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## Time and Narrative at Eight Years Old: an essay in interpretation

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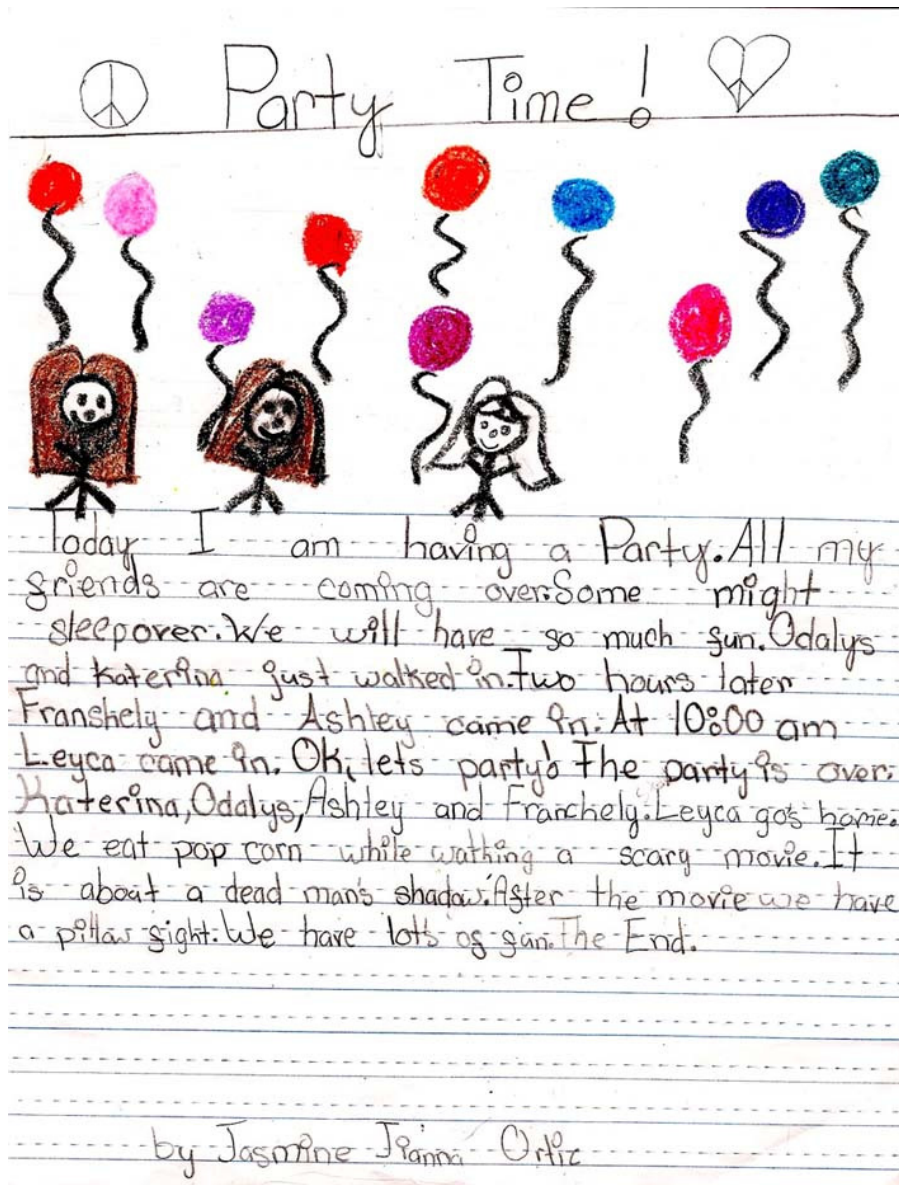
**ABSTRACT** This article examines an eight-year-old's story as a literary work which throws light on the extent of a young child's knowledge of the human condition and on the child's capacity to set forth her knowledge in measured prose.

There is a moment in Henry James's story *The Pupil* when the young tutor Pemberton reflects in some astonishment on his pupil Morgan Moreen's perceptiveness concerning his parents and the kind of life they lead. The tutor's reflection leads him to speculate more widely on the extent of children's knowledge.

When he tried to figure to himself the morning twilight of childhood, so as to deal with it safely, he saw it was never fixed, never arrested, that ignorance, at the moment he touched it, was already flushing faintly into knowledge, that there was nothing that at a given moment you could say an intelligent child didn't know (James, 1913, p. 547).

James's fascination with a child's capacity for knowledge was to lead, a few years later, to his great novel of childhood sensibility, *What Maisie Knew*, a novel to which I will briefly return in conclusion. What I want to do is to illustrate, justify and extend James's generalisation by examining a single tiny episode in the morning twilight of childhood: a story composed by a Dominican American second grader in the late autumn of 2009.

Here is the story:



I came across this story while I was visiting a second grade class at the H.K. Oliver School in Lawrence, Massachusetts, when I heard Jasmine read the story to her classmates and respond to their questions and comments. Later I found an opportunity to talk with her about the story and to discuss it with friends and colleagues, and the longer I thought about it, the more the story intrigued me. But it was Jasmine herself who set me thinking, that first day, by the way in which she answered her youthful critics.

It was towards the end of the school day on a mild November afternoon. The children sat with their teacher and their two visitors, in a circle, on the classroom rug, listening to Jasmine read her story. For the most part they enjoyed it, especially the part about a 'scary monster' and a 'dead man's shadow,' but they had their reservations. Some of them wanted her to have said more about the movie; others wondered why she had said nothing about the party itself. Simon was particularly severe. Why was the party no sooner begun than it was ended, he wanted to know. When it came to her turn to respond, Jasmine was unrepentant. Well, it was a fairy tale, she explained to Simon, with a smile, as if that gave her the licence to write as she had. I was impressed by the self-assurance of her reply and later that evening I asked a friend, himself a distinguished novelist and critic, what he made of Jasmine's explanation. Well she wasn't to be bound by time, he suggested. Excited by the hint, I re-read the story and began to notice how preoccupied the story is with time.



### **Party Time!**

The title of the story announces its theme. We might have expected the title to be, simply, 'The Party'. That seems, at first, to be what the story is about, to judge by the colourful drawing immediately below the title, and the opening sentence, with its capitalisation of the word 'Party'. But the subject of the story is not so much the party itself as the total experience in which the party is embedded, an experience which includes not one but many times, each with its own quality: the time of anticipation, the time of waiting, the time of the central event, the time of closure, and the party's aftermath. The tale that Jasmine tells incorporates all of these times, weaving them into a vivid and intricate narrative, symbolised by the title's exclamation mark, which Jasmine later described to me as an 'expression' of excitement. To call the story 'Party Time!' is to acknowledge that the party itself, however central, is one aspect of a wider temporal whole, an event which draws its significance from the circumstances which surround it, and to which it responds. The story takes the succession of times, past, present and future, and makes out of these many times one time, the time to party.

**Today I am having a Party. All my friends are coming.  
Some might sleepover. We will have so much fun.**

Jasmine said of her story that it was just a fairy tale, which makes the story's opening all the more remarkable. Traditionally the fairy tale opens with the presentation of characters in the indefinite remoteness of once upon a time. By contrast Jasmine opens her story with herself in the immediate present. But the word 'today' is deceptive. It refers, not to the historical present but to an imagined present in which Jasmine becomes the imaginary, first person, narrator while her real life friends are co-opted as imaginary friends. The effect is to demythologise the fairy tale and to play on the equation of lived time and imagined time. The atmosphere which the story's opening conveys is one of make-believe, the context in which a playful child might announce to her playmates the subject of their fantasy and their respective roles, and at once begin the game: 'Today I am having a Party.' This sense of immediacy is vital to the story's theme. The tale opens in the very same moment of time in which it is being told, a here and now that is full of expectation. The present tense looks forward to what is going to happen, or what might happen, while at the same time announcing what is happening right now. The implication is that party time has already begun with the thought of what is to come: the arrival of friends, the party itself, the possibility of a sleepover after the party is over. Contemplating the moment, the narrator looks forward to the party's success in words which find an echo at the story's end: 'We will have so much fun.' With this declaration, both promise and prediction, the significance of party time is provisionally established and the story is launched. The fun has already started.

**Odalys and Katerina just walked in.  
Two hours later Franshely and Ashley came in.**

Now comes a dramatic change of tense, as present and future give way to the past. Jasmine told me that by the word 'just' she meant 'right at that moment,' the moment at which she imagines herself to be telling the story, the immediate past. It is as if time and the story have moved on together and the narrator is announcing the first arrivals to her party, which is about to begin. But the party does not begin, and the next sentence unexpectedly reverses the flow of time, stepping back from the immediate past of just now into the conventional past of narrative. The narrator is no longer recounting the story as it happens, but recalling an event that took place a while ago. Her perspective has changed from that of commentator to that of recorder. This sudden distancing of the narrative by way of moving into the past tense draws attention to the length of time that the narrator and her two friends have to wait for the party to begin. The excitement conveyed by the words 'just walked in,' with their implication of an event unfolding before the narrator's eyes, gives way to suspense and frustration. The words may seem innocent enough, 'Two hours later Franshely and Ashley came in,' but the simple statement of time past barely conceals the narrator's disappointment. Reading between the lines, we sense that anticipation

has been undermined by delay. It is the first of several discordant notes within the happy tale.

**At 10:00 am Leyca came in.**

The waiting is still not over once Franshely and Ashley have arrived. There is still one friend to come, and her arrival is given an exact time by the clock: '10:00 am.' The fact that it is still only ten o'clock in the morning surprised me on first hearing, but when I questioned it, Jasmine confirmed the hour, which didn't seem unusual to her, at least not in her 'fairy tale.' Wouldn't it be fun, she seemed to be saying, to imagine an entire day of partying, beginning early in the morning and carrying on into a sleepover? However that may be, the earliness of the hour is less important than the precision of the chronological moment. The words '10:00 am' have an impact like that of a bell or a starting gun. They tell us that the hour has finally come, and the party can now, at last, begin.

**OK, lets party! The party is over.**

Excitement returns and to mark the long awaited moment, the narrative breaks out of the past and bursts back into the present. The hour is noted and the past is forgotten, if not quite forgiven. The present rules: 'OK, lets party!' But now comes the surprise that puzzled Jessica's classmate Simon. Any reader might be forgiven for assuming that the urgent imperative mood of the sentence 'OK, lets party!' reinforced as it is by a second exclamation mark, would be followed by a description of the party itself, the event towards which both the narrator, and her story, appear to have been wishing to hurry. Instead, the very next sentence tells us that 'the party is over.' The effect is startling, even shocking; it is natural that Simon should have felt cheated. Time seems to have skipped a beat and the party has vanished. The central event goes unrecorded.

What might be the point of this all too abrupt closure, as it seemed to Jasmine's critics? There are two answers that the story itself suggests. The first continues to play on the distinction between party and party time. The words 'the party is over' are mischievous, for the aim of the story is to redefine the nature of a party. The formal party may be over but party time continues, extending informally, with popcorn, a scary movie and a pillow fight, in a scenario all too familiar to anxious parents, eager to clear up. Thus the premature ending of the formal party, in effect its absence from the narrative, reinforces the meaning of the story as a whole. But the second, and richer, answer is to point to the picture which Jasmine has drawn above the text. We may take the exclamation mark after the words 'OK, lets party!' as signalling a pause in the narrative, like the fermata that introduces the cadenza in a classical concerto. Time is momentarily suspended in favour of space as word gives way to image. It is the picture which brings the party to life, the children smiling as they dance, while brightly coloured balloons float freely above their elegantly

coiffured heads. Jasmine told me that when she thought of a party she thought of balloons and pizza. The pizza may be missing but otherwise the imagery of the picture represents just how Jasmine – the middle figure in her drawing, she told me – might be thought to have imagined her party. Instead of describing it depicts, reminding us that there are times when the visual image carries more power than the written word. This might have been more obvious if the illustration had been placed between the two sentences devoted to the party itself. But the paper which Jasmine was using was plain at the top and lined below, constraining her to draw her illustration above her text. We will see later how this constraint gave rise to a particular opportunity.

A parallel to Jasmine's visual treatment of the party can be found in Maurice Sendak's story, *Where The Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963). As soon as Max, the story's hero, has been made king of all wild things he announces, as the imaginary Jasmine does, the commencement of the celebratory party: 'And now,' cried Max, 'let the wild rumpus start!' Like Jasmine, he marks the announcement with an exclamation mark that serves as a verbal pause, as in a musical score. There follow three double page spreads picturing the rumpus, with no accompanying words. Once the images end, the rumpus is over: 'Now stop' Max said and sent the wild things off to bed without their supper.' Sendak's images may be more sophisticated than Jasmine's but the conception overall is similar, although, as we will see, Jasmine concludes her story in a very different manner than Sendak.

However, Jasmine herself offered neither of these answers to Simon's question. Instead, as we have seen, she justified her unexpectedly sudden closure to the party by insisting that what she had written was simply a 'fairy tale,' that is to say, a fiction, a piece of make-believe, the written equivalent of children's fantasy play. Following the hint given by my storytelling friend, I began by interpreting this as meaning that she was not to be bound by time, and the story itself is certainly not bound by any conventional temporal sequence, as we have seen. But perhaps, more broadly, her answer implies a refusal to be bound by contingency. Jasmine told me that she hadn't actually had a party of her own so she thought she would write a fairy tale about one. In telling her own, imaginary, autobiographical story, it is not the contingency of any single party that interests her so much as the universal character of party time. The story of the party she never had broadens into the tale of what it means to hold a party.

**Katerina, Odalys, Ashley and Franchely.[stay]  
Leyca goes home.]** Jasmine told me that, by mistake, she had left out the word 'stay' in the first of these sentences.]

The words 'The party is over' signal a further shift of mood and tense. In *Where The Wild Things Are* the end of the rumpus signals the closing down of the story, as Max feels lonely, wants to be back 'where someone loved him best of all,' and sets off home. Jasmine is more adventurous. Only for Leyca does the end of the party mean the end of the story. Like Max, 'Leyca goes home.' She

came to the party last and leaves it first, and although Jessica forbears to suggest a reason, it is tempting to imagine that her story gently mocks Leyca's failure to take advantage of party time as a whole. She was the last to arrive, having kept the others waiting, and now the narrator makes her the first to leave, missing the sleepover, as if she has still not quite forgiven her. Or perhaps it is not of her own free will that she comes late and leaves early. In either case she leaves but the other four friends remain.

**We eat popcorn while watching a scary movie.  
It is about a dead man's shadow. After the movie  
we have a pillow fight. We have lots of fun. The End.**

And now, with the end of the official party, the narrative continues in the present tense, as if past time is seen passing in front of the narrator as she describes it, as in a film. The backward looking present chosen for these final sentences, corresponds to the anticipatory present of the opening sentences, but rather than hurrying the story on, it slows it down, giving the ending of the story a pensive, dreamy, feeling. The official party, flamboyantly portrayed in Jasmine's drawing though over within a moment in the written text, gives way to an extended after-life as Jasmine and her friends settle down to watch a movie, the tale of a dead man's shadow. There is a pause in the action, a period of rest that is conveyed by means of a sentence notable for being the only sentence in the story to contain a subordinate clause: 'We eat pop corn while watching a scary movie.' With its strange and eerie subject matter, frightening but unexplained, the movie gives the reader, also, pause. We have to imagine it as we will; the author chooses not to assist us, to the dismay of some of Jasmine's first listeners. It is the untold story within a story, adding a final discordant note to the narrative, the hint of death. After the uneasy calm of the mysterious movie, haunted by a dead man's shadow, life returns with the pillow fight, which might, at one and the same time, be seen as both a challenge to the shadow of death, and a last reprise of the excitement of the formal party, now itself passing into the shadows, and on that note the story ends, with words adapted from the opening: 'We have lots of fun.' This is how we should imagine the experience of giving a party. Party time means fun, although the fun is not without its anxieties, disappointments or regrets. The story we have been told confirms it and to mark that confirmation the words 'The End' can now be written, jammed up against the previous sentence and capitalised in mimicry of the title. But the insistence on an ending is more apparent than real, as the renewed life hinted at by the pillow fight implies. The final sentence is in the present tense, not the past, and perhaps it has now become a more forward looking present once more. The story is over but its thought remains. Soon enough party time will return and the circle of narrative will be renewed. But we understand it better now and in any case that's another story. Jasmine has taken her tale as far as she wants or needs. Like many another storyteller, she passes the story on, inviting her readers to take over, to fill in the gaps, to add

to the tale or to tell another, perhaps the tale of the dead man's shadow, perhaps the story of Leyca, the girl who went home, perhaps the tale of another party, maybe of one that went wrong. As the Italian novelist and teacher Gianni Rodari says, in his remarkable book *The Grammar of Fantasy*: 'Even when a fairy tale is finished, there is always the possibility of an after (Rodari, 1996, p. 36).' There is always a new tale to tell, more sense to make.



The last question I asked Jasmine when I discussed the story with her, a day or two after I had listened to her read it, was whether she had the entire story in her mind from the start or whether she made it up, in part at least, as she went along. Without hesitation she replied that the story was all in her mind from the start. That confirms what the story's formal clarity and precision would perhaps lead us to suspect. What took me longer to recognise was how the formal control is as evident in the visual appearance of the story on the page as in its verbal content. We might think of the visual element as confined to the drawing of the party scene but that would be to ignore a number of small but significant details in the spacing of the text and the handwriting. The tiny circles that replace dots above the letter i and below the exclamation mark, are echoed in the fluttering balloons above the three figures in the drawing. The peace signs, as Jasmine called them, on either side of the enlarged title, for which a special line has been drawn by Jasmine herself, symbolise the pacific air of the story. The opening sentence is more widely spaced than any other, as if to emphasize the story's theme. The words 'OK, lets party!' which stand at the centre of the narrative, appear close to the centre of the handwritten text. Such details may be more or less accidental but they are so bound up with the story's meaning as to seem indispensable. It is impossible to print or to type out Jasmine's story without losing some part of its eloquence. Even a black and white photocopy is inadequate, for Jasmine was very precise about the colours she had given to each balloon. When I pointed to what I called a red balloon; she told me it was magenta. I pointed to a purple balloon; violet, she corrected me. I pointed to a green balloon; it was turquoise. She seems to have conceived her story as a verbal and visual whole, after the manner of one of William Blake's songs. The story fits perfectly on the page. Right at the bottom of the page, in splendid isolation in the centre of the last line of the paper, she has added her own her full name: Jasmine Jianna Ortiz. She told me that she only wrote her full name when she thought of a story as important.



The preoccupation of Jasmine's story with time calls to mind the theory of narrative which Paul Ricoeur develops in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*. According to Ricoeur, the narrative plot both reflects and resolves, poetically, the paradox of time. He puts it like this:



It reflects the paradox inasmuch as the act of emplotment combines in variable proportions two temporal dimensions, one chronological and the other not. The former constitutes the episodic dimension of narrative. It characterizes the story insofar as it is made up of events. The second is the configurational dimension properly speaking, thanks to which the plot transforms the events into a story. This configurational act consists in 'grasping together' the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole... Yet poiesis does more than reflect the paradox of temporality. By mediating between the two poles of event and story, emplotment brings to the paradox a solution that is the poetic act itself. (Ricoeur, 1984)

Jasmine's story shows how a young child sets about the poetic act. The story she has written with such confidence mediates between event and story much as Ricoeur suggests. Her literary play with time and tense is the means by which she draws from the manifold of events – the late arrival of friends, the party, the departure of Leyca, the scary movie, the pillow fight – the unity of one temporal whole. Scarcely any tense within the story is simple or direct; all appear to look beyond or behind one time to another. The jumble of successive incidents finds its resolution in the configuring act which grasps them together into a single comprehensive story. At the heart of *Party Time!* we still find the party proper, but rather than describing the party itself, the story sets out to show us how the one event draws its meaning from all that surrounds it in the past, the future, the possible and the probable. The trick which the story plays on us, to Jasmine's amusement as she listened to her youthful critics, is to appear to exclude the main event. The party vanishes in the space between an exclamation mark and a capital letter. Or so it seems. But the verbal conceit serves to deceive. What the written text refuses, the visual image supplies. Time gives way to space, leaving maybe the faintest of traces in the form of the balloons floating above Jasmine and her friends' heads, magenta, violet, turquoise. And now we can see how the constraint of having to draw the picture above the text afforded Jasmine an opportunity. She has indeed drawn a picture of the party, which the written text has ignored or forgotten, but, because it had to be drawn at the beginning of the story, right below the title, it has become the picture that embodies the story as a whole, uniting the two terms, party and party time, the particular and the universal. It was drawn last of all, Jasmine told me, after the written text was finished, but placed first by force of circumstance, so that it has the effect of re-envisaging the beginning of the story in its ending. Ricoeur writes elsewhere of 'the power of fiction to redescribe reality (Ricoeur, 2007).' Not the least of the surprises that Jasmine springs on her readers is her final embodiment of that power in the form of a visual image. She lets the image have the last word.



How are we to describe Jasmine's achievement? What is she working on? A clue can be found in the following passage from John Dewey's lectures on the philosophy of art, published in 1934 under the title, *Art as Experience*:

Through art meanings of objects that are otherwise dumb, inchoate, restricted and resisted are clarified and concentrated, and not by thought working laboriously upon them, nor by escape into a world of mere sense, but by creation of a new experience. Sometimes the expansion and intensification is effected by means of

*...some philosophic song  
Of Truth that cherishes our daily life*

Sometimes it is brought about by a journey to far places, a venture to

*casements opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn.*

But whatever path the work of art pursues, it, just because it is a full and intense experience, keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness. It does so by reducing the raw materials of that experience to matter ordered through form (Dewey, 1934, p. 132-133).

I can imagine no better way to describe Jasmine's achievement. In the most general terms, her aim is to define her experience of the common world in measured prose. In the case of this particular story she has chosen the path of Wordsworth rather than that of Keats, transforming the fairy tale into a philosophic story of daily life. The formal concerns that she exploits are extensive: temporal sequence and the grammar of tense, the relation of word to image, interpretive space, the narrative interplay of concordance and discordance, the contrast between autobiography and fiction. These are the means by which she orders her subject matter as she sets out to redescribe the reality of party time. But it would be a mistake to view her story as the literary expression of a vision that has been formed independently of the story. It is by way of the story itself that Jasmine comes to a fresh appreciation of the common world and of her own being within it. The story clarifies and concentrates her experience, to use Dewey's terms. It tells us what she knows, or, rather, it gives form and substance to what she knows.

In the preface to *What Maisie Knew*, Henry James suggests that 'small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their at all producible vocabulary (James, 1913, p. x).' A story such as *Party Time!* suggests that, for all the authority of James's great novel, his prefatory comment calls for revision. For in writing her story Jasmine has

indeed found the terms in which to translate her perceptions into literary form. Her immaturity has been turned to her advantage. Her vocabulary may be limited but she has made the most of her limitations, fashioning opportunity out of constraint and discovering a narrative style that offers wide scope for her expanding consciousness. To return to the quotation with which I began, she seems at this given moment to know precisely what words she needs to convey her far from laborious thought. As for the drawing with which the story opens, it is the very image of her apprehension. Yes, it assures us, I have had my vision.

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