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The Heart of the Labyrinth: Reading Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* as a Modern Dream Vision

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Abstract

Demonstrates how Jim Henson's film *Labyrinth* traces its ancestry to the dream vision genre exemplified by such medieval works as "Pearl" and *The Divine Comedy*, showing how the dream vision parallels and guides main character Sarah's growth toward emotional maturity. Also addresses the way Sarah deals with the prospect of sexual maturity, rejecting a too-early adulthood.

Additional Keywords

Dream visions; Girls in fantasy; Henson, Jim; *Labyrinth* (movie); Medieval dream vision—Relation to *Labyrinth*; Medieval literature



THE HEART OF THE LABYRINTH:
READING JIM HENSON'S *LABYRINTH*
AS A MODERN DREAM VISION

SHILOH CARROLL

"I've brought you a gift. It's a crystal, nothing more. But when you turn it this way and look into it, it'll show you your dreams."

—Jareth, *Labyrinth* (Scene 4)

THE DREAM VISION IS A GENRE WITH A LONG LITERARY TRADITION. This genre includes works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Guillaume de Lorris's *Romance of the Rose*, "Pearl," and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, among others. Medieval poets frequently used dream visions to explore dimensions of the psyche, often serving "as depictions of the inner life of characters," which provides motivation and character background as well as reasons for sudden character transformations and out-of-character decisions (Russell 26-7). Jim Henson's 1986 fantasy coming-of-age movie, *Labyrinth*, can be read as a dream vision. *Labyrinth*'s protagonist, Sarah, matures by several years in a matter of hours after traveling through a fantastic labyrinthine world populated with fuzzy creatures and a sinister yet sensual Goblin King, Jareth. While *Labyrinth* does not exactly conform to the formula of dream visions as used by medieval poets, it contains many of the same elements, such as the nature of the dreamer, the dream guide, and allegorical figures.

Labyrinth opens with Sarah, clad in a medieval-era gown and flowery coronet, speaking entreatingly to the camera, but she falters and has to check her lines in a small book she draws from her sleeve. A bell begins to toll, and she hikes up her dress, revealing blue jeans underneath it, and runs for home through a sudden pouring rain. She confronts her stepmother, has an argument with her father, and is left alone to tend her baby brother. While her brother, Toby, cries, she tries to calm him—unsuccessfully—with a story from the book she'd been reading, also titled *Labyrinth*. After a few minutes, she gets fed up and wishes that the goblins would come take her brother away "right now!" She is shocked when her brother actually disappears and Jareth, the Goblin King, appears in the bay window. She pleads with him to return Toby, and though he tries to talk her out of wanting him back, she is adamant. Finally, Jareth agrees to return Toby – if Sarah can solve his labyrinth. He and Sarah are transported to a

hill overlooking the labyrinth, where Sarah's quest begins. She finds her way through the labyrinth (with equal parts help and meddling from the creatures inside and Jareth himself), rescues Toby, and is magically transported back to her house as the clock strikes midnight.

Despite the lack of definite sleeping and waking moments, *Labyrinth* contains many psychological and narratological clues that indicate it may actually be a dream. Psychologists such as Ernest Hartmann have done extensive research and testing on dreaming and personality types. Sarah, with her creative-mindedness, fits the personality type of a thin-boundaried person. A person with thin boundaries, or little division between internal processes, tends to "experience states of being half-awake and half-asleep, or will become deeply immersed in daydreaming or in reverie, so that at times the boundary between real life and fantasy may be unclear" (Hartmann and Kunzendorf 102). Psychologists have also found a correlation between thin boundaries and "a belief in or tendency to experience paranormal phenomena" (Hartmann, Harrison, and Zborowski 356). People with thin boundaries tend to be art students, music students, or other creative-minded individuals (353).

Sarah's creative personality is illustrated in the earliest scenes. Immediately after the opening credits, we see her in a medieval costume, practicing lines from a play called *Labyrinth*. Her room contains books such as *Where the Wild Things Are*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, and *Through the Looking Glass*. Her mother was an actress, as evidenced by the newspaper clippings and playbills in Sarah's scrapbook and on her mirror. Sarah's dramatic tendencies may be an attempt to emulate her mother, who she undoubtedly finds more interesting than her stepmother, or may be due to a genetic tendency toward imaginative behavior.

The single, sweeping look we get of Sarah's room provides further clues. Nearly everything in Sarah's room is reflected in the Labyrinth in some way, indicating that her journey through the Labyrinth is a journey through her own subconscious. Despite the internal nature of the journey, it appears very external; Sarah leaves her house through a window (a move Henson borrowed from Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There* [White 119]) and enters a fantastic world. Henson's decision to blur the lines between sleeping and waking, fantasy and reality, may be due to a need to heighten the visual impact of the movie; the sudden disappearance of the house from around Sarah as she looks through the window at the Labyrinth is much more visually interesting than Sarah falling asleep and finding herself in or near the Labyrinth. It may also be due to a need to heighten the immediacy of the story. A journey that appears real is much more likely to affect Sarah than something she—and the audience—recognizes as a dream. It is also possible that Henson was trying to conform to several definitions of Fantasy which claim that dreams are a logical explanation for

fantastic events, thus removing such stories from the realm of true Fantasy (Tynn, Zahorski and Boyer 4; Manlove 16-18; Wolfe 2226). Whatever Henson's reasons, Sarah's psychological state and the parallels between Sarah's room and the labyrinth both indicate that *Labyrinth* is still a psychological journey rather than a "real" one, and as such can be analyzed as a dream vision.

Medieval dream visionaries were often in a state that necessitated intervention from an outside source. Some, such as Chaucer's *Duchess* narrator, are having trouble sleeping. Dante's pilgrim has fallen into a state of sin. The narrator of "Pearl" has experienced the death of his daughter. Nearly every dream visionary has some emotional trouble that he cannot solve himself, whether he is aware of it or not. He is in need of guidance and advice that he cannot find in the physical world, so his mind conjures a setting in which he can find what he needs. The dreams and those in them teach the visionaries necessary and important lessons to help them move through their current crises.

As a teenager on the cusp of adulthood, Sarah is a typical dream visionary; she needs the lessons the dream can teach her and tends to be obtuse about learning them (Gainer; Marti 181). She initially self-identifies as a fairy tale princess, imagining overblown conflict between herself and her stepmother, acting as though babysitting is an untold burden of slavery, and using overly dramatic speech patterns. Her stepmother recognizes this as well, complaining to Sarah's father that "she treats me like the wicked stepmother in a fairy story no matter what I say!" (scene 2).

While Sarah emulates her mother's acting career, she has trouble differentiating between acting and life, probably because of both her thin boundaries and her age. She may identify more with the characters her mother played, which, from the newspaper clippings, seem to have been romantic leads, than with her mother herself. Her mother's career's influence on Sarah's psyche is also evident in Jareth, who looks suspiciously like a man who is often seen posing with Sarah's mother. The actor appears to play opposite Sarah's mother's lead, making him an object of romantic attraction, as is evident later in the movie.

In a stereotypical teenaged manner, Sarah constantly proclaims that "it's not *fair!*" when anything goes against her wishes or desires, regardless of the event's actual relative fairness or lack thereof. She takes out her frustration at being pulled away from her daydreaming to baby-sit on her brother, refusing to pick him up or comfort him when he cries, instead telling him the story of her play and threatening to ask the goblins to come take him away. The dream begins when she finally does proclaim, "I wish the goblins *would* come and take you away. Right now!" (scene 3). Toby immediately disappears, and Sarah is confronted with the task of rescuing him from the goblins by finding her way through the Labyrinth to the castle in the city at the center. While finding her

brother is the ultimate goal of her vision quest, along the way Sarah learns valuable lessons that help her mature.

One of the first lessons Sarah learns while in the Labyrinth is that it's okay to ask for help if it's needed, or, as Hoggle advises, not to take too much for granted. At first, she demands information from Hoggle, the dwarflike man she encounters outside the Labyrinth, then assumes too much from the information he does give her. He asks, "Would you go left or right?" and she asks him for advice. When he says he "wouldn't go either way," she assumes he's being rude and snaps at him rather than asking for clarification (scene 6). After a few minutes of running down a straight path with no apparent turns or openings, she encounters a tiny blue worm. She learns from him what she could have gotten from Hoggle if she'd asked him: the walls are riddled with openings hidden by optical illusion. She has not yet learned to ask for clarification, however; when the worm cautions her not to "go that way! Never go *that* way," she cheerfully changes direction. The worm notes to himself: "if she'd kept on going down *that* way, she'd have gone straight to that castle!" (scene 7). After her encounter with the worm, she seems to realize the necessity of details, and she asks every friendly creature she encounters for help finding her way through the Labyrinth, seriously considering every ounce of advice they provide. While not everyone is much help, she responds graciously and thanks them anyway.

The next lesson Sarah learns is that, however clichéd, life isn't fair. Many of the things she's claimed aren't fair since entering the Labyrinth truly aren't fair (unlike the rainstorm that she dubs unfair at the beginning of the movie), such as walls moving, tiny inhabitants of the Labyrinth changing the marks she's making, and Jareth taking away some of her allotted time. Jareth has no sympathy for her and simply replies, "You say that so often. I wonder what your basis for comparison is?" (scene 12). Ironically, it takes an act of unfairness on Sarah's part to teach her this lesson. When Hoggle complains that her theft of his pouch of jewels isn't fair, she says, "No, it isn't. But that's just the way it is." Her sudden look of understanding indicates that she's learned that things may not be fair, but they must be dealt with, not whined about (scene 13). She does not utter the phrase "It isn't fair!" again for the rest of the movie.

The last lesson she learns is that material possessions are not as important as people. At the beginning of the movie, Sarah discovers her teddy bear, Lancelot, missing from her room and storms into Toby's room to retrieve it. She begins this lesson very soon after entering the Labyrinth; she gives Hoggle her bracelet in payment for leading her out of the oubliette, which he was going to do anyway. However, the bracelet wasn't dear to her and is no real loss. Later, she gives an unhelpful "oracle" one of her rings, which she takes off with a bit more reluctance. Hoggle complains about this donation, which shows the beginning of her growth; Hoggle is a very materialistic character. The fact that

she has done something to displease him shows she is learning that material possessions are less important. The lesson is well and truly learned during Sarah's encounter with the Garbage Lady, who carries all of her possessions on her back and tries to get Sarah to do the same. Sarah is a bit confused from a previous exposure to a hallucinogenic drug and the incongruity of finding a copy of her bedroom in a dump, and she allows the Garbage Lady to hand her items and pile them on her back. But then she finds her copy of the play *Labyrinth* and remembers her duty to save Toby. "It's all junk!" she cries, throwing her possessions from her back, and the reproduction of her bedroom crumbles around her (scene 22). When she returns to the real world, she gives Lancelot to Toby, a sign of her understanding of the fleeting nature of material possessions and the general maturing she has undergone in the Labyrinth.

Dream visions often include a guide to help the visionary learn the necessary lessons. Dante's pilgrim had Virgil to lead him through hell and explain the punishments of the damned. The "Pearl" dreamer must be reminded of Christian doctrine by a young woman who may or may not be his daughter. And Chaucer's *Duchess* narrator has the knight in black with whom to discuss loss and love. Dream visions were often a dialogue between the dreamer and the guide, the journey itself taking second place to the dialogue (Gainer). This is true for *Labyrinth* as well; while the journey is an important part of Sarah's learning experience, she learns most of her lessons and receives guidance through talking to other characters.

Sarah receives help and guidance from several different creatures in the Labyrinth, but the play she has been rehearsing is her main guide. The book itself does not quite replace a human guide and makes very few physical appearances, but by providing a script to follow, it is the closest thing to a consistent guide Sarah has. At the beginning of the movie, she is seen practicing lines from the end of the play, the exact lines she uses against Jareth at the end of the movie. She tells the story to Toby during her fit of pique at having to babysit him. She knows immediately who Jareth is when he arrives and accepts unquestioningly his challenge to solve the Labyrinth within thirteen hours. When she strays far off the path due to Jareth's drugged peach and nearly allows herself to be taken in by the Garbage Lady, she finds her copy of the book and once again reads aloud the final lines of the play: "Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered, I have fought my way here to the castle beyond the Goblin City to take back the child that you have stolen" (scene 22). The book reminds her of her duty and guides her back to the necessary path to save Toby.

Her companions are her support structure, not her guides; according to Brian Henson, "ultimately, all they're doing is giving advice, but what they are, really, is spiritual support" ("Journey"). None of them knows how to find the castle at the center of the labyrinth (Hoggle might, but if he does, he's not

telling). They do, however, guide her toward adulthood and spiritual growth. And although Jareth is the entity that pulls her into the dream world, he never directly answers any of her questions and continuously tries to sabotage her journey. Sarah succeeds in navigating the Labyrinth and rescuing her brother in spite of him. He may still be considered a guide because Sarah learns to do the opposite of what he tells her to in order to find her way and because interaction with him shows her the parts of adulthood that she is not yet ready for.

One of the most common elements of dream visions is allegory; the characters populating the vision are stand-ins for aspects of human psychology, personifications of ideas or traits (Gainer). *The Romance of the Rose* is a prime example of allegory, containing characters such as Friend, Rebuff, Fair Welcome, and Wisdom. None of these characters is a whole person, but facets of the human mind. In Dante's *Inferno*, the allegory is more subtle. Each of the people Dante's pilgrim encounters is a real historical figure, but their punishments are physical representations of their own sins turned on the sinner (Gainer). Since a dream vision is an internal journey through the dreamer's mind, it is reasonable to assume that the characters are facets of the dreamer himself.

Most of the creatures in the Labyrinth, including Sarah's companions, are allegorical figures. Jareth has been identified as the fairy tale archetype of the Demon Lover, who "appears to be a very sensual and fabulous catch," but not without consequences (Arendt 42). He poses as Prince Charming, offering Sarah all of her dreams and desires, but this gift comes with a price – she must give up her baby brother. He tempts her with her own self-identification as a fairy-tale princess, claiming the gift is "not for an ordinary girl who takes care of a screaming baby" (scene 4). Sarah finds Jareth fascinating, at least until he attempts to take on the role of Prince Charming with her as his princess during the ball sequence. The presence of raucous adults dressed like goblins reminds Sarah that if she gives in to the sensual pleasure that Jareth offers her in return for giving up her brother, she will end up the queen of the goblins. Her fairy tale shatters when she realizes that Jareth as Prince Charming is all an illusion and not a promising reality (Arendt 43).

At the same time, Jareth represents the danger inherent in Sarah's tendency to lose herself in her imagination. Everything Jareth has done is because of and for Sarah, because he exists only in her mind. "You asked that the child be taken; I took him," he says. "You cowered before me; I was frightening. I have reordered time. I have turned the world upside-down, and I have done it all for you. I am exhausted from living up to your expectations of me" (scene 27). He falls in love with her because the story calls for it; "but what no-one knew was that the King of the Goblins had fallen in love with the girl, and he had given her certain powers" (scene 3), Sarah claims while telling Toby the story. He takes Toby because she wishes for it. He gives her a way to reclaim her brother because

she needs to get Toby back. And he works against her and tries to scare her because she expects it of him. These expectations create a sensual tension that is odd for Sarah, which she ultimately rejects at the end of the movie when Jareth asks her to give control over to him. Instead, she exerts her control over him, bringing her imagination under her power rather than allowing herself to be controlled by her imagination.

Sarah's three companions represent parts of her own personality that she must integrate in a balanced and healthy way. Brian Henson points out that "as a threesome, they're solid and what Sarah needs. Independently, they're all woefully lacking" ("Journey"). He claims that none of the three share characteristics, that together they are a whole person.

Hoggle, the first one she meets, is representative of sensibility and self-preservation. He is a self-proclaimed coward and refuses to apologize for it. Whenever something scares him—usually Jareth—or Sarah heads into a potentially dangerous situation, he runs away. However, he returns when she needs rescuing and provides a very common-sense method of escaping the situation. He rescues her from the oubliette by creating a door, but at the same time, he advises her to give up: "It gets a lot worse from here on in," he says (scene 11). The sensible thing would be for her to give up, but sensibility is not the entirety of Sarah's personality. She shows this most clearly when she rescues Ludo, an action that makes Hoggle run away, of course. "Hoggle looks after himself, like everyone!" he insists (scene 14), but Sarah proves that not everyone looks only after themselves. Hoggle's constant rescuing of Sarah shows that he doesn't really only think of himself, either, though he thinks *mostly* of himself. His fear of Jareth drives him to betray Sarah by giving her the drugged peach. However, he returns to help the party fight the giant metal guardian of the Goblin City for no perceivable reason besides his care for Sarah and guilt at having betrayed her, and he is willing to follow her into Jareth's lair to fight him. Her compassion and friendship give him the courage to face his fear.

Ludo represents compassion and loyalty. These traits appear to be the root of Sarah's personality, her grounding force; Ludo's ability to communicate with rocks indicates a rapport with the most basic form of nature: the ground itself. He is "totally untarnished and all feeling, incapable of cynical thought," as well as the brute force of the team (Brian Henson, "Journey"). While he is not an accomplished hand-to-hand fighter, being too big and slow, his rapport with rocks more than makes up for it. This rapport, not Hoggle (though she calls for him first), saves Sarah from the Bog of Eternal Stench. His rocks also do most of the fighting in the Goblin City, clearing the way for Sarah to face Jareth.

Sir Didymus represents courage and brotherhood. He is not regulated by fear or common sense; he charges into places the others would rather approach with caution. Brian Henson describes him as "just the picture of

gallantry, and that's pretty much all he is, is just honor and gallantry. [...] Which is wonderful and sometimes can be considered great bravery, but sometimes could be considered enormous stupidity" ("Journey"). He is compatible with Ludo—loyalty, courage, and brotherhood are very similar traits—but the complete opposite of Hoggle. He may be seen as Sarah's overdramatic traits; he is an overblown caricature of Arthurian chivalry with a dash of Don Quixote (White 127-8; Arendt 44). He agrees to go quietly into the Goblin City only after Sarah assures him that quietness does not make him a coward. During the battle in the Goblin City, he continues to believe he has the upper hand despite being seriously outnumbered. Didymus himself never truly helps Sarah through any situation, though he constantly tries to.

Other more minor characters and situations are also allegorical. The Fire Gang, fuzzy red creatures who can take themselves apart, represent the irresponsible teenage years. Their song, "Chilly Down," reflects a lack of responsibility and care with lyrics such as "Don't got no problems / Ain't got no suitcase / Ain't got no clothes to worry about / Ain't got no real estate or jewelry or gold mines to hang me up" (scene 17). They hang out in the woods playing games and try to drag Sarah into the easy freedom they claim to enjoy. Her inability to relate to them and frustration with them indicates that she has grown past such laziness and irresponsibility and is nearly ready to enter the grown-up world. However, their immaturity has a darker side. They can also be seen to represent a physical danger to a girl's sexuality. Later in "Chilly Down," the lyrics include encouragements toward sexual behavior such as:

Drive you crazy, really lazy, eye rollin', funky strollin', ball playin'
Hip swayin', trouble makin', booty shakin', tripping, passing, jumping
Bouncing, drivin', stylin', creeping, pouncing, shoutin', screamin'
Double dealin', rockin', rollin', and a reelin'
With the mackin' sex appealin'.
Can you dig our groovy feelin'? [...]
Just strut your nasty stuff
Wiggle in the middle, yeah
Get the town talking. (scene 17)

When Sarah does not join in their game, they try to force her to remove her head, which can be seen as an attempt to take her virginity (or an attempt to remove her rationality so she will join them in their hedonism). It is very subtle, only truly recognizable to those who know the term "maidenhead" and understand older meanings behind references to one's "head." The subtlety is necessary, however, in order to avoid frightening children or exposing them to ideas they may not be ready for. The inclusion of the idea is also necessary; growing up can be dangerous, and many girls face threats such as this. Fittingly, it is Hoggle who

rescues her from the Fire Gang—sensibility rescues her from senselessness and hedonism.

Although the Fire Gang's version of sexuality is not to Sarah's liking, later she is shown exploring her sexuality in the ballroom sequence. She is dressed in virginal white, moving through a crowd of adults in goblin masks, looking for Jareth. He seems to be playing a game with her, allowing her to see him for brief moments before disappearing. When she finally comes face-to-face with him, he sweeps her up in a dance and croons "As the World Falls Down," a love song which promises his undying loyalty and affection (scene 21). Sarah is obviously uncomfortable with his declaration of love and the behavior of the masked adults around her and makes her escape. Brian Henson claims that this scene is an exploration of "that thing that happens with girls at that age, who can pull up an illusion that they're an adult [...]. [T]hey end up with the struggle of what happens when an adult man starts to respond to you [...] it's scary for her" ("Journey"). Jim Henson says, "she's walking into a very adult situation where she knows she's too young to be there. It's something that's attractive to her, yet also repellent" ("Inside"). Sarah's status as not quite a woman, no longer a little girl, adds to the tension; it would be very easy for her to get drawn in to this world that she's not yet ready for. She is old enough to have romantic relationships – her stepmother mentions that she wishes Sarah would have dates at her age – but not yet old enough for the brand of sexuality Jareth is offering. Jareth, as the Demon Lover, is a more overt predator than the Fire Gang, but Sarah recognizes the danger and does not allow him to seduce her.

Whether through reliance or independent convergence, *Labyrinth* parallels the dream vision tradition to allow a young woman to grow up in an amazingly short span of time. It is a journey through the confusion, twists, and turns of the emotional and intellectual maturing of a teenage girl. Executive Producer George Lucas explains it thus:

She's on that cusp between being an adult and a big sister [...] and its her struggle to kind of compete with these two things, but of course, in the end, she enters adulthood on her own terms, not on the terms of society or what her peer group says she should be doing or what the temptations are; she moves into it as her own woman. ("Journey")

Sarah faces the temptation to stay a child, the dangers of budding sexuality, and her own personality flaws and comes out of the experience a more integrated, controlled, and mature human being. She has learned to control her imagination without losing it, sympathize with other human beings, and interact with the world in a healthy manner. Henson has shown the normal maturing of a young woman in a compressed format, a dream vision, to metaphorically and allegorically explore the trials that girls must endure to become women.

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