

# "Enchanting Realms: Exploring the Role of Magic and Fantasy in Modern Literature"

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**ABSTRACT** Magical Realism and Fantastic are two widely used concepts in contemporary literature. Fantastic is such fiction that blends the realities of our physical world with the supernatural in an indistinguishable manner, with the aim of leading minds of varying abilities on different trails. Both are used in combination to complete the novel. The reader is amazed by the inability to differentiate between real life and the world of fantasy. In Magical Realism, as the name implies, magic, history, fiction and myths are employed. The characters often possess supernatural abilities. It is often mistaken for imaginary realism. The main difference between the two is that in Fantastic, the characters feel shocked and horrified by the happenings, as in Harry Potter's series, where the sudden disappearance of 'the mirror' causes shock. By contrast, in magical realism, the characters tend to react to the occurrence of magic. Another important point is the relation of both to scientific fiction, where events are analyzed on the basis of facts and scientific development in order to enable humans to face life intelligently. When I was growing up, I almost exclusively read fantasy. C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, L. Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll, Ursula LeGuin, Madeleine L'Engle, E. Nesbit were the writers I read again and again, devouring every one of their books. In my teen years I idolized Robin McKinley, and became passionate about Diana Wynne Jones. Well into adulthood I pored over lists of best novels and tried out authors I didn't much like, but could appreciate, like Michael Moorcock and Mervyn Peake... Now, even as I look forward to this event, I'm wondering about my current relationship to the genre. Fantasy is more popular than ever, but I seem to have drifted away from it, at least when it comes to new releases. Many of the books and series that others are raving about leave me cold; they seem too formulaic, too gimmicky, too dishonest and unconvincing, and sometimes just too silly. What happened to the magic?

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**Introduction.** What happened to the magic, indeed? I feel exactly the same way—I was a huge fantasy fan growing up and into college, mostly of the epic or heroic fantasy authors: Tolkien, Lewis, Vance, Kay, even lighter fare by authors like Saberhagen, Brooks, Eddings, and Kurtz. But for decades I've been put off by most of the newer sci-fi/fantasy titles. Fantasy ceased to be interesting to me as a genre when it left behind its fairytale roots and instead became a remix of contemporary stories stuffed in a fantasy shell. Part of the change is the result of post-modern angst, part of it is the result of an industry trying to market to adolescents, no matter how old they may be. But regardless of the reasons, this change is not unique to the fantasy genre. It's across the board in imaginative fiction of all types and media, including comic books, movies, and TV shows, and is probably a reflection of modern culture's lack of faith and trust in anyone in power, no matter how benevolent they are. Events like Watergate, Vietnam, religious and political scandals—you name it—can make

fantasy from the 60s, 70s and 80s appear quaint and out dated. Today's fantasy books are darker, grittier, and more violent, supposedly reflecting a more realistic view of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

The lines between good and evil have become blurred as authors seeking to be original take villains from the past and rehabilitate them to present them as misunderstood. Disney is making an industry out of recasting old fairytale villains as victims. Part of that is a healthy realization that people are not all good or all evil—this is an important and necessary understanding about humanity, especially in our increasingly polarized culture. But fairytales are a different type of storytelling, and I see the fantasy genre as continuing the important role of the fairytale as expressed by J.R.R. Tolkien in his landmark 1939 essay, “On Fairy Stories.” First of all: if written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which, as literature, they share with other literary forms. But fairy-stories offer also, in a peculiar degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people. Most of them are nowadays very commonly considered to be bad for anybody.

**Fantasy.** Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured. If they ever get into that state (it would not seem at all impossible), Fantasy will perish, and become Morbid Delusion. Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.

**Recovery.** Recovery (which includes renewal and recovery of health) is a re-gaining regaining of a clear view. I do not say “seeing things as they are” and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them” as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity from possessiveness<sup>2</sup>.

**Escape.** I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which “Escape” is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers 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. Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using Escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. Next is the first part of the preoperational stage, the preconception phase, which lasts until the child is four years old. At this point, the child's mind is very egocentric, and they can only understand things from a single point of view. To them, the sun is seen to be alive because it gives light, or the stone rolling down the hill has life simply because it moves. Children do not have a definitive perception of reality. This is why stories that contain fantastic elements such as anthropomorphism can become invaluable teaching tools.

The second part of the preoperational stage is the intuitive phase. The child can now use language more successfully and can verbalise their thoughts. Alongside this, the child's mind gradually

becomes less egocentric. They are more observant of the things around them, and they are increasingly able to consider things from new perspectives. They can identify and empathise with people other than themselves, regardless of whether they are fictional or not. This is because the child is still unable to separate the fantasy from reality. Fantasy stories at this stage become less of a teaching tool and more of a learning aid; children can now follow and immerse themselves in the narratives.<sup>3</sup> They can experience new perspectives, using them to enrich their inner world. Around seven years of age, children enter the concrete operational stage. Becoming less and less egocentric, they begin to form ideas based on their reasoning rather than their perceptions. They can conceptualise ideas like the past, the future, or even things that are far away and unknown to them. Piaget's schemata are particularly important at this stage; the child is beginning to solidify their inner world, their moral values, and the rules that may eventually govern their lives. It is, therefore, imperative that the child is encouraged to experiment with and question these rules. Stories can allow this to happen. For instance, Sir Percival in *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* is the traditional hero, a selfless warrior. In contrast, Bilbo in *The Hobbit* does not fit into this archetype but still becomes the hero of Tolkien's story. Finally, at approximately twelve years of age, the child transitions into the formal operational stage. They can now think beyond their immediate experiences in much more conceptual and hypothetical ways. Thoughts are much less stereotypical, and along with their growing mastery of language, they can communicate new ideas, take in this new information, and, more importantly, judge whether this information is valid to what they already know. At this stage, however, children's literature no longer offers the required depth and complexity the child needs to develop. This is best illustrated in the Harry Potter series; in the first two books, they are more befitting of a reader in the concrete operational stage, whereas, by the last book, it is more suited towards a reader in the formal operational stage. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson had an alternative theory to Piaget's; Erikson's ideas centred on the child's psychoanalytical development.<sup>4</sup> He believed there are psycho-social conflicts which emerge once the child reaches certain ages. How they deal with these conflicts determines their psychological maturity in later life. Stories that address and explore this conflict can be helpful to the child. In *Five Minutes' Peace* by Jill Murphy, for example, the child can see the elephant mother's desire to have some alone time but is constantly interrupted by her three children. At ages three to six, a new conflict between initiative and guilt emerges. The child is now more capable and is therefore expected to be more responsible. Gradually, they become more sensitive to how their behaviour affects others. Whenever the child is in conflict with another individual, a sense of guilt is likely to arise. If these conflicts continue and the child becomes overburdened with these feelings of guilt, they begin to lose their sense of purpose. Yet guilt is also fundamental; it helps children establish the basis of their moral values, so eliminating it could be equally dangerous. Stories that have characters whose actions and motives throw them into conflict with other characters are particularly important here. For example, in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Jack is told by his mother to sell the family cow for money but instead uses his initiative, trading it for beans. The child can then see how this conflict plays out and how, after a series of fantastical scenarios and tests, Jack is redeemed. Industry versus inferiority is the conflict the child faces between the ages of six and thirteen. This stage revolves around the child's perception of their own competency. The primary source of their self-esteem shifts away from their caregivers and moves closer towards their peer groups. They put a greater emphasis on the characteristics they feel will be valued both by their peers and by society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Even modern fairy-stories can produce this effect sometimes. It is not an easy thing to do; it depends on the whole story which is the setting of the, turn, and yet it reflects a glory backwards. A tale that in my measure succeeds in this point has not wholly failed, whatever flaws it may possess, and whatever mixture or confusion

of purpose... Far more powerful and poignant is the effect in a serious tale of Faërie. In such stories when the sudden “turn” comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the wry web of story, and lets a gleam come through.

Where is the magic? To me it is in the stories that offer Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation as described by Tolkien. I find it in in very few modern fantasy authors, but when it is there it is unmistakably wonderful: Patricia McKillip, Susanna Clarke, Naomi Novik. The problem is not that there are no fairytale writers anymore, but that there are so few of them—and so many imposters. A good start in looking for fantasy stories that exemplify Tolkien’s four elements is to look to the winners of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award.<sup>6</sup> This award is given by the Mythopoeic Society to “the fantasy novel, multi-volume novel, or single-author story collection for adults published during the previous year that best exemplifies ‘the spirit of the Inklings.’” The Inklings, you may remember, was that inspired group of writers consisting of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and others. Here is how the society defines Mythopoeic Literature: We define this as literature that creates a new and transformative mythology, or incorporates and transforms existing mythological material. Transformation is the key mere static reference to mythological elements, invented or pre-existing, is not enough. The mythological elements must be of sufficient importance in the work to influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters, and must reflect and support the author’s underlying themes. This type of work, at its best, should also inspire the reader to examine the importance of mythology in his or her own spiritual, moral, and creative development. Our members are a diverse lot, and their individual definitions of mythopoeic literature and its authors are equally diverse. If more modern fantasy stories fit that description, I would read a lot more of it than I do now. For therein lies the magic Fantasy has the amazing ability to take this a step further, reassuring a child that, even though there might be things happening to them that they may not understand, it will be okay in the end. Alice returns from Wonderland. Percy Jackson becomes the hero his birthright demands. These stories create a world that reshapes a child’s fears and doubts, telling them they can overcome them.<sup>7</sup> Literature often imitates life, but I believe fantasy literature has the magical ability to aid life. It can give children hope for tomorrow. It can change the way they think about things around them. And it can offer them the tools to cope with an ever-changing world. A beautiful example in *Touch Magic* by Jane Yolen best articulates this: she recounts when her family cat was killed. She staged an elaborate funeral with singing and prayers. Her ten-year-old son and her six-year-old daughter were able to sob out their last goodbyes; her eight-year-old son, however, could not. He would not even come to the cat’s grave. For the next two days, he was unreachable, his grief held behind a set jaw. That evening, Yolen read Grimm’s *Goose Girl* to all three of them. In the story, *Goose Girl*’s magical companion, a horse, is killed, and its head is hung over the arched gateway to advise her. As *Goose Girl* walked beneath the door, she cried out, ‘Alas, Falada, hanging there’; at that moment, Yolen’s son burst into tears. After hearing the story, he could go to the cat’s grave, which he had not dared to do before. This story resonated with the child. It made a unique connection with him. It did something that transcends theories. It spoke to him in a language only understandable to the heart: what it said we will never know, but isn’t that what makes it magic? And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairystories provide many examples and modes of this – which might be called the genuine escapist, or (I would say) fugitive spirit. But so do other stories (notably those of scientific inspiration), and so do other studies. Fairy-stories are made by men not by fairies. The Human-stories of the elves are doubtless full of the Escape from Deathlessness<sup>8</sup>.

## Consolation

But the “consolation” of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important 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 that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite – I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially “escapist,” nor “fugitive.” In its fairy-tale – or otherworld – setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of joy, joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality. On the other hand, if the child experiences too little control, they will find it difficult to manage their emotions, which may encourage destructive behaviour such as aggression or violence. Erikson stressed the importance of play in helping the child overcome this challenge because it allows the child to experiment with their autonomy in a safe environment where they can create their own boundaries. The sensorimotor stage begins immediately after birth and finishes at around two years of age. This stage is purely reflexive and focuses on what an infant can learn through touch, taste, smell and sound. Piaget does note that towards the end of this stage, the child starts to develop object permanence. This means that the infant is becoming more aware of the objects around them, realising that they exist even if they cannot see them.

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