‘Thou’s let oot thy-sel’ fro’ unner th’ sto’an’: the narrative environment of Yallery Brown


Abstract

One of the most challenging tasks facing a writer or storyteller seeking to explain his or her creative process is to address the lack of a critical vocabulary in which to express a writer's rather than a reader's, critic's or teacher's point of view. As Michael Rosen noted in his PhD thesis, trying to represent the writer's point of view puts one in contention with the most respected theorists and critics: "According to some I am dead (Barthes). To others whatever I intend is irrelevant (Wimsatt and Beardsley). And to yet others, the whole task is pointless because whatever I think that my writing-language is signifying, it is not (Saussure, Derrida); and anyway, in the final instance it's only the reader who knows what's written (Fish)." In this paper I trace the development of my re-telling of the Lincolnshire folk tale, 'Yallery Brown', and how the processes of researching and adapting it for performance as a chamber opera, and subsequently for solo storytelling, helped shape the printed versions published by Scholastic and Ginn. I also present the idea of a 'narrative environment', a term I'm appropriating from interior design, and extending Henry James's notion of the 'house of fiction, to imagine a fantasy, multi-dimensional space in which stories are re-configured, re-interpreted and re-combined with other whole stories, fragments of stories, poems, songs, images, objects - part of a symbiosis which is not simply self-replicating but dynamically evolving.

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Tell not me; when the butt is out, we will drink water; not a drop before: therefore bear up, and board 'em. Servant-monster, drink to me. TRINCULO. Servant-monster! the folly of this island! They say there's but five upon this isle: we are three of them; if th' other two be brained like us, the state totters. STEPHANO. Drink, servant-monster, when I bid thee: thy eyes are almost set in thy head. As I told thee before, I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island. ARIEL. Thou liest.