The State of Critical Theory of Fantastic Literature

by

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ABSTRACT

The study of genre literature in general, and fantasy or fairy tale literature in particular, by its very nature, falls outside the normal course of literary theory. This paper evaluates various approaches taken to create a framework within which scholarly research and evaluation of these types of genre literature might occur. This is done applying Secondary World theory to better-established literary foci, such as psychological analysis and monster theory while still respecting the premises posited in traditional literary inquiry.

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Part I: Defining the Issue

In 1811, Jane Austen released her novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. In it, Austen wedded romance and satire in such a way that the novel is now held up as a prime example of one of the first great works of literary fiction. Forty years later, Herman Melville spun a tale of a grand adventure on the high seas in which a mad captain hunted for an impossibly massive white whale. *Moby Dick* has since gone on to be considered one of the greatest works of literature in the English language. Austen and Melville did not set out to create timeless pieces of literary art. They set out to produce stories of fiction to be consumed and enjoyed by as many as possible. Would *Moby Dick* have survived the test of years if it wasn't at heart a damn fine high seas adventure filled with action and peril? If Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, or *Great Expectations* today, instead of in Victorian England, would he still be placed on the shelf in the category of great literary authors? Or would he be relegated to the shelves of young adult literature and rarely given a second thought when it came to discussing greatness in English literature? When asking one of the most fundamental questions in philosophy, "What is it to be alive?" does it really matter if it is Upton Sinclair's Bunny, Arthur C. Clarke's HAL 9000, Philip K. Dick's Rachael and Deckard, or René Descartes' dreaming-self asking the question? Aren't they all asking the same question?

Today, there is a very discernable (if not always identifiable) divide in critical literary circles. The debate is waged as to what is and is not to be considered "literary." On the surface, this seems to be somewhat silly. After all, whether a book is genre or literary is largely defined these days by publishers and book sellers and has little to do with content. Go to the local bookseller and you are quite likely to find Stephen King's

Different Seasons in either the horror or science fiction section, even though it is in no way either of these. It is a collection of four novellas, three of which have true "literary" qualities about them. Not surprisingly these three stories have since been turned into three highly successful films, "The Body" was turned into the coming of age film, *Stand By Me* (1986). "Apt Pupil" was adapted into a psychological thriller of the same name in 1998, examining how the seeds of Hitler's evil can take root in impressionable youths. Finally, "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption" was developed as the film, *The Shawshank Redmption* (1994), which was subsequently nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay (Frank Darabount based on the novella by Stephen King). One might also find Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in either the "literature" or "contemporary fiction" sections of the bookstore, despite that it is plainly a murder mystery set in 1327 Italy.

With such wild disparities between content and label, it would be simple to write off the entire genre versus literary fiction debate as pointless. That would be disingenuous however, as in today's literary world, labels do matter. Sometimes they matter too much. The literary merits of fiction are what is considered when awards like the Pulitzer are discussed. When decisions are being made on what texts to include in the anthologies that will inform and educate later generations, the tag of "literary" can be the difference-maker between the honor of inclusion (bringing with it a small tidbit of immortality and prestige) and exclusion. A body of work deemed literary can open numerous doors, including university tenure and commercial promotion by the likes of the *New York Times*. What though of genre fiction? Why is it so maligned, especially when even well-educated adults are lining up in droves to read it? A partial answer to this can be found in

the remarks made by Ursula K. Le Guin, a celebrated author who has managed at times to straddle the line between genre and literary fiction.

> But when the characteristics of a genre are controlled, systematized, and insisted upon by publishers, or editors, or critics, they become limitations rather than possibilities. Salability, repeatability, expectability replace quality. A literary form degenerates into a formula. Hack writers get into the baloney factory production line, Hollywood devours and regurgitates the baloney, and the genre soon is judged by its lowest common denominator…. And we have the situation as it was from the 1940's to the turn of the century: "genre" used not as a useful descriptor, but as a negative judgment, a dismissal. (Cunningham and Le Guin)

The result of this negative judgement seems largely to be that genre fiction, especially young adult, children's literature, and fantasy continue to be pushed to the margins in some sort of hope by the literati that such novels will eventually be forgotten. This marginalization, however, creates an orphan class of literature, those books at the pinnacle of genre literature. These are the books which truly define the genre, not those found with Le Guin's baloney. They are the works of literature which the baloney aspires to be and have, for more than half a century now, helped to define modern cultural development. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* has been around for 81 years and is (thanks to modern cinema) as popular now as it ever has been. C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* has begun to stand the test of time as well. Is it fair or academically honest that simply because some authors choose to lift their stories out of this world and place them in another, or to include magic or the monster character as literary devices, that the works be summarily dismissed from consideration as works of literature worthy of intellectual scrutiny?

In today's modern studies of literature, it has become commonplace to evaluate works under the large umbrella of literary theory developed by great philosophical minds

such as Foucault, Derrida, Benjamin, Lacan, and Sartre. Literary works are subjected to oftentimes exacting critical inquiry using methods pioneered by these and other great thinkers. This allows the literati to point to concepts such as authorial intent, the truth of the message, character delineation, and the influences the author has allowed to touch the work. The adage that the author is dead once a work is written is often taken to heart as a guiding principle.

Much of genre literature though, simply does not conform to this sort of critical inquiry. For many years, works of genre literature have been marginalized, considered pulp literature or low-brow popular literature. In my youth, I was repeatedly cautioned that popularity does not make for meaningful content. While I concede that this is a very poignant truth, it does create something of an easy out for dismissing works that refuse to be defined by traditional inquiry.

Students of literature are expected to pick up what is generally accepted as the literary canon and develop an understanding of the cultures that led to its creation. In cases like Charles Dickens, this has as much to do with his widespread popularity across the vast expanse of the British Empire as it did with his exacting details about London and the life of the poor there. For Melville, the culture of life at sea during the time of tall ships came to be the bedrock of *Moby Dick.* Those studying the Devonshire Manuscript are greeted with the Renaissance equivalent of social media, as different hands comment in the margins on previous passages, even going so far as to indicate likes, allowing the student to see how unfettered expressions of art developed.

Picking the pseudo-arbitrary starting point of Professor Tolkien's publishing of *The Hobbit* in 1937, modern culture, especially popular culture and the literature of

cinema, has increasingly been both defined by and reflected in the works of fantastic literature, a genre wholly resistant to traditional critical inquiry. Furthermore, the tales that are still told over and over again to our children, often as oral traditions, without the aid of written books, are those fairy tales that have been engaging both childhood and adult imaginations for hundreds of years. The collected tales of the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault, the romances of Arthur, or the folklore of the Ulster Cycle are all stories which have endured the ravages of time, making up large portions of the Matter of Britain as well as studies of Germanic literature and culture. For all the importance given to the likes of Raymond Carver, Ayn Rand, T.S. Eliot, Kurt Vonnegut, and others, none of those authors were of the sort where literally millions of readers around the world would line up for hours on end to grab the next installment of their work.

How are we creating a realistic snapshot of the last 85 years (or more) of the English-speaking culture if we are marginalizing some of the largest influencers, simply because they do not conform to traditional critical inquiry? I submit that we are not. At the same time though, popularity does not equal quality. There still needs to exist a way in which the genre of fantastic literature, especially fairy tales, can be examined without relying on what has become the popular trend of looking for great truths hidden within the author's words. In so doing, we can critically separate the genre-defining works penned by the like of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Neil Gaiman from the baloney created by authors such as Chris Paolini and Stephenie Meyer.

What follows is what such critical inquiry might look like. I acknowledge up front that there are other genres beyond that of fantasy and fairy tales which too deserve critical evaluation based on their merits, and that the particular approach described here

may leave much to be desired if applied to those other genres. I also acknowledge that what follows does rely on a work of literature still being defined as one sort of genre or another, rather than simply a work of fiction. However, if we step away from the publisher-defined pigeon holes of genre fiction and allow authors to express themselves in the manner they see fit, much of the problem of defining something as fantasy or not goes away. Strong authors are cognizant of what sort of story they are writing. They will sometimes, in fact, craft a story specifically to embrace a particular genre, even when telling a story not typical of the type, such as when Margaret Atwood penned *The Handmaid's Tale.*

> At some time during the writing, the novel's name changed to "The Handmaid's Tale," partly in honor of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," but partly also in reference to fairy tales and folk tales: The story told by the central character partakes — for later or remote listeners — of the unbelievable, the fantastic, as do the stories told by those who have survived earth-shattering events. (Atwood)

The first step in identifying what this new approach to critical inquiry of fantasy literature might look like is to identify why it is, that traditional critical inquiry does not work.

Part II: The Problem with Traditional Methods

In 1970, French-Bulgarian literary theorist, Tzvetan Todorov used the word "fantastic" to define a very narrow subset of literature found somewhere between the uncanny (an encounter with something that is at once both strange and familiar) and the marvelous (that place where wonder and the traditional notion of fantasy lie). For Todorov, the fantastic is defined in those precarious moments between belief and

disbelief in the supernatural, where the slightest shift may nudge decision one way or the other.

> The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov, 25)

Todorov's unfortunate choice of the term "fantastic" has since mistakenly framed fantasy literature (not the subject of the fantastic) as violating reality, reader expectations, and/or the rules of the world created by the narrative. I use the term unfortunate because Todorov's theories in no way marginalized what is today generally regarded as fantasy. For Todorov, those instances in which the supernatural could eventually be explained fell under the heading of uncanny. For those other times when the supernatural remained and was forced to be accepted as supernatural, one was then in the realm of the marvelous. Only during the hesitation between deciding which way to lean did the fantastic exist.

> "I nearly reached the point of believing": that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life. (Todorov, 31)

This general misunderstanding or misapplication of Todorov's term "fantastic" has largely defined criticism of fantasy literature ever since.

It would be easy to blame Todorov's unfortunate choice of label for the trials and tribulations faced by fantasy genre literature being taken seriously. However, 49 years of monographs, written as the result of intense scholarly study of literature have not managed to clear up and eliminate the confusion, giving credence to the notion that there just might be something to the violation of expectations which Todorov carried on about,

which makes fantasy beyond the works of J.R.R. Tolkien so difficult to define and evaluate.

One need look no further than box office receipts to see that cinema is a major contributor to what is considered literature today. Films based on fantasy fiction are being endowed with massive budgets reaching into the hundreds of millions of dollars and then taking in *over one billion dollars each* in ticket sales, giving us some idea of how widely this genre is embraced and respected by contemporary readers and viewers around the world. It would seem then to follow, with such ardent production and consumption, that it would behoove us to subject the fantasy literature from which these blockbuster cultural influencers are being created to the same level of intellectual scrutiny that we would apply to those more "literary," but lesser known works, that may very well be forgotten in the space of a decade rather than live on for close to a century. If an argument can be made to elevate the much-maligned genre of fantasy to the same level of critical regard as the likes of Dickens, Melville, Austen, and Hugo, then perhaps it is only a very small leap to raise the regard of other genres in similar fashion.

While turning to some of those sources used as the foundation for traditional literary criticism yields some interesting trains of investigation, the process has its issues. Sir Philip Sidney provides a starting point from which a traditional approach to an evaluation of fantasy criticism can be constructed. In his *Defence of Poesy,* Sidney states:

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. (Sidney, 10).

Sidney argues that poets, dating all the way back to Horace and unfettered by the constraints of traditional prose, have served to educate and entertain audiences.

From 1711 to 1712, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele produced a daily publication called *The Spectator.* A key component of *The Spectator* was Addison's essays on literary theory. In these essays Addison writes to the engaged reader:

> …I may reckon about threescore thousand disciples in London and Westminster, who I hope will take care to distinguish themselves from the thoughtless herd of their ignorant and inattentive brethren. Since I have raised to myself so great an audience, I shall spare no pains to make their instruction agreeable, and their diversion useful. For which reasons I shall endeavour to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality, that my readers may, if possible, both ways find their account in the speculation of the day. (Addison, 38)

These readers were challenged by Addison in his essays to allow words the power to incite the imagination to create things unseen in their minds.

A little over 250 years later, Roland Barthes returned to this concept of the engaged reader breathing life into a narrative through *jouissance* of the "writerly" text, a text enjoyed by the constant re-writing of the narrative through engagement of the reader breaking out of his or her position as subject rather than creator. Calling upon the concepts of semiology, Barthes posited that modern myth making was an extension of the relationship between signified (an object) and signifier (the linguistic representation of the object) and the signs they create. Barthes contended that myths occurred when signs, when carefully and deliberately employed, relying on symbolism, tropes, and archetypes, can then further serve as signifiers themselves. This new signifier would then combine with new language and create a new sign or thought. He used as an example the cover of a magazine he saw in a barber shop.

> I am at the barber's and copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors... (Barthes, 116)

When simplified, this approach to myth-making resembles Joseph Addison's challenge to engaged readers to allow their imaginations to build the larger narrative.

Samuel Coleridge provides another entry into critical inquiry with regard to fantasy literature. In his *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge likens the author's narrative act through imagination to the creative power of God:

> The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. (Coleridge, 214).

It was in this same text that Coleridge posited the willful suspension of disbelief for the reader which in turn would allow that, "The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself" (Coleridge, 224). As we will see shortly, it is this willful suspension of disbelief which allows Tolkien's fairy-story author to engage in the act of "sub-creation," by which the Secondary World of his narrative comes into existence.

The ability to segue from Coleridge to Tolkien notwithstanding, it is still abundantly clear that attempting to mold these traditional models of examining literature

into frameworks for studying the fantasy genre entails a good deal of square pegging a round hole. While, as we shall see, these works do indirectly inform some primary notions attached to the study of fantastic literature, the amount of mental gymnastics that must be engaged in so that these theories may come to directly bear on the fantasy genre only serves to obfuscate what the fantasy author has actually written. The crux of this issue may be found in the critical work done by C.S. Lewis.

> It is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself. Granted the story, the style in which it should be told, the order in which it should be disposed and (above all) the delineation of characters, have been abundantly discussed. But the Story itself, the series of imagined events, is nearly always passed over in silence, or else treated exclusively as affording opportunities for the delineation of character. (Lewis, 3)

According to Lewis, there have been three notable exceptions to this; Aristotle's *Poetics*, Boccaccio and his contemporaries' work on allegory, and Jung's study in archetypes. All of these, though, revolved around treating story in such a way as to create a desired result, whether it be Greek dramatic tragedy, allegorical explanations of the ways of antiquity, or an explanation of the collective unconscious. Lewis continues:

> Apart from these three attempts the subject has been left almost untouched, and this has had a curious result. Those forms of literature in which Story exists merely as a means to something else – for example, the novel of manners where the story is there for the sake of the characters, or the criticism of social conditions – have had full justice done to them; but those forms in which everything else is there for the sake of the story have been given little serious attention. Not only have they been despised, as if they were fit only for children, but even the kind of pleasure they give has, in my opinion, been misunderstood. (Lewis, 3)

It is Lewis' contention that this came about due to some "hasty" assumptions on the part of literary scholars: that fantastic fiction, especially the fiction of fairy stories, was intended for children and that children "liked stories of the marvellous because they were

too ignorant to know that they were impossible" (Lewis, 12). As Lewis goes on to point out, though, not all children like such stories, nor is it the case that those who care for such stories are always children. He also points out that to "…enjoy reading about fairies – much more giants and dragons – it is not necessary to believe in them. Belief is at best irrelevant; it may be a positive disadvantage" (Lewis, 12).

In defending the inclusion of the marvelous in stories, Lewis points out, "Nor are the marvels in good Story ever mere arbitrary fictions stuck on to make the narrative more sensational" (Lewis, 12). Lewis takes umbrage with the notion that decisions made regarding the construction of fairy tales are arbitrary things. "The logic of the fairy tale is as strict as that of a realistic novel, though different" (Lewis, 13). Lewis relies on Kenneth Grahame's stories of Mr. Toad to make his point. The decision to make the characters anthropomorphized animals is not one that can simply be reversed. If the characters were people, of what sort would they be, children or adults? They truly do not fit either. The characters have all the faculties and learning of adults, along with adult sensibilities, yet they also benefit from all the carefree parts of being a child such as a lack of responsibility or any care for existence or domestic duty.

If, then, it is accepted that the decisions made by fantastic authors are not arbitrary ones made merely for the express purpose of sensationalizing the story, then a new line of critical inquiry is also made available. Under such circumstances, it then becomes possible to evaluate the decisions made by the authors to include specific fantasy elements, how those elements work or don't work, and why.

Part III: Secondary World Theory

It may be pointed out that there does, in fact, exist thousands of pages of criticism on Tolkien's works, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit,* penned by such scholars as Tom Shippey, Michael Drout, Verlyn Flieger, Rose Zimbardo, and Neil Isaacs as well as many others. These criticisms, however, exist mostly as part of the larger, still youthful, field of Tolkien criticism. As such, while many observations of and approaches to evaluating Tolkien's great works can indeed be applied to other works of the genre, it would be unfair to both those scholars and to the authors of other fantastic works to call this fantasy criticism. This would be no different than taking the lens of Dickensian criticism and applying it to the works of Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters and calling that one lens the critical understanding of Victorian literature.

Regardless, Tolkien was an early pioneer of fantasy literature, making it both disingenuous and self-defeating to ignore some of the specific observations found within Tolkien criticism. As C.S. Lewis observes in his essay, "The Dethronement of Power":

> "But why" some ask, "why, if you have a serious comment to make on the real life of men, must you do it by talking about a phantasmagoric never-never-land of your own?" Because, I take it, one of the main things the author wants to say is that the real life of men is of that mythic and heroic quality. One can see the principle at work in his characterization. Much that in a realistic world would be done by "character delineation" is here done by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls. And man, as a whole, man pitted against the universe, have we seen him at all till we see that he is like a hero in a fairy tale? (Zimbardo and Isaacs, 14)

Given that any criticism of fantastic literature must address these basic questions posed by Lewis' hypothetical reader, it is readily apparent that there will be considerable overlap between Tolkien criticism and criticism of fantastic literature. Much of this

criticism hinges on Tolkien's own essay, "On Fairy-Stories." This essay, however, was not written in a vacuum when it came to considering fairy tales and the power of the imagination. Tolkien's own work, which has come to serve as a foundation for study of fantastic literature, had its own outside influences. Possibly the biggest influence on Tolkien's perception of fairy story can be found in a work written one hundred years before his essay on the subject.

In 1839, George MacDonald penned the essay, "The Fantastic Imagination" and appended it to the preface of his book, *The Complete Fairy Tales.* In this preface, MacDonald makes a point of informing the reader that he prefers the German term, "Märchen" to the English "fairy tale," which is the common translation. He felt that the German term carried with it more of the older meaning, touching back on the sense of "fairy" as used by Spenser in the 16th Century. Rather than directly defining what a fairy tale is, MacDonald instead chooses to use Friedrich Baron de la Morte Fouqué's 1811 German romance, *Undine* as an exemplar. Referring the reader to the work, MacDonald states, "…that I should as soon think of describing the abstract human face, or stating what must go to constitute a human being. A fairy tale is just a fairy tale as a face is just a face" (MacDonald, 5). MacDonald continues in this vein when he notes that many scholars

> would feel sorely hampered if at liberty to use no forms but such as existed in nature, or to invent nothing save in accordance with the laws of the senses; but it must not therefore be imagined that they desire to escape from the region of law. (MacDonald, 5)

These natural laws, MacDonald argues, "may suggest laws of other kinds," (MacDonald, 5) these laws liberating a writer to

> …invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms – which is nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation. (MacDonald, 6)

MacDonald suggests that through the power of imagination one is free re-create nature in a way that imitates, but is better than real nature, engaging in an act of creation similar to that of the divine creator. "When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy" (MacDonald, 6). MacDonald goes on to explain a key premise which Professor Tolkien would later expound upon, that once this Fancy has been committed to paper, the author must from that point forward strictly adhere to the laws of this secondary creation.

> To be able to live in a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. The imagination is in us, whose exercise is essential to the most temporary submission to the imagination of another, immediately, with the disappearance, of Law, ceases to act. Would not the tale, however lovelily begun, sink at once to the level of the Burlesque – of all forms of literature the least worthy? A man's inventions may be stupid or clever, but if he do not hold by the laws of them, or if he make one law jar with another, he contradicts himself as an inventor, he is no artist. (MacDonalad, 6)

MacDonald makes another key departure from traditional literary theory when it comes to the subject of truth or meaning. Largely, it is MacDonald's position that the meaning and truth of a fairy story can and should be an entirely subjective thing.

> The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another. (MacDonald, 7)

Expanding on the subjectivity of meaning, MacDonald claims it is really a simple thing to admit plainly that one does not understand what the fairytale means.

> If you do see a meaning in it, there it is for you…A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean. If my drawing, on the other hand, is so far from being a work of art that it needs "this is a horse" written under it, what can it matter that neither you nor your child should know what it means? (MacDonald, 7)

Lastly, MacDonald makes it clear that he does not write fairytales for children, but rather the childlike, allowing for a bigger audience with more divergent understandings: "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (MacDonald, 7-8).

Building off of George MacDonald's work and touching on the likes of Sidney and Coleridge, as previously noted, we come to the essay which serves as the bedrock for both Tolkien and fantasy criticism. One hundred years after MacDonald's preface was written, J.R.R. Tolkien, gave his lecture, "On Fairy-Stories" wherein he again posited the notion of a narrative "Secondary World." Unlike MacDonald, Tolkien chooses not to refrain from attempting to define the concept of a fairytale. Rather, he carries on at length about the lexicographic difficulties of trying to understand the word "fairy." Eventually, Tolkien uses his specific understanding of the term "fairy" to establish the premise for his Secondary World approach.

> I said the sense 'stories about fairies' was too narrow. It is too narrow, even if we reject the diminutive size, for fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Faërie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (Tolkien, 113)

It is important to Tolkien to delineate the difference between stories about fairies and fairy stories, as it is his assertion that stories concerned primarily with the creature understanding of fairies are uninteresting.

> Stories that are actually concerned primarily with 'fairies', that is with creatures that might also in modern English be called 'elves', are relatively rare, and as a rule, not very interesting. Most good 'fairy-stories' are about aventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches. (Tolkien, 113)

With regard to defining what a fairy-story is, Tolkien thus concludes:

> The definition of a fairy-story – what it is, or what it should be – does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. (Tolkien, 114)

Tolkien, in an attempt to illustrate the finer points of his argument, presents examples of stories often presented as fairy-stories which he feels are, at best, fairy-story adjacent, but not actually fairy-stories themselves. The inclusion of *A Voyage to Lilliput* in Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book* is an error in his estimation, mistaking the diminutive size of Lilliputians as meaning fairy, rather than simply treating them as the story treats them, as tiny, but otherwise ordinary people. This story, Tolkien argues, belongs in the category of travellers' tales. "The tales of Gulliver have no more right of entry than the yarns of Baron Munchausen" (Tolkien, 115). A second sort of tale he excludes are those which rely on the mechanic of the Dream. While a story dreamed "…may indeed sometimes be a fairy-story of almost elvish ease" (Tolkien, 116) this holds true only during the time of dreaming. However, when the writer explains that a tale is merely something imagined in sleep, "he cheats deliberately the primal desire at the heart of Faërie: the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (Tolkien, 116). It is to this

category which Tolkien relegates the likes of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories. Lastly, Tolkien would likely take some exception to C.S. Lewis' use of Kenneth Grahame's stories to make a point about fairy-stories. Tolkien posits that these stories, ones

> in which no human being is concerned; or in which the animals are the heroes and heroines, and men and women, if they appear, are more adjuncts; and above all those in which the animal form is only a mask upon a human face, a device of the satirist or the preacher, in these we have beast-fable and not fairy story… (Tolkien, 117)

It is from here that Tolkien shifts his focus from making fine distinctions regarding the notion of Faërie and the Perilous Realm and focuses briefly on the notion of origins, so as to lay the groundwork for what is to follow. Tolkien is quick to downplay the importance, or even the relevance of the origin of the genre of fairy-stories. It suffices for Tolkien to acknowledge that fairytales are nearly as old as language itself. It may be of use to a student of various mythologies, an archaeologist, or a comparative philologist to examine the specific origins of a fairy-story, but these origins, if it is even possible to untangle them from the origins of language and story, do little to shed light upon the fairy story itself. Tolkien finds that the real origin question for fairy stories is a variant of the problem appreciated by comparative philologists: is a story one to be appreciated engaging "with the debate between *independent evolution* (or rather *invention*) of the similar; *inheritance* from a common ancestry; and *diffusion* at various times from one or more entries" (Tolkien, 121). While all three are important, Tolkien chooses to key in on one specifically, which serves to inform the entirety of the rest of his argument.

> The history of fairy-stories is probably more complex than the physical history of the human race, and as complex as the history of human language. All three things: independent invention, inheritance, and diffusion, have evidently played their part in producing the intricate web of Story. It is now beyond all skill but that of the elves to unravel it. Of

> these three, invention is the most important and fundamental, and so (not surprisingly) also the most mysterious. (Tolkien, 121)
>
> For Tolkien, invention is the most important because of the powers of language and the mind.The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalisation and abstraction, sees not only green-grass…but sees that it is green as well as being grass. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faërie is more potent. (Tolkien, 122)

It is the power of the human mind, through the at of imagination, finding new and unusual ways to use the linguistic power of the adjective which is the foundation for Faërie.

> We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon 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 a cold worm. But in such 'fantasy', as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator. (Tolkien, 122)

Tolkien maintains, "An essential power of Faërie is thus the power of making immediately effective by the will the visions of fantasy" (Tolkien, 122). It is this power of sub-creation which Tolkien feels receives insufficient consideration. Tolkien posits that this is due to a misunderstanding which has resulted in false division of high and low mythologies. Nature-myths, those Olympian stories of Zeus and Hera, were personifications of the sun and moon and other aspects of nature. They represent the concept of high mythology. Descended from those tales are stories of epic heroes – legends. Then, from those legends were spun *Märchen*, the fairy-stories or nursery-tales. Tolkien takes issue with this understanding though and uses the stories of Thórr as his example. He points out that the stories told of Thórr in *Thrymskvitha* are simply fairy-stories, that though the stories may be old, there is no reason to think of them in any way

"un-primitive". While going back through time, the specific details of the story might change, but that so long as there was a Thórr, there was a fairy-story. "When the fairy-tale ceased, there would be just thunder, which no human ear had yet heard" (Tolkien, 124).

Having established the importance of language and the power of invention, Tolkien turns to address one of the most damaging notions to ever be levelled against fairy-tale and fantasy literature, the notion that fairy-stories are meant for children. This singular concept has been the basis for many a dismissal of fantastic literature as anything but a flight of fancy.

> Among those who still have enough wisdom to not think fairy-stories pernicious, the common opinion seems to be that there is a natural connection between the minds of children and fairy-stories, of the same order as the connection between children's bodies and milk. I think this is an error; at best an error of false sentiment, and one that is therefore most often made by those who, for whatever private reason (such as childlessness), tend to think of children as a special kind of creature, almost a different race, rather than as normal, if immature, members of a particular family, and of the human family at large. (Tolkien, 130)

As Tolkien keenly points out, the association of fairy-stories with children is largely the result of domestic history. The wealthy often hired women to care for their children. It was these nurses, often from more rustic backgrounds and so more likely to be in touch with "common" folklore, who provided stories for the children. Thus, the fairy-tale came to inhabit the modern nursery. This relegation, or more appropriately, this cultural shift to telling the stories to young children is not the same as having stories written *for* children. While the active imagination of young children allows some of these tales to go down easily enough, "only some children, and some adults, have any special taste for them; and when they have it, it is not exclusive, nor even necessarily dominant" (Tolkien, 130).

Tolkien is also of the belief that the taste is only likely to increase with age if it is innate. He acknowledges that in recent times fairy-stories have been 'adapted' for children, but that this process is

> *only saved from disaster by the fact that the arts and sciences are not as a whole relegated to the nursery; the nursery and the schoolroom are merely given such tastes and glimpses of the adult thing as seem fit for them in adult opinion (often much mistaken).* (Tolkien, 131)

Tolkien succinctly states that, "The value of fairy-stories is thus not, in my opinion to be found by considering children in particular" (Tolkien, 131).

He takes Lang to task for using as synonyms *belief* and *appetite for marvels*, stating that Lang's usage implies that

> The teller of marvellous tales to children, must, or may, or at any rate does trade on their credulity, on the lack of experience which makes it less easy for children to distinguish fact from fiction in particular cases, though the distinction in itself is fundamental to the human mind, and to fairy stories. (Tolkien, 132)

It is from this admonishment that Tolkien builds the crux of his argument. He rightly states, "Children are capable, of course, of *literary belief*, when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it" (Tolkien, 132). He tackles the concept of the "willing suspension of disbelief." For Tolkien, this is not an accurate description of what happens but rather, "What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'" (Tolkien, 132).

A sub-creator, according to Tolkien creates a space which Tolkien terms a "Secondary World." A Secondary World is a place which the mind can enter and inside that world, whatever the sub-creator relates to the reader is "true" in that "it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside"

(Tolkien, 132). If it should chance that something causes disbelief to arise, then the spell is broken. The reader is then thrust back into the Primary World and can then only observe and engage with the Secondary world through a willing suspension of disbelief. “If you are obliged, by kindness of circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled) otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable” (Tolkien, 132).

Beyond whether or not the story invokes belief is the concept of enjoyment. Here Tolkien touches on what his peer, C.S. Lewis, referred to as Joy. A few decades later both Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan would use the much more complicated term *jouissance.*

> Belief depended on the way in which stories were presented to me, by older people, or by the authors, or on the inherent tone and quality of the tale. But at no time can I remember that the enjoyment of a story was dependent on belief that such things happen, or had happened, in ‘real-life’. Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded. (Tolkien, 134)

Though Tolkien attacks the notion that fairy-stories are “for children” he nonetheless is quick to point out that this does not mean that the term “child” cannot be used in a good sense, nor should it be implied that the use of the term “adult” or “grow-up” should necessarily be construed in the bad sense. While growing older and growing wickeder often go hand-in-hand, this is not necessarily so.

> Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pans. Not to lose innocence and wonder; but to proceed on the appointed journey: that journey upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive But it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories (if we can speak of the lessons of things that do not lecture) that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow and

> the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom. (Tolkien, 137)

When viewed in this manner, Tolkien notes that adults will both pour more into and take more away from fairy-stories than will children, thus closing his argument on how the stories are more than merely "stories for children."

Having established both the parameters for what is and is not a fairy-story and also establishing who will gain the most appeal from them, Tolkien moves on to one of the key elements to Secondary World literature – fantasy. According to Tolkien, the key to fantasy is the human mind's ability to form mental images of things not actually present. This ability, the faculty of conceiving both abstract and concrete images, is called Imagination. Tolkien states that Art is "the operative link between Imagination and the final result; Sub-creation" (Tolkien, 139).

> I require a word which shall embrace both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image; a quality essential to fairy-story. I propose, therefore, to arrogate to myself the powers of Humpty-Dumpty, and to use Fantasy for this purpose: in a sense, that is, which combines with its older and higher use as an equivalent of Imagination the derived notions of 'unreality' (that is, of unlikeness to the Primary World), of freedom from domination of observed 'fact', in short of the fantastic. (Tolkien, 139)

Tolkien is glad of the fact that fantasy and fantastic share an etymological and semantic connection with images of and notions of things "not actually present." Not only are these images not actually present, but they "are indeed not to be found in our world at all" (Tolkien, 139). He is quick to caution that he does not assent to the depreciative understanding of the word fantasy. He insists that images of things not from the real or primary world should be looked to as a virtue and not a vice. Thus, he concludes,

“Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent” (Tolkien, 139).

Tolkien concedes that this often runs into difficulty because fantasy is a mode of “arresting strangeness.” The problem is that many people dislike any sort of arresting or any sort of meddling with the proper, familiar aspects of the Primary World. Tolkien, however, cautions that “Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity.” This is important as those who object to meddling with the Primary World tend to “confound Fantasy with Dreaming, in which there is no Art” (Tolkien, 139). Whether this confounding is the result of malice, dislike, or a simple lack of education, it is not the only source of confusion.

> Fantasy has also an essential drawback: it is difficult to achieve. Fantasy may be, as I think, not less but more sub-creative; but at any rate it is found in practice that ‘the inner consistency of reality’ is more difficult to produce, the more unlike are the images and rearrangements of primary material to the actual arrangements of the Primary World. (Tolkien, 139-140)

He notes that with “sober material” this sort of thing is easier to create. The images and material of fantasy must be more than mere decoration or fanciful use of language. Using the concept of a “green sun,” Tolkien demonstrates that it is easy to create a mental image of such a thing. To simply create this sort of “thumbnail sketch” is not enough though. It must do more.

> To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, story-making at its primary and most potent mode. (Tolkien, 140)

Tolkien Argues that this is a high form of Art and that it is one best left to literature as, the creation of fantastic images in the world of painting, for instance, is simply too easy. It is but merely a matter of a few brush strokes. However, no basis has been created from which this silly image is to be taken seriously.

So too, does he take umbrage with Drama. Drama, he explains, is naturally hostile towards Fantasy. The reason for this, Tolkien states, is that "Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy" (Tolkien, 140). Even in more somber, highly-acclaimed works, such as William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Drama fails with regard to Fantasy. The witches "have a narrative function and some hint of dark significance; though they are vulgarized, poor things of their kind" (Tolkien, 141). The common argument in support of the witches is that one needs to be familiar with the culture of the period, including the witch-hunts and witch-trials. The problem with this method of embracing the witches is that it forces the reader or spectator to first regard the witches as something possible in reality – something which can, and likely does, exist in the Primary World. It is at that point, though, when they move as fully realized members of the Primary World that they cease to be Fantasy. Tolkien does not see the inadequacy of visual effects or the mistaken inclusion of mythical characters into a realistic story as the true short-coming of Drama though. "Drama has, of its very nature, already attempted a kind of bogus, or shall I say at least substitute, magic: *the visible and audible presentation of imaginary men in a story.* That is in itself an attempt to counterfeit the magician's wand" (Tolkien, 141).

Tolkien is of the mind that Drama and Literature are fundamentally different forms of narrative art and that the two do not mix well. He does not judge that one or the

other is superior, but merely points out that they are so fundamentally different as to not brook much complicity. For those who are fans of and appreciate character, Drama is likely to be where they find their enjoyment. However, for those who find enjoyment in things, it is Literature which will best serve them as "Very little about trees as trees can be got into a play" (Tolkien, 142).

There is one form of "Drama" to which Tolkien makes an exception. It is the highest narrative form of Secondary World fantasy, the "Faërian Drama."

> Those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men – can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. As a result their usual effect (upon a man) is to go beyond Secondary Belief. If you are present at a Faërian Drama, you yourself are, or think you are, bodily inside the Secondary World. (Tolkien, 142)

Tolkien cautions that this world is often confounded with Dreaming. This is, however, not entirely correct, as in Faërian Drama, the one which it is worked upon is existing in the dream of the story weaver, and not their own Dream space. From here, Tolkien states "To experience *directly* a Secondary World: the potion is too strong, and you give to it Primary Belief, however marvellous the events" (Tolkien, 142). Tolkien identifies a need to label this form for better understanding and identification. He discards out of hand the term "Magic" as "Magic should be reserved for the operations of the Magician" (Tolkien, 142). Continuing, Tolkien identifies Art as "the human process that produces by the way (it is not its only or ultimate object) Secondary Belief" (Tolkien, 143). Art of the same sort, but more skillfully applied, he chooses to call Enchantment. For Tolkien, "Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic

in desire and purpose" (Tolkien, 143). This somewhat abstract notion is what leads Tolkien to finally conclude:

> Of this desire the elves, in their better (but still perilous) part, are largely made; and it is from them that we may learn what is the central desire and aspiration of human Fantasy – even if the elves are, all the more in so far as they are, only a product of Fantasy itself. That creative desire is only cheated by counterfeits, whether the innocent but clumsy devices of the human dramatist, or the malevolent frauds of the magicians. In this world it is for men unsatisfiable, and so imperishable. (Tolkien, 143)

He acknowledges that to many, the power of language and the sub-creative act of redistributing adjectives, combining nouns, can be a tricky thing and quite suspect. Yet, this does not illegitimize the process of Fantasy. For all the trickery and all the work of sub-creation, "Fantasy is a natural human activity" (Tolkien, 144). Fantasy is not a slave to logic and reason. Instead, Fantasy acts as a lens through which reason and logic can be heightened and appreciated in new ways, creating new understandings of the world.

If fairy-stories are the medium through which one can appreciate the world in new and exciting ways, then it serves as a vehicle for recovery. According to Tolkien, "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – regaining of a clear view" (Tolkien, 146). This clear view is not to be confused with the philosopher's notion of truth or "seeing things as they are." In this case it is more about "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them – as things apart from ourselves" (Tolkien, 146). While fairy-stories serve to help in recovery, they are not the only means by which it can be achieved, as evidenced by *Mooreeffoc. Mooreeffoc* is a device of Chestertonian Fantasy. It is simply the word Coffee-room, viewed from the inside and through a glass door as seen by Dickens in London. Chesterton used it "to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle" (Tolkien, 146). It

is seeing the world in such new and potentially interesting ways which recovery is about. And it is the realm of Fantasy and fairy-stories which most lends itself to the act of recovery. Ass Tolkien observes “It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine” (Tolkien, 147).

Recovery invariably leads to the concept of Escape, or escapism. Tolkien acknowledges that in today’s world, fairy-stories serve as one of the most obvious forms of “escapist” literature. This, though, is not a problem to Tolkien’s mind. The problem, in his reckoning, is with how the word escape is commonly misused or misunderstood.

> In what the misusers of Escape are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds. (Tolkien, 148)

He uses contrasting examples to illustrate his point that there is both a confusion of terminology, but also of thought. Contrast the entirely reasonable escape of a prisoner with the flight of a deserter and the difference is quickly apparent. Further, it depends on who the observer is, as the flight from the tyranny and the criticism of the Führer’s Reich could be seen by many as a positive escape, while a party-spokesman may see the same act as one of treason. Tolkien takes umbrage with this tact.

> In the same way these critics, to make confusion worse, and so to bring into contempt their opponents, stick their label of scorn not only on to Desertion, but on to real Escape, and what are often its companions, Disgust, Anger, Condemnation, and Revolt. Not only do they confound the escape of the prisoner with the flight of the deserter; but they would seem to prefer the acquiescence of the “quisling” to the resistance of the patriot. (Tolkien, 148)

To complicate matters more, escapism critics tend to be very loose with the way in which they use the term "real life." As Tolkien is eager to demonstrate, the use of the term falls short of academic standards. "The notion that motor-cars are more 'alive' than, say centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more 'real' than, say, horses is pathetically absurd" (Tolkien, 149). It is Tolkien's position that there is no reason for the reader of fairy-stories to feel any more ashamed than the reader of real life stories which often are no more "real" in what they attempt to accomplish with their narratives. He concludes that it is

> possible for a rational man, after reflection (quite unconnected with fairy-story or romance), to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of 'escapist' literature, of progressive things like factories, or machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say, 'inexorable', products. (Tolkien, 150)

In short, Tolkien believes in the power of the rational, thinking reader to distinguish between what is escapism and what is escapism in the damning fashion and what is escapism in the manner meant to relieve the one of their burdens. The lack of some sort of escapist function can be just as damning to a piece of literature as the inclusion of an escapist element if the work refuses to confront the very 'real-life' to which it so ardently adheres. Tolkien also points out that there is one last sort of Escape for which fairy-stories provide numerous examples, Escape from Death. To wish to escape death is a common, primal urge, found in nearly all people of sound mind, though to truly escape death is to flee towards immortality, which brings with it its own set of challenges.

Lastly, Tolkien touches upon the concept of Consolation. For Tolkien, one of the most important features of the fairy-story is the "Consolation of the Happy Ending."

> Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. (Tolkien, 153)

It is from this notion that Tolkien settles upon what he calls *Eucatastrophe.* "The *eucatastrophobic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function" (Tolkien, 153).

Eucatastrophe is the "good catastrophe," "the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale)" (Tolkien, 153). Neither "escapist" nor "fugitive," "it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur" (Tolkien, 153). It does not, nor can it, deny the existence of sorrow and failure, which Tolkien calls *dyscatastrophe* as the possibility of these outcomes is necessary in order to experience the joy of deliverance. It is a denial of universal final defeat "giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (Tolkien, 153). Despite what may seem the nature of the *eucatastraphobic* event, it is not to be conflated with *deus ex machina*. Regardless of how fantastic the event, it should, as with all other parts of Secondary World fantasy, still not break the internal logic or create a moment of unbelievability.

Secondary World fantasy, as promoted by Tolkien, is a fantasy story that follows the rules established by the author from the outset of the story's narrative. "But since the fairy-story deals with 'marvels', it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a fragment or illusion" (Tolkien, 117). This Secondary World is both "real" and "inhabited" so long as the reader continues to play within the narrative space. Thus magic, monsters, or strange foreign lands can readily exist without violating reader expectations, the story's narrative, or the "internal reality" of the Secondary World. It is this sort of fantasy literature that has become a staple of

numerous, talented wordsmiths, including the likes of Ursula K. Le Guin, Neil Gaiman, C.S. Lewis, and Stephen R Donaldson, while also embracing on their merits, the stories of Homer, et al. It is this sort of story which Clyde Northrup, in his dissertation, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Lecture "On Fairy-Stories": The Qualities of Tolkienian Fantasy* that Northrup terms as Tolkienian fantasy. This term becomes problematic though when evaluating modern fantasy literature. While many authors are quite capably working with Secondary World fantasy, some, such as the critically acclaimed George R. R. Martin, are creating these stories with an eye on an intentionally anti-Tolkien bent. Thus, referring to the literature as Tolkienian would seem to push them too forcibly back in a direction the authors are trying to avoid going. Instead, these authors are trying to write stories of a more ambiguous and grey nature than the fantasy stories of Tolkien. Still, though the stories are not then Tolkienian, they are still works of Secondary World fantasy, as established by Tolkien.

Part IV: Beyond Secondary World Theory – Developing a New model for Criticism

Adopting the premise of Secondary World fantasy provides an objective framework within which fantastic literature can be evaluated. At its simplest, it provides a means for critics to evaluate whether or not the story holds up to the scrutiny of the definition of Secondary World literature. However, this sort of critical reading does not embrace deeper questions of meaning and authorial intent. It seems, therefore, that there is a need to work beyond Tolkien's premise of Secondary World literature. As it happens, one of Tolkien's peers, the acclaimed literary critic and author, C.S. Lewis presents the

next level of analysis in his 1956 essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories Say Best What’s to be Said.” According to Lewis:

> The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of ‘commenting on life’, can add to it. (Lewis, 48)

If we can accept this Secondary World as something both real and inhabited when the reader is engaged with it, then the New Criticism, developed by T.S. Eliot, W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, and others is yet another modern critical theory which can be adapted to the cause. In “The Intentional Fallacy,” Wimsatt and Beardsley laid the foundation for the examination of authorial intent. The essay states a narrative can be judged on how successfully it reflects authorial intent by using three forms of evidence: internal evidence (evidence found within the pages of the narrative), external evidence (extratextual evidence as to the author’s intent such as comments made by the author about the work), and contextual evidence (how the narrative relates to others of its kind, how it is presented, and possibly even the use of biographical information). Internal evidence is what authors should strive to provide to ensure that their intent becomes irrelevant to the piece itself. If the author successfully communicates the intended message, then the work can distance itself from the author and stand on its own to be examined and judged. While Wimsatt and Beardsley were speaking primarily about poetry, the process can be applied to most any work of art. The relation of fantasy to poetry as examined through Coleridge and Sidney would seem to help fantasy literature lend itself even more readily to the theory as the same criteria can be applied to various

works of fantasy literature to establish whether or not the author has provided a work within which a reader can seriously engage the narrative, or if the reader must rely on outside knowledge to appreciate a deeper meaning within the work.

Tolkien's Secondary World and Lewis' Fantastic Mode taken together provide a solid framework from which to build further critical theory. How such literature would affect the reader's understanding or appreciation of life opens the door for a classical psychological analysis of such literature, a method embraced by Dr. Julius E. Heuscher in 1974. Heuscher's work was not devoted to fantastic literature as a whole. Rather, Heuscher focused on myths and fairy tales and their psychological impact on children and the child within adults. In establishing the reasoning behind his research, Dr. Heuscher leaned on the words of German poet, philosopher, and physician, Johann Christoph Friedrich Von Schiller: "Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life" (*Piccolomini*, III, 4). Dr. Heuscher's work examines both individual fairy tales, but also takes the time to examine common symbology and themes that run through many of the fairy tales. A year later, Bruno Bettelheim continued Dr. Heuscher's work, firmly setting the evaluation of fairy tales in the school of child psychology, embracing the words of English writer, G.K. Chesterton: "Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon." According to Bettleheim:

> For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions;

> be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at once and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality – and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future. *(Bettleheim, 5)*

Alas, Bettleheim's analysis of fairy tale literature is an extreme example of Freudian theory put to work. This approach was taken to the extreme, with nearly every symbol in the evaluated stories representing some form of Freudian penis metaphor. Bettleheim's example of the perfectly concise fairy tale is "The Three Languages." In the story, a young boy with difficulty learning anything, is sent off by his father so that someone else might attempt to teach him the ways of the world. Instead of learning about the world, he learned what dogs say when they bark. Infuriated, the father sent him to a different master in a different town to try and educate his son. When he returned from his time abroad, the father was enraged to learn that his son had learned nothing important but had wasted his time learning what birds are saying when they chirp. Giving his son one last chance to appease him, he sent his son a third time to learn the ways of the world, under threat of being disowned. Yet, when the boy returned, he reported that he learned no more than the speech of the frogs. Thus, he was disowned and sent out into the world to wander. The young man's abilities to understand the dogs, birds, and frogs allowed the boil to prevail through a series of odd challenges. The young man's final challenge faced him when he entered Rome, shortly after the passing of the Pope. Here, the young man, in true Freudian nature, becomes his own man by replacing his father, both literally and figuratively, as he claims his independence and also is named the new Pope, thanks to his ability to speak with a pair of doves which come down and sit upon

his shoulders, giving the gathered Cardinals the divine sign they were looking for in order to name a new Pope. The learning of the language of dogs is, according to Bettleheim, the taming of the ego – the dogs representing "instinctual freedom – freedom to bite, to excrete in an uncontrolled way, and to indulge in sexual needs without restraint" (Bettleheim, 100). Mastering the language of birds is a metaphor for mastering the superego: "Birds stand in this story for the superego, with its investment in high goals and ideals, its soaring flights of fancy and imagined perfections" (Bettleheim, 101). The frogs of the story then stand in for the id, "…so frogs symbolize the most ancient part of man's self, the id" (Bettleheim, 101). They also represent an evolutionary element, indicating the sloughing off of youth and the embracing of maturity by moving from tadpole to frog. The presence of white doves represents the Holy Ghost, which is then symbolic of the hero becoming ready to take on the mantle of Pope. "I know of no other fairy tale in which the process of an adolescent reaching his fullest self-actualization within himself and also in the world is described so concisely" (Bettleheim, 102). Bettleheim chafes against the notion that there are other readings that can be equally applied to the stories, including and especially ones that hint at a feminist interpretation or ones that adopt non-Freudian interpretations of the symbols found in myths and fairy tales. While this would seem to close off many other avenues of critical analysis of fantastic literature, his open disdain for Perrault's telling of fairy tales touches upon a key point which was also a part of Dr. Heuscher's analysis, that the telling and understanding of the popular, enduring tales depended upon an understanding of the culture both from which the tale came and to which it was being presented.

Hearkening back to Wilson's review of *The Lord of the Rings* mentioned earlier, Edmund Wilson claims Tolkien's epic fails to live up to the narrative of a hero's journey. Setting aside the fact that Tolkien's tale of a hobbits, wizards, elves, and orcs is commonly used as an example of the hero narrative writ large, the key takeaway is that Wilson, like many others, leans heavily on the marriage of cultural anthropology and psychology created by Joseph Campbell in his famous 1949 work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* wherein Campbell explored the monomyth – the shapeshifting but ever present singular myth, and the stages of the Hero's Journey – a universal motif of adventure and transformation that runs through virtually all of the world's mythic creations. Ten years later, a continuation of this marriage can be found in C.G. Jung's, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Based in the psychology of the unconscious mind, Jung takes the time to demonstrate how certain archetypes hold true across various diverse cultures throughout the history of Western Civilization. This is especially notable when he discusses the Trickster archetype and compares the appearance of the archetype in American Indian mythology, the Bible, and the fantastic folklore of Europe. This archetype, along with Jung's concept of the "Spirit" in fairy-tale literature touches quite closely to the concept of the creature fairy which Tolkien alluded to when describing the types of tales mistaken for fairy-stories. Another primal archetype addressed by Jung is the villain archetype, which in fantastic literature, is often portrayed by the monster. Even when still human in character, the villain can still be monstrous in nature. This duality allows for both monstrous human and literal monster readings of Grendel in the epic, *Beowulf,* each bringing a unique interpretation of characters and

events. This concept of the monster and monstrous is later examined in greater detail by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.

In 1979, Roger Schlobin continued the trend of setting fantasy study in the realm of psychology arguing that fantasy "is an everyday, natural activity that summons and creates images and converts them into external manifestations" (Schlobin, xix). For Schlobin the totality of human achievements began their lives as a "Fantasy" of a dreamer, who through hard work and determination turned their fantasy into a reality. Furthermore, the power of the imagination is such that it allows us to enter an internal fantasy through which we can vicariously experience various events and situations. In so doing we learn better how to relate to others and how to make logical sense out of our own life experiences. Schlobin notes that in literature fantasy places its focus on "the impossible is primary" and adopts "a rigorous detachment from the ordinary" (Schlobin, xxvi-xxvii).

In an attempt to understand fantasy literature, Brian Atterbery takes the lessons of fantasy from psychology and apply them once more to a more traditional form of literary theory. His 1992 work *Strategies of Fantasy* attempts to understand fantasy through the process of treating fantasy as a mode, a genre, and a formula of literature. Atterbery defines mode in this case as "a way of doing something, in this case, telling stories" (Atterbery, 2). Atterbery makes his argument by extending the work of Northrup Frye who referred to the mimetic tendency on pole of literature. While Frye does not name the second pole, Atterbery calls it fantasy. Atterbery also argues that while mimetic tendency and fantasy are the two poles, they are not opposites of each other. Rather, according to Atterbery, mimesis and fantasy work as "contrasting modes." Atterbery goes on to

explain that “fantasy depends on mimesis for its effectiveness” and “mimesis depends on something akin to fantasy for its ability to organize and interpret sensory data” (Atterbery, 4).

In 1996, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen examined the way in which monsters could define and shape the narrative with *Monster Theory: Reading Culture.* In his contribution to the volume, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Cohen postulates that the monster’s body is a cultural body. He goes on to state,

> The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy…The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant... These epistemological spaces between the monster’s bones are Derrida’s familiar chasm of the *différance*: a genetic uncertainty principle, the essence of the monster’s vitality, the reason it always rises from the dissection table as its secrets are about to be revealed and vanishes into the night. (Cohen, 4)

Later in the text, Ruth Waterhouse expounds on the role of monsters in society and culture. Waterhouse places the monster in the role of the Other in the Self-Other relationship. In doing so, Waterhouse points out that, once again, a cultural appreciation is necessary to understanding the development of the monster figure when evaluating Grendel’s mother as a monster. In order to understand Grendel’s mother, one must first understand the regard and respect which was accorded strong women, stating that she was, “…a reflection of the contemporary attitude toward women; but it could also be an iconic comment on the heroic ideology, if women were not expected to take part in actual combat” (Waterhouse, MT, 36).

Embracing monsters as a form of villain archetype, while combining cultural and psychological considerations, is *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*,

written by Stephen T. Asma in 2009. Giving a nod to modernity and more skeptical nature of today's advanced society, Asma concedes, "In this book I am concerned with literal monsters, but the monster as metaphor is probably more relevant for us now" (Asma, 13). While being focused on literal monsters, Asma takes time throughout to demonstrate when both the literal and metaphorical come together to engage in what Asma terms a "dance of causation." Parts I and II of Asma's work focus on the monsters of fantastic literature and how they are reflections of the teachings of the likes of Aristotle and Plato among others. Asma, too, like many of the others discussed in this paper spends a great deal of time examining the monsters of *Beowulf.* Here, Asma leans heavily on Tolkien's defense of the "low" monsters of *Beowulf*: "…the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold. Even to-day (despite the critics) you may find men not ignorant of tragic legend and history, who have heard of heroes and indeed seen them, who yet have been caught by the fascination of the worm" (Tolkien, Monsters, 16). Asma goes on to postulate that, because monsters can excite the imagination so, they are the perfect vessel to embody our fears and to designate the borders of desire and taboo.

Thus, setting aside the bias of Todorov's take on fantastic literature, there now seems to be a foundation from which a comprehensive critical analysis of fantastic literature can be built. The existing attempts to examine fantastic literature, taken collectively, present a series of questions which can serve as a basis from which to evaluate a work of fantastic literature. Is the narrative reflective of a fully-developed Secondary World, and does it hold to the internal "truths" laid out by the author in the development of the world in accordance with the guidelines laid out by Tolkien and

Lewis? How does this Secondary World engage with the Faërie or the Perilous Realm? Is this engagement a full commitment, or is the engagement a more tangential one, involving only fairies as creatures or wondrous stories which are later revealed to be merely dreams, creating a story that is more "fairy-adjacent"? How does the narrative reflect Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, and does it do so clearly? What Jungian archetypes are present in the narrative and how are they employed to drive the narrative? Does the narrative rely on the cultural subconscious understanding of the symbols and archetypes presented to enhance the tale? How does the narrative affect the reader's life experiences? Does the story indeed entertain and arouse curiosity? Is the narrative plot driven or character driven, and what message is presented within any specified philosophical framework, especially those with a psychological bent? Is there a moral in the tale, and is the tale prescriptive or proscriptive?

Individually, each of those questions may present a limited view of a fairy story. Taken together though, a new understanding might be found. Beginning with Coleridge's power of the imagination to create a secondary reality, Tolkien's concept of Secondary World theory arrives almost full-fledged. The further contributions by Lewis, Campbell, Jung, Heuscher, Bettleheim, and Cohen create a series of individual literary theories which, when strung together, eventually brings the series of theories and questions back around, full-circle, to Coleridge, Sidney, and Tolkien.

The recent development of the Master of Studies in Fantasy Literature programme at the University of Glasgow is, if anything, an acknowledgement that the argument for the literary merits of genre fiction in general and fantastic literature specifically, is a topic that is not going away. In fact, the discussion is now likely to grow if anything. This

approach, cultivated from numerous corners of literary criticism, cultural anthropology, and psychology should, if applied universally, result in a much broader literary pool from which canonical works of literature might be selected and may even provide a better future representation of the literary leanings of any given historical culture. Within this framework, serious scholarly attention can be applied to fully unpacking the literary joke by screenwriter, John Rogers:

> There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year old's life: *The Lord of the Rings* and *Atlas Shrugged*. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally stunted, socially crippled adulthood, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves orcs.

Though massive popularity will by no means ensure a literary work's inclusion into canon, the simple fact of a work falling into the realm of "popular genre fiction" should no longer stand as a metric for exclusion allowing for the likes of Neil Gaiman, Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen R. Donaldson, George R.R. Martin, Margaret Atwood, and others to be studied alongside Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville.

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