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## **A Modern Guide to Life: New Perspectives from the Back of a Dragon, the Inside of the Wardrobe and the Uppermost Window of the Highest Tower**

Fight or flight? Fantasy literature is often seen as the latter. The sheer popularity of phenomena such as *Harry Potter*, the *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* warrants a critical investigation of the genre of fantasy writing. Fantasy literature is often criticized, even by those who partake of it, as a waste of time, an enjoyable but ultimately fruitless distraction. But is that all it is? Perhaps not. An exploration of the relationship between fantasy and myth, and a mindful consideration of the historical context in which fantasy authors wrote, supports the claim that fantasy literature facilitates the converse of flight—a confrontation with reality— thereby serving the same function as mythology once did. Its specifically designed structure and features permit fantasy to serve the pedagogical, pragmatic purpose of helping people to better understand the world around them and their place and purpose within it, thus fulfilling the same functions as myth but within a modern context.

George Hamilton, in his poem "The Change" (1919), depicts fantasy literature as a temporary and ultimately inconsequential reprieve from the meaningless monotony of life.

“All the daytime I belong,

To the solemn-coated throng

Who with grave stupendous looks,  
Study cash and ledger books,  
Or who go,  
Staid and slow.  
On sad business to and fro" (9).

His deliberate choice of the adjectives "solemn", "grave" and "slow" clearly demonstrate that he despairingly perceives his everyday life to be boring and uninspiring. The dreary reality of his daylight existence sits in contrast with his twilight escapades amongst "the fay birds and phantom flowers". Despite the jubilant sense of freedom he gains from his fantastical experience, his use of the verb "waste" encapsulates his belief that it is not a productive endeavour—"Wasting all my leisure hours." This attitude is reinforced by the description of his experience as nothing more than a "mad fling" and an "impish evening". The word "fling" implies a brief, meaningless encounter that serves to satisfy immediate needs yet is never intended as a long-term or worthwhile action. "Impish" suggests that this wilful squandering of his leisure time is both indulgent and mischievous. Hamilton's poem outlines the commonly held belief that fantasy literature yields no benefit other than momentary emancipation from the tediousness of life, the "sad business, to and fro," yet, as this essay will demonstrate, scholars have charged in with swords held high to refute the claim that it serves solely as a temporary vehicle for catharsis or a brief evasion of reality.

Before examining the scholarly ballistas built to defend the fantasy genre, it is prudent to outline the distinction between true, effective fantasy writing and mere escape writing. Both categories can facilitate an indulgent, affective response; however, this is where escape literature

sheathes its sword. It provides refuge, a safe space where engagement is optional and even then, blissfully undemanding. It permits a “blind, passive enjoyment,” absorbing our attention just enough to painlessly distract us from life’s endless siege (Hume, 59). Not all fantasy literature is successful, not all climb to the summit of the best-selling list, and many are, to put in plainly, giant flops. These books tend to fade from memory, yet the classics, the true masterpieces, continue to resonate for years to come.

It is important to recognize that true fantasy can also facilitate an escape; but this escape is not necessarily an act of disengagement. Tolkien draws our attention to the important distinction between the “Escape of the Prisoner” and the “Flight of the Deserter” arguing, “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?” (Tolkien, 76). From this viewpoint, escapism can be a valid and constructive course of action. The most effective fantasy literature provides an escape while also demanding something more from us. It piques our curiosity, stimulates our intellect, makes our hearts beat that bit faster and our fists clench with emotion so as to teach or enlighten us. Often denoted as the literature of wonder, it pushes us to engage with new worlds and often challenging perspectives. Kathryn Hume, author of *Fantasy and mimesis: responses to reality in Western literature*, showcases how Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* departs from reality’s physical limitations using a ring of invisibility in order to prod our moral engagement and to suggest the possibility of heroism (102-110). *The Hobbit* thus exemplifies the pedagogical intent of true fantasy literature to engage the reader and provide an educational, thought-provoking experience. It is imperative to consider this essay’s concept of fantasy writing as the latter type, as that which aims to do more than merely offer an

escape, but which utterly enthrals us and takes us beyond ourselves, forcing us to adopt new perspectives and unfamiliar values (Morris, 84).

A defence of fantasy's practical intentions rests on its basis in mythology, whose didactic functions serve to inform the parallel objectives of fantasy literature. The following sections will firstly outline the link between fantasy and mythology and subsequently investigate the pragmatic, pedagogical functions of mythology. The myths and stories which dominated literary tradition for centuries are all rooted in the fantastic (Szumskyj, 352-355). Just as ancient mythologies depicted the epic quests of brave heroes with superhuman powers, the ploys of nefarious villains, miraculous magic and mystical creatures, so too does fantasy. The earliest forms of fantasy literature have been attributed to ancient mythological sources such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Iliad*, which contained similar elements of the supernatural and fantastical (Szumskyj, 352). While each genre may tell completely different stories in their own entertaining or unpredictable way, their appeal lies in their attention to the basic human need for truth, meaning and significance. A critical similarity exists between mythology and fantasy thus supporting its claim to be a modern form of mythology.

What exactly were myths designed to achieve? An analysis of the functions of mythology affirms its didactic role within society. Great intellects of the twentieth century such as Freud, Jung and Levi-Strauss have made convincing arguments that reinforce the now widely accepted belief in the importance of mythology to society (Price, 11). Joseph Campbell, a historian who devoted his life to studying mythology and its uses, argues that mythology provides a set of pedagogical guidelines that allow us to understand our own consciousness and our place in the surrounding universe. Myths were designed to stimulate our imaginations, to force us to

reconsider our own reality from afar in order to battle with these new perspectives, to impart a system of meaning that illuminates good and evil, and to facilitate a deeper understanding of our own consciousness, our place in society and what group we belong to (Campbell, *Masks of God*, 519-523). In antiquity, mythology gained its authority through its connection to the gods, thus invoking the evolutionary link between mythology and religion. Mythology's aim to impart a sense of togetherness and belonging through a communal identity parallels the objectives of religion (Price, 16). Biblical stories akin to myths teach a set of morals and ethics to society. Mythology's link to religion and subsequently fantasy can be seen through C.S. Lewis' use of fantasy to reinterpret biblical stories and teach Christian morality. Similarly, Margaret Hiley, author of *Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien*, comments on the striking comparison between Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and the 1611 edition of King James' bible, which she argues Tolkien intentionally mimicked so as to imbue his work with an undeniable authority, veracity and gravitas (847). Myths and religious tales both answer the elusive questions that evade rational explanation by offering solutions "beyond the reach of human consciousness" (Price, 17). Mythology therefore functioned pragmatically, acting as the initial system of meaning, reflection and teaching which later evolved into religion. If we take fantasy writing as an extension or evolution of mythology based on its shared features, it arguably shares a similar pedagogical function within society.

The historical context in which fantasy writing emerged provides strong support for its claim to share the pedagogical functions of mythology and by extension, religion. Fantasy literature emerged in the late 1800s with its popularity continually increasing right through the twentieth century, when classics such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and C.S Lewis' *The*

*Chronicles of Narnia* burst onto the fantasy scene. Its initial period of inception was a reality bubbling with creative tension as Enlightenment ideas clashed with those of the Romantic Revolution. Stemming from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth century, intellectuals such as Locke, Descartes and Leibniz encouraged a renewed emphasis on reason, rationality and scientific method. Not only did this shove the previous concepts of the magical, mystical, romantic and animate to the very back of the wardrobe, but it also transmitted a legacy of secularization. Campbell argues that it was at this point that, the new scientific discovery and analyses that denied literal translations of the bible, revealed Christianity's inability to function as mythology once had (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*). In the early nineteenth century, the emergence of Romantic thought re-invigorated an appreciation of traditions, the individual, the supernatural and the imagination thus opening the door for many of fantasy's characteristic features. The warring of Enlightenment and Romantic ideas had a profound effect on society finally culminating in a reconciliation that defines what historians widely term modernity; a period characterized by an appreciation of both science and imaginative intuition in which religion no longer took centre stage. Within the context of a society devoid of a system of meaning that was previously provided by religion, it follows that fantasy with its specially designed structure and features would emerge to take on the role of providing meaning and confronting reality.

Once again, analysing the historical context in which the authors wrote provides insights into their intentions and the aimed pragmatic use of fantasy within society. The attempt to balance the tension between the realistic and the imaginary in this new context of modernity created an agitated environment that fostered the development of fantasy literature. For example,

William Morris, author of *News From Nowhere* (1890), placed the past against the modern, contrasting medieval craftsmanship with industrialised nineteenth century England as an effective form of social criticism. Similarly, the prose of C.S. Lewis (1950s) and John Ruskin (late 1800s) are also believed to have acted as social criticisms written in response to industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation (Brooks). Fantasy authors wrote in response to their differing social contexts making it relatable and relevant to their audience. Tolkien himself admitted that his works were intended as a mythology of England that intentionally linked the fantastical Secondary World he created with his own Primary World—England (Hiley, 853). Mythological based fantasy stories became increasingly popular post-Enlightenment when rational, reasoned explanation lacked the answers to humanity’s most pressing concern —man’s purpose in life. Approaching knowledge solely through reason generated a “pseudoscientific arrogance” that threatened to fragment society and ignore these concerns (Prothero, 33). The result was a world devoid of meaning, that had forgotten all that mythology had previously taught (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*). Within this fragile, rapidly changing world, fantasy literature emerged to confront reality and provide a system of meaning in a way that no other literary genre could match (Bakker). This development is encapsulated in the words of C.S. Lewis— “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning” (265). On analysing the context in which fantasy writing developed, we can point to its clear purpose of addressing the current social, cultural and political issues at the time, thus affirming that akin to mythology it had concise pedagogical intentions.

At this point, it might be argued that many other genres aside from fantasy serve to teach us important lessons. Why did fantasy literature specifically adopt the pedagogical purpose of

mythology? Answers lie in the unique structure of fantasy writing; the use displacement in order to confront reality and specific features such as elements of the supernatural, the impossible and moral character-development arcs. These allow it to unobtrusively yet effectively instruct the reader. While the definition or categorisation of fantasy literature has been widely contested for centuries amongst leading scholars and avid aficionados alike, ranging from short phrases such as Hume's "a departure from consensus reality" (21), to Morris' broad definition of it as, "not of this world" (77), it is, as Aliel Cunningham suggests, best understood by its distinguishable features (113). It usually involves displacement to another world with magical or supernatural features in the form of a journey or quest. It is this journey through distinct magical worlds that extends its uses beyond mere escapism by allowing it to alter our perspective of reality, impart a moral code and affix meaning to our existence (Cunningham, 113). There has been some criticism of fantasy literature's claim to be able to transport us to other worlds. Hume points to some of the most recognized critics of fantasy literature such as Irwin, who argues the impossibility of the idea that fantasy's secondary worlds are a world of imagination wholly unconnected to reality. Man sees the world through an anthropomorphic lens, unable to imagine anything beyond his own experience or reality. The worlds that are created are therefore not "other-worldly" but instead reflect the real world (Hume 5-21). However, this quibble is only problematic to the definition of fantasy writing and serves rather well instead to highlight the inextricable link between fantasy and reality. Set within another world, it draws on the readers own context demonstrating how fantasy literature was intended to confront social realities. Yet how did its unique features of; displacement, an incorporation of the supernatural and the

impossible and relatable character development in the form of the Hero's Journey, allow it to achieve its goals?

The creation of imagined or parallel worlds, provides the reader with a sense of perspective challenging them to confront the limits of reality. This confrontation is achieved through the displacement and rupture of familiarity and the incorporation of the impossible. Stefan Ekman, author of *Here Be Dragons*, analyses the use of setting within fantasy stories to argue that the alternate appearance of geography and maps in the fantastical world lends a thought-provoking element to fantasy. In the fantasy world, natural laws and causality do not always apply, but arguably this disjuncture does not position them as irreconcilable opposites but instead unites their conflicting realities, thereby enabling a transition across map boundaries and geographical borders where the impossible is possible. Fantasy's use of displacement permits a re-conceptualisation and reconsideration of the real world that thus allows the reader to reimagine reality (Ekman, 129-166 and 216-220). Baker develops this idea further arguing that fantasy's dislocation can rupture current and historic reality thus altering the readers understanding and allowing them to re-imagine the world. He does this through an exploration of the incorporation of the concept of utopia which he claims is geared towards affecting the present. By making us more aware of our imprisonment it prompts activism thus paving the way for radical, progressive change (439-442). Rosemary Jackson takes this idea further arguing the angle that its displacement facilitates a psychological exploration within the reader. Jackson argues that fantasy has a distinct narrative that confronts reality, the limits of rationality and the struggle between the conscious and unconscious. Expanding on previous work by Todorov, and incorporating Freud's psychoanalytical approach, she explores fantasy as an

expression of unconscious drives and cultural disillusionment. According to Jackson, fantasy challenges reality when, unlike science fiction, it forces us to confront our desires; it is an attempt to subvert an oppressive and insufficient reality. Through it we confront desires that are often unattainable within our known reality, yet their impossibility can be entertained and understood within the fantasy world (Jackson, 180). This aligns with the previous point made by Baker about the ability of utopia and the impossible to expose reality. He rather eloquently sums it up in the following quotation;

“The impossible must appear before us magnificent and other, frightening and impossibly true. It must ask those questions that may never have answers but whose purpose is to make us stop, to make us think. That is why we have always needed and will always need dragons: sometimes to breathe their flames and burn us, sometimes to carry us on their wings so we can see our world anew.”<sup>457</sup>

Fantasy’s incorporation of the impossible, the extraordinary and the supernatural presents another way by which reality is confronted and exposed. Morris argues that this feature represents an attempt to re-experience the “fundamental life-giving sources” generated by myth (80). Yeats’ poetry can be seen to demonstrate how the mystical and supernatural functions in ways similar to fantasy literature. His reference to a “miracle” in his poem “A Vision” (1937), is arguably an attempt that did not seek to create history as a true reality, but rather to lay another structure over it in an attempt to better understand it (Paul, 302-307). Yeats’s emphasis on the mystical demands that the reader, like him, go beyond the limits of rational experience to achieve a higher synthesis of comprehension. Robert Crossley, writing in a journal of the National Council of teachers of English, analyses an excerpt from the *Lord of the Rings* to argue that

fantasy is restrained from mere self-indulgence by directing the reader towards the ordinary within the supernatural. It prompts a renewed consideration of the familiar and thus a sharper understanding of what the reader believed they already knew thus contributing to a widening of thought that challenges habitually narrow outlooks (287). In the same way that mythology incorporated the gods, heroes with superhuman powers and magical weapons, fantasy's exploration of the supernatural and unexplainable facilitates a greater understanding of the real world.

A sense of meaning and purpose in life can be derived from fantasy's integrated moral code. Basic human concerns regarding morality and meaning, remain constant over time. Questions such as — What is the point of life? and What is morality? recur time and again, remaining as pertinent in a modern context as they did in ancient times. While the questions remain the same, the means of answering them has changed. As mythology faded, and religion discredited, fantasy assumed the role of imparting a moral code and value system. Cunningham describes fantasy's imperative role in developing "moral identity" particularly in young children (112). We can see the characteristic appearance of a moral guide in fantasy stories a role filled by Gandalf, Brom and Dumbledore in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Eragon*, and *Harry Potter* respectively. Fantasy literature's depiction of often extreme or heightened situations presents an opportunity for the reader to wrestle with and explore moral quandaries. Campbell first observed a now widely accepted feature of myth and fantasy known as the Hero's Journey— a story arc inherent to almost all fantasy storylines. Readers relate to, and engage with, the protagonist on their journey and are thus actively engaged in the decision-making processes that illuminate the struggles of morality (Campbell, *Hero* prologue). Cunningham points to two examples, the first

in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: “the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy” (125). Upon identifying with the protagonist, there is an opportunity to choose the right path from the wrong. Secondly, he points to the protagonist Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, who is forced to choose between keeping his share of Erebor’s treasure or sacrificing it to potentially avert a war between strangers he owes nothing to (127-129). The dualism between good (hero) and evil (villain) highlights the often ambiguous line between what is right and socially acceptable and what is wrong and denounced by society. Fantasy thus acts as a guiding philosophy in the same way that mythology did before it.

True fantasy permits an escape that does not shy away and flee from reality but rather facilitates an engagement and confrontation with society. The features and structure of fantasy literature point to a critical similarity between mythology, religion and fantasy. As myths faded, so too did religious belief, and a new mythology emerged in the form of fantasy. An analysis of the context from which fantasy literature emerged sheds light on its intended pedagogical functions which match those of mythology and religion. Fantasy writing’s structure and features are what render it so well-placed to confront reality. Its use of displacement, the supernatural, the impossible and the Hero’s Journey permit a reconsideration of reality and impart an essential system of values and meaning. Considering the context and way in which it was written, we can see fantasy literature as more than a pointless undertaking but rather as a modern mythology. Today, in a world facing a supposed void of meaning in the wake of a diminishing belief in religion, could stories about dragons, wizards and heroes make life meaningful in the same way that mythology and religion once did?

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