

**MORRISON AND THE BRONTËS: THE ARCANA OF THE  
ARCHETYPAL THREE SISTERS**

Valter Henrique de Castro Fritsch

*Universidade Federal do Rio Grande*

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a reading of the play *We Are Three Sisters*, written in 2011, by the British poet and playwright Philip Blake Morrison, in order to discuss the links among fiction, reality and biographical information based on the perspectives of Adaptation Studies and Imaginary Studies. As backdrop for the creation of *We Are Three Sisters*, Morrison uses the text *Three Sisters*, written by the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, adapting its historic and social context, filling his play with information about the life of the Brontë sisters. Besides being three great authors of the Victorian canon, the Brontë sisters are also British cultural icons, so often represented as characters in fictional biographies, novels, movies, ballets and plays. To write his appropriation of the Brontës' life, Morrison utilizes Juliet Barker's biography, while using Chekhov's play as a shadow text, a matrix that serves as the basis for his creation, a scaffold around which he builds up his fiction. This paper both analyzes the intertwining of reality and fiction performed by Morrison through adaptation and transposition processes and presents a reading of the symbolic content of the three sisters archetype from the perspective of the Imaginary Studies.

**KEY-WORDS:** Blake Morrison; Brontë sisters; British Theatre; Adaptation Studies; Imaginary Studies.

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo apresenta uma leitura da peça *We Are Three Sisters*, escrita em 2011 pelo poeta e dramaturgo britânico Philip Blake Morrison, com o

objetivo de discutir as ligações entre as instâncias do ficcional, do real e do biográfico a partir das perspectivas dos Estudos de Adaptação e dos Estudos do Imaginário. Morrison utiliza como pano de fundo para a elaboração de *We Are Three Sisters* o texto *As Três Irmãs* escrito pelo dramaturgo russo Anton Chekhov, adaptando seu contexto histórico e social e preenchendo com dados sobre a vida das Irmãs Brontë. Além de serem três grandes autoras do cânone vitoriano, as Irmãs Brontë surgem também como ícones culturais britânicos, tantas vezes já representados como personagens em biografias ficcionais, romances, filmes, balés e peças de teatro. Para escrever sua apropriação da vida das Brontës, Morrison se ampara na biografia de Juliet Barker, ao mesmo tempo em que utiliza a peça de Chekhov como um texto sombra, uma matriz que serve como base para sua criação, um andaime em torno do qual constrói sua ficção. O presente artigo analisa o movimento de entrelaçamento de realidade e ficção realizado por Morrison através de processos de adaptação e transposição e apresenta uma leitura do conteúdo simbólico do arquétipo das três irmãs através da perspectiva dos Estudos do Imaginário.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Blake Morrison; Irmãs Brontë; Teatro Britânico; Estudos de Adaptação; Estudos do Imaginário.

“My first memory is gravestones. What’s yours Emily?” –

Anne/Act One – Blake Morrison, *We Are Three Sisters*.

Blake Morrison is an English poet, anthologist, critic and playwright. He was born in Skipton, Yorkshire, in 1950, and was educated at Nottingham University before pursuing his postgraduate studies at University College in London. According to the *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, he worked for the *Times Literary*

*Supplement* between 1978 and 1981, when he was editor for both *The Observer* and *the Independent* on Sunday. Morrison is now Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Chairman to the Poetry Book Society and council member of the Poetry Society, a member of the Literature Panel of the Arts Council of England and Vice-Chairman of English PEN<sup>1</sup>. Since 2003 he has been Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College in the University of London.

Blake Morrison has also written non-fiction books, such as his memoir *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993), a moving narrative about his father's life and death which won the J. R. Ackerley Prize and the Esquire/Volvo/Waterstone's Non-Fiction Book Award. His biography was made into a film in 2007, starring Colin Firth. A second memoir called *Things My Mother Never Told Me* was published in 2002. He is also the editor of the *Penguin Reader of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982). When it comes to theatre, Blake Morrison's works are predominantly what is normally called adaptations<sup>2</sup>. He adapts from classic plays such as in *The Cracked Pot* (1996), an adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. Both *The Cracked Pot* and his version of Sophocles's *Oedipus* (2001) were produced and performed by Barrie Rutter's theatre company, Northern Broadsides. The same theatre company went on to perform his version of *Antigone* in 2003 and published *Antigone* and *Oedipus* in a double volume in that same year. Morrison's plays also include *The Man with Two Gaffers*, a version of Carlo Goldoni's *Il Servitore di due Padroni*, and *Lisa's Sex Strike*, an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, which transforms the classic text into a

---

<sup>1</sup>English PEN is the founding centre of a worldwide writers' association with 145 centres in more than 100 countries. It facilitates and promotes translation into English of published work in foreign languages they consider to be of outstanding literary merit.

<sup>2</sup> By the purposes of this article, adaptation is understood both as a process and as a product that broad knowledge of cultural and artistic works, in order to discuss literature and other arts and to enrich reading experience processes.

comedy set in a northern mill town. *Lisa's Sex Strike* toured with Northern BroadSides in 2007.

His latest play is *We Are Three Sisters*, published and performed in 2011. In this play, Morrison uses Chekhov's *Three Sisters* as a shadow text, or a template, to tell the story of the Brontë sisters - Charlotte, Emily and Anne. He has mirrored many of the dialogues in Chekhov's play, translating and adapting them to fit the specific details of life at the Brontë Parsonage. He has kept the structure of *Three Sisters* as a scaffold around which he builds the story of the Brontës. In the present paper, I will discuss the movements of adaptation and transposition, entwining facts and fiction, performed by Morrison. It is also important to understand Morrison's creative process to analyze the borrowing of Chekhov's play to build up his own fictional version of the life of these three Victorian writers and to examine the imaginary content and symbolic appeal surrounding the archetype of the three sisters.

Morrison saw the obvious connections between the life of the Brontë sisters and Chekhov's play - for instance the three sisters who support one another, a troubled brother with alcoholic problems, dead parents, the feeling of remoteness from the centre, an old servant who is also considered part of the family and themes such as culture, literature, work, women's rights, love and marriage that are discussed by Chekhov and the Brontë sisters. I learned from Morrison<sup>3</sup> (FRITSCH & MORRISON, 2016) in an interview he granted me in 2015, that Chekhov's biography written by Donald Rayfield mentions that the Russian writer may have read a biography of the Brontës he ordered from St Petersburg. That biography could be the link based on which he establishes the connections between his literary work and the real life of the Brontë sisters.

---

<sup>3</sup> Blake Morrison gave me an interview, in his office, at Goldsmith College of the University of London, in February 2015. The interview was part of my PhD research about his literary works.

But this is just a literary speculation. In this paper, we will deal with the movements of adaptation and transposition that Morrison performs in order to create his literary work and the symbolic appeal surrounding the archetype of the three sisters. To do so, we have to sum up to the conversation the theories of imaginary and a theoretician who has a lot to say about adaptation and transposition – Linda Hutcheon.

Blake Morrison chooses Chekhov's *Three Sisters* as a shadow text, a kind of scaffold from which he builds up his story about the Brontë sisters adapting characters and situations and transposing time and social background. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that we are not talking here about a derivative work, but a literary creation that is unique and stands for itself without the necessity of any exterior help. Morrison's *We Are Three Sisters* stands for itself without the necessity of knowing Chekhov or his plays. The more one knows about those facts and literary works, the more one can deepen one's reading of Morrison's play. As Linda Hutcheon teaches us

If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works. It is what Gérard Genette would call a text in the second degree, created and then received in relation to a prior text. This is why adaptation studies are so often comparative studies. This is not to say that adaptations are not also autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such; as many theorists have insisted, they obviously are. This is one reason why and adaptation has its own aura, its own presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. I take such a position as axiomatic, but not as my theoretical focus. To interpret an adaptation as an adaptation is, in a sense, to treat it as what Roland Barthes called, not a "work", but a "text", a plural "stereophony of echoes, citations, and references". Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double or multilaminated works that can be theorized as adaptations. (HUTCHEON, 2013, p.8)

So, taking Hutcheon's words into consideration, it is not the literary critics' job to perform judgements related to the fidelity or proximity of the text. Neither is this the criterion of judgement nor should it be the focus of analysis. My reading of *We Are Three Sisters* is not an attempt to show how it gets close or how loyal it is to Chekhov's structure or the Brontës biographical materials, because I do not believe Morrison's play aims to reproduce such things but to adapt them in a creative way. In addition to that, Morrison works with the transposition from the real to the fictional, from a historical and social background to a fictionalized play, and these movements can be studied through different lens and perspectives.

Hutcheon defends that adaptation must be seen in at least three different perspectives – as a formal entity or product, as a process of creation and as a process of reception. As an aesthetical construct, *We Are Three Sisters* is an adaptation to the stage of some periods of the Brontë Sisters' lives that uses Chekhov's structure of a previous play to build up the universe of the Brontë parsonage as the background of Morrison's text. The process of creation adopted by Morrison involves a lot of study and research not only about the Brontë sisters' literary works and life, but also of the entire process of recreation. The process of reception relies on the reader/watcher of the play and it is engaged with the previous experiences one has had with the Brontës, Chekhov and Morrison's works – the process of reception depends on our memories and capacity to read intertextualities.

One more thing one has to keep in mind when reading *We Are Three Sisters* is that it is a theatrical play, and as a theatrical play we have at least two different modes of engagement with it. In her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Hutcheon presents three different modes of engagement with a work of art – the telling mode, the showing mode and the interacting mode. According to her,

In the telling mode – in narrative literature, for example – our engagement begins in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel, as well as see, how much of the story remains to be read. But with the move to the mode of showing, as in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And we have to move from imagination to the realm of perception – with its mix of both detail and broad focus. The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural equivalents for characters' emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects. On the other hand, however, a shown dramatization cannot approximate the complicated verbal play of told poetry or the interlinking of description, narration, and explanation that is so easy for prose narrative to accomplish. Telling a story in words, either orally or on paper, is never the same as showing it visually and aurally in any of the many performance media available. (HUTCHEON, 2013, p.23)

So, we are dealing with two diverse possibilities when performing a reading of a play. In the telling mode we deal with the play - the play on the page - and such task demands efforts of imagination to set the scenes while reading. These are the main reasons why I choose to focus on my reading in the telling mode. I did not have the opportunity to watch *We Are Three Sisters* on the stage; and, therefore, I chose to focus on the literary aspects of the play. The showing mode is bound to the sensorial aspects of reception and works for the multiple possibilities of the play on the stage. According to Hutcheon,

When we work in the other direction – that is, from the telling to the showing mode, especially from print to performance – a definitional problem potentially arises. In a very real sense, every live staging of a printed play could theoretically be considered an adaptation in its performance. The text of a play does not necessarily tell an actor about such matters as gestures, expressions, and tones of voice to use in converting words on a page into a convincing performance; it is up to the director and

actors to actualize the text and to interpret and then recreate it, thereby in a sense adapting it for the stage. (HUTCHEON, 2013, p.39)

In this sense, we have as many possibilities of different performances of the play on the stage, as we have different actors and directors performing it. *We Are Three Sisters* is a five-act play set in the Haworth Parsonage, home to our three protagonists Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë. It covers a brief period of the life of these writers, from 1845 to 1848 – a time when the Brontës were not well known yet. Blake Morrison did not choose this specific period of their lives by chance, as he attests.

Many periods in the Brontës' lives were dramatic but this was a particularly dramatic period. I was interested in the whole idea of the three sisters, unlike Chekhov's three sisters, doing something, becoming published and so on, but their breakthrough also coinciding with Branwell's decline. This is the period of his disappointment with Mrs Robinson, for whom he had worked as a tutor and with whom he was in love and then his decline and indeed death. There is a question mark as to whether Branwell might've known that his sisters had found a London publisher. Certainly Charlotte was worried that someone had seen one of the letters that came from her publisher. Anyway, it seemed to me this is a very dynamic and interesting period of their lives to explore and that there were connections and parallels to be made with Chekhov's play. (BROWN & MORRISON, 2014, p.32)

The practice of adaptation and transposition as performed by Morrison brings to both readers and audience a double-coded work of art, because we can interpret the meaning of the play in its own right and also the relationship to its original sources and texts – in this case Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the Brontës' biography. Not only does Morrison approximate the structure, dialogues and sequences of actions performed by the characters from *Three Sisters*, but he also uses feelings and silences in a strategy that sometimes approximates Chekhov's characters to the Brontës, and sometimes get them far away from one another. He deals with the transposition of the vast emptiness



of the Russian landscape to the wild desolation of the moors of Yorkshire, a place he knows very well, as he was born there.

*We Are Three Sisters* starts in a mood very similar to the first scene of Chekhov's play. The three sisters – Charlotte, Emily and Anne – are together at their working tables while talking about their memories of the past, and remembering their mother's death. It is in this first scene that we are already able to establish the connections with Chekhov's characters. Charlotte is Olga, the one who claims for her the role as the mother figure, the one who tries to cheer up the youngest in order to elevate her moral, constantly protecting her sisters, brother and father while administrating the life of the house. Emily is Masha, detached from the scene; distant, distinctly sad, whistling while sometimes talking through poetry – her own poems, in this case. Anne is Irina, she is the baby of the family, the one whose innocence and capacity of keeping on dreaming must be preserved, and she is also subject to the amorous attentions of the doctor and the new curate.

However, although the sisters perform similar roles as characters of a play, Morrison is aware that their destinies are quite different, and the way Chekhov's characters and the Brontës deal with life goes to unlike directions. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that we are not talking about the Brontë sisters as the real persons who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the fictional characters from Morrison's play. The choice of using Chekhov's structure and model of characters baffles the reader with the amount of similarities, but also provokes us to think about the differences that arise from two very distant settings in time and space. In the conversation we had, Morrison talked about these parallels and dissimilarities.

But, of course, it's a wonderful play and the structure of the play is a fantastic template to use anyway. And, although it is set in

Russia, there are sufficient parallels to work with. So, to take one example, the line everybody remembers from *Three Sisters* is “Moscow, Moscow, Moscow”. So, that make me think what the Brontës relationship to London was. Well, ambivalent, I think. There’s a letter that Charlotte wrote where she tells her friends who are visiting London about the wonderful and majestic things in the capital that you can see. And, of course, there is that famous trip they made to London to declare their identities to the publishers, this was Anne and Charlotte, Emily stayed behind. And they had, like anybody growing up in rural Yorkshire, like I did, we are always a little suspicious of the capital city – London. So, the attraction to the city and this slightly resistance I found interesting to explore in the relation to the Chekhov work. And, also, there are obvious connections: three sisters, a troubled artistic brother, dead parents, the feeling of remoteness from the centre, an old servant, and a lot of discussion about work, about marriage and about love. One thing I think that is in common in Chekhov work and the Brontës is the position of women in society. In Chekhov, we see a class of women who are frustrated with the life they have, although it is a privileged life. The Brontës were also, I think, frustrated with the position of women in society, but, of course, the great difference was that they worked. They worked so hard. They worked so hard in order to accomplish their duties and their writing work. So, although there are similarities in the position of women in society, the way they address the matter is not the same. (FRITSCH & MORRISON, 2015)

Among these parallels, there is also the very important participation of Branwell in the plot of the play. As Andrey, Branwell was the centre of various scandals concerning alcohol and gambling, and also like Andrey, he is the one on whom the family deposits high hopes of a brilliant future. It is interesting to notice that Branwell was the one the family expected to be published, as Andrey is the one the family expected to be a famous professor in the University of Moscow. However, the reactions these two brothers receive from their sisters are poles apart. While Olga, Masha and Irina refuse to face the reality of facts that are being presented in their lives, Charlotte, Emily and Anne do not expect their brother to do the work and become writers themselves.

The processes of adapting and transposing that we see in *We Are Three Sisters* are a complex conversation between past and present and the world of the story. Actually, the story told in *We Are Three Sisters* happened before the time when Chekhov's *Three Sisters* takes place. The mediation of what is shown and what is discarded is done in the present time by Morrison's play. He orchestrates his choices sometimes transposing dialogues and changing the setting, sometimes adapting characters, aggregating more than one character into another one – as the character of the Doctor, who stands for Chekhov's Tzuembach and Vershinin, for instance – and sometimes recontextualizing entire scenes to let both Chekhov's structure and the Brontës characters appear.

As Morrison mentioned, “To Moscow” seems to be the mantra that motivates and works as an engine that moves the life of the Prozorovs ahead. The Brontës had a very different relationship with London, as Morrison already brought up, the Brontë sisters were sort of suspicious about the habits of people from the capital. Another important thing that Morrison had to take into account to write his adaptation is that the Brontës, different of the Prozorovs, never lived in the capital. He addressed this topic in the interview we had.

(...) in the Chekhov, they were in Moscow at first, and that is very different from the Brontës who had no earlier attachment to London. But, anybody in Yorkshire, and it would be the same today; the city has still a sort of glamour about it. Although the Brontës being kind of puritanical and their resistance to the superficiality associated with London society, another part of them was called by the capital. More important, perhaps, they were dependent of London if they wanted their works to get published. London was, you know, where books were published, and they had ambitions to be writers. So, they had to have a relationship to London in order to become published writers. And, later in life, after Anne and Emily died, Charlotte spent some time in London. Of course she was not a member of London society, but she got to know a little bit of it. But the key point was the trip, when Charlotte and Anne decided to go and

be honest with their publishers: “We are not men called Bell, we are women called Brontë”. This is beautifully described in Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography, and it is very detailed in Juliet Barker, talking about the trains they got, the places where they stayed, the publishers who were shocked, how they introduce themselves, and when they got back, how Emily was disgusted because she wanted to remain anonymous, and now the publishers knew they were women. Well, that scene had to be added, there’s nothing like that in Chekhov, and thinking about the title of the play, this is where *We Are Three Sisters* come from. I felt I had to include that scene, because it was such a good dramatic scene. The other thing, and sorry it is not part of your question, but think about the problems of transposing Chekhov: Masha, as the Emily figure, is married; the Branwell figure is also married, so I had to change that obviously. Branwell is interesting, because he had this affair with this woman, Mrs Robinson, and she became the equivalent of Natasha. The three sisters resist to Natasha as the Brontës resist to Mrs Robinson. The problem I had was because of the staging of my play, it all takes place in the Parsonage, so the trip to London publishers is related, recounted, and a similar thing happens to Branwell, because I couldn’t have Branwell in Mrs Robinson’s house. I had to get Mrs Robinson in the Parsonage, what actually never happened, in reality she never came. Of course, it was highly implausible in reality, but that is fiction. (FRITSCH & MORRISON, 2015)

The destiny of Charlotte, Emily and Anne, although very similar with the final act of Chekhov’s, is far away from the tones of despair and void that Olga, Masha and Irina present. But, once again, it depends entirely on the reception of the reader/audience to put the pieces together. It is clear that both groups of sisters have different endings because they have different journeys. The lines are transposed almost equally, but the interpretation goes poles apart. Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* ends without letting the audience know what is going to happen to Prozorov’s sisters. We know they fear to be forgotten and we know that it is a possibility in the fictional world they live in. However, they will never be forgotten, as Romeo and Juliet, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary and so many others fictional beings that will keep on living in literature and in the imagination. On the other hand, although the discourse of Charlotte, Emily and

Anne is practically the same, we know the Brontë sisters will not be forgotten, because we are aware of literary history, and we know the place they occupy in the literary canon. It is again a clash of adaptation of different spheres and a clash the transposition of the biographical to fictional provokes.

Morrison plays with multiple possibilities fading the barriers of what is fictional, what is biographical and what is adaptation, leaving to the reader/audience the task to decipher what is hidden inside his play. As David Lane teaches us, “adaptations will always carry a metatheatrical echo as one text is seen and heard through another” (LANE, 2010, p.82). Morrison allows these resonances and reverberations of Chekhov’s play provoking the reader/audience to dig deeper into the text to understand the movements he is creating. *We Are Three Sisters* breaks from Chekhov’s structure by adding a fifth act and by the transposition of the protagonists from the Prozorovs’ to the Brontës’. All the experience on adaptation in Morrison’s play relies on the ability of the reader/audience to read intertextualities – it is Umberto Eco’s backpack metaphor all over again. Umberto Eco, in his book *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (ECO, 1994), provides an interesting metaphor to the hermeneutic relation between the reader and the analyzed piece of literature. He compares the book to a dense forest, and the reader is the adventurer who will make his journey inside the woods. The success of the journey will depend on the resources we carry in our backpacks. If we have the necessary tools to go through the woods, we can stay longer, visiting unknown places, climbing trees, lighting a fire camp, and finding new directions. If we do not have the appropriate materials we can only follow a limited path. We manage to go through the woods, but straight away, without the possibility of finding new wonders. We need memory and knowledge in order to experience differences, similarities and imagery.

Carl Gustav Jung believed (JUNG, 1990) that the unconscious and the foundation of any individual personality relies on several discrete perspectives or archetypes that come into play more or less forcefully, depending on the particular circumstances that are available for each individual. The archetype is, in a certain way, a tendency to form mythological patterns or motifs, and they can be represented by typical images common to psychic activity in every culture through history. Jung suggests that these motifs can be presented in dreams, myths, fairy tales, and in the arts. From this perspective, they must be understood as manifestations of the unconscious and its forces that operate in individual and collective levels, building the experience of each human being in a journey he called process of individuation. To Jung,

The term archetype thus applies indirectly to the “*représentations collectives*”, since it designates only those psychic contents which have not yet been submitted to conscious elaboration and are therefore an immediate datum of psychic experience. Primitive tribal lore is concerned with archetypes that have been modified in a special way. They are no longer contents of the unconscious, but have already been changed into conscious formulae taught according to tradition. The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear. (JUNG, 1990, p.5)

These symbolical patterns happen to appear in Morrison’s play as well. In the epigraph that opens this paper, Anne Brontë, the character in Morrison’s play, attests that her first memory of the Haworth moors was the gravestones. It is the first scene in Act One and the sisters are talking about their mother’s death and the memories they are able to recollect from the time they had to move to Haworth. It is morning and the three sisters have a small writing desk in front of them, suggesting that they are writing or that they are getting prepared to write something.

One knows by the overlaps of fiction and reality that these three sisters are not merely characters in a play, but they are also references to three persons who have really inhabited that small town in the Northern of England. We also know that these same three sisters became very famous writing books about female characters that reflect the way they were able to express the tension of the paradoxes of the imaginary - the tension between reality and imagination that is the struggle of any artist when composing any artistic work.

Thinking about these sisters as weavers is a quite instigating metaphor to the archetypal image of the Fates, the Greek goddesses of man's destiny. The Brontë sisters, both as characters of Morrison's play or as the portrayed figures in Juliet Barker's biography are related to the *Moirai*, not only because of the interpretative reading that I suggest, but by the etymology of their own family name, as Barker shows.

Patrick had first to be proficient in Latin and Greek. As these were not on the syllabus of the ordinary village school in Ireland, it seems likely that Patrick was instructed in the Classics by Thomas Tighe, perhaps in part payment for his services as a tutor to the family. Interestingly, the story was current as early as 1855 that Patrick adopted the "Brontë" spelling of his surname in response to pressure from Thomas Tighe, who disliked the plebeian "Brunty" and thought the Greek word for thunder a more appropriate and resonant version of the name. (BARKER, 2012, p.6)

The Fates were among the eldest goddesses in Greek mythology and were both daughters of Zeus, the lord of the gods and thunder, and Themis, the goddess of justice. The Brontës were the daughters of Patrick Brontë, the one who decided to associate his family name with thunder – in a sense they are thunder's daughters. The Fates were the spinners of the thread of life, determining the span of human life of every mortal from birth to death. No other god had the right or the means to alter their decisions.

Therefore, even Zeus, the lord of thunder, had to accept the decisions of the goddesses of destiny. Although Patrick advises the sisters in the play leave writing behind, he is not able to stop their literary drive. There was something powerful and horrifying about the presence of the Fates and, although they detained such powers, they were cut off from the world, living in isolation and silence. This image is reinforced by one of Charlotte's lines in Act One when she affirms that "nothing ever happens – we're buried away from the world." (MORRISON, 2011, p.13).

To the archetypal spinners is given the power to initiate and terminate lives, a power that Charlotte, Emily and Anne were acquainted with as the own goddesses of their private literary worlds. It is Charlotte the responsible to sew the threads of the lives of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snow, as Emily tessellates the destiny of Catherine and Heathcliff, and Anne embroiders the fate of Agnes Grey and Gilbert Markham. In this sense, weavers and writers share the power upon life and death. Talking about the powers of female spinners, Pierre Brunel poses some questions.

Em que consiste esse poder das fiandeiras? Até onde ele se estende? A natureza sagrada de seu número – o três – parece remontar as estações do inverno, da primavera e do verão, que eram as únicas distinguidas pelos povos antigos. Os utensílios das fiandeiras têm uma dimensão simbólica; o que liga as fiandeiras ao tempo, o que as torna dependentes entre si e faz delas a representação do feminino cotidiano, guardiãs da divina fertilidade terrestre, dos cuidados preciosos de vigília nos períodos do dia e da vida, do vigor inflexível das leis que regem a relação com a morte, seja de todas as pequenas mortes individuais, seja do desaparecimento em geral. Serão também mulheres com capacidade de desejo? As fiandeiras e o desejo: será isso que faz a tradição gloriosa, presente em todos os povos, de pôr as mulheres para fiar, depois para tecer e costurar? (BRUNEL, 2005, p.371)<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> What is this power of the spinners? How far does it extend? The sacred nature of their number - the three - appears to date back to the seasons of winter, spring and summer, which were the only ones distinguished by ancient people. The tools of the spinners have a symbolic dimension; which connects the spinners to time, which makes them dependent on one another and makes them the female daily representation, guardians of the divine fertility, precious care wakefulness during periods of the day and



I take the risk to fill in Pierre Brunel's digressions by suggesting that the next step in the archetype of the female spinners is to take from them the needles and spinning wheels to replace them with pens, pencils and notebooks. Putting their pens on paper is also a way of weaving, tessellating words where they used to use threads and wool. What differentiates the Brontës from the Fates is the fact that their webs are not composed by an amalgam of sewing materials, but by a myriad of images embroidered with words written on paper. And they are not alone. The archetype of the three sisters – the three female spinners – is widespread in Western imaginary, from the most canonical texts, such as the Greek tragedies and epics, fairy tales, medieval romances and Shakespearian plays, such as *Macbeth* and *King Lear* to the modern dramaturgy, as Chekhov, or even to the popular culture of movies, such as *Hocus Pocus* and *Charlie's Angels*, fantasy literary fiction as Neil Gaiman's novel *Stardust* and cartoons, such as the *Powerpuff Girls*. The archetype of the three sisters is also transposed to different media as in the videogames such as *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy*, *God of War* and *The Legend of Zelda*, and even in songs of Heavy Metal in bands such as *Nightwish*, *Angra* and *The Rasmus*.

The triple aspect of these women seems to be connected to a reference of time and the weavers, because even the technique that is used in the spinning wheel demands three different gestures. There is a work of choosing the raw material and macerating it, then the preparations with the material and the spinning wheel until the precise time when the weavers are able to weave, observing with patience and caution every single thread in order to make a good weaving work. This is the same kind of task, the Brontë

---

life, unyielding force of the laws governing the relationship with death, be it related to all the little individual deaths, or the the disappearance in general. Would they also be women with capacity to desire? The spinners and desire: Would it be what makes the glorious tradition, present in all peoples, to put women to spin, then to weave and sew. (Translation mine)

sisters had to deal with, although, as said, their material was in the realm of words. As weaving their own threads was the safety and liberty for the Fates, the Brontë girls would free themselves through the power of the words they were able to put on paper.

In Charlotte Brontë own words,

How few would believe that from sources purely imaginary such happiness could be derived – Pen cannot portray the deep interest of the scenes, of the continued trains of events. I have witnessed in that little room with the low narrow bed & bare (white washed) walls – twenty miles away – What a treasure is thought! What a privilege is reverie – I am thankful that I have the power of solacing myself with the dream of creations whose reality I shall never behold – May I never lose that power may I never feel it growing weaker – If I should how little pleasure will life afford me – its lapses of shades are so wide so gloomy its gleams of sunshine so limited & dim. (BRONTË, 2007, p.181)

It seems that the liberty that is so vital in the origin of the archetype of the three weaver sisters and the empowerment that they provide themselves with their intertwining craft is reached by the Brontë sisters through their liberty of the mind and imagination. In Morrison's play, the sisters are engaged in a vibrant dialogue about the things they intend to do and the places where they want to go - they talk about London, the Opera House and the National Gallery.

Another interesting fact that connects these characters to the archetypal sisters is the images that they reveal when describing their first impressions of the moors. Charlotte says that the first thing she remembers seeing is daffodils in a garden, while Anne's first image is that one with the gravestones. Symbolizing rebirth and new beginnings, the daffodil is virtually synonymous with spring. According to Chevalier's *Dictionary of Symbols* (1996) there is a widespread lore connecting the daffodil to not only a sign of winter's end but a lucky emblem of future prosperity found throughout the

world. In Wales, folklore says that if one spots the first daffodil of the season, one's next twelve months will be filled with health and wealth, and there is a Chinese legend that says that if a daffodil bulb is forced to bloom during the New Year, it will bring good luck to your home. On the other hand, the image described by Anne when she interrogates Charlotte by saying "My first memory is gravestones. What's yours Emily?" (MORRISON, 2011, p.8) is the one we associate with death – it is the end of the man's line, when one of the Fates must cut the thread of life. The antagonistic images may be seen as a representation of the human's life span that correspond to different life cycles, beginning full of life as a bunch of daffodils and ending in the morbidity of a gravestone.

One more image related to death is portrayed in the attitude of Emily. She does not talk to her sisters in the beginning of the play but whistles while listening to Anne and Charlotte's chat. Lachesis, one of the Fates, measured the thread length to determine the length of life before cutting it and in some narratives, such as Hesiod's *Theogony*, she whistles while doing it. According Chevalier, the whistle is also associated with death thanks to the mine workers who used to whistle to tell his workmates that something bad was happening (CHEVALIER, 1996).

There are other symbolical references to the gloomy ambiance that permeates the play. In Act One of *We Are Three Sisters*, the Doctor calls Anne "my little seagull." (MORRISON, 2011, p. 8). The seagull is not only a bird with a very rich symbolism, but it is also the title of other play by Chekhov. This play is about Nina, an actress, and Konstantin who struggles against diverse difficulties that lead him to commit suicide at the end of the play. The image of the seagull changes its meaning over the course of the play. First, in Act One, Nina uses a seagull to describe the way she is drawn to the lake of her childhood home and her neighbours on Sorin's estate. In this case, the seagull

represents freedom and security. Later, Trigorin, another character in the play, uses the seagull as a symbol for Nina and the way he will destroy her, as Treplev destroyed the seagull. Henceforth, the same symbol may represent both the liberty and the fragility of life. It could also be read as an indicative of the Doctor's ethos in Morrison's play as well as the kind of relationship he intended to have with Anne. He could be seen as a parallel to Trigorin in Chekhov's play by the subtle image Morrison weaves in his textual fabric. Pierre Darmon (1983) also presents and analyses a German folk tale entitled *The Three Weavers* that tells the story of a young man who happens to meet the Fates. In his narration, the sisters live near the ocean and have many seagulls walking around them and resting on their shoulders. Here we have one more bond between the mythological sisters and the fictionalized Brontë characters created by Morrison.

One more characteristic that is presented in Hesiod is the image of the three sisters speaking in a way that one speech completes the previous one - a feature that Shakespeare adopted in the opening scene of *Macbeth* as well, in which the three weird sisters talk completing the lines of one another. Morrison puts a scene like this in Act One, when the three sisters and the Curate are talking about Jane Austen.

**CHARLOTTE:** Jane Austen! Oh, I know the whole world esteems her. But there's no open country in her work.

**ANNE:** No fresh air.

**EMILY:** No running beckes.

**CHARLOTTE:** It's all neat borders and dainty flowerbeds. It's so narrow.

**CURATE:** Name me a living writer who's as good.

**CHARLOTTE:** I'm sure there are some.

**ANNE:** Even if they're not yet published.

**EMILY:** Or they choose to stay anonymous.

**CHARLOTTE:** Writers whose work will last forever.  
(MORRISON, 2011, p. 14)

It is interesting to observe not only the way they speak, but also how they are almost prophets foreseeing the future and determining what is supposed to happen. They know there will be female writers as good as Jane Austen and that their works will last for future generations, as we can interpret they are talking about themselves. The Curate is the perfect representation of the man who looks for the oracle and, although they clearly tell him the truth, he is not able to grasp such knowledge. The readers and the audience, if acquainted with the story of these Victorian writers, may be seen as witnesses from the future, who can guarantee that their prophecy was accurate. Hence, sewing the lines through myth, biography and literature we are able to establish strong connections between the Brontë sisters and the *Moirai*. These three powerful women, who recurs in dreams, myths, legends and literature linking the notions of time and fate, are here represented by the three sisters of Haworth. The Brontës' words worked as life threads guiding and governing the fictional lives they created through their novels and poems.

Blake Morrison discloses through his adaptation a door to multiple possibilities of reading by establishing a possible connection with Anton Chekhov and the Brontë sisters with a text that brings many features of the present aesthetic drama disguised by an apparent traditional approach to theatre. I also believe that Morrison presents a text with a rich imagery, surrounded by subtlety that defy the reader/audience to decipher the delicacy of the small details that compose his artistic creation. By transposing the huge emptiness of the Russian landscape to the wild emptiness of the English moors, Morrison plays with the tension provoked by the paradoxes of the imaginary, stretches what we define as real and make-believe, and creates a remarkable set of passages,

speeches and images. He transforms real persons in fictional characters with a powerful capacity for imagination, reaffirming the content of Shakespeare's verse (SHAKESPEARE, 2007) - the sisters being real or fiction are, as anyone of us, made out of the same material as dreams.

## References

- BARKER, Juliet. **The Brontës: Wild Genius on the Moors -The Story of a Literary Family**. 1. ed. New York: Pegasus, 2012.
- BRONTË, Anne. **Agnes Grey**. 4.ed. New York: Wordsworth Classics, 1998.
- BRONTË, Anne. **The Tenant of Wildfell Hall**. 5. ed. New York: Wordsworth Classics, 1998.
- BRONTË, Charlotte. My Compliments to the Weather. In: SMITH, Margareth. **Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë**. 1. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 164-167.
- BRONTË, Charlotte. **Jane Eyre – A Norton Critical Edition**. 3. ed. New York: Norton, 2001.
- BRONTË, Charlotte. **Villette**. 19. ed. London: Penguin Classics, 2004.
- BRONTË, Emily. **Wuthering Heights – A Critical Norton Edition**. 3. ed. New York: Norton, 2003.
- BROWN, Richard & MORRISON, Blake. The Brontës and Chekhov in Blake Morrison's *We Are Three Sisters*. In: **Brontë Studies**, Vol. 39 N° 1, Haworth: Brontë Society, January 2014, 30-39.
- BRUNEL, Pierre. **Dicionário de Mitos Literários**. 2. ed. Translated by Carlos Sussekund et all. Rio de Janeiro: Editora José Olympio, 2005.
- CHEKHOV, Anton. **Selected Plays – A Norton Critical Edition**. 2. ed. Edited and translated by Laurence Senelick. New York: Norton Edition, 2005.
- CHEVALIER, Jean & GHEERBRANT, Alan. **Dictionary of Symbols**. 1. ed. Translated by John Buchanan-Brown. London: Penguin, 1996.
- DARMON, Pierre. **Mythologie de la Femme dans l'Ancienne France**. 1. ed. Paris: Seuil, 1983.
- DURAND, Gilbert. **The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary**. 1. ed. Translated by Margaret Sankey & Judith Hatten. Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999.
- ECO, Umberto. **Six Walks in the Fictional Woods**. 1. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- FRITSCH, Valter H. C. & MORRISON, Blake. Interview about *We Are Three Sisters*. In: FRITSCH, Valter Henrique de Castro. **“Stretching their shadows far away”: Weaving Chekhov and the Brontës on the stage through Blake Morrison's *We Are Three Sisters***. 2016. Tese (Doutorado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) - Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre.
- GAIMAN, Neil. **Stardust**. 2. ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- HESIOD. **Theogony**. 1. ed. Translated by Richard Cardwell. New York: Focus Classical Library, 1987.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. **A Theory of Adaptation**. 2. ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- JUNG, Carl Gustav. **The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious**. 2. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

LANE, David. **Contemporary British Drama**. 1. ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

MORRISON, Blake. **We Are Three Sisters**. 1. ed. London: Nick Hern Books, 2011.

MORRISON, Blake. **And When Did You Last See Your Father?** 1.ed. London: Granta Books, 1993.

SHAKESPEARE, William. **The Tempest**. 6. ed. New York: Bounty Books, 2007.

Recebido em: 28/04/2016

Aceito em: 23/05/2016