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THE ROLE OF HESITATION IN K. BARNHILL'S *THE GIRL WHO DRANK THE MOON*: A TODOROVIAN PERSPECTIVE

*This article investigates the narrative role and linguistic significance of hesitation in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* by Kelly Barnhill, interpreted through the theoretical framework of Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic. According to Todorov, the fantastic is characterised by a moment of hesitation experienced by characters and readers alike when confronted with events that defy rational explanation and hover between the natural and the supernatural. In Barnhill's novel, such hesitation is experienced most intensely by the protagonist, Luna, whose magical powers become a source of internal struggle. Through a close reading of Luna's internal dialogue and speech patterns, the article demonstrates how hesitation functions as a key narrative device and a marker of the fantastic genre that maintains ambiguity and emotional tension.*

At the same time, the article explores how hesitation is shaped by gendered norms of communication. Drawing on Deborah Cameron's [4] work on gendered language, it argues that Luna's use of hedging phrases such as «I think», «Maybe» and «What if» reflects societal expectations that girls and women speak cautiously, with modesty and self-restraint. These linguistic features are interpreted not merely as expressions of uncertainty but as culturally conditioned responses to the burden of responsibility and fear of transgression. As Luna gradually learns to control her powers and assert her identity, her hesitation evolves from a manifestation of internalised doubt into a vehicle for critical reflection and self-awareness.

Ultimately, this article argues that Luna's use of hesitation is an essential window into her internal process and a more significant interplay of linguistic and gendered forces. Examining Luna's elements of speech with a gendered language lens reveals the nuance of how this hesitation acts as both an indicator of her psychological development and a reflection of societal expectations in how girls and women are «supposed to» communicate. The story of Luna's oscillating indecision and eventual self-acceptance highlights how language manifests in the identity-building process and the movement towards empowerment when manipulation and subjugation exist in the cultural framework.

Key words: *fantastic, hesitation, gendered speech, Tzvetan Todorov, Kelly Barnhill, young adult fantasy.*

Introduction. In fantasy literature it is common to open a space of the real space that encourages us to weave through a portal of the extraordinary with the intent to upend ordinary structure, and, this happens in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (Kelly Barnhill), where magic and the stories that shape it are the axis that holds the world inside Barnhill's imagination into its place. She is a young girl in a world rife with mystery and magic who must face her magic and identity. The moments of ambivalence that Luna experiences as she battles with these powers fall within the framework of the fantastic, a term that Tzvetan Todorov first defined in his foundational text, «The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre» [10]. As befits Todorov's theory of the fantastic, wherein fantastic moments are characterised by confusion about whether events are supernatural or rational,

ambiguous moments abound. Todorov explains, «The fantastic is a hesitation, a moment when we do not know whether we remain in the real and we are leaving for the supernatural» [10, p. 25]. The present article engages with the nature of hesitation articulated by Todorov and, through an exploration of Barnhill's novel, how this literary quality expands the narrative and thematic structure of the text.

Todorov's theory states that this moment of hesitation happens when the characters face events that cannot clearly be explained, marking a border between the natural and supernatural. In *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, Luna's internal struggle as she starts to realise the capabilities of her magic is an essential moment of doubt. As Luna navigates all the forces that shape her world, she feels uncomfortable accepting or rejecting the supernatural explanations

for her existence. Barnhill conveys this uncertainty in Luna's character and other key figures, like the witch Xan, who navigates her power dynamic. As Todorov reminds us, this moment of hesitation is «constitutive of the fantastic» [10, p. 27]. Through her moments of uncertainty, Barnhill encourages readers to interrogate the lines between the magical and the real, drawing directly from Todorov's schema of the fantastic.

The fear of the witch is also tied to Luna's reluctance, with gender dynamics playing a key role in foregrounding a potential source of anxiety, the expectation for young girls to remain pure and untainted. Fueled by the other languages they speak and the culture they grew up in, these speakers learned to talk as women are socialised in many cultures: to be more diffident and indirect, avoiding sounding assertive or confident. This socialisation exists in its linguistic form as hesitation markers: hedging phrases («I think»; «Maybe»; «I'm not sure») and more tentative language. But these markers pop up in Luna's internal dialogue, particularly when she doubts her newly minted magical abilities. For instance, Luna's declarations such as «I think I can...» or «Maybe that's how it works» reflect her hesitancy, which fits in with how girls are often instructed to moderate their assertiveness. Based on Deborah Cameron's *Verbal Hygiene* [4], women are socialised to speak less assertively, less directly, and speak less confidently to avoid coming across as confident or aggressive. As Cameron explains [4, p. 64], «Hedging and vagueness are... often regarded as ways of constructing femininity, of ensuring that one remains in the position of relativity rather than authority». Luna's self-doubt is part of a socialised speech pattern palpable here that reflects broader societal narratives about female hesitation and reticence.

From a Todorovian perspective, Luna's hesitation is crucial to the fantastic nature of the narrative, as it underscores the ambiguity between the natural and the supernatural. In Todorov's model, the fantastic arises when characters are confronted with an event or experience that cannot be easily categorised, triggering hesitation. Luna's journey, where she hesitates to accept her magical powers, mirrors this phenomenon. Her uncertainty, shaped by gendered expectations of speech and behaviour, reinforces the tension between the rational and the supernatural, central to Todorov's concept of the fantastic.

Todorov's theory asserts that the fantastic thrives on indecision, as characters grapple with accepting or rejecting supernatural explanations for their experiences. Gender plays a subtle but significant role in shaping how Luna navigates these moments

of hesitation. In traditional fairy tales, female characters are often portrayed in passive roles, typically as the recipients of magic, rather than active participants. However, Luna's hesitation complicates this traditional narrative. Her uncertainty about her ability to control her magical powers reflects broader societal narratives about girls' hesitation and lack of confidence when stepping into positions of power.

Luna's hesitation, shaped by both her gender and her magical transformation, is integral to creating the tension that drives the story's supernatural elements. As she begins to understand her powers and the world around her, Luna must reconcile her hesitation with her growing strength. This evolution from a passive to an active role mirrors the broader themes of empowerment and self-realisation. Luna's self-confidence gradually grows, but her hesitation persists, symbolising the ongoing conflict between the natural and supernatural forces that influence her life. As Todorov suggests, «the fantastic is the hesitation that keeps one from being able to decide, and this hesitation generates the genre» [10, p. 31]. In this way, Barnhill uses hesitation as a linguistic tool to develop Luna's character and as a narrative device that aligns with Todorov's concept of the fantastic, where the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural remain fluid and unresolved.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

Over the last several decades, the landscape of young adult fantasy has expanded to include psychological depth, identity negotiation, and sociocultural critique. These developments have reframed fairy tale conventions to reflect contemporary adolescent experiences. As Mendlesohn [5] and Ryan [6] observe, the genre no longer centres solely on the escapism of alternate realities but uses fantastical frameworks to interrogate emotional and cognitive development in immersive, sometimes disorienting ways.

The increasing complexity of these narratives is evident in fairy-tale retellings. As Thomas [9] points out, contemporary fantasy has become a platform to address marginalised voices, particularly those shaped by racial and gendered constraints. These stories often feature protagonists navigating transformative spaces where magic intersects with identity, and where narrative and linguistic hesitation play a central role in expressing the uncertainties of growing up.

Zipes [12, p. 145] highlights that modern fairy tales «subvert the classical norms of these fairy tales and reject formulaic interpretations of good and evil», replacing fixed moral binaries with ambiguity and introspection. Echoing this, Bettelheim [2, p. 6] stresses that the symbolic structure of fairy tales allows

young readers to confront internal psychological conflicts. The interplay between supernatural encounters and real-world anxieties allows characters to externalise and examine their fears.

This shift is closely tied to the rise of empowered female protagonists. Trites [11, p. 103] notes that contemporary literature increasingly «foregrounds the intersection of feminism and youth identity formation», particularly by highlighting young women who confront systems of authority and limitation. In *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* [1], Luna embodies this dynamic. Her journey is not merely one of acquiring magical skill but also of learning to navigate social expectations, fear, and agency.

Barnhill's writing underscores how verbal, cognitive, and emotional hesitation mark the process of becoming. Samuel [7, p. 53] emphasises that Barnhill's characters often «pause, question, and wonder aloud in ways that foreground their moral and emotional complexity». Luna's frequent use of tentative phrases like «I think I can...» and «Maybe this is how it works...» signals a narrative delay and an internal dialogue reflective of identity formation.

These markers of hesitation, however, are not neutral. As Cameron [4, p. 64] argues, «traits like hedging and vagueness have been widely read as marks of femininity, linked with deference and emotional subtlety». Luna's linguistic restraint mirrors how girls are often taught to speak cautiously and indirectly, particularly when facing moments that require assertiveness. This dimension of speech becomes a symbolic layer of the novel's critique of gendered communication norms.

Contrasting with Luna is Xan, the ancient witch who raised her. Taylor [8, p. 28] sees Xan as a character who «embodies a feminist reworking of the witch, exercising power not through fear but through care and wisdom». This contrast creates a narrative arc in which Luna must move from internalised uncertainty toward an empowered model of femininity.

The novel also engages with what Brugué and Llompart [3, p. 9] describe as the «subversive potential of contemporary fairy-tale magic», where magical elements are no longer decorative but ideological. Through hesitation, Barnhill reflects on how identity is not simply discovered, but continuously negotiated, especially within the fantastical setting that mirrors real-world pressures.

Todorov's theory of the fantastic provides a theoretical backbone for this approach. Although discussed in detail in the introduction, it is worth recalling that, for Todorov [10, p. 25], «The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows

only the laws of nature, confronting a supernatural event». This moment of hesitation is not just thematic but structural: it prolongs the uncertainty that defines the genre. In Barnhill's text, such hesitation is embedded in plot and language, aligning form and content.

Ultimately, Barnhill's *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* engages the fairy-tale tradition to enchant and interrogate. It combines the immersive quality described by Ryan [6] with the narrative ambiguity emphasised by Todorov [10], using hesitation as a core mechanism to explore female empowerment, social critique, and the process of becoming. Through Luna's growth and voice, Barnhill affirms the idea that magic is not simply inherited or discovered—it must be claimed, doubted, and eventually owned.

Task statement. In this paper, I intend to explore how hesitation (explicitly identified by Todorov as a key feature of his theory) influences the internal story structure and character arcs of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. This study will explore through a linguistic analysis of the script when and at what aspects characters challenge their dialects, challenging the supernatural with what will amount to their material reality. In turn, this will show how Barnhill works with hesitation to examine themes of power, transformation, and identity politics in a magical realism setting. In this way, I will show how the ambivalence Todorov identifies is more than just a formal device; it will serve as one way of specifically attending to the complex progression between magic, fear, and knowing oneself that the novel enacts.

In Kelly Barnhill's *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, hesitation becomes a key narrative and linguistic device, reflecting Luna's internal struggles while critiquing societal expectations that I believe we place on girls at a young age. So basically, I will further analyse Barnhill's use of hesitation in Luna's speech and thoughts, and how it reflects her journey of growing empowerment and identity, and points to the gendered nature of the other characters around her.

To meet the aim, the following **objectives** have been set:

1. To study the narrative function of hesitation in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* using Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic.
2. To recognise and understand linguistic markers of indecision in Luna's inner speech and verbal communications.
3. To take a closer look at how moments of hesitation structure the protagonist's confrontation with the supernatural and inform the reader's experience of narrative uncertainty.

4. To analyse the function of hesitation within the protagonist's character arc and how this is linked to her developing magical abilities and her developing self-image.

5. To investigate how gendered norms of communication shape hesitation, based on Deborah Cameron's theories of gendered language.

6. To show how hesitation adds to the more prominent themes of power, transformation, and negotiation of identity across a fantastical setting.

7. To suggest that it is also a narrative and ideological device that deepens the novel's engagement with magic, self-discovery, and feminist critique.

Outline of the main material of the study.

Luna's experience of hesitation is not a fixed quality, but an active gestation that emerges in different layers of confusion, inner conflict, and somatic discomfort throughout the story of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. These utterances do not simply indicate indecision; they encode a profound emotional and psychological dissonance that attends her wizardly coming of age.

From the earliest chapters, uncertainty permeates the narrative in subtle yet persistent ways. At age five, Luna's magic is described as dormant but accumulating: «all potential and no force», an image that mirrors her unawareness of its existence and the anxiety surrounding its eventual emergence [1, p. 50]. The repeated use of modal verbs by those around her – «Maybe it will never come out. Maybe things will never be difficult» – projects their fears and hopes into the unknown, reinforcing a shared uncertainty that envelops Luna even before she is conscious of it.

Luna's inner world becomes increasingly fragmented as she begins to sense the pressure of concealed truths. Her reflection, «Silly Luna» is undercut by the «waver and rattle in her voice», which betrays a lack of confidence despite the outward simplicity of the statement [1, p. 51]. The physical discomfort she experiences—shaking her head, pressing her temples, feeling the world like «a coat that no longer fits» – underscores a bodily response to the dissonance between her feelings and what she cannot yet name. This interplay of language, sensation, and partial memory constructs hesitation not just as doubt, but as disorientation and loss of grounding.

Even small moments of caretaking carry linguistic uncertainty. In her interaction with Xan, Luna's speech is marked by a cascade of tentative suggestions: «Maybe you should eat something... Or drink something... Would you like me to make you tea?» [1, p. 156]. These repetitive softeners do

not simply signal politeness; they demonstrate Luna's strategy for managing the discomfort of confronting vulnerability, both her and that of her caretaker. Here, hesitation functions as a gesture of care constrained by fear and the inadequacy of language to manage emotional complexity.

One of the most visually resonant moments of ambiguity occurs when Luna tries to channel her powers through visualisation: she imagines the horizon with such focus that her «mind had transformed to paper», and she feels a physical reaction – «a crackling in her fingertips» and a sensation that her birthmark is shining [1, p. 190]. This moment balances clarity and doubt, grounded in the paradoxical phrase «And who knows? Maybe it was». Luna's imagination and intuition open a portal to magical awareness, but the lingering «maybe» withholds full affirmation. Her cognitive leap is immediately curtailed by speculative language.

This kind of speculative modality pervades the dialogue between other characters as well, revealing that Luna's hesitation is not isolated. Xan's refusal to discuss Luna's magical future, despite Glerk's concern, reveals her evasion. «Maybe she won't grow... Maybe she was never magic to begin with», she muses, only to admit, «The alternative is too sorrowful to contemplate» [1, p. 109]. These conversations model a culture of emotional suppression, where speculative speech functions as a defence mechanism against grief and loss. Luna, raised in this environment, mirrors this avoidance in her speech and inner thoughts.

These examples outline a history of reticence that is never fully reconciled. Instead, it evolves in lockstep with Luna. Her hedging, physicality, and use of modal verbs such as perhaps become a site for emotional and magical excavation. Instead of a barrier, hesitation becomes a critical site for making a new self, a liminal space where uncertainty makes both vulnerability and eventual empowerment possible.

Luna's growing awareness of danger and agency does not eliminate her reliance on tentative constructions. When threatened, she expresses a guarded decisiveness: «I don't think we are going to be friends», she growls [1, p. 281]. The line that follows – «I think I need a weapon» – blends assertiveness with uncertainty, suggesting a moment of action filtered through the language of conjecture. Even as Luna begins to confront external threats, her internal monologue remains cautious, as though she still requires verbal permission to step into her power. Later, in an emotionally charged confrontation with

Xan, Luna's speech becomes a patchwork of certainty and doubt: «I can talk to a crow. And the paper birds love me. And I think I found – well. I don't know what she is» [1, p. 350]. Her fragmented phrasing and repeated qualifiers reveal the disorientation of reconciling memory, grief, and magical perception. These moments reinforce that hesitation in Barnhill's narrative is not a flaw to be overcome, but an essential part of how Luna processes and articulates reality – an evolving grammar of transformation.

Conclusion. When viewed through the lens of Todorovian magic, hesitation found in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* is a structural and thematic device that builds the narrative tension throughout the novel. Barnhill employs linguistic markers of hesitation to convey Luna's internal conflicts, which are informed by her magical metamorphosis and the gendered expectations imposed on her as a little girl. Luna's hesitation reflects the indecision Todorov marks as central to the fantastic genre, and the tension between the natural and the supernatural that would come to shape it.

Luna's transition from a girl who scrambles to be what others want to a girl who revels in staying true to herself critiques societal standards that make girls feel they must be passive and unsure. Through this focus on the linguistic elements of hesitation, Barnhill interrogates the social processes that encourage girls to silence themselves and the importance of agency and self-discovery. This show deals with the powers and the knowledge of her identity; hesitation becomes a frantic response at the beginning but becomes a home of transformative potential. By doing so, *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* doesn't merely tell one young girl's coming-of-age story; it also invites readers to question the meanings of silence, uncertainty, and hesitation, especially in girls.

Future research may explore how hesitation works in adult fairy tales like Naomi J. Novik's «Uprooted and Spinning Silver», or Sarah J. Maas's «A Court of Thorns and Roses» series, in which female protagonists contend with magic, power, and identity. In more adult fantasy texts, these texts give us plenty of ground to explore issues of hesitation and gender, autonomy, and genre conventions.

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Ткаченко К. С. РОЛЬ ВАГАННЯ У ТВОРІ К. БАРНГІЛЛ «ДІВЧИНКА, ЯКА ВИПИЛА МІСЯЦЬ» У КОНТЕКСТІ ТЕОРІЇ ФАНТАСТИЧНОГО Т. ТОДОРОВА

У цій статті досліджується наративна роль і лінгвістичне значення вагань у романі Келлі Барнгілл *Дівчинка, яка пила місяць*, інтерпретованих через теоретичну призму поняття фантастичного, запропонованого Цветаном Тодоровим. За Тодоровим, фантастичне характеризується моментом вагання, яке переживають як персонажі, так і читачі, стикаючись із подіями, що кидують виклик раціональному поясненню та коливаються між природним і надприродним. У романі Барнгілл найбільш виразно це вагання проявляється у головній героїні, Луни, магічні здібності якої стають джерелом внутрішньої боротьби. На основі детального аналізу внутрішнього діалогу Луни та особливостей її

мовлення, стаття демонструє, як вагання функціонує не лише як ключовий наративний прийом, а й як ознака жанру фантастичного, що підтримує невизначеність і емоційну напругу.

Разом із цим стаття аналізує, як вагання формуються гендерними нормами комунікації. Спираючись на дослідження Дебори Камерон щодо гендерованої мови, авторка стверджує, що використання Луною обережних висловів, як-от «я думаю», «можливо» та «а що, якби», відображає суспільні очікування того, що дівчата та жінки повинні висловлюватися стримано, з поміркованістю та самоконтролем. Ці мовні особливості інтерпретуються не просто як вираження невпевненості, а як культурно обумовлені реакції на тягар відповідальності та страх перед порушенням норми. У процесі того, як Луна поступово вчиться контролювати свої здібності та утверджувати свою ідентичність, її вагання трансформуються з прояву внутрішньої невпевненості у засіб критичного осмислення та саморефлексії.

Зрештою, в статті стверджується, що використання Лунною вагання є важливим вікном у її внутрішній процес та більш широке взаємодію мовних і гендерних чинників. Аналізуючи мовні елементи Луни через призму гендерованої мови, виявляється тонкість того, як це вагання виступає як показник її психологічного розвитку та відображення соціальних очікувань щодо того, як дівчата і жінки «повинні» спілкуватися. Історія вагань Луни та її остаточне прийняття себе підкреслює, як мова проявляється в процесі формування ідентичності та руху до самовизначення, коли гендерні стереотипи існують у культурному контексті.

Ключові слова: фантастичне, вагання, гендерована мова, Цветан Тодоров, Келлі Барнгілл, підліткове фентезі.