

ENGLISH ADVANCED: THE WEE FREE MEN

Cultural Diversity in *The Wee Free Men*

Cultural diversity refers to the variety of qualities which are different from our own culture. It can include a diverse range of concepts such as race, culture, gender, ethnic group, age and background. Not only does cultural diversity concern itself with how people identify themselves, it also involves how people likewise perceive others. In turn, this affects how they interact. As a society, we need to recognise and understand differences in cultures and these differences need to be celebrated; not ignored or criticised. "Even if people have cultural differences they desire the same things: acceptance, well-being, security, esteem and equity." (Reference*, 2019). The Arts have given a voice to those who were not always able to speak up for themselves in the past. Films, plays, paintings and literary works have provided such a forum.

Terry Pratchett, renowned for the satire and fantasy in his literary work *The Wee Free Men*, is able to dispel some of the myths surrounding witches as portrayed in literature. In the past, the profile of witches was somewhat confused and that as a group of people, witches were not well represented. This then led to the marginalisation and misunderstanding of witches. The novel revolves around the main protagonist Tiffany and explores in detail the hardship she faces on her journey to witch-hood.

Through the main protagonist Tiffany Aching, Pratchett "questions, satirises, and recontextualises the traditional conventions of a witch by subverting them." (Bell, 2019). When the reader first meets Tiffany, she is a nine-year-old girl described as "intelligent, independent, inquisitive and imaginative." (Pratchett, 2003). However, at this young age, Tiffany is already beginning to realise that there are inconsistencies and injustices in her world that need to be addressed; especially where people are concerned.

As a younger child, Tiffany was read stories from "The Goode Child's Book of Faerie Tales". Stories that represented the good versus evil theme and were peppered with the stereotypical characters that dominate those stories. "[Princesses] had lovely golden hair, too, and Tiffany didn't... it was the blond people with blue eyes and the redheads with green eyes who got the stories. If you had brown hair you were probably just a servant or a woodcutter or something." (38). Unfortunately, we do not all fit into these categories. Society has a diverse range of individuals who must be appreciated and accepted for who they are.

In these stories, the witches would have been depicted as malevolent, ugly, old crones. They lived in run down cottages and invariably had a slinky, black cat. They spent their time making magic potions, casting spells on unsuspecting victims and kidnapping innocent children. Tiffany was disgruntled with these stories and the characters in them. She did not want to be under their spell and she did not believe that "Children are born into a particular cultural niche that will influence how they begin to know the world." (Purkiss 1996). She knew that her beloved Grandmother was considered a witch and she did not have these characteristics. Similarly, Tiffany was not going to walk the path that these stories would have predestined for her. "It is this predestination that in part motivates Tiffany to become a witch, in order to escape what she expects to be a boring and powerless role in her community and the resulting dissatisfaction within her own life because she is a plain-looking girl from a poor shepherding family with minimal access to education." (Bell, 2019). Societal expectations can act as a barrier to a person attaining their full potential.

One incident that had a huge impact on Tiffany was the death of Mrs Snapperly. Tiffany recalled the incident surrounding her death in a conversation with Miss Tick. She described how Baron's son, Roland, went missing in the forest and "the community were all afraid and

looked for answers and someone to blame.” (Bell 2019). Labelling individuals due to them possessing stereotypical qualities can prove to be flawed.

The townspeople had preconceived ideas about witches and their kidnapping of children. They believed that Mrs Snapperly, an ugly, lonely old woman with a cat, must have been responsible. She was the prime suspect. Mrs Snapperly was marginalised by the town because she was different. She looked like a witch therefore, she was assumed to be a witch. She was culturally diverse because of her appearance and also her lifestyle. This misconception unfortunately occurs in contemporary society. It is evident that “Where a group in society is invisible or demeaned, the message is clear. Those in that group are outsiders, second class members, or even an ‘other’ against whom society defines itself.” (Soutphommassane, 2017). For example today, if you look like a Muslim, you must be a terrorist, if you have tattoos and dreadlocks you must be a drug-dealer and if you are if you have glasses you must be a nerd.

The treatment of Mrs Snapperly and her death had a profound effect on Tiffany. She saw the serious consequences of people’s assumptions and how they can have an adverse result. Tiffany had a differing opinion of Mrs Snapperly and shared this with Miss Tick. “Mrs Snapperly was just a sick old lady who was no use to anyone and smelled a bit and looked odd because she had no teeth,” said Tiffany. “She just looked like a witch in a story. Anyone with half a mind could see that.” (48-9). Thus highlighting the misconceptions about of Mrs Snapperly.

Tiffany knew that Mrs Snapperly had been misjudged and misunderstood by the community that she wanted to be part of. She knew that she was marginalised for a diverse range of reasons: her disability (due to age and chronic illness), her gender (being a woman), and her class. (Bell, 2019). Tiffany wanted to ensure that this incident with Mrs Snapperly would not be repeated. Hence, when Miss Tick says “Tell me why you still want to be a witch, bearing in mind what happened to Mrs Snapperly?” Tiffany replies “So that sort of thing does not happen again.” (48). She was determined to do all that was possible to avoid a repeat of this unfortunate incident. She knew that Mrs Snapperly was “a victim and not a perpetrator.” (Bell, 2019)

Tiffany believes that she can make a difference in the world and be like her Granny Aching. “Granny Aching is the central moral compass and the mentor figure of the text.” (Bell 2019) She has fond memories of her beloved Granny. It is through the lens of these memories that Tiffany is able to live her life. Tiffany was aware that her Granny was a witch, although she never saw a pointed black hat or saw her stir a cauldron. She knew that she was knowledgeable and that people would come to her for advice especially about sheep. Tiffany is greatly motivated by Granny Aching’s statement, “Them as can do, has to do for them as can’t. And someone has to speak up for them as has no voices.” (196) and this accentuates the fact that there is a diverse range of individuals in society, yet her kind (witches) cannot speak up about their exclusion within society because they are not given a voice.

As a whole, Terry Pratchett’s novel *The Wee Free Men* is a masterpiece which shows a great deal of controversy around the concept of cultural diversity. Through the eyes of Tiffany Aching, we are able to be exposed to a diverse range of individuals unlike ourselves and experience their struggles when it comes to inclusion within their own society. We can also understand the negatives which are associated in a society which is not culturally diverse. This is evidenced when people do not consider that they fit in or are alienated, and this can lead to catastrophic results.

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