

Haunted poems: a path in brazilian children's poetry /

Poemas assombrados: um viés na poesia infantil brasileira

*José Hélder Pinheiro Alves**

Graduated in Letters - Faculdades Integradas de Uberaba (1983), Master's Degree in Letters (Brazilian Literature) from the University of São Paulo (1992). Doctorate in Letters (Brazilian Literature) from the University of São Paulo (2000) and Post-doctorate from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (2004). Full Professor in Brazilian Literature at the Federal University of Campina Grande, Campina Grande, Paraíba, Brazil.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4304-7178>

*Emmanuelle Silva Freire Pereira***

Graduated in Full Degree in Letters - Portuguese Language from the Federal University of Campina Grande (2018). Currently, Master's student in the Postgraduate Program in Language and Teaching at the Federal University of Campina Grande, Campina Grande, Paraíba, Brazil, in the line of research Literature Teaching and Reader Training.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5288-7094>

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ABSTRACT

Children's approach to poetry happens during childhood in different ways, such as songs, rhymes, riddles, games, and other manifestations that come from oral poetry. The permanence of this experience should be encouraged by the school, facilitating children's contact with diverse manifestations of children's poetry, which cultivates musicality, fantasy, and recreation of games, questioning, and other experiences (BORDINI, 1986). This research was carried out to analyze some poems from *Vanish into thin air and other haunted poems*, by André Ricardo Aguiar (2013), a Brazilian poet from Paraíba. The book is consisted of 25 playful, and humorous short poems, which bring characters from Brazilian folklore in supernatural situations. The author depicts problems in the human reality, that are personified by the monsters; besides, he represents them from a perspective that is sometimes questioner, sometimes innovative. One issue that we will

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 helder.pinalves@gmail.com

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 manuletrasufcg@gmail.com

discuss is the way in which the poet brings back some characters and reinvents them. We will also reflect on the text's adequacy the child reader. This paper is supported by the reflections of Bordini (1986), Cascudo (2002), Goldstein (1997), and Aguiar and Ceccantini (2012).

KEYWORDS: Children poetry; haunt; child.

RESUMO

A aproximação da criança com a poesia se dá, na infância, de diferentes modos: cantigas, parlendas, adivinhas, brincos e outras manifestações advindas da poesia oral. A continuidade desta experiência deveria ser estimulada pela escola, favorecendo o contato das crianças com as mais diversas manifestações da poesia infantil, que cultivam a musicalidade, a fantasia, a recriação de jogos, brincadeiras, dúvidas e outras experiências (BORDINI, 1986). Neste artigo temos como objetivo analisar alguns poemas da obra *Chá de sumiço* e outros poemas assombrados, do poeta paraibano André Ricardo Aguiar (2013). A obra é composta por 25 poemas lúdicos, curtos e bem-humorados, que abordam personagens da nossa tradição folclórica em situações de assombração. O autor retrata problemas da nossa realidade humana, personificando os monstros, além disso, os representa a partir de uma perspectiva ora questionadora, ora inovadora. Uma questão que tentaremos explicitar é o modo como o poeta retoma e reinventa certos personagens e refletir sobre a adequação ao leitor infantil. Teoricamente, para fundamentarmos nosso trabalho, recorreremos às reflexões de Bordini (1986), Cascudo (2002), Goldstein (1997) e Aguiar e Ceccantini (2012).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poesia infantil; assombração; criança.

1 Introduction

When we target contemporary Brazilian children's poetry, we observe the permanence of the most diverse themes and procedures that have been cultivated at least since the publication of Cecilia Meireles' *Or This or That*, first published in 1964. This book is characterized by the presence of animals, the theme of playing, the playful language, and the resumption and re-signification of popular tradition repertoire.

The presence of oral tradition characterizes children's poetry, especially when one thinks about its musicality, earrings, *parlendas*¹, riddles, and other oral genres. Many folkloric supernatural stories were rediscovered in children narratives. One of the most popular characters in children's literature in general is the ghost or other Supernatural entities. Literary works such as the Brazilian children's literature classic *Pluft, The Little Ghost*, written by Maria Clara Machado, and Rosa Amanda Straus' *Seven Bones* [idem] exemplify this affirmation. However, the witch is the most striking presence among the characters from the oral tradition tales. There are several books that retake this character and, although the witch does not originally belong to the Supernatural setting, it can be

¹*Parlendas* are child-themed word combinations that are part of Brazilian folklore.

frightening one. Other characters also appear as werewolves, souls from another world, among others.

By focusing on Brazilian children's poems, we observe that this tendency was practically not absorbed by the poets. Recently, Eucanaã Ferraz published *Beast of Seven Heads and Others Fantastic Beings* and *Iara's Poems*. The axis of the first book is the retaking of characters from various folkloric and mythological traditions, without exploring the aforementioned characters' astonishing viewpoint. As for the second, when representing the figure of Iara, Ferraz associates her with nature in general, that has gone through many changes.

In the context of contemporary children's poetry, André Ricardo Aguiar's *Vanish into thin air and Others Haunted Poems* can be considered a landmark. In this article, we will point out some peculiarities of this book, especially through supernatural stories. Considering that the book does not have academic criticism yet, we selected theoretical texts to show the differentiating aspects of his poetry.

2 José Ricardo Aguiar: his production and biography

José Ricardo Aguiar was born in 1969, in the city of Itabaiana - Paraíba, and nowadays he lives in João Pessoa. As a child, he experienced the interior world with his experience in rivers and farms. At a certain age, he moved to João Pessoa, thanks to the influence of his family: his parents who liked to read, his grandfather who used to go to the library a lot, he began to attend out of curiosity and ended up taking interest in reading and developing the habit of writing through the construction of verses, poems, and even tried to reproduce well-known poets. At first, he wrote a poetry book, and after a while, quite unexpectedly, turned to children's literature.

Author of the short story collection *Portable Fables* (Patuá, 2016) and poems *The City of Rainfalls* (Patuá, 2013), Aguiar also published the poetry book *The Flower in Construction* (Editoral deia, 1992), *Masonry* (Editora Universitária/UFPB, 1997), among others. In the scope of children's literature, the author has published *The Mouse That Gnawed the King* (Rocco, 2007) and *Vanish into thin air and Others Haunted Poems* (Autêntica, 2013), both of which were selected by the

PNBE²s for Brazilian school libraries. In 2012 *Small Funny Feasts* (Editora Girafinha) and *Portable Fables* (Patuá, 2016).

He also participated in magazines such as *Correio das Artes* and literary events such as Flibo (Boqueirão-PB). The author is a founding member of the *Short Story Club of Paraíba* and a coordinator of projects to encourage reading, such as *Encontro das Traças*. His performance in the field of children's literature seems to us somewhat lonely since in the state of Paraíba there is still no articulation of writers that favors the debate and dissemination of the works they produce.

2.1 The Supernatural Viewpoint in the *Vanish into thin air*

Supernatural stories, in general, is present in TV, cinema, theater, and literature. In general its presence is almost always a resumption of the oral tradition that has accompanied humanity for centuries.

Dictionaries define supernatural in different ways: "Fantastic object or ghost that haunts, that causes terror", "Soul from another world", "Ghost, apparition", "Scarring caused by the encounter or apparition of supernatural things" and "terror arising from an inexplicable cause", as taken from the dictionary Michaelis³. Its etymology is originated by *haunt* + *ing*.

In the field of folklore studies, Cascudo (2002), in his *Dictionary of Brazilian Folklore*, defines Supernatural in the following terms:

Supernatural. Fear of encountering fantastical beings, the apparition of specters, the act of being terrified, haunted house, where souls from another world appear. A supernatural, a great fear. Rumors, voices, mysterious sounds, inexplicable lights. (CASCUDO, 2002, p. 28, translated by the authors)

In this way, we understand supernatural as a manifestation that can be associated with the fantastic, the supernatural, without having an explanation considered logical. In addition, we find personifications of some of the entities, such as bogeyman, werewolf, ghost, among others. Cascudo

² The National School Library Program (PNBE) was created by the Brazilian government in 1997 to encourage reading in public schools.

³ <https://michaelis.uol.com.br/buscar=0&f=0&t=0&palavra=assombra%C3%A7%C3%A3o>

emphasizes different situations that have amazing content, such as apparitions, voices, in short, manifestations that trigger fear. The most diverse scenarios accompany these phenomena, all strange, in addition to the predominance of nighttime. The supernatural narratives, in our oral tradition, were almost always narrated at night, which favored frights, also arising from the storyteller's performance.

In the work *Vanish into thin air and Others Haunted Poems*, there are characters and situations that can be scary, as showed by the table below, despite the fact that we are focusing on *ghosts* and *vampires*.

Table 1: haunted characters and/or supernatural situation

Haunted character	Supernatural setting or situation
Vampires	Cemetery
Ghosts	<i>Smell a Rat</i>
Bat	<i>Gravedigger's Moon</i>
Frankenstein's bride	<i>A Chicken</i>
Bogeyman	<i>The Living Dead</i>
Small-bogeyman	<i>Haunted Houses</i>
Witch	<i>Mummy</i>
Spirit	<i>Medusa's Hairdresser</i>
Werewolf	<i>Request</i>
Zumbi (sleepless night)	<i>Three Haunted Limericks</i>
Headless mule	X

Source: elaborated by the authors of this article.

An important aspect to be highlighted is that the poem “Vanish into thin air” is also the title of the book. So, let us read the poem:

Vanish into thin air⁴

Little ghost
Doesn't like to drink coffee:
It may cause sheet stains.

He will not take that risk.

He really prefers
[vanishing into thin air] To drink vanishing
tea.

The poem, as well as the vast majority of those in the book, is short and direct, in addition to having a playful tone, taking into account that the book is aimed for children. We usually have the habit of saying that a person “vanished into thin air”, that is, that person simply disappeared. In the poem, we understand that there is a relationship of meanings between someone who is not perceived and the ghost. It is also ironic once we perceive the language game to emphasize the importance of physical presence.

The author used daily actions, as in the verse: “Little ghost/Doesn't like to drink coffee:/it can cause bed strains”; we observe a common action, in which we have a white sheet and if we drop coffee on it, it will leave stains and, according to the poem, the ghost would be visible and be “in a tight spot”, pointing out this well-known pun.

On the other hand, if we look at the sheet in this poem, it is nothing but the ghost's body. In addition, the verse “He really prefers/[to]drink vanishing/tea”, refers to drinking something that doesn't exist, just as the ghost itself needs to vanish, in the metaphorical sense.

As for the structure, the poem has 3 stanzas, the first with three verses, the second with one verse, and the last with three more verses. We can identify internal rhymes in the first and second verses of the first stanza, in the verbs to *stain* and to *drink*. But what calls our attention are the risk/vanishing rhymes, which are not perfect, thus escape children's poetry predominant model.

This opening poem can dialogue with “From father to son”, which reflects on a common reality in many families: growing-up children who believe they are superior to adults. It is precisely at

⁴This and all the following poems were translated by the authors of this article.

this moment that their parents/guardians must guide them and intervene, showing that they are children.

From Father to Son

The little ghost barely outgrown diapers
and already getting scolded by his ghost father:

- Grow and vanish!

The poem reminds us of a popular saying: “he hasn't grown up and already wants to rule the roost”, in which we can make a parallel with the verse of the poem that says: “the little ghost has barely outgrown diapers/ and is already being scolded off by the ghost.”.

We observe that the language used in the poem is colloquial, straightforward, and quite simple, following the standard Portuguese punctuation norm. We can also emphasize that the poem is short, having only a single stanza with three lines, in which it addresses a critical dialogue between father and son.

The use of figures of speech is present in the verse: “The ghost has barely outgrown diapers”, which refers to the growth of the little ghost through metonymy. In another verse “Grow and vanish”, we have a pun that brings the famous “grow up” phrase.

The ghost is also present in the poem “Comradeship”. In it, we also find the character's physical description. Let's see what's peculiar about this character:

Comradeship

There's nothing to see
in a ghost
except to see, through it,
that inside and outside
it's all the same.

If there is something to see
in the ghost,
still there is no reason
to so much astonishment.

But there are people
who still insists
in tapping his shoulder
and say:

- Ah, ghost, you don't exist! [you are unique]

The poem tries to deconstruct the idea that the ghost is scary, drawing attention to the fact that “There's nothing to see” on him. Therefore, through the language use, we observe that the author shows the reader that they do not need difficult words to alert them that the child must be inserted in the child's universe.

Regarding its structure, it is a short blank-verse poem, with dialogues and only three stanzas, much similar to the two poems previously analyzed. The external rhymes are haunt/shoulder⁵ and insist/exist that also break standards in this longer poem that explores persuasion viewpoint instead of imagination.

Alongside the supernatural viewpoint, two poems are worth highlighting: *Classified Ads* and *Three Haunted Limericks*. Unlike the other analyzed poems, the poem resembles news articles. We find here the intertextuality of genre considering that at the same time it is a literary text, the poem is similar to an advertisement. The poem is as follows:

Classified Ads

Haunted house
For sale
almost no mystery.
Balcony, rooms and bedrooms
and the backyard
towards the cemetery.

Quietness warranted
For sale.
There are some noises

⁵This rhyme only occurs in the source text in Portuguese.

in fact - and not of rat:
it's the ghost who always
stumbles in his shoes.

Creaking doors
For sale,
Beating windows,
Flying objects
briskly flinging.

All in the most perfect state
for the supernatural.

The title refers to newspaper advertisements, in which we find classified products for sale, such as properties and automobiles, amongst others. Therefore, the ad somehow must convince the buyer/reader that the deal is worth it.

When reading the lines “Haunted”/ [...] the back towards the cemetery/ [...] Quietness warranted/ [...] beating windows, flying objects briskly flinging”, we understand that the uniqueness of the house relies upon its ghosts. The following supernatural events can happen: the doors and windows creek and objects move out of their places. For those who enjoy an adventure, it is a perfect property, once it’s “All in the most perfect state of supernatural”.

Regarding its structure, the poem has four stanzas, the first and the second having six verses, the third five verses, and the last only two. Concerning the rhyme scheme, there are enclosed rhymes despite the opposite wordplay employed by the author: mystery/cemetery; there is also the internal rhyme fact/rat, besides joking with the ghost stumbling in the shoes. It is noteworthy that the poem has a faster pace, and also presents certain musicality due the alliteration of the “S” consonant.

With its simple and straightforward language, it resembles an ad. It also has humor because a person who owns a haunted house would not advertise it in such a way. Therefore, the emphasis on supernatural is responsible for the predominating humor. According to Abramovich (1997), the humor is constant device in Brazilian children’s literature. In children’s poetry, it can be observed in the production of poets such as José Paulo Paes and Sérgio Caparelli. Others, more contemporary, have explored this device, which has not yet been properly studied.

In the poem *Three haunted limericks*, the author seems to bring the same haunted viewpoint of the previous poem.

Three Haunted Limericks

There was an old house in Bagé
where ghosts slept standing;
thus they'd wake up bored
and all was chains and moans
in the old house of Bagé.

There was a man in Montevideo
who insisted in charging rent
of the basement monster
who fouled the floor
of that poor man of Montevideo.

There was a funeral in Zanzibar
in which the dead couldn't settle down
with the crooked-narrow coffin;
he asked a joiner to deal with it
to keep on the funeral in Zanzibar.

Composed by three stanzas of five lines each, following the structure of the limerick, we find something different. In the first stanza, the speaker describes a house where supernatural events happen, thus alluding to the *Classified ads* poem. In the second stanza, the tenant is a monster in the flesh. In the third and last one, there is a humorous event where a dead man requests that services to be provided for his funeral. The poem follows a rhyme scheme in which the first, second and fifth verses rhyme amongst them, therefore conferring a pleasant musicality to the child reader, reminiscent of the rhythm of our popular sextile.

There is also a rather unusual character, the bat, an animal that scares people and is famously associated with vampires. It is present in myths and legends, related to death, terror, and bad things. Bats appear in two poems with different perspectives: *Bat sleep* and *Occupation*.

The first is a short poem composed of two stanzas of three lines each. It has a simple and straightforward language, thus facilitating the comprehension of its content for the reader. The speaker refers to this animal in a softer way, like his sleep.

Bat sleep

What a dead knot
is the bat sleep
with this pendant craze.

It's of its kind
To always sleep like this
Hope it falls.

The playfulness of the poem begins with the way that the sleeping position of the animal is presented. Therefore, it does not speak of the dangerous side of the animal but its position whilst it sleeps. Hence the comparison with the pendant and the expression “hope it falls” (*tomara que caia*, in Portuguese), taken from a feminine piece of clothing.⁶

Regarding *Occupation*, there is once more the description of bat habits, that it sleeps during the day and is awakened at night. Moreover the author plays with words and compares the animal with the night guard with a humorous tone.

Occupation

Sleeps the day, works at night
detects as a radar
with much attention all around
while in its shift.

- Is it the night guard
- No, it's the bat.

⁶ In English, the equivalent word for the clothing “*tomara que caia*” is strapless dress/top. In Portuguese, it is called “*tomara que caia*” (hope it falls), given the logic that since it is strapless, it has little support, hence being easier to fall.

The poem has two stanzas: the first is composed of four verses, and the second of two. The rhyming does not follow the pattern as in *apego/morcego* and *turno/noturno* (attachment/bat and shift/night guard, respectively)⁷. The poem resembles a riddle and can be read like this, with the mediator saving the last line. The resumption of weird creatures like the bat is related to a strand in modern poetry that broke up with the idea of elevated themes. It is noteworthy that the bat is related to the idea of fright and haunt due to how it appears in the places where people find it.

Final Remarks

We highlighted supernatural as a literary theme in several poems that compose the book and their titles. On the other hand, we draw attention to the fact that the books constantly plays with issues traditionally considered haunted. André Ricardo Aguiar uses several resources, such as daily sayings, riddles, advertisements, in addition to returning to typical rhythms and rhymes from oral tradition without totally focusing on them.

Therefore, the author brings a universe of oral tradition situations to poetry, but in a concise and playful viewpoint, as observed in the analyzed poems. Fantasy and imagination are triggered to think and play with our tradition. According to Bordini (1986), poetry is similar to a toy for a kid, for it affords emotions, fun and, through the playfulness expressed in the words, it provides a different enchantment on kids.

Colomer (2017) reminds us that

In the last decades of the twentieth century, a strong current of demystification emerged that transformed most of these beings, from bogeymen or witches to wolves, into friendly or tender characters, while the psychological change in the themes approached favored the rise of monsters as a new kind of fantastic being since their plasticity and little solidity make them able to embody the inner distress, nightmares and undefined terrors that conspire ever since in children's literature. (COLOMER, 2017, p. 36-37, translated by the authors).

⁷In the free translation of the poem into English, it was not possible to keep the rhyme scheme, so the rhymes mentioned above are only verified in its Portuguese version.

The author refers to children's literature in general and, specifically, to narratives for children. However, in the scope of children's poetry, this viewpoint has not been explored yet. Hence the importance of the contribution of the book *Vanish into thin air and Other Haunted Poems*, by André Ricardo Aguiar.

The reader's proximity with the text becomes something fun when the language used is simple, the texts are short, in addition to a diversity of rhymes that do not follow the rule according to Goldstein (1997) and, above all, when the humorous aspect found in most poems is not ignored.

Like any other child-oriented literature, children's poetry presents a unique characteristic, which is having a specific audience that should be considered in its condition, as stated by Aguiar and Ceccantini (2012, p. 11). Children need something more imaginative and also some visual appeal. Generally speaking, it is essential to have literary quality and bring new ideas, which is still a standard to be followed in order to be successful, both in sales and earning children's approval and identification.

The characters have a funny side and we believe that there is an exaltation of the characters in this sense. We also notice that the poems show the caricatural side of these unusual beings, thus bringing for kids new playful ways to face their fears.

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