociocultural background. Within the limits of the Banks’s home, Mary complies with her role by performing her duties in a ‘most efficient way’. However, by means of her endeavours, the patterns and logic that rule in the household are often suspended, a circumstance that enables children discover other levels of reality, together with a system of values different to the ones prevalent in their own milieu (for instance, respect to all beings and creatures). Despite her being seemingly officious and uptight, she also helps the children apprehend the importance of dreams and imagination, hence the contradictory, almost dual nature of the character.

This flight to the fairylands of the imagination, this passing beyond the confines of the real and the possible, this envisioning of parallel worlds and multiple possibilities, is subject to different interpretations. While ostensibly addressed to an infant audience (if not by the author, at least by the editorial market), different groups of readers will come across different levels of significance. A first layer of meaning pivots round the enjoyment produced by fantasy and wonder. Of course, the magic of the tale lies precisely in the power of suggestion, in the evocative nature of the subtexts. There is indeed an abundance of symbolic material likely to appeal to the unconscious and/or be decoded in the light of different systems of thought. As we have seen, Travers firmly believed in the pre-existence of fictional material in the collective unconscious as well as in the visionary nature of the creative process. In her article ‘The Fairy Tale as Teacher’, she refers to the awakening effect of fairy tales, very much in accordance with George MacDonald’s ideas as exposed in ‘The Fantastic Imagination’, where he elaborated on the connotative quality of fairy tales and fantastic narratives. As he put it, ‘A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean. [...] It is there not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning’ (1973:25). This statement can be suitably applied to Travers’ works.

In this essay, we have dealt with three related aspects of Travers’ universe that we consider relevant in order to fully comprehend the nature of the Mary Poppins texts, namely her own ideas on the writing process, her deep involvement with esoteric thought, and her contemplation of folklore as a source of ancient wisdom. In the light of such questions, we believe her working method was, as she

herself claimed, more of an inspirational or intuitive type than a too-conscious fabric of patterns and themes. Nevertheless, there are clear patterns and themes reappearing in her work. It is not the writers' task to analyze such patterns, nor should they necessarily be aware of their precedence. However, it is the job of the scholar –particularly those of us working in the field of children's literature and/or reading– to chart them and trace their origins, to analyze their impact and possible readings, to make the implicit explicit; in sum, to reflect upon them from an academic perspective.

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