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## **FANTASY LITERATURE AND TOLKIEN'S THEORY ON FANTASIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The genre of fantasy has won much acclaim in every area of art and entertainment, from literary fiction to being incorporated into movies and games. The influence of myths, legends and folklore is quite evident in most of the fantasy. Initially, however, the fiction was branded synonymous to children's literature and looked down for its escapist appeal. Preference for fantasy and magic was seen as a means of escape from the rash realities of everyday happenings around the world. The present article aims to give an overview of fantasy literature, giving details on the salient characteristics, history and development of the genre.

To understand the term Fantastical Literature, the shortest and quickest route would be to acquaint oneself with how it is popularly defined. Fantastical literature, simply speaking, is a genre of literature that advocated magical and supernatural elements into a fictional plot, theme or setting. The elements used in a Fantasy can be traced back to ancient works that had inclinations to mythology and folklore. From the Eastern epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the tales in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* to the Western classics of *Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, *Divine Comedy* and the Arthurian Legend, fantastical elements have always existed, enrapturing many audiences throughout the ages.

### **KEYWORDS**

Fantasy, literature, mythology, folklore, epics

## RESEARCH PAPER

Long before fantasy fiction existed as a genre, it was the Romances that incorporated fantastical elements in the backdrop of traditional themes. In Rome, romances centred on the life and deeds of Alexander the great. In France, the plot focused on Charlemagne and Roland, and in Britain, the lives and deeds of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and their famous quest for the Holy Grail held wide renown.

With the coming of the Renaissance era, the works of many writers like Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d' Arthur*, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Edmund Spenser in his *The Faerie Queen* comprised elements that were fantastical. Literary fairy tales written by Charles Perrault and Madame d' Aulnoy became very popular in the 18th century but gradually, with the rise of realism in the Era of Enlightenment and Reason, very little regard was given to fantasy. Even children's literature lacked fantasy, deploring fairy tales as falsehood and far-fetched.

In reaction to the Era of the Enlightenment came the Romanticism in the Middle Ages that highly prized the supernatural, tradition and imagination. It was here that the predecessor of modern dark fantasy found fascination through the Gothic novel. But the dark fantasy genre was yet to develop a long way in the future through the works of Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allen Poe and H. P. Lovecraft. In the Victorian era, there was a revival of interest in the literary fairy-tale. Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Hans Christian Anderson, John Ruskin and Robert Louis Stevenson were popular figures who devised fantastical elements in their works. But it was probably the writer of *The Well at the World's End*, William Morris, who instigated the beginnings of modern fantasy and the "fantasy world." He was deeply inspired by the medieval romances and sagas and wrote in the archaic style popular of the Middle Ages, which is probably why he had a direct influence on J. R. R. Tolkien. Following Morris's example, modern fantasy genre truly took shape first in the late 19th century, beginning with the works of Scottish George MacDonald, who wrote the first ever critical essays on the fantasy genre titled "The Fantastic Imagination." MacDonald was a major influence on both Tolkien and Lewis.

Several classic children's fantasies emerged such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and many other works. Till early twentieth century, fantasy was accepted as juvenile literature and it was only with the popularity of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* that "fantasy" became accepted as a genre for the adult reading population. Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" was a formative work of fantasy criticism. Subsequent to

Tolkien's works came C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and works by Mervyn Peake, Ursula K. Le Guin, Theodor Seuss Geisel, Roald Dahl, Terry Brooks, Eoin Colfer, E. B. White, Robert Jordan, George R. R. Martin, Piers Anthony, Brian Jacques, J. K. Rowling, Rick Riordan, Anthony Horowitz, Christopher Paolini, Stephanie Meyers and many others.

Despite the acclaim the Fantasy genre is enjoying presently, one cannot overlook that initially, this genre was marginalized as "children's literature" because it used magic and supernatural phenomena and make-believe features, the standards of which were exclusively juvenile. The fantastical was a realm apart though in some way connected to the real world setting and the characters were drawn to encounter events that were magical and imaginary. Wizards, witches, dragons, wicked stepmothers, monsters, castles and caves, swords and sorcery, talking animals and humans transforming to beasts, curses to be healed, strange doors to be unlocked, curious mysteries to be unravelled, impossible journeys to be made, epic battles to be fought, in the midst of which there would be encounters with supernatural beings, deities or demons: the list is endless with regard to the popular elements that fall under the title of the fantastical.

The settings in a fantasy are generally less realistic than that of the science fiction but they associate the plot to a fictional world, the construction of which is termed as "world building." World building is the creation of a self-coherent world having a history (back story), geography (maps), ecology (flora and fauna) and a people with a culture (humans or other imaginary creatures), all elements which remain consistent to that of the world being built. The aim of world building is to create a context for a story. World building is most evidently identified in the subgenre of "high fantasy". High fantasy is thus named because of its setting involving an imaginary world or because of the epic stature of its characters, plot and themes. It differs from "low fantasy" where the latter takes place in a real or "primary" world with the inclusion of magical elements. On the other hand, high fantasy is set in an alternative "secondary" world which is entirely fictional and, on the basis of the kind of "secondary" world included in the fiction, high fantasy is categorized into three.

The first category is devoid of the primary world. Middle-earth in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Alageasia in Paolini's *The Inheritance Cycle* and Randland in Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* are the best examples to an exclusively "secondary" world setting where the primary world does not exist. The second category includes the secondary world as a parallel world which is entered through a portal from the primary world. Wonderland in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Narnia in Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* are some examples. The third

category consists of a distinct world-within-a-world as part of the primary world. The magical world of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and the Greek-mythology related dimension of Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series are secondary worlds that are within the primary "real" world, where the real-world people (referred to as Muggles in Rowling's series) are not aware of the existence of the "secondary" fantastical dimension.

The major theme underlying fantastical novels is a moral one, founded on a conflict between evil and good. This conflict finds itself in either several instances of the plot or is the underlying plot itself, upon which the story progresses. Most often a dark/evil enemy's imminent victory triggers the action of the plot and the concerned hero/heroine is led through a sequence of trials at the end of which the goodness overpowers evil, crushing it to nonexistence, and thus the end of a fantasy fiction mirrors the popular "happily ever after" closure of fairy tales. Hence, for the similarity in their essential characteristics, one can undeniably link fantasy to fairy tales, which was how they were called in the beginning, and probably it was the latter that paved the path for the former to become a full-fledged genre.

Presently fantasy fiction is multi-layered and encompasses many sub-genres of literature from traditional high fantasy to magic realism, dark fantasy, science fantasy, historical fantasy, paranormal romance and so on. High fantasy or epic fantasy, which is sometimes related to Heroic Fantasy as well, is probably the most popular sub-genre of the fantasy fiction. The central theme is a quest for an object, a person or the accomplishment of a distinct purpose and the plot runs on a sequence of various minor and major battles between good and evil. Historical Fantasy is a kind of fantasy that has a historical setting, relevant to the real world, with fantastical and magical elements. In King Arthur's story, the Middle Ages or the Dark Ages were the temporal focus. In contrast to Historical Fantasy, we have the Contemporary or Urban Fantasy. This sub-genre has a modern-day setting, like the Harry Potter and Twilight series and there may be magical beings or humans who can use magic in the tale. A sub-genre that is gaining great prominence is the Dark Fantasy, a development on the Gothic novels of the Middle Ages. The plot is strewn with haunted castles, scary creatures like monsters, vampires, werewolves, dungeons and trapdoors, ghosts and mysteries, curses and deaths, creating a formidable and eerie atmosphere. This sub-genre is closely linked with the Horror genre.

Notably, Fantasy fiction is often confused with Science Fiction but both genres have distinct qualities. The fantasy genre is predominately medievalist in form while science fiction incorporates scientific themes and is mostly located in modern settings. In resolution of the

debated Science Fiction and Fantasy genres, the sub-genre of fantasy termed as the Science Fantasy embraces qualities of both these genres. Medieval magic is intertwined with modern machines and spaceships in Science Fantasy. Other than the mentioned sub-genres, there are other new divisions that are claiming category in the field of literature. Anthropomorphic Fantasy has a special quality wherein the characters are animals and not humans. Fantasies based on myths and popular fairy tales fall under the category of Mythical Fantasy and parody or satirical stories in a fantasy setting come under the title of Humorous Fantasy.

Fantasy is a genre that is attaining commendation not only in books but also in movies and games. Role playing games like *Dragons and Dungeons*, card games like *Magic: the Gathering*, science fantasy role-playing games like *Final Fantasy* are all dominant in the gaming industry. Media has flourished in its technical expertise such that fantasy movies have come into production and won great fame from their almost realistic portrayal of the magical and supernatural. The *Harry Potter* series, *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are the best examples for the popularity that fantasy movies have worldwide. These movies largely helped to revive interest in reading fantastical literature.

While trying to make sense of the essentials of the Fantasy genre through its history, development and present prominence, the aesthetic relish and significance accorded to its readers and audience must also be attended to.

Fantasy is possibly the highest level of creative exercise. Carl Jung stated that every work of man originated foremost in “creative fantasy”. It would be interesting to note that imagination was a level of man’s mind that was valued not just by artists and writers but also by scientists. In Albert Einstein’s own words, “the gift of fantasy . . . meant more to [him] than [his] talent for absorbing positive knowledge” (Clark 207). Fantasy exposes the magnitudes to which man's imagination can expand. It recognizes the excitement and wonder that is obtained when the impossible is imagined. Imagination is generally the realm in man's psyche that enables him to mentally create, perceive and control images. The product of an exercised imagination is, according to Tolkien, “Sub-Creation,” which when duly "expressed" finds itself materialized in Art.

However, this extreme streak of creative imagination in Fantasy, led the genre to be categorized under the children’s literature paradigm. There was a popular belief that fantasy, being detached from the real-world, was an escape from reality and hence was not an encouraging entity to adult readers. Countering this, C. S. Lewis in his dedication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, tells his goddaughter Lucy Barfield that in the future,

when old age finds her, she will be “old enough to start reading fairy tales again.” This is similar to George MacDonald’s proposition in his essay “The Fantastic Imagination” where, in answer to some queries regarding his fantasy works, he stated that he was not writing “for children but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five” (25).

If an adult was to read a fantasy fiction, it would be done merely on the support of “sentiment”, that is to say in reliving memories of childhood or what childhood ought to have been. This “sentiment” does not encourage the adult reader to like the work because he does not believe in it. Hence, it is understandable that what is required is to put aside all reasoning and requirement of being rational, or as Coleridge put it, a “willing suspension of disbelief” which, adopting the term used by Tolkien, gives one the “humility” to embrace the fantastical. By the suspension of disbelief, the ability of the human mind is praised, being “endowed with powers of generalization and abstraction” (Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” 22).

The mind that thought of light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power.....and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane. We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such “fantasy,” as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (22)

Undoubtedly, a study of Tolkien’s essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” would reveal more insight into our analysis of the Fantasy. The mental power of imagination enables fantasy into existence. Since, the involvement in fantastical imaginings is believed to be strange; attempts were made to parallel fantasy with that of dreams and hallucinations or mental delusions. But Tolkien pointed out that fantasy differs from them: Dreams have no Art and Mental Disorders have no control. Tolkien ascertained that fantasy was best achieved through words, that is, through “narrative art” which is “story-making in its primary and most potent mode.” According to him, fantasy suited more to literature than to painting or even drama.

In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy; the hand tends to outrun the mind, even to overthrow it. . . . Fantasy, even of

the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted. Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy, and no “belief” of any kind in any part of the performance is required or expected of anybody. This is, of course, partly due to the fact that the producers of drama have to, or try to, work with mechanism to represent either Fantasy or Magic. (49-50)

However, with the rapid development and innovations in the filmmaking industry, one cannot wholly second Tolkien’s view that narrative art is the best medium for fantasy. Lately, this genre has won much commendation thanks to the movies through which worlds created by words are being brought to life in an almost realistic visual experience.

In defence of fantasy, Tolkien assures it to be a “natural human activity” that neither destroys nor insults Reason. He believed that fantasy did not “obscure the perception of scientific verity” and established that “the keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make” (54). He ascertained fantasy to be a “human right” where man was a creator because he was created in the “image and likeness” of the Great Creator (55).

Fantasy is a creative art, made out of the Primary World or the “real” world and hence one must understand how the fantastic is related with the realistic. Tolkien understood imagination to be the power that gave “to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality” (46). Real-life situations are shaped and adapted into worlds that are unexplainable and fantastical. Tolkien believed that fantasy was unable to “blur the sharp outlines of the real world” because it depends on them (82). Creative Fantasy is founded on the “recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (55). Though a difficult task, the creation of fantastical elements expected rearrangement and production of Art that stemmed from the “inner consistency of reality.”

Tolkien adopted three terms that favoured his analysis of fairy tales, the forerunner of fantasy fiction. They were Recovery, Escape and Consolation. Recovery, with respect to old age disabilities, was the renewal of health and spirit through the “regaining of a clear view” without one’s vision being stained by the “drab blur of triteness or familiarity” (57). The second word is a key word in the understanding of fairy tales. Fairy tales, were by far by many, believed to be the world’s “most obvious and outrageous forms of escapist literature” (59). Escape worked as the main function of fairy stories but it was not an escape from reality according to Tolkien. It was an escape from the chaos and nonsensical lifestyles of the

modern folk. For him, escape was very practical and even heroic. He cites a brilliant example to confer his point: “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it” (60). Reality around him was “the rawness and ugliness of modern European life” in an age of “improved means to deteriorated ends” (63).

Escapism was profound when the fleeing away was from things more terrible and grim like hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death. Escape from Death, a theme that inspired George MacDonald, was the Great Escape which was undoubtedly the oldest deepest desire, proved not only in fiction but in everyday living too. This brought Tolkien to his final term which was Consolation of the Happy Ending, a phrase for which he formulated a term known as the “eucatastrophe.” Eucatastrophe was “the sudden joyous turn” perceived as a “miraculous grace” in the otherworld setting. By the “happily ever after” phenomena, he did not “deny the existence of sorrow and failure” but pointed out that the possibility of there being sorrow and failure would make the “joy of deliverance” a fulfilling one (68).

Partaking of or drawing on reality, a fantasy writer created the secondary world and the successful “joy” was “a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” (71). The Consolation was not just a soother from sorrow but a satisfaction, a sense of truth that what one created existed truly in that world which was enough consolation for the artist’s efforts. The epilogue of his essay is where he speaks of the “mythical” Gospels as a “fairy-tale” that accomplishes the essence of all that is worthy of a fantasy.

They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfilment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the “inner consistency of reality. . . .” [T]his story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. . . . Legend and History have met and fused. (71-72)

He believed that the Gospel narratives had all the qualities of a great human storytelling, the storyteller entering into the story in flesh and bringing out a joyous conclusion from a tragic situation. Tolkien transferred this insight to his friend C. S. Lewis, which, having changed the



latter's perception of Art and Religion, was the rich soil upon which Lewis would come to sow the seeds of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Tolkien and Lewis, nicknamed "Tollers" and "Jack," are the key figures in the development of modern fantasy fiction. They met with other Oxford scholars on a regular basis, founding a literary discussion group called the Coalbiters that later evolved into The Inklings. The group constituted of the most influential intellectuals and authors of the day and these literary enthusiasts praised the value of narrative in fiction and encouraged the writing of fantasy.

Tolkien was so encouraged by these meetings with Lewis that he began to read to him bits and pieces of his early Middle-earth mythology and Lewis lavished praises on the writings. Daniel Grotta writes in his *Biography of J. R. R. Tolkien* that "if Tolkien ever encountered a kindred spirit at Oxford, it was Lewis" (80). Through myth and legend, Lewis and Tolkien's works managed to offer a taste of the Christian Gospels, the latter's writing sounding more secular than the former's. Colin Duriez, in his book *Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship* speaks of Tolkien's belief that telling stories mirrored the creative powers of God. Lewis and Tolkien, according to Duriez, share three interrelated commitments—"romanticisms, reason and Christianity," all of which are reflected in their respective works (93).

Hence, Tolkien and Lewis, like most fantasy writers, drew their fiction from the inspiration of their real life experiences and perceptions. The inclusion of such realistic beliefs and elements into their fantastical worlds of Narnia and Middle-earth contrastingly shows that by a reader's passage into the imaginary, "unreal" world, he/she is not escaping reality but discovering that the real, in fact, exists in the fantastical.

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