The Uses of Fantasy
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O nly a few years after the phenomenal success of the film trilogy based upon J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books are off to an equally promising start on the silver screen. Worldwide receipts for Disney/Walden Media’s adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* surpassed a half a billion dollars within three months of the film’s release, putting it on pace to be Disney’s highest grossing live-action film ever (*Variety*, January 16, 2006).

Although these high-profile cinematic adaptations have revived interest in Tolkien’s and Lewis’s fantasy books published half a century ago, the film versions have also revived familiar criticisms about fantasy writing as a lightweight genre, best suited for children—or for adults who wish they had never grown up. In his review of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Elvis Mitchell in the *New York Times* (December 19, 2001) condescendingly described Tolkien’s classic work as “the most intimidating nerd/academic fantasy classic ever.” Mitchell’s words seem to echo those of critic Edmund Wilson, who dismissed Tolkien’s massive tale as “essentially a children’s book which has somehow gotten out of hand” (*The Nation*, April 14, 1956).

In the same way, recent reviews of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* echo comments by earlier critics about the Narnia books themselves. Charles McGrath (*New York Times*, November 13, 2005) concluded that Lewis’s children’s books are not really about portraying the author’s world-view, but more about his desire to escape. In this off-hand remark, McGrath repeats an oft-sounded theme in A.N. Wilson’s biography of Lewis: that the distinguished Oxford don and brilliant Christian apologist was actually a victim of the “Peter Pan syndrome,” a refusal to grow up and see the world as it really is (*C.S. Lewis, New York: Norton*, p. 26).

Although psychoanalysis has become all but extinct as a therapeutic science, it lives among reviewers and critics as a way of explaining why formidable intellects such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien insisted on creating fantasy stories. Apart from its glib psychology, the dismissive approach so often adopted by journalists also reveals a lamentable ignorance about the fantasy genre itself.

In middle-brow circles, fantasy has a bad name. Normal, well-adjusted adults are supposed to resign themselves to the real world. Fantasy is seen as the domain of children, the mentally disturbed, or the sexually frustrated. In literature too, fantasy is often associated with nursery stories, comic books, or teen-targeted movies. But when writers of the first order—Franz Kafka, D.H. Lawrence, Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, and Gabriel García Marquéz, to name a few—turn to fantasy as their genre of choice, it is time to ask why serious authors write fantasies and why serious readers turn to them for enjoyment and contemplation.

“The problem with the real world, frankly, is that it is the only one we have” (FW3). This remark by Eric S. Rabkin sums up as well in one sentence what other critics have taken chapters to say: fantasy seems to begin as an itch in the imagination, a sense that what might be, or what could never be, enriches the meaning of what is.

In pop culture, the most spectacularly successful creators of comic book and film heroes are those who know how to tap into the collective consciousness of their times. It is a commonplace of culture studies that Superman was created in the late ’30s not as a swaggering Ubermensch but as the friend of ordinary folks trying to make ends meet. *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in 1954, but did not become a cult classic until the mid-’60s, when a whole generation of young people responded to the adventures of a simple, down-to-earth fellow called upon to do battle with a vast, almost faceless, enemy seeking to control a mysterious, all-powerful new weapon. In recent years it has been the Harry Potter who becomes a wizard and...
Peter Parker who becomes Spiderman—the schlémiel as superhero.

The basic contrast between the realistic and the fantastic is as old as storytelling itself. Plato distinguished between two types of imitation, the icastic, representing things that may be found in the real world, and the fantastic, things that exist only in imagination. The great philosopher was suspicious of literary creation, as something was one step removed from physical reality and two steps removed from the perfect world of Forms. Yet to illustrate his point, he resorted to one of the most famous of all literary creations, the parable of people living in a cave who only see the shadows of real things outside.

Contemporary critics tend to distinguish between two kinds of non-realistic stories, science fiction and fantasy. They would classify works by Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Isaac Asimov in one category and works by Lewis Carroll, J.R.R. Tolkien, and J.K. Rowling in another. The general sense is that in science fiction extraordinary events are brought about by imagined but plausible technologies, whereas in fantasy the extraordinary is brought about by magic or enchantment. Thus, science fiction writers are obliged to explain time travel or the means of surviving in space, while fantasy writers may people their stories with wizards or talking animals without troubling themselves about how such things might come to be.

This distinction may have heuristic value, but it begins to break down when one considers actual texts by authors such as E.R. Eddison, Arthur C. Clarke, or Margaret Atwood. The more critics have tried to explain the difference between fantasy and science fiction, the more it seems a matter of emphasis rather than a clearly definable boundary. One might be able to conclude only that science fiction writers make more effort to make their imaginative worlds seem plausible according to the laws of nature as presently understood, whereas fantasy writers make less effort. The most common charge against fantasy literature is that it is escapist, that it encourages a flight from reality. But C.S. Lewis responded that there are varieties of escapism. Children may be regaled by Peter Rabbit without wishing to become rabbits, but the "reality-based" story of the awkward novice who becomes the star athlete panders to a young reader’s actual fantasies and ambitions (SBJ 35).

Lewis’s friend and fellow fantasy writer, J.R.R. Tolkien, took his defense of fantasy a step further. In his classic essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien acknowledged that a basic purpose of fantasy is Escape, but he sees this as a method of recovering reality, not retreating from it. Sometimes a flight of fancy may be the very thing required to give us an overview of our own world. What Anaïs Nin said about all art is especially true of fantasy: “It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with, we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.” Thus the fantasy writer may offer what Kenneth Burke called “perspectives of incongruity,” making us view our own reality differently, not by casting a spell, but by breaking the spell of familiarity.

We can see this technique at work in Bernard Malamud’s classic tale “Angel Levine,” first published in 1958. “Angel Levine” is the story of a Jewish tailor living in New York who endures a job-like series of reverses: his business burns down, his son is killed in the war, his daughter runs off with a lout, his wife becomes terminally ill, and he himself suffers excruciating backaches. The tailor, named Manischevitz, calls out to God for relief and soon receives a visit from a black man in an ill-fitting suit who claims to be an angel on probation sent to help. Though the angel, named Alexander Levine, explains he was an observant Jew in life and sonorously recites a Hebrew prayer, Manischevitz just can’t believe that such an unprepossessing, not to mention wingless, character could be an angel sent from God, and so refuses any help. Levine is crest-fallen and turns to leave, saying that if the poor tailor changes his mind, he can look him up in Harlem.

Soon afterwards Manischevitz sees Levine in a dream preening opalescent wings. His suffering unabated, the tailor finally decides in desperation to seek out the self-proclaimed angel in a part of the city he would usually never visit. On his first trip he sees Levine drinking in a honkytonk in the middle of the day and so turns back. But eventually he returns, overhears a conversation about how the spirit is an immaterial substance, invisible but embodied in things of every color, and he humbles himself before the slightly disheveled angel and asks for help. Levine bursts into tears, accepts Manischevitz’ apology, and then returns with him to the tailor’s apartment. Suddenly there is the sound of fluttering wings and Levine is gone. Manischevitz goes inside to discover his wife vigorous and well, busy tidying up what had seemed a spell of familiarity.

“A wonderful thing, Fanny! Believe me, there are Jews everywhere.”

“Angel Levine” is both fantasy and parable, a tale about suffering but one with many comic elements. The last line of the story suggests that, even after his miraculous deliverance, Manischevitz is less amazed that Levine was an angel than that he was an observant Jew. Written in 1958, the story makes its point by indirection, using otherworldly elements as a commentary on very real this-worldly attitudes.

Ursula Le Guin offers a similar mixture of fantasy and parable in her much-anthologized story “The
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known creators of fantasy—Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Madeleine L’Engle—belong to communities of faith. It would seem that the former group, those more inclined toward rational explanations, see their fiction writing as a replacement for religion, while the latter, perhaps more accustomed to taking things on faith, see their fiction-writing as an expression of their religious views.

J.R.R. Tolkien went so far as to define fantasy writing as a form of worship, constructing imaginary worlds not for recreation, but as Re-creation, expressing the *imago Dei* within oneself. For Tolkien, fantasy was not one of the lower forms of literary expression, but rather one of the highest. His term for it was “Sub-Creation,” the god-like act of creating not just plots or people, but whole alternative worlds in which they may find a local habitation and a name (*EP* 67). And C.S. Lewis spoke for fantasy writers of philosophical persuasions when he commented on what is perhaps the most fundamental drive behind all literary fantasy: “No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realize the idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp... you must go into another dimension. To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit” (*OS* 12).

Works Cited


