



The Conflict between Reality and Magic in Here We Are by Graham Swift

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ABSTRACT

In *Here We Are*, Graham Swift's latest novel, the theme of magic features strongly, in that the main character is a professional magician and is fascinated by magic performances. Throughout the story, the world of magic often stands in opposition to the sphere of reality and clashes with it. By investigating this crucial conflict at the historical, existential and emotional level, the present paper aims to underline the importance of the conflict between magic and reality and shed light on the role it plays in paving the way for the ending of the novel. In order to fulfil this aim, significant passages and excerpts of the novel are analysed and quoted. This paper postulates that the outcome of the aforementioned conflict results in the main character's decision to disappear and provides a solution to the chasm between the two irreconcilable dimensions. Finally, the meaning of the main character's disappearance is analysed.

Keywords: Magic vs Reality, Existential Conflict, Sudden Disappearance, Graham Swift.

1. Introduction

World is suddener than we fancy it.
World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural.
("Snow" by Louis MacNeice)

In his works, contemporary writer Graham Swift frequently tackles the theme of magic and the extent to which it influences the everyday lives of his characters, who find themselves at the intersection of magic and reality. The seeds of magic took a while to flourish in his works, though. As the writer admits, magical and supernatural elements "were there inside waiting to get out, and they did in *Waterland*" (McGrath 26, Swift). In his "magic-realist-inspired" (Rustin) 1983 Booker-prize-winning novel *Waterland*, the halo of magic hovers on the swampish region of the Fens, peppered with myths, legends and ghosts which embroider the stories of the Atkinsons and the Cricks families. Touching on these topics once again, his latest novel *Here We Are* is shrouded in an aura of magic and is concerned with "the interplay of stage magic and life's tricks" (Charles).

Despite involving three main characters, *Here We Are* revolves mostly around the story of Ronnie Deane (known onstage as Pablo), a talented magician, and his rather sad love story with his stage assistant, Evie. As awe-inspiring as their shows in the luminous, summery Brighton may be, Graham Swift is more interested in bringing to the foreground the inner life of his characters, rather than issues from the outside world (Rustin).). Once again, he masterly fulfils his aims in a novel where the outside world mirrors and triggers the internal conflict of the main character. As it will be demonstrated in the present paper, I claim that Pablo's decision to disappear is engendered by the major friction between magic and reality.

This conflict takes on various hues and manifests itself at different levels. Indeed, in my opinion the historical, existential and emotional dimensions are influenced by this dichotomy and depict the clash of the two spheres, in which magic almost always outshines reality. By analysing how the conflict is embedded in these three levels, this paper aims to give a possible interpretation of the enigmatic and evocative ending of the novel, resulting in Pablo's mysterious disappearance.

2. Falling Bombs and Magic Wands

Although it is mainly concerned with the theme of magic, *Here We Are* does not sugar-coat the real, harsh historical backdrop of the Second World War and its dramatic consequences on British people's lives. Indeed, according to Swift, "it's important for fiction to be magical, just as it's important for fiction to embrace the real world, to look really hard at the real world" (McGrath 27). It is exactly at the factual, historical level that magic and reality first come into conflict. In this first clash, reality is exemplified by war and its manifestations, whereas magic is represented by Ronnie's sojourn at Evergreene with the Lawrences, the place where Mr Lawrence (the magician 'Lorenzo') lives and introduces young Ronnie to magic tricks. In the grey neighbourhood of Bethnal Green in London, Ronnie spends his childhood with his mother and longs for more time with his father, who is a sailor and therefore comes home only after being at sea for long stretches of time. Manifesting itself in this dreary, undoubtedly real environment for the first time, magic definitely steals reality's thunder in Ronnie's tastes and imagination. The form in which it presents itself is a gift from his father: a colourful parrot, whose description is worth quoting at length so as to understand the impression it leaves in young Ronnie's mind:

It was a beautiful bird, its feathers a brilliant mix of green and blue with flashes of red and on its throat a bib of glowing yellow. Even if it hadn't been able to tell you its name, could you ever forget such a creature? (Swift 20)

Needless to say, the answer is no: Ronnie will never forget the colourfully mottled parrot Pablo, as evidenced by the similar bird that tellingly figures in the very last pages of the novel. The parrot, whose varied colours almost echo the charm and variety of magic, marks the entrance of the extraordinary in Ronnie's otherwise drearily ordinary life. As Swift acknowledges, he is a writer who starts his works from the ordinary world: "The world around the corner, the familiar world. And if there is going to be anything extraordinary, I will find it in that. Of course, there is something extraordinary" (Birnbaum 71). Even in Ronnie's uneventful childhood in London, the extraordinary (or magic) manages to break through and colour his life.

As extraordinary as magic can be, though, it is also fleeting and temporary, especially if confronted with an oppressive reality: "Perhaps a parrot in a cage would be one of the first things to suffer, even to be brutally sacrificed, when bombs were otherwise whistling down on human beings" (Swift 59). Its precariousness is further exemplified by the fact that Dolores, Ronnie's mother, remorselessly sells the parrot in order to get some money. The fact that it is Ronnie's mother, a pragmatic and determined woman (in a word, extremely 'realistic'), who disposes of the parrot only strengthens the portrayal of the friction between reality and magic in this initial, but vital, episode of the novel. As it is pointed out, Ronnie "was getting a sharp lesson in the ways of the world" (Swift 21). Despite grieving the loss of the parrot, Pablo will never forget the fact that he might have set the bird free, thereby pre-empting its unhappy existence spent in a cage at the mercy of humans.

When war starts to rage in full swing, Ronnie is sent by train to the Lawrences and spends the worst period of the war with them. Perfectly depicting a "bomb-spattered London" (Hughes), *Here We Are* painstakingly evokes the experience of the evacuation during the dramatic period of the Second World War (Norris). Indeed, many children are sent away from their families in order to protect them from the hailstorm of German bombs. Notwithstanding their parents' good intentions, some children actually got into major trouble and peril, since the families they were entrusted to did not look after them and let them suffer. Around Oxford, numerous munition factories spring up like mushrooms to produce weapons, whereas some areas of London are ablaze, as a result of the bombings.

Although it is clear that the situation is extremely dire, Ronnie is barely aware of the horrors of war while he lives in the Lawrences' magic house. Indeed, it has to be pointed out that while a far-too-real war is ravishing the country, he is introduced to magic tricks and decides to become a magician under the guidance and training of Mr Lawrence, or 'Lorenzo'. In order to clarify the contrast between war and magic it is necessary to highlight that in various instances Ronnie repeats his observation that the effects of war are not visible in Oxford. First and foremost, he asks himself: "Where was Bethnal Green, and were bombs really dropping on it?" (Swift 32). Despite the country being riddled with bombings, "the truth was that even while London and other cities suffered, hardly a bomb fell in their part of the country" (Swift 34). Although Mr Lawrence shows courage in signing up as an air-warden:

While he patrolled, looking for offending chinks of light, he would gaze up at a sky (from which all hell was supposed to fall) that, because of the blackout, was lit by a spectacular display of stars. He could grasp no better than Ronnie that whole swathes of London might be on fire (Swift 34, emphasis mine)

Due to the absence of evidence of its destruction, war is a mere 'hoax' and a 'fraud,' in young Ronnie's opinion. Paradoxically enough, reality becomes unreal and bogus — adjectives which would normally better fit magic — whereas magic does happen and it has the power to materialize objects and creatures which did not exist before. This

is exactly what Mr Lawrence does when he miraculously produces white rabbits in front of a puzzled and surprised Ronnie.

As if the conflict between reality and magic were not clear-cut enough, there is a meaningful scene where magic takes centre stage and reality, albeit dire and threatening, shrinks to a mere frame of a crucial episode. When the day of Ronnie's first magic show in front of the Lawrences finally comes, readers are incidentally informed that:

It was not one of Eric's 'warden' nights, but their own blackout curtains were meticulously in place, with the regular curtains closed before them. For all they knew, this might have been the night on which the Luftwaffe chose to shift its own attention from London or Liverpool to pulverise Oxford instead (Swift 136)

As menacing and intruding as war might be in this passage, it is literally relegated to a window and cut off through a set of thick curtains. As if that were not enough, it is promptly pointed out that the lack of light only adds to the magical atmosphere: "the sitting room at Evergreene had turned into a little hushed theatre, the drawn curtains and just the light of two standard lamps, with their gold-fringed shades, adding to the mood" (Swift 136). Ironically enough, therefore, rather than marring the performance, reality strengthens and heightens magic.

However, war cannot be relegated to a window for long. Afterwards, Ronnie goes back to his previous life in London and does military training: "Then anyway the army caught up with him and he had to go away and do his time. Never mind Pablo or any other name, he was now plain Private Deane, with a number" (Swift 60). The present excerpt shows a clear-cut division between reality and magic, which results in a split identity as well. When he performs, Pablo feels unique and absorbed in an incredible world full of possibilities, whereas as a soldier — his "proper job" at last" (Swift 60) — his surname Deane chains him to his unmagical life in Bethnal Green. In addition, uniqueness is nothing more than a memory, in that he becomes a 'plain' private whose identity is erased and merely reduced to a number. An annihilating homogeneity comes to characterize his military life far away from Evergreene.

Nevertheless, dreary reality does not succeed in stifling Pablo's love for magic. On the contrary, its anonymity and plainness backfire and rather end up fuelling his longing to become a fully-fledged magician. As a result, he takes the resolution to keep learning magic tricks while serving in the army: "He told his mother that these were weekends when he had to go for special training. It wasn't a lie. 'Training' was a useful word. To himself he might have used the phrase 'refresher courses'" (Swift 61). Ironically enough, not only does reality fail to weed out magic from his life, it is also used as a cover for his professional training as a magician. The language of reality itself, in particular the word 'training,' is subtracted from its army-related context and magic takes advantage of it to reach its goals. As far as the dimension of the conflict is concerned, therefore, it can be said that magic is undoubtedly the winner of this first round, in that it manages to neutralize war, and even to take advantage of its trademark characteristics and language.

3. The Poor Boy from Bethnal Green, the Rich Boy in Magical Evergreene

Another arena of the conflict between reality and magic is on the existential level, concerning identity. Describing Ronnie's "magical childhood" (Charles 2020) and its enormous difference from his "hardscrabble upbringing in London's East End" (Forbes 2020), the novel brilliantly tackles the theme of change (Self). Indeed, *Here We Are* provides readers with exhaustive information about Pablo's background and childhood: a bird's-eye view which adds to characters' characterisation and relatability (Vianu 65). However, his childhood at Bethnal Green is not the only one to be portrayed, since in Swift's novel characters have the "tendency [...] to judge reality as not worth living in and therefore to imagine another reality to actually exist in" (Crane 3). In the present novel, the possibility of another childhood is not imagined but materially offered by war conditions and the necessity to evacuate London.

This gives readers the opportunity to observe another field where magic and reality contend. Indeed, at this second level of analysis, magic is embodied by Ronnie's sojourn at Evergreene, whereas harsh reality is represented by his childhood in London. In this case, the two dimensions clash in Ronnie's identity, since he is torn between his roots and the life he would like to belong to. Being full of "exotic wonders" (Papinchak), Evergreene is not only spared by war, it is also a place inhabited by the Lawrences, who, differently from Ronnie's mother, have numerous and multifarious interests, as various as a magician's inventory. It is only a matter of time before Ronnie starts to consider his life in Oxford "his new (his proper?) life" (Swift 32), with the entire existential conflict embedded in the question mark.

In fact, little by little, Evergreene takes on the hues of a fairy-tale palace shrouded in magic and beauty. Swift masterfully manages to instil this impression in his readers by making a wise and purposeful use of the language: the same he uses to create a "prose which could now and then flower into something like poetry" (Swaim 14). At Evergreene, Ronnie feels truly loved by the Lawrences, who tenderly care for him and are filled with happiness to have him there, since they have no children of their own. In this sense, the recurring use of the word 'charming' is particularly meaningful. The adjective is used by Pablo's adoptive parents and their friends to describe the child: "He'd never been called that before, never imagined that he might be called it. Charming" (Swift 41). Apart from being deeply appreciated by Pablo, the term echoes magic's charm and the audience's enthusiastic exclamations at magic tricks. These echoes are further strengthened by other noticeable linguistic choices in the text. When commenting on the house and Pablo's blessed stay in Oxford, phrases like "the amazements of this place" (Swift 48) and the

adjective “enchanted” (Swift 47) are employed, whereas his time there is called a “charmed existence” (Swift 53), where “it all sounded too good to be true” (Swift 107). As a consequence, magic hovers over the house, thus entailing a conscious use of related language.

Mastering the use of images as well, Swift takes advantage of the evocative and correlative potential of the colour green, which frequently figures in the narration and could allegorically hint at magic. Curiously, the word ‘green’ links together the neighbourhood of Bethnal Green and the enchanted Oxford house. In addition to figuring in the reassuring, almost promising name of Evergreene, the adjective ‘green’ also characterizes other elements which Ronnie runs into in the Oxford house. In many instances, the colour is tellingly connected with magic and magical objects. For example, at the beginning of the novel green is one of the colours tinging the feathers of the parrot, whereas after a few pages we find it again setting apart Mr Lawrence’s professional magic table from other pieces of furniture: “Over in one corner of the sitting room [...] was a table that he’d never seen before. It was square and had a surface that was entirely bright green” (Swift 42). Furthermore, Pablo recalls that his bedclothes and curtains were green as well, together with the grassy green of the huge garden surrounding the house; the place where the white rabbits materialize and magic finds material expression.

Far from being only linguistically and allegorically implied, at Evergreene magic finds concrete realisation in front of Pablo’s incredulous eyes. Indeed, Mr Lawrence suddenly materializes some white rabbits, which disappear shortly thereafter. Apart from this kind of performative magic though, Swift poignantly makes reference to a deeper, more tender field affected by magic, which fills the Lawrences with surges of joy:

she [Mrs Lawrence] might look at him with a sudden soft expression which Ronnie, to his surprise, could quite accurately interpret as her wishing he was hers, and which might melt even further into a look that almost seemed to say that he was hers – so her wish had come true (Swift 38)

Therefore, the magic which imbues the house is not limited to Mr Lawrence’s profession as a magician, but is physically represented by Ronnie’s presence, who has become the Lawrence’s child by magic.

Back to the existential clash, Pablo’s life in the neighbourhood of Bethnal Green cannot be described as magical at all. Figuring in its name, in this case the term ‘green’ seems almost ironic and sets up a comparison with the Lawrences’ charming house. Originally known as Blithehale and Blythenhale, the name ‘Bethnal Green’ could be translated as ‘happy corner’ (Oakley). In addition, the reference to ‘Green’ comes from the ancient proximity to a marsh forest (Oakley). Therefore, Bethnal Green could mean ‘happy green corner.’ All the blithe and green belong to a bygone era, though, since in the novel the origin of the name of the neighbourhood cannot be guessed. Dolores’s pragmatic reaction to her son’s desire to become a magician is categorical and leaves no room for doubt: “She was not going to stand for any nonsense anyway” (Swift 54). All the beauty and magic with which his existence at Evergreene was imbued are now ‘foreign’ in London. As a magician feeling imprisoned in his house and former existence, Ronnie empathises with the caged parrot of his childhood, which was sacrificed to reality and the ways of life. This identification both underlines Ronnie’s longing for magic and further highlights the association between magic and the bright green parrot. After calling his house a “prison cell” (Swift 56), Pablo goes on to say that “It had once briefly housed a parrot, which, according to his blatantly lying mother, had flown away. [...] And how he identified with that caged bird” (Swift 56). Both belonging to the sphere of magic, the parrot and Pablo feel oppressed and hemmed in by the dreary reality. At first Pablo marvelled at the parrot, which he observed from the outside. His fascination reminded me of Ferdinand’s amazement at Miranda, addressed with “O you wonder!” (*The Tempest* 1.2.428) in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare. After his experience at Evergreene, though, he meaningfully identifies with the bird and shares its perspective, thereby showing an existential metamorphosis.

Even in this case, however, the toughness and insensitivity of reality just prompt him to embrace magic even further and pursue his dream of becoming a magician worthy of his name. Before picking it as a career, though, first and foremost Pablo makes magic a life choice, insomuch as he considers it the purpose of his life and a new start. As it is concisely put: “It was not just that a vase of flowers had appeared from nowhere. He himself had become a different person” (Swift 139). As a result, he feels reborn and his rebirth is symbolised by the fact that he adopts a new, magic-related name, namely Pablo: the parrot’s name and Ronnie’s middle name. Welcoming magic as a life choice entails accepting it as a profession as well. His friend Jack, a comic, offers him the possibility to work at Brighton in summer. After hiring the assistant Evie, Pablo starts performing at Brighton in a theatre built on the pier, very close to the sea. This setting is particularly meaningful, in that proximity to water is a *leitmotiv* in Swift’s works (Foyles) — for instance *Waterland* (Swift) and *Last Orders* (Swift) — and could represent “what [...] lies beyond life” (Burke Frumkes 55). Having different meanings, the ‘beyond’ in this case could mean overcoming reality and reaching a different, higher dimension.

Strikingly, the difference between Pablo’s magic shows and Jack’s more ordinary, ‘down-to-earth’ performances reproduces at a minor level the major friction between magic and reality. As far as this aspect is concerned, Jack’s remarks to the public before and after Ronnie’s performances are particularly revealing, such as “Now all you’ve got is me. Back down to earth, eh?” (Swift 9) or, even more pointedly, “I want you to meet the real Mr Magic. Not like me, eh?” (Swift 15). Although the novel is scattered with many characters steeped in reality, Jack is undoubtedly a capital example. Despite it not being entirely like Dolores’, his opinion of Pablo’s training at Evergreene

is similar to hers. Apart from defining his formative experience as a “sorcerer’s apprenticeship” (Swift 51), he dismissively labels Pablo’s illusions as mere tricks: “Tricks? Illusions? What’s the difference, Evie? You tell me” (Swift 123).

Indeed, Pablo’s specialty is illusions, effects which look real but are not. During his performances, magic has the power not only to transcend the boundaries of reality but also to transform it and make its places look different and more beautiful, as Jack angrily acknowledges: “Turn up the lights and you’d soon see, he knew, how tatty, how shabby, how sham it all was” (Swift 103). In case Jack’s words were not explicit enough, even in this case reality is defeated and magic outstrips it also as far as the existential level is concerned as well.

4. The Illusion of Love and the Enigmatic Ending

We have now reached the last level of the analysis regarding the conflict between magic and reality in *Here We Are*. Up to this point, reality has always been outshone in the confrontations, regardless of the obstacles on Pablo’s professional and existential path. The next level of examination is concerned with the emotional and sentimental sphere, which is linked to Pablo and Evie’s love story. Characterising Graham Swift’s literary production, betrayals, disappointments and fallings-out are a recurring thread (Rustin) and hinder relationships between characters. However, in this case the collapse of the love story with Evie makes the difference in the ending of the novel, as it will be demonstrated at the end of this section, and is therefore of paramount importance. At the sentimental level, reality is embodied by Evie’s betrayal which acts as a wake-up call from magic’s world, whereas magic suffuses their engagement.

As Swift admits, he is “fascinated by borderline conditions” — be they on the cusp between past and present or between history and story (Vianu 64). Yet, he adds that there is an even more impossible border, consisting of “the line between what we agree to call the real world and a world that exists but mainly in our heads, the world of imagination, memory and invention” (Vianu 64). In the emotional realm more than in the others, the boundaries between magic and reality become more blurred and constantly merge into one another. Indeed, Ronnie and Evie are not only lovers but also professional partners, thereby cementing the two dimensions. Originally taken on as an assistant, Evie muses on the twofold nature of their relationship by saying that “though they were Pablo and Eve they were also Ronnie and Evie” (Swift 74).

Further placing the emphasis on this blend is the double meaning of objects, concepts and verbs. One of the most noticeable examples is the engagement ring, almost a seal and glaring proof that as a couple they have something special (or magical): “And look, there was even her engagement ring, glinting on her finger, to clinch it” (Swift 15). Apart from symbolizing a romantic promise, the golden ring is compared later on to the golden key used to open the boxes in which Evie is locked to be sawn in half. The term ‘engagement’ itself possesses two meanings: a professional engagement to work in Brighton during the summer and the engagement to get married in September, after the end of the high season. Sometimes magic and magic tricks are explicitly associated to their relationship, weaving interesting and thought-provoking jokes such as Pablo’s introductory banter “Meet Evie. Meet Eve. My other half. Halves” (Swift 89). Strewn across the plot, associations continue and peak in the secret of Ronnie’s magic tricks, which Evie might or might not know (it is not clear). The most noteworthy element, though, is that she compares being in the know about them to “the deal, the pledge, more binding and unbreakable, it seemed, than even a promise of marriage” (Swift 90). Whether she knows Pablo’s secrets or not, many years later she is still adamant in not breathing a word to anyone.

As compelling as the double use of language can be, another element proving that Ronnie’s love for Evie is imbued with magic is his protective attitude. Although Evie longs to meet Dolores, Ronnie does not want his mother to meet his fiancée. A similar behaviour was adopted in his childhood, since he refused to write long, detailed letters to his mother and wanted to keep her apart from the magical world of Evergrene. Whenever there is something precious or magical to him, he tries to prevent Dolores from reaching it. This makes sense if we consider his mother a pragmatic realist who could negatively affect whatever magic she comes across, as it happened with the parrot, which Pablo never forgot.

Interestingly, though, Evie herself is a good example of a realist and she is definitely aware of the ‘ways of the world,’ as it clearly emerges from her job interview with Pablo. He talks about magic with rapture and highlights the importance of giving the public what it wants, but Evie has known that lesson for a long time and concisely summarizes it with her own words: “Keep smiling, Evie, and look after your legs” (Swift 65). The scene of Evie’s job interview includes humour — a feature rarely pinpointed in some of Swift’s novels (Crane 8, Gossmann 48) — because of the chasm between their perspectives. Moreover, at first sight she funnily keeps thinking to herself that Pablo is a far cry from magic, as her thoughts explain: “this man didn’t look all that magical” (Swift 65), “Hardly magic words” (Swift 66) and “Anywhere less ready for magic would have been hard to find” (Swift 67).

Much as she loves Ronnie, though, Evie has more in common with Jack, another pragmatic character, and even their stories are similar. ‘Same’ is a binding adjective repeated twice when mentioning their experiences, since both had the same start in life and ambitious mothers who encouraged them to go into entertainment. Instead, Ronnie is immediately labelled as “a different kettle of fish” (Swift 17). As evident as their differences in upbringing and points

of view may be, the reason for Evie's betrayal and their break-up ultimately deals with priorities and magic itself. Despite wanting to be the one for Ronnie, Evie soon realizes that she has an immaterial rival in his profession, since it is as clear as day that the magician is 'married to magic' in the first place. What leads Evie to cheat on Ronnie with Jack is the fact that she feels valuable, important and special in his eyes:

If what he was saying to her now, about slipping back into the auditorium, was true, then she wasn't just some passing thing he'd only noticed yesterday. And, fortunately or unfortunately, it was true. And, fortunately or unfortunately, she was right (Swift 142)

Pablo does not need to exchange words with her to understand that Evie has cheated on him while he was away to see his deceased mother's corpse. As it has been nicely put, the strength of Swift's novels comes from orchestrating the collapse of a certain number of false ideas, of erroneous concepts, on which your characters based their lives, and which collapse in silence, without the world around them feeling the traces of this profound shock" (Porée 30)

This collapse is triggered by Evie's cheating and overthrows Ronnie's beliefs and certainties, as it will be highlighted in the next section. Furthermore, this traumatic event results in Pablo's resolution to disappear and therefore sets the stage for the ambiguous ending of the novel.

As many readers fond of Swift's novels would agree, disappearances often figure in the author's works, such as the exceptional *Waterland* (Swift) or *Mothering Sunday* (Swift). During an interview with the writer, Porée made reference to a "macabre fixation on the "serial" disappearance" of his characters (Porée 32-33) and *Here We Are* is no exception. Lying at the heart of the novel (Brown), appearances and disappearances affect characters and the denouement, apart from belonging to the realm of magic tricks. Silently overwhelmed by the collapse of his magic-imbued relationship with Evie, Pablo faces the plain, harsh reality which ruthlessly seems to prevail and undermine the foundations of his passion for magic.

In the first part of the novel, events and experiences unmistakably prove that magic is a far cry from miracles. When the war is over and Pablo has to return to Bethnal Green and resume his former life, it is sadly pointed out that

Even the availability of magic, it seemed, could not solve everything. It could bring about extraordinary transformations, but not alter the fundamentals of life. It was a lesson a budding magician would be wise to heed (Swift 53)

Being a wise magician, Pablo is well aware of the difference and Mr Lawrence himself spells the lesson out for him, by underlining that there are magic wands but at the same time no magic wands. For instance, magic cannot grant eternal life or everlasting health, as Mr Lawrence's death confirms: "magicians do die" (Swift 63) indeed.

However, Dolores's sudden death sets Pablo thinking and reconsidering the choices he has made in his life. When he is informed that his mother is seriously ill, he travels by train to reach her but arrives too late to exchange last words. Quite surprisingly, during the journey he broods on the uselessness and futility of magic, which has nonetheless shaped his life and that he has embraced as a professional choice. Melancholic, sad thoughts cloud his mind and their effect is heightened by people's reaction at their discovery of his unusual profession. Here again the difference between magic and miracles resonates. Far from being accepted as an established fact, this difference now torments Pablo, who is already harbouring sad thoughts about magic. The excerpt is worth quoting at length in order to highlight his feelings and sense of dejection:

Then they of course might think he was lying. 'You're having me on.' Or they'd want him immediately to 'do a trick.' To prove it. Or the conversation might drift into some wishful realm in which it was assumed he might do *anything*. Sort out this man's problems, for example. Make money grow on trees, make dreams come true. Come on then, if you are what you say you are. And there would be an evident disappointment, even a touch of suspicion and distrust if it emerged, as it would, that he could not do absolutely anything, there were only some things he could do. Call yourself a magician... (Swift 127)

All of this would be painful enough even if Pablo's mother weren't seriously ill, but in his already excruciating situation he feels belittled and humiliated. Upon returning to Brighton, his deeply distressed state of mind is further worsened by the realisation of Evie's cheating. It is at this point, I reckon, that the novel reaches its lowest point. Nevertheless, and quite surprisingly, Pablo reacts not by shunning or brusquely rejecting magic, but by clinging to it even more. This decision was already taken on his way back to Brighton when he decided that he still wanted to perform magic and entertain people. In a sense, his initial dejection and brighter final resolution are perfectly mirrored by the dreary weather of the countryside outside the train window:

suddenly everything, flashing past him as it was, became tempestuous and dramatic. Rain lashed his window, the greenery before him became awash and blurred [...]. But then, just as suddenly, [...] half the world was full of sunshine again (Swift 133)

Although it is compelling and interesting, readers are not allowed to know whether the half world he mentions is the magic one, which would further enlarge the fracture with reality.

Nevertheless, after the break-up with Evie the conflict between magic and reality noticeably becomes more marked. As a matter of fact, Ronnie has no intention of abandoning magic and rather steps into wizardry with a new name, the Great Pablo. Through the choice of a new name and the interest for more complex kinds of performance,

it is as if Pablo, the Great Pablo, were beginning to take more distance from the world of reality, now strewn with grief, loss and failures. Metamorphosing into the Great Pablo, he leaves Evie and Jack behind: "Eve was always just Eve. And Jack was just Jack" (Swift 121).

This brings us to his decision to disappear during his last show, a telling choice open to numerous interpretations. It is a lyrical, pivotal moment where Swift's poetic prose shows all its might. Indeed, according to the writer, "poetry isn't just a matter of verse, so there is poetry in prose" (Andrews 137). The final disappearance represents not only the end of the novel but most importantly the end of a cycle in many ways. In fact, the first trick Ronnie ever performed at the Lawrences dealt with appearances, inasmuch as he made a bunch of red roses appear from nowhere. Added to this, before vanishing he sets a beautiful, colourful parrot flying over the audience, an awe-inspiring sight: "It was something that looked at first almost like some broken-off whirring piece of the rainbow itself. It had feathers of all colours, blue and red and yellow, but mainly a vivid brilliant green" (Swift 186). Apart from being a recurring feature throughout the novel, the parrot in the last scene has a deeper meaning, which binds together Pablo's past and his present, not to mention the beginning and the end of his story.

Far from forgetting the parrot his father had brought to him as a gift, Pablo clearly remembers that his mother sold it. Most importantly, though, he felt pangs of guilt since he knew that he could have easily set the bird free, thereby avoiding condemning it to a life spent crammed into a cage. Furthermore, upon returning to his former life in London, he identified with the colourful bird and its situation of captivity. After Evie's cheating and the mounting oppression of reality, I am of the opinion that he feels imprisoned again. This time, though, he decides to change his situation and alter his fate. By setting the parrot free — his last artistic gesture and ultimate affirmation of his passion for magic in spite of everything — it is as if Pablo were breaking his shackles as well and escaping the situation of restriction he finds himself in. He did not set the bird free when he was a child but years later he has the possibility to make amends. The fact that he himself literally vanishes further hints at this possibility and underlines his identification with the parrot. Another interesting element which catches the eye is that Pablo finds a solution to recollect the searing conflict between reality and imagination, by disappearing. As if he himself were one of the objects of a magic performance such as a bunch of roses, a dove or a handkerchief, he steps into the realm of magic and leaves once and for all the real dimension, in which he is never to be seen again.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Here We Are* is the arena of the constant and prolonged conflict between reality and magic, which takes place at three different levels. The first two levels, namely the historical and the existential ones, are evident examples of magic's triumph, which deliver strong blows to the dimension of reality. Despite these shining victories though, the field of emotions and sentiments witnesses the unquestionable victory of reality, which triumphs over magic. As a result of this blow, the main character chooses to abandon reality once and for all and clings even more to the dimension he has devoted his life and professional career to. He does so with a spectacular and exceptional final show and artistic gesture, which brims over with meanings and fascinating references. According to Swift, "Several of my novels end with an unknown outcome, with no real ending" and this frequent denouement portrays life as it is (Craps 113). Needless to say, indeed, the issue of Pablo's disappearance is open to other possible interpretations and is not limited to one solution, thereby adding to the novel's mysteriousness. Therefore, in *Here We Are* as well the writer gives his readers another masterly example of a novel sharing his other masterpieces' tendency to "become more mysterious at the end than they were at the beginning" (Craps 113).

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