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Terry Pratchett's Discworld witches as liminal beings

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Abstract

This article presents the characters of witches in the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett. Witches are a part of the Western civilisation and are popularly connected with evil and harm they can cause to people. In this article I argue that Terry Pratchett depicts witches as liminal beings in his Discworld series. I also identify the most important qualities of these literary characters.

Key words

Terry Pratchett, Discworld, witches, liminality

Wiedźmy z cyklu o Świecie Dysku Terry'ego Pratchetta jako istoty liminalne

Abstrakt

Poniższy artykuł omawia postaci wiedźm w cyklu o Świecie Dysku Terry'ego Pratchetta. Wiedźmy są częścią cywilizacji zachodniej i w większości kojarzą się ze złem i szkodą, jaką mogą wyświadczyć ludziom. Artykuł ukazuje wiedźmy w wybranych utworach Terry'ego

Pratchetta jako istoty liminalne oraz identyfikuje najbardziej charakterystyczne cechy tych postaci.

Słowa kluczowe

Terry Pratchett, Świat Dysku, wiedźmy, liminalność

1. Introduction

Following the definition in the *Handbook to Literature*, liminality can be most simply defined as "the state of being on a threshold in space or time" (Harmon 2012: 273). The concept of the liminal is primarily applied in anthropological studies, for example by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, who employed it in describing customs and rituals connected with important changes in individual and social life, such as a wedding or graduation ceremony. These changes are often perceived as crossing a threshold beyond which an individual may change their name, status, clothing and many other qualities (Harmon 2012: 273).

In literary texts liminality is often expressed by spatial motifs of "thresholds, windows, sills, edges, borders, and passages" (Harmon 2012: 273). Dianna C. Lacy in her thesis *Expanding the Definition of Liminality* explains that this notion is "easiest to define as […] a space between the spaces" and connects it with "an exploration of the self": "A liminal space is the space through which the character journeys while on the way to something new" (2019: 1). She also observes that "it is a place of uncertainty" thus linking the spatial aspect of liminality with the experiential one (Lacy 2019: 2). According to Bjorn Thomassen's essay "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality", liminal experiences embrace "the way in which personality [is] shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience" (Thomassen 2009: 14).

In this paper I will apply the notion of liminality to characters of Discworld witches, and treat it as something that defines

them, bearing in mind that it always functions in motion, between one state or place and another. In order to prove that Terry Pratchett portrays witches as liminal beings, I will distinguish three aspects of liminality: supernatural (or magical) liminality, spatial liminality, and gender liminality. All three aspects can be seen as important in characterizing the witches from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series.

The word *witch* derives from Old English *wicca* (masculine) or *wicce* (feminine) and denotes "a woman supposedly having supernatural power" which is believed to derive from evil spirits or the devil (*Webster's* 1976: 1633). Tradition has it that witches are almost exclusively female. Their traditional image is that of an old woman wearing a black cloak and pointed hat, and flying on a broomstick.[1] Male practitioners of magic are not called witches, but wizards, warlocks, or sorcerers. The word "witcher" is a recent neologism and denotes a fictional character from Andrzej Sapkowski's book series and has no connection to what is traditionally understood as a witch.

The negative image of a witch in our culture stems from several aspects, the first of which is, without doubt, the ever-present connection to the devil and accusations of doing harm to innocent people. According to Professor Edward Peters and his *The Literature of Demonology and Witchcraft* project website, the women understood under the common denominator of a witch could bring harm to people and property using secret methods only they knew. One could identify a witch by means of, for example, finding and revealing their body mark (which connected them to the devil). Additionally, a witch was supposed to have her own *familiar*, or a low-rank demon in a cat's, toad's or any other small animal's body, provided by the devil to help the woman. She was also supposed to be able to shapeshift and fly,

[1] Andrea Dworkin writes "The broomstick [is] an almost archetypal symbol of womanhood, as the pitchfork [is] of manhood" (1974:139), to which Justyna Sempruch adds: "The flying broomstick also denotes escape from housework, domestic ties and oppressive confinement to the sphere of home" (2008:28).

either using a broomstick, or by means of levitation. What is more, these alleged servants of the Lord of Darkness gathered in what was called a "synagogue" or "sabbath" of witches, during which they performed acts of unspeakable evil and promiscuity to pay homage to the Devil (Peters 1998). Between 1561 and 1670 in Germany such an understanding of witches led to a mass hysteria and persecution on a large scale, with many a wise woman ending their lives on a pyre or the executioner's table of torture.[2]

The advancement of science on the one hand and the revival of wicca on the other has certainly altered the view of a witch in the twentieth and twenty first centuries although the stereotypical image of an old, unkempt and ugly woman still remains deeply ingrained in popular culture. Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels definitely belong to popular culture though they frequently challenge traditional stereotypes, which also concerns the liminal aspect of the Discworld characters.

2. Liminality

Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement suggest that the witch is an ambiguous figure: "the sorceress – the witch, the wise woman, destroyer and preserver of culture – is she not the midwife, the intermediary between life and death, the go-between whose occult yet necessary labors deliver souls and bodies across frightening boundaries?" (1968: xiii). The Discworld witches in Terry Pratchett's novels can also be considered as liminal characters due to their role of intermediaries between the living and the dead: they help women in labour and assist souls of the dying people in crossing the black desert to the afterlife.

In actual fact, Pratchett's major fictional witch Esmerelda Weatherwax comments on the liminal aspects of witchcraft in

[2] For more information on the understanding of witches see Diane Purkiss' *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth–Century Representations* (1996).

The Wee Free Men (2004): "[The witches] look to … the edges, […] a lot of edges, more than people know. Between life and death, this world and the next, night and day, right and wrong … an' they need watchin'. We watch 'em, we guard the sum of things" (Pratchett 2004: 304).[3] The liminality of the Discworld witches is expressed in their use of magic, in their social relations and in their transgression of gender stereotypes. In the following sections I will consider liminality connected with magic, community and gender.

2.1. Supernatural (magical) liminality

In contemporary fantasy female characters wielding magic are more often than not much weaker than their male counterparts. One could say modern fantasy almost solely foregrounds more or less powerful men, with women being put in the subsidiary parts of a healer or an evil, old mumbling crone in a cabin in the woods. Good example of such approach can be found in the early Earthsea series, namely *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971) and *The Farthest Shore* (1972), in which women's magic is considered as much weaker and inferior to the magical powers of male wizards. The Earthsea denizens have two significant sayings on the topic: "weak as a woman's magic" and "wicked as a woman's magic" (LeGuin 2004: 6–7). Barred from reaching mastery in the magical arts as no school wants to teach them, women in Earthsea can only learn such basic skills as healing. True to the popular wisdom, some witches join the evil forces of the Powers of the Earth, but so do some wizards.[4]

[3] Granny Weatherwax also emphasizes that the witches are not interested in personal gain: "we never ask for any reward. That's important" (Pratchett 2004: 304).

[4] The inferiority of women's magic is reversed by Ursula Le Guin in *Tehanu* (1990), *Tales from Earthsea* (2001) and *The Other Wind (*2001), in which magic power of women is presented as the one connected with the natural order – as opposed to the artificial magic of wizards.

Craig Cabell claims that "Pratchett has homed in on the sexism of the whole fantasy genre, with witches having lesser powers than wizards and it being accepted as fact that females are only good for flying on broomsticks and throwing eye of newt into a bubbling cauldron" (2012: 61). Even though Pratchett presents witches as humorous characters, they also play an extremely important part in their communities – and not thanks to the magical abilities (although they do have them), but due to their approach to those they serve – with kindness, relatability and constant willingness to provide help to the needy.

Actually the tension between the witches' magical abilities and their use of entirely natural means of curing people's various ailments can also be seen as an aspect of liminality. The most experienced and powerful witches wield what Granny Weatherwax calls headology. From the point of view of the modern reader it is nothing short of psychology. Like all aspects of the wiches's magic, headology is never to be used to for obtaining any kind of personal gain. One can find a passage in *Maskerade* (1995), in which Esmerelda Weatherwax uses it for the sake of curing a patient with a bad backache. She provides him with a quasi-magical prescription of what to do:

> This is a mixture of rare herbs and suchlike,' she said. 'Including suckrose and akwa.' 'My word,' said Jarge, impressed. 'Take a swig now.' He obeyed. It tasted faintly of liquorice. 'You got to take another swig last thing at night,' Granny went on. 'An' then walk three times round a chestnut tree.' […] 'An'… an' put a pine board under your mattress. Got to be pine from a twenty-year-old tree, mind.' (Pratchett 1996: 27).

After that she sets his vertebrae in place, just like a chiropractor would do though she pretends she trips over something and incidentally kicks the suffering weaver's back in the exact place which needs healing. The weaver is soon much better while the witch observes: "People were so blind, she reflected. They preferred to believe in gibberish rather than chiropracty" (Pratchett 1996: 27–29). It is easy to understand that Granny Weatherwax

uses headology in order to impress the superstitious patient, as otherwise he would not understand or believe in her power. The tension between quasi-magical gibberish and the witches' true medical knowledge creates a humorous tension suggesting another dimension of the witches' liminality.

The supernatural/magical liminality of the Discworld witches is also expressed by how they serve their communities by standing between life and death. When Esmerelda Weatherwax is summoned to help a gravely ill child, she is able of see and talk to Death himself and challenges him to a daring game of poker. The stake is the highest there could be: the life of a child. The narrator describes the situation as follows:

> 'Fair enough,' she said, […] how many have you come for?' ONE.[5] […] 'Then I challenge you to a game. That's traditional. That's allowed.' Death was silent for a moment. THIS IS TRUE. […] HOWEVER… YOU UNDERSTAND THAT TO WIN ALL YOU MUST GAMBLE ALL? 'Double or quits? Yes, I know.'[…] 'Very well. How about one hand of poker? Five cards each, no draws? Sudden death, as they say.'" (Pratchett 1996: 98-102).

Having faced Death, Granny Weatherwax prevails and Death leaves with the soul of a cow, while the child quickly regains health. As he is standing in the doorway, Death asks: "WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF I HAD NOT … LOST?, […] Granny laid the baby down carefully on the straw, and smiled. 'Well,' she said, 'for a start … I'd have broken your bloody arm'" (Pratchett 1996: 102). This is a clear indication of the lengths to which a true witch is willing to go to save their community. Even Death needs to reassess his plans when facing such a formidable opponent as Esmerelda Weatherwax with her power and determination.

Moreover, the Discworld witches possesses an important ability connected with crossing the boundaries between life and

[5] The utterances of the character of Death are rendered in capital letters in Pratchett's novels.

death, and returning safely to the living. They are able to enter the liminal zone beyond life that the newly dead have to cross in their journey to the afterlife. For example, the young witch Tiffany Aching learns how to bring a dying person across the black desert – the passage to the afterlife for the Discworld characters. Helping souls to depart from the Disc to another plane of existence is also one of the most important duties of a witch. Definitely liminal in its nature, such a feat can be achieved by nobody else but a witch. In *A Hat Full of Sky* (2005), Tiffany helps a Hiver – a dangerous magical creature – to find its way across the black desert:

> Beyond the door, black sand stretched away under a sky of pale stars. There were some mountains on the distant horizon. *You must help us through,* said the voices of the hiver. […] So, thought Tiffany as she stared through the doorway, *this* is what we do. We live on the edges. We help those who can't find the way . . . She took a deep breath and stepped across. […] The sand felt gritty underfoot and crunched when she walked over it […] but when it was kicked up it fell back as slowly as thistledown […]. The air wasn't cold, but it was thin and prickly to breathe. The door shut softly behind her. *Thank you,* said the voices of the hiver. *What do we do now?* Tiffany looked around her, and up at the stars. They weren't ones that she recognized. 'You die, I think,' she said. […] Tiffany looked around at the endless sand. She couldn't see anybody, but there was something out there that suggested movement. It was the occasional change in the light, perhaps, as if she was catching glimpses of something she was not supposed to see. 'I think,' she said, 'that you have to cross the desert.' […] She felt the hiver fall away. There wasn't much sign of it – a movement of a few sand grains, a sizzle in the air - but it slid away slowly across the black sand. (Pratchett 2005: 303–306)

Without her help, the Hiver would not be able to find the correct path and would be lost forever on the black sands. An example of a character lost in the black desert can be found in Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods* (1993) where the antagonist Vorbis dies and has to walk the black desert alone and without assistance.

As he does not have any witch to help him, he spends one hundred years waiting in an unspeakable terror haunted by his evil deeds. It takes the protagonist Brutha, when he dies, to finally help Vorbis find the way as they both cross the desert (Pratchett 1993: 379-381). Brutha can do it because he is a good person and acts out of compassion and mercy, just as a witch would do.

The Discworld witches possess another magical ability that is evidently liminal: it is called Borrowing and it allows a witch to take control over the mind of an animal host. Trying to possess a human being is possible but not practised as it is seen as completely immoral. An example of Borrowing (performed on animals) is provided by a deaf and blind witch, Miss Treason, who in *A Hat Full of Sky* uses different animals to see and hear through their eyes and ears. Also Esmerelda Weatherwax is known to be able to use bees and other animals to gather information, which she does on a regular basis. However, even such a powerful witch needs to be aware of possible overstaying one's hospitality in the animal mind and, in effect, losing the ability to return to one's own mind and remain human. Such was the danger faced by Ged Sparrowhawk in Ursula Le Guin's *Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), who had to be rescued from the bird's form or else he risked remaining a bird forever. Eskarina Smith, the protagonist of Pratchett's *Equal Rites* (1987) also finds Borrowing very pleasant and, having possessed an eagle for an extended period of time needs Granny Esme Weatherwax to come for her and save her from almost sure dissolution into the animal's form, with her cold body staying apparently lifeless in her hut. Borrowing illustrates another form of magical liminality of a witch: the crossing of the border between the human and the animal, which seems parallel to the witches' ability to cross the boundary between life and death, and return to the living.

2.2. Spatial liminality

Pratchett's witches can also be associated with another aspect of liminality: in this case spatial liminality. It can be found in *Carpe Jugulum* (1998) where, as the plot unfolds, three witches – Magrat Garlick, Agnes Nitt and Nanny Ogg – compare notes on a strange spatial phenomenon known as "gnarly ground":

> 'What is gnarly ground?' said Agnes. 'There's a lot of magic in these mountains, right?' said Nanny. 'And everyone knows mountains get made when lumps of land bang together, right? Well, when the magic gets trapped you ... sort of ... get a bit of land where the space is ... sort of ... scrunched up, right? It'd be quite big if it could but it's like a bit of gnarly wood in an of tree. Or a used hanky ... all folded up small but still big in a different way.' (Pratchett 1999: 176)

An additional feature of gnarly ground is the difficulty to perceive it or even notice. As the narrator puts it: "[it was] tricky to spot, like a join between two sheets of glass, and it seemed to move away whenever she was certain she could see it, but there was an ... *inconsistency*, flickering in and out on the edge of vision" (Pratchett 1999: 183). What is more, when the trespasser is happy and full of joy, the gnarly ground reflects the mood and is enjoyable, safe and delightful for the person, while a bad mood, fear or depression can make the gnarly ground a death trap.

An example of such terrain is definitely provided by the mound of King of Elves, which Tiffany Aching, at that time a powerful witch herself, enters in order to fight the Elves. This is not the first time she has visited the Elvish domain as in *The Wee Free Men* Tiffany journeys there to save her baby brother Wentworth taken captive by the Elves. The domain of Elves is a different dimension of reality in Discworld, so the ability to enter it involves crossing over the boundaries of one's proper world – a feat similar to entering the sphere of death.

Another aspect of the witches' liminality is pointed out by Rosi Braidotti when she says that "[they] can only be 'in-transit,' moving on, passing through, creating connections where things were previously dis-connected or seemed un-related" (1994: 93). This quality is amply exemplified in the Discworld series where the witches are often shown traveling and rarely stay in one place. Tiffany Aching traverses the Chalk in her line of duty to provide assistance and help to her community. In *Equal Rites* Esmerelda Weatherwax is travelling with her young protégé, Eskarina Smith, the first female wizard of the Disc. In *Witches Abroad* Esme and Gytha Ogg travel to Genoa or Akh-Morpork (the biggest city on the Disc and *axis mundi* for the vast majority of the Discworld series novels) in order to solve serious issues ailing their people and help those in need. Witches provide restoration via healing, protect people from evil (for example, Elves) and if necessary assist them on their last journey to the afterworld. They never restrict themselves to their own jurisdiction only, but they go outside their turf to help the needy.

2.3. Gender liminality

When we talk about witches, gender is one of those aspects that immediately come to mind. Terry Pratchett's witches can also be analysed from the gender point of view. True to tradition, the Discworld witches are women. However, one of the most interesting examples of gender liminality as applicable to the witch comes in the character of a man, namely Geoffrey Swivel – one of the main figures of *The Shepherd's Crown* (2015) and the youngest offspring of Lord Harold Swivel. As the youngest son, his only task is to read and learn from the hired tutor Mr. Wiggal, who instils love for knowledge, literature and wisdom into Geoffrey. Then, after Wiggal is fired (due to Lord Swivel's mistrust of teachers and education itself), Geoffrey receives his education from an elderly servant, McTavish, who is all about nature and love of animals.

Taught by both preceptors to be kind and love animals, Geoffrey refuses to kill an animal during a hunt on the order of his father Lord Swivel. He then leaves his home, pursuing his goal to become a witch. As this is close to impossible (mostly because everybody knows men are wizards and women are witches, and no exceptions are admitted), he turns to the only person that would help him – to Tiffany Aching of Lancre, who reluctantly approves him as her apprentice. In the interview Tiffany asks: "Why do you want to be a witch instead of a wizard, which is something traditionally thought of as a man's job?", and Geoffrey answers: "I've never thought of myself as a man, Mistress Tiffany. I don't think I'm anything. I'm just me" (Pratchett 2015: 150). This answer can be understood as Geoffrey's denial of his innate sex and therefore taking on an unmarked gender. It proves to be the key to Tiffany's approval, as this is how a true witch would answer. Consequently he becomes a back-house boy. This is not a prestigious job, as it is about providing firewood, assisting the witch with even the worst most menial tasks (like cutting old men's toenails) and in general doing what the superior witch-in-command does not want to do herself. However, all these unrewarding, difficult and sometimes even disgusting chores are kind of an exam, testing if the back-house boy has what it takes to become a witch, as a true witch performs such tasks all the time without complaining.

Geoffrey soon wins over the people of Lancre. His revolutionary ideas (e.g. the invention of the man shed, in which elderly men can avoid their wives' nagging while enjoying their free time) and his kind heart are the key to the acceptance of his community. The narrator says about Geoffrey: "there was something about his willingness to stop and talk, his gentle smile and pleasant manner, that made them immediately warm to him" (Pratchett 2015: 165). As soon as Geoffrey shows diligence and proves that he can do his chores easily and correctly, Tiffany starts bringing him along when she attends to the villagers. She also immediately recognizes that

> the houses lit up as soon as he came in, so cheerfully alive. He could be funny, he could sing songs, and somehow he made everything … a bit better. Crying babies began to gurgle instead of howl, grown-ups stopped arguing, and the mothers became more peaceful and took his advice. He was good with animals too. […] Tiffany once saw him leaning up against a woodland cottage wall with a family of rabbits resting at his feet – at the same time as the farm dog was by his side. (Pratchett 2015: 166)

Geoffrey is well-met at every place that he visits, and anticipated with pleasure, which is not often experienced by witches – mostly due to the so-called unbelonging of the witch, which I will talk about later. However, this exception may have its root in the fact that Geoffrey is a man, which in a conservative rural environment means more than being a woman. In this case his occupation is less important than his sex.

Due to his special abilities, Geoffrey Swivel is officially named a "calm-weaver" (Pratchett 2015: 325). All the most powerful witches, including Gytha Ogg, also acknowledge his powers:

> […] he calms people. You all know that. He is calm itself, and the calm stays even when he has left. He doesn't just jolly people up. After he is gone, they are somehow much better – as if life was still worth havin'. People like that, like Geoffrey, well, they makes [sic!] the world, well, better. (Pratchett 2015: 323)

For all he does to and for the people, he is soon approved as a true protector of the land and assigned with his own witch's cottage and jurisdiction. However, he cannot be proclaimed a witch as he is a man – and witches are women, undisputedly and undeniably. Geoffrey is definitely a character unique in the sense that his attempts to fill in a position traditionally assigned only to women rewrite the requirements for a witch. Geoffrey represents everything that essentially stands for being a witch – he lacks only the official title. And as we know from *Romeo and*

Juliet: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" (2005: 379, verse 85–86).

Another example of gender liminality can be found when we consider how the people perceive witches. They can feel that the women who care for them are no ordinary ones. They know their power and, even if they do not exactly love their witches, they care for them. More often than not, however, the witches are not understood by their communities, and therefore "[the witches are] needed [...] practically all the time, but not, in a very polite and definitely unspoken way, not *exactly* wanted" (Pratchett 2011: 11). Fear and anxiety among villagers and, to a lesser extent, among city dwellers (mostly because they do not believe in witches' power that much) accompany the work and life of a witch, especially since her supernatural powers and abilities give her the opportunity to know, see and perceive more than anybody else. Therefore, many witches build their huts outside the borders of the village and the community. The witch takes care of the people, works among them, but in fact does not belong to them. This is also an important aspect of the witches' liminality – both spatial and social at the same time. Such a state can be named "un/belonging". Quoting after Justyna Sempruch,

> un/belonging, a term designating both physical location (belonging) and sociopolitical relation with agency (unbelonging), conveys a decentralized but not disempowering cultural topography. As a fugitive from melancholic positions of absence and exclusion, s/he draws on her confinement to the 'far away land' of collective myths and superstitions, to her repulsion from the 'here and now,' and simultaneously her ubiquitous physical presence, her hidden closeness as a neighboring woman, mother or daughter. But her nonconforming physical appearance is ambiguous, because as a phallocentric projection of the feminine it should be familiar (motherly), but it is not. [...] Her enforced exile or voluntary flight is from this initially marked gender, as she is caught between, rather than supported by, the various laws and languages of the Father. (2008: 122)

It can be seen that the reason of the witch's unbelonging is her gender, as well as the fact that she is always different than the rest of the community. This tension between how people perceive the witch and her true nature is another example of the her ambiguity and liminality.

The above examples show clearly that the witches of Discworld are liminal characters – spatially, socially and in magical/supernatural manner. Their ability to visit places the ordinary people cannot, like gnarly ground, the land of the Elves or the black desert or to see and interact with supernatural beings (like Death or the Hiver) is connected with spatial and social liminality, whereas crossing barriers and thresholds between life and death and between man and animal are good examples of supernatural liminality. Social liminality is also represented by the fact of unbelonging – as the witch serves her community but is not really part of it and is separated from the rest of the people, who fear her and cannot or do not want to understand her.

3. Conclusion

This article is devoted to characters of witches in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series and focuses on their liminality in supernatural, spatial and gender aspects, also connected to the social liminality. The characters' liminality serves to express their transgressive status in the story world of the series. Though thematically the witches can be seen as embodying certain female qualities and illustrating some social attitudes to women in general, they definitely go beyond these functions in Pratchett's novels because they express crucial human values and serve to introduce a serious moral perspective in the predominantly humorous world of Pratchettian fantasy.

The appearance of the male witch in Pratchett's last novel forcefully suggests transcendence of gender stereotypes and adds a vital aspect to the witches' liminal nature. Geoffrey Swivel, who is gifted with an endless compassion and the power

to weave calmness over people, is a unique and very interesting character. Being male, he throws the qualities required of a (female) witch into a sharp focus. Paradoxically, supernatural abilities are not of primary importance, the values which are really crucial for a witch include understanding, devotion to helping others and calmness. Even though a witch often chooses to live outside a village (like Granny Weatherwax), due to the witch's un/belonging, Geoffrey is very welcome whenever he goes – which contrasts him with other witches. As a man, Geoffrey cannot be accepted as an ordinary witch, but he is treated as an honorary one. Being a witch and not being one makes him an emphatically liminal character.

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