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## Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) or The Story of a New Mythology<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper focuses upon Diana Wynne Jones's 1986 fantasy novel *Howl's Moving Castle*, part of the trilogy including *Castle in the Air* (1990) and *House of Many Ways* (2008). Taking place in a utopian land, the story creates a new mythology built upon magic, objects coming to life, no space boundaries and the search for eternal life and the perfect human. As a consequence, the paper will deal with the main elements of this mythology and the way in which they have been transposed in the 2006 Oscar-nominated movie version.

**Keywords:** Fantastic literature, Utopia, Mythological elements, Movie adaptation.

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The novelty of Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) is that it breaks up with the traditional canons of standardized patterns of ordinary fairy tales creating the conditions for a new type of mythology. Part of a trilogy, the book seems to have been particularly designed to reflect the new demands of the reading public at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>th</sup> century. The target audience is most likely made up of teenagers who would be able to understand and enjoy the meaning of the story and the implications of the character's actions. Adults could also read and enjoy the story, especially if they perceive it at a different level, the ironical and satirical one with a continuous parody of all the elements recurring in older folk or fairy tales.

The very title of the novel could be interpreted as a warning for the readers that this is not going to be a typical fairy tale although all the necessary elements are present throughout the text, but in a completely different order in utterly different associations and combinations. From this perspective, the readers' interest is aroused as they become aware that they will embark on a journey where they do not know what to expect or they are to expect the unexpected. After all, the story will revolve around a moving castle, a symbolic setting for the ever-changing circumstances in contemporary society.

The first sentence in the first chapter reminds the readers of the beginning formula in a fairy tale only to challenge it immediately afterwards: "In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortune (Jones, 1986, p. 1). There is a magical land and there are magical objects such as "seven-league boots" and "cloaks of invisibility" and there are even the three daughters to be found in traditional stories like *Cinderella*. The major difference is that the third-person narrator is voicing the doubts and fears of the eldest daughter who is consciously aware of her unfortunate status in the fantasy world.

Like Snow White, Sophie Hatter's mother has died and her father remarried having another daughter, Martha. Apparently unlike in the fairy tale, Sophie seemed content with the way their stepmother treated them all: "Fanny treated all three girls with the same kindness and did not favor Martha in the least" (Jones, 1986, p. 1).

In an intertextual dialogue, Howl becomes a new Bluebeard like in Charles Perrault's famous fairytale telling the story of a violent noble man in the habit of murdering his wives and the attempts of one wife to avoid the fate of her predecessors. Likewise, Howl was known to amuse himself by collecting young girls and sucking their souls and eating their hearts.

The story becomes more and more complicated with intricate narrative threads focusing upon one of the following characters; Sophie and her two sisters, Martha and Lettie ; Howl, his apprentice Michael, his fire demon Calcifer, the Witch of the Waste as well as the King, Prince Justin or Wizard Sulliman. Maybe not accidentally, the Witch of the Waste transforms Sophie into an old woman since the readers should have been already warned that she is a symbol of maturity and wisdom bearing the name of the Greek goddess of Wisdom. Unlike in traditional fairy tales, Sophie's sisters take charge of their own lives and decide to change their destinies refusing to assume their pre-established roles as they are being set by their mother: in spite of her beauty, Lettie is the clever one and as a consequence, she does not want to accept her faith as an apprentice in a pastry shop, so she will change her place with her other sister, Martha who is sent to live with a witch and to learn the mysteries of witchcraft.

Following the traditional pattern in fairy tales, Sophie will experience three magical encounters with a scarecrow, a dog and a shepherd. When she reaches her destination (Howl's Castle), Sophie will struck a deal with the fire demon, Calcifer like in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in which a man sells his soul to the devil for power, experience, pleasure and knowledge. The demon agrees to raise her spell if she is able to break the contract he is under, a contract forced upon him by Howl.

Throughout its development, the story acquires comical accents, the protagonist being mocked at and parodied and their behavior being made to reflect the typical activities in any ordinary household (they have breakfast together, Sophie is cleaning the house, Howl complains about his cold and likes being spoilt and treated like a sick person, etc.).

In a blending of fantasy and science fiction, the novel revolves around the story of Wizard Howl who seems to have been projected from the future, from a place in Wales and whose personality is fragile and unstable, therefore he feels the need to assume multiple identities (Sorcerer Jenkins in Porthaven and Wizard Pendragon in Kingsbury). Reflecting the instability in contemporary society, the readers have to understand and to adapt to the various

settings Howl is using in order to hide his real location from his greatest enemies, the King and the Witch of the Waste (the green knob of the door leads to the Folding Valley and Market Chipping, the red knob leads to Kingsbury, the blue knob takes him to Porthaven whereas the black knob opens the door to Wales and the future). When the castle's location is changed, there are new settings too such as the secret garden whose door is opened by the purple knob, a mansion at the end of the Folding Valley where the orange knob leads, and the street in Market Chipping where Sophie has been living all her life marked by the yellow knob. A symbol of fertility and vegetation, the secret garden is placed immediately near the Witch's Wasteland in an attempt of reviving the barren land and of putting an end to the Witch's reign.

As in any magical realm, Sophie makes use of magical objects such as the seven-league boots meant to help her travel long distances faster or the invisibility cloaks helping them to hide their identity and to transform themselves into either animals (a horse or a dog) or human beings such as a red bearded man. For Michael and Sophie, the ordinary objects from the future such as a TV or a computer game become magical objects because they cannot understand their functions and utilities. For example, Howl's nephew Neil is playing a computer game and he is exclaiming: "Don't interrupt!, one of the boys said. He'll lose his life. Seeing it was a matter of life and death, Sophie and Michael backed toward the door" (Jones, 1986: 53). Obviously, they do not understand that the threat is not the real one since they have been used with the life and death situations in their own world.

Another element of novelty is the fact that Jones's literary text includes a number of inter-textual elements such as the reference to John Donne's poem *Go and Catch a Falling Star*: "Go and catch a falling star,/ Get with child a mandrake root,/ Tell me where all past years are,/ Or who cleft the devil's foot,/ Teach me to hear mermaids singing,/ Or to keep off envy's stinging,/ And find What wind Serves to advance an honest mind./ If thou beest born to strange sights,/ Things invisible to see,/ Ride ten thousand days and nights/ Till age snow white hairs on thee./ Thou, when thou returnest, wilt tell me/ All strange wonders that befell thee,/ And swear/ Nowhere/ Lives a woman true, and fair./ If thou-" (Jones, 1986, p. 57). The poem is turned into a spell and the symbolism of the falling star usually associated with somebody's death acquires new meanings: Howl has interfered in the natural course of a falling star thus changing it into a demon and losing his own heart in the process. Moreover, the intertextual reference to *Hamlet* is used with respect to the magical skull which is a

scrambled part of the poor Prince Justin and Wizard Sulliman: “Alas, poor Yorick!” he said. “She heard mermaids, so it follows that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark.” (Jones, 1986, p. 83). The Witch’s attempt to create a perfect creature out of Prince Justin, Wizard Sulliman and Howl is set under the sign of derision and is doomed to fail from its very emergence.

The image of Howl’s castle in the movie does not resemble the ordinary image of the castle to which the viewers may have been accustomed with from previous adaptations of fairy tales or fantasy novels, in fact the castle looks rather comical and therefore the story is set from the beginning in the area of mockery and parody. Sophie herself is amused when she sees the castle and ironically asks: “Do you call this a castle?” Later on, the opulence and grandeur of the King’s castle are contrasted with the ordinariness of Howl’s castle. Like in the novel, Howl’s castle stirs the imagination of the inhabitants of Market Chipping, especially of the young women who feel irresistibly attracted to Howl’s charm.

In the movie, during Sophie and Howl’s first encounter, Howl acts as her savior helping her to resist the advances of a young officer, whereas in the novel he is the one trying to accost Sophie in the middle of the street and she rejects him. This is a fundamental difference in terms of character construction. If in the movie Sophie is still the typical maiden in fairy tales who always needs a man to help her, in the novel she is strong enough and independent enough to protect herself from any exterior aggression.

The movie fails to focus upon the portrayal of the condition of women as they are rendered in fairy tales. The novel challenges the status of the three sisters with Lettie taking Martha’s place and Sophie being forced to leave her home and find her fortune somewhere else. Unfortunately, the movie does not capture the sisters’ disappointment with the fate their mother decided for them and they merely become episodic characters in support of Sophie’s story.

The first encounter between Sophie and the Witch of the Waste looks like a confrontation and the interesting thing is that Sophie does not seem to be intimidated by the witch as most people would most probably have felt. She is even brave enough to tell her to leave the shop, but maybe too brave because defying the Witch of the Waste led to her transformation into an old woman.

The war passionate director of the movie, Hayao Miyazaki, has deliberately chosen to use war scenes as a background for the story highlighting the conflict between two kingdoms which was not actually enhanced by the novelist. This is an opportunity for him to use images with various types of war machineries, some of them looking as if they have been projected from a science fiction movie.

Both in the movie and in the novel Sophie has some difficulty in finding the way inside the castle. This could be interpreted as a difficulty in passing from one realm into another, from the real world into the magical one. At first, the interior of the castle looks dark and deserted an unlikely place for a magician like Howl to live in. The fire demon himself acquires human attributes, complaining that he is “an exploited demon” and that “he is chained there by a contract with Howl, who works him to death”.

Even if the major events of the story outline are preserved in the movie, there are some drawbacks influencing the viewers’ perspective. For example, there is no door leading to Wales where Howl was supposed to have come from, but there is a door leading to Howl’s childhood.

The movie creates the image of Howl as an anti-hero since he himself admits that “The truth is I’m scared to death” or “I’m just a coward”; the message is that he has chosen to use magic in order to hide his weakness and the flaws in his own character. He reveals himself in his true colors in front of Sophie and even asks for her help when he has to face the King. Howl in the movie has to fight against his dark side which makes him transform into a wild animal. The Witch of the Waste herself is reduced to a vegetative state by a more powerful witch. Sophie is the only one who manages to preserve her kindness and humanity and this is the reason why only she will be able to regain her youth and rescue Howl in the end. Sophie’s love for Howl will make her step into darkness straight to the moment when the child Howl caught the falling star and gained his magical powers in exchange for his heart. Ultimately, Sophie will acquire magical powers so she will be able to revive Howl and send Calcifer back on the sky. The happy ending is preserved even if the hero is a heroine and her moral qualities and not her physical valor help her triumph against the powers of evil.

In conclusion, Diana Wynne Jones’s 1986 fantasy novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* and its 2006 movie adaptation challenge the patterns of traditional fairy tales responding to the demands of contemporary readers and viewers while uniquely combining the fantastic and science fiction elements with the satirical and parodical ones.

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