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Abstract

Examines the Harry Potter series as an example of a "high fantasy scenario within the structure of a wainscot fantasy"—that is, high fantasy themes taking place in a world of two parallel cultures, one an "invisible or undetected" society existing "in the interstices of the dominant world."

Additional Keywords

Fantasy, high; Fantasy, wainscot; Rowling, J.K. Harry Potter novels

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Kerrie Anne Le Lievre

THE central theme of the twentieth-century genre fantasy novel epitomised by J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is frequently described simply as the conflict between Evil and Good. In *The Comedy of the Fantastic: Ecological Perspectives on the Fantasy Novel,* however, Don D. Elgin suggests that genre fantasy does not in fact deal with "evil" and "good," at least as abstract moral concepts. Rather, it uses the discrete theatre of the Secondary World as a site for the exploration, comparison and judgement of two opposing and mutually exclusive paradigms of imaginative response to the environment within which human beings exist: one which constructs that environment as limiting and attempts to transcend its limits by gaining power over it, and one which attempts to adapt to existence within the limitations the environment imposes and thus to ensure survival.

The Harry Potter series of children's/young adults' novels by J. K. Rowling is not genre high fantasy. It belongs to a sub-genre of fantasy which John Clute in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* labels "wainscot" fantasy; its precursors are texts such as Mary Norton's *Borrowers* tetralogy, Terry Pratchett's *The Carpet People* and Diana Wynne Jones' *Power of Three.* Within the wainscot landscape of her series, however, Rowling constructs a complete genre fantasy scenario. The Harry Potter series features a conflict with a long history. It includes an antagonist (Lord Voldemort) making a second bid for power. He is opposed by a marginalised protagonist (Harry Potter), who is aided by a group of secondary heroes (Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley). A third party (Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Harry's school) to some extent stage-manages the conflict between antagonist and protagonist(s) to achieve his own—positive—ends. The series' major narrative strand represents the closing movement of the long conflict.[1] As well as adding a complexity not often seen in wainscot fantasy to the narrative of the Harry Potter series, and tying it firmly to its generic roots, the location of this high fantasy scenario within the structure of a wainscot fantasy allows Rowling to expand the genre fantasy's abstract exploration of imaginative paradigms into a

more complex examination of the positions those paradigms hold in modern Western cultures.

Although wainscot fantasies are ostensibly set within Primary Reality, they focus on fantastic "invisible or undetected societies living in the interstices of the dominant world" (Clute and Grant 991). In wainscot fantasy a particular relationship exists between two cultures which share the same physical space. The dominant culture—the culture the text's readers are presumed to share—is mundane, large, and presumed to hold power over its environment, but is largely unaware of the existence of the wainscot culture. The wainscot culture is fantastic in some way, but also small (often literally tiny, but also in terms of numbers) and marginal, vulnerable to the power the dominant culture can exercise over its environment (which includes the wainscot culture) and therefore fearful of attracting the dominant culture's attention. Wainscot cultures tend to defend themselves against the power of the dominant culture by becoming invisible and very insular.

Authors of wainscot fantasy frequently use the (actual or feared) collision of a wainscot culture and a dominant culture as a vehicle for social critique. Mary Norton's tiny Borrowers' fearfully negotiating the oversized world of the Human Beans expresses "the situation in any society which suppresses and stunts the growth of the human spirit"; Norton's choice of the adventurous adolescent girl Arrietty as her protagonist makes a more overt statement about the position of women within both the late nineteenth-century era in which the *Borrowers* tetralogy is set, and the post-World War Two era in which it was written (Swinfen 131). Michael de Larrabeiti's *Borribles* trilogy can be read as, among other things, a response to the real-world implications of Thatcher-style politics. In the Harry Potter series, the wizarding world is positioned as a wainscot culture as soon as it is introduced:

"But what does a Ministry of Magic *do?*"

"Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country."

"Why?"

"*Why?* Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone." (*Philosopher's* 51)

The wizarding world's status as a wainscot society is reiterated forcefully early in each volume of the series (*Chamber* 21; *Prisoner* 33-4; *Goblet* 65-6). The difference between the wainscot wizarding world and the dominant culture (Muggles) in the

series, however, is not a physical difference such as size (as in the *Borrowers* tetralogy), conformity (the *Borribles* books), or socioeconomic status (Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*) as is usual in this sub-genre. It is magic: that is, imagination. The first culture to be encountered in each Harry Potter book is the dominant, mundane culture: it is represented primarily by the Dursley family, Harry Potter's relatives and guardians. The Muggle world is not, however, a realistic representation of Primary Reality. It is a caricature that constructs the culture of its readers as one which is—often wilfully—deficient in imagination and sympathy:

> Mr Dursley [. . .] had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination. (*Philosopher's* 10)

Muggles are represented as lacking any ability to engage with the physical reality they inhabit. Dudley Dursley, Harry's cousin, tells the time by means of television schedules and fills it with computer games; deprived of these, he is unable to compensate imaginatively: "By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programmes he'd wanted to see and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer" (35).

Muggle culture is emotionally and imaginatively barren: the Dursleys become Harry's guardians after his parents' deaths only reluctantly, and the long summer holidays he spends with them are the most boring months of his year. And far from holding power over their environment, Muggles are represented as being unable to exercise any real control over it at all. The Dursleys are unable to suppress Harry's magical tendencies by ill-treatment. They cannot stop the invasion of their space by the magical letters which begin arriving on Harry's eleventh birthday, or even outrun it. A hostile wizard's house-elf—embodiment of an enslaved but inherently capricious environment—is even able to invade their home and spoil a dinner-party.

Although each book in the series begins its narrative within the Muggle culture, the protagonist Harry soon makes a transition into the wizarding world—the wainscot culture (tellingly, this transition is often presented as an escape or a flight). In contrast to the Muggle culture, Rowling constructs the wizarding world as a society not only capable of, but founded upon, an intense imaginative engagement with its environment. Within the wainscot, human beings share their

physical space with other, non-human, intelligent beings—hobgoblins, bogeymen, basilisks, centaurs, werewolves, ghosts—which in Primary Reality can only exist as metaphors for human perceptions of their environment as benign, indifferent, capricious, or outright hostile. Further, the human inhabitants of the wainscot must find ways of coping with these beings, which are not necessarily subject to Primary Reality's laws of physics—or common sense. The method humans must use to survive in the wainscot is magic: the direct engagement of imagination with environment. This is the ability that Harry Potter learns through his education in magic at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry—the ostensible focus of the series.

Through the juxtaposition of Muggle and wizarding worlds within each book of her series, Rowling creates an explicit critique of the tendency of Western cultures of the twentieth century to move away from imaginative engagement with the physical context within which human beings exist—their environment—and towards a virtual experience of reality. However, this critique is not the extent of Rowling's engagement with the issue. Once the narrative moves into the wizarding world, Rowling uses this wainscot culture, which she has established as the domain of imagination, as the site for a deeper examination of paradigms of imaginative engagement with the environment which are available to modern Western cultures, and the consequences of engaging in them at all.

In the wizarding world (as in Primary Reality), the principal means by which imagination engages with environment is language. Language is numinous in the wizarding world. Words—especially Latin ones—can also be spells; when spoken with intent they can produce material alterations to reality. Names can reveal character, and possibly also determine it, although the characters who inhabit the wizarding world show no awareness of this fact: thus the Malfoys are a family of deceivers (Fr. *mal foi*—bad faith/false fealty), Sybill Trelawney is an occasional oracle, and somebody with a name like Remus Lupin couldn't possibly *not* be a werewolf. But while this punning is intentionally witty (and often hilarious), its effect is not solely comic. As W. R. Irwin states, "Writers who set forth the fantastic may play games, but ultimately these games are tactical maneuvers instrumenting some serious strategy" (190). The names of the wizarding world continue a dramatic tradition of meaningful names which stretches past Restoration comedy (e.g. Congreve's Fainall and Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World*) and Renaissance drama (e.g. Shakespeare's Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Tourneur's Vindice and Supervacuo in *The Revenger's Tragedy*) to mediaeval allegory (e.g. *Everyman*), and

they are intended to be read in the same way—as markers of both the true nature of characters and the eventual outcome of the narrative. Thus, within the controlled whimsy of the wizarding world's loaded language, some names—two in particular—function not only as character labels, but also as indicators of the series' central theme.

Lord Voldemort's name can translate from French as both "flight from death" and "theft from death"; it also euphonically suggests *vault*—"leap over"—death. It is a partial anagram of his birth name, the rearrangement of which severs the links it represents to both his despised Muggle father and his magical mother and grandfather—that is, to his community. Lord Voldemort's main aim in the first four books of the series is to restore himself fully to life and a physical body after his own over-reaching in pursuit of power leaves him half-dead. His long-term goals are immortality and power over the wizarding world (*Goblet* 569): his name encapsulates not only his worldview but also his narrative.

Harry Potter's name is not so overtly significant as Lord Voldemort's. In fact, although there is loaded language and imagery attached to Harry within the narrative just as there is to Voldemort, the links between character and symbolism are always relatively distant and tenuous—a device which both discourages simple allegorical reading, and allows Harry to remain a character rather than a symbolic figure and thus function as a point of reader identification, allowing readers to engage fully with the narrative. Nevertheless, Harry's name contains its own significance. As a name partly inherited from, and partly bestowed by, his now-dead parents, it locates Harry as an individual who is also the latest in a sequence— a family. The given name of Harry reinforces this positioning through its historical association with royalty[2]—especially the young hero-king Henry V: "Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'" (*Henry V* 3.1.34). And, through this link with Henry V, the name also establishes Harry's narrative direction. Henry V successfully went to war against the French (Harry's name is bluntly English as opposed to Voldemort's French "title"), during which wars he became associated with the hero St. George, who slays the dragon in defence of others in European folklore: a vision of St. George "is reported to have appeared above the field" at Agincourt, Henry V's decisive battle against the French (Davies 343). The associations layered into his name position Harry firmly in the rôle of defender of a community (one of the obligations of feudal royalty is to defend the nation it rules: Bloch 408-09). Although Harry's conscious aim throughout the series is simply to complete—at times just to survive!—his education in magic and become

a full member of that community, his actions in each book increasingly show him moving into this rôle.

Through the meaningful names of her antagonist and protagonist, Rowling explicitly articulates the central theme of her narrative as the conflict between the paradigms of transcendence of context and adaptation to context—the same conflict which Elgin locates at the core of the high fantasy genre. Thus it is no surprise to find that the narrative of the Harry Potter series also takes up and restates the underlying argument of high fantasy.

Genre fantasy's dominant narrative structure is comedic (Attebery 15): a fantasy's protagonists are confronted with a problem (the antagonist's destructive effect on their landscape) which must be resolved before they can integrate themselves into their own societies. This problem-to-resolution narrative paradigm stresses a group's adaptation to a situation rather than an isolated individual's rise to power over it. Fantasy as a genre privileges the adaptive ethic—a bias which can be clearly seen in the Harry Potter series. Like the hero of a genre fantasy, the series' protagonist Harry Potter is at the outset positioned between two characters who represent the opposing ethics of transcendence over physical limitations through the use of power and of adaptation to existence within the limits of the environment. Harry bears a close resemblance to Lord Voldemort, the wizard who murders Harry's parents and transforms him into a cultural icon—the baby who defeated the Dark Lord. The resemblance is both situational and physical: "'[. . .] there are strange likenesses between us, Harry Potter. [. . . .] Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even *look* something alike [. . .]'" (*Chamber* 233).

Harry is nearly Sorted into Slytherin, Lord Voldemort's old school House, which has a reputation for turning out evil wizards. Harry's mentor, however, is Albus Dumbledore, the school's Headmaster, who both embodies and articulates the ethic of acceptance of human limitations: "'After all, to the well-organised mind, what is death but the next great adventure?'" (*Philosopher's* 215). And the self-contained narratives of each book in the series depict Harry, like a high fantasy hero such as Morgon of Hed in *The Riddle-Master's Game*, confronting the range of implications of the ethic of transcendence and moving gradually towards the ethic of adaptation which his mentor favours. In *Philosopher's Stone* Harry learns to accept the fact of mortality and his place as the latest link in a chain of succession, via the Mirror of Erised, a magical device which almost traps Harry with images

of his long-dead family. In *Chamber of Secrets* he confronts his own potential to become like Voldemort (signalled by their extreme similarity), and must work out the factor which differentiates between a Voldemort and a Dumbledore. This is articulated by Dumbledore as *choice*, which is also the factor which directs a high fantasy hero away from the ethic of transcendence:

"[The Sorting Hat] only put me in Gryffindor [. . .] because I asked not to go in Slytherin . . ."

"*Exactly*," said Dumbledore [. . .] "Which makes you very *different* from Tom Riddle [Lord Voldemort]. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." (*Chamber* 245)

In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry is confronted with the ethos of revenge, a doctrine which insists that it is the moral right of a wronged individual to impose a subjective ideal state upon an uncongenial environment. Like high fantasy's heroes, Harry nearly gives in to the socially-sanctioned ethos of revenge (*Prisoner* 251-52), but at the last moment rejects it, choosing to both prevent the murder of his parents' betrayer, leaving him to be dealt with by the processes of his society's law, and protect two of his parents' friends from themselves becoming murderers and therefore contaminated by the ethic of transcendence[3]. And in Harry's confrontation with the resurrected Lord Voldemort toward the end of *Goblet of Fire*, whereas Voldemort is motivated in part by the wish for revenge (*Goblet* 570), Harry's objective is neither to fight Voldemort nor to extract revenge, but only to defend himself (he attempts to disarm Voldemort rather than engage in a cursing duel) and then escape to safety—that is, to survive. His actions have become fully oriented to the ethic of adaptation to circumstance, the ultimate aim of which is simple survival.

Rowling's engagement with the genre fantasy theme of conflicting worldviews goes beyond simple restatement of that theme, however. The elaborately detailed wainscot setting of her narrative contains not only the working-through of generic themes, but also a construction of the ways in which the worldviews around which the conflict occurs are validated and perpetuated in society.

As well as having significant names, Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter are both associated within the wizarding world with images which carry symbolic meanings in Primary Reality. Lord Voldemort is constantly associated with serpents. He is a Parselmouth, able to speak with snakes in their own language, and a descendant of another Parselmouth, Salazar Slytherin; in *Chamber of Secrets*

he uses this ability to control a nearly-classical basilisk, a creature in heraldry designated the king of serpents (Dennys 186). In his weakened state he gains strength from consuming the venom of his pet snake (*Goblet* 12); in his resurrected state he resembles a snake himself: "[. . .] Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes, and a nose that was as flat as a snake's, with slits for nostrils . . ." (558). This positions him as the dragon (Latin *draco*: serpent, dragon) which Harry, in his rôle as defender, must defeat to protect his people.

Harry is associated with the image of the lion—although much less overtly than is Lord Voldemort with the serpent. Harry's school House is Gryffindor, which has the emblem of a lion, and his birthday is on July 31st (*Philosopher's* 105): although the fact is never mentioned in the text, this places him under the birth-sign of Leo in the European zodiac.

As a symbol, the serpent conveys more than one meaning. It is associated with malice, deceit, and destruction through its Biblical depiction as the tempter of innocence; but its older meaning, derived from its ability to shed its skin, is that of regeneration—the renewal of life—and bodily immortality (Jobes 1469: both layers of meaning are appropriate to Lord Voldemort[4]). The lion also conveys layers of symbolic meaning. It represents courage and mercy, but also royalty. Its heraldic significance is as the "king of beasts," and it functions as "the symbol of royal sovereignty" (Neubecker 110); it appears in the coat of arms of the English sovereign, and in at least one royal nickname (Richard I is called the Lionheart).

These symbolic meanings are never unpacked within the text, either by the characters or by the narrative voice. Nevertheless, as images sited close to the antagonist and protagonist—and associated more and more closely, in Lord Voldemort's case, as the narrative unfolds—the serpent and lion symbols come to both reflect and stand for the worldviews these characters embody[5]. The serpent echoes Lord Voldemort's impulse to transcend the physical limitation of mortality through the exercise of his imaginative power to change reality; the lion's connotations of royalty both reinforce Harry Potter's position within a sequence of generations and foreshadow potential developments of his narrative[6].

However, these meaning-loaded images do not appear within the wizarding world only when needed to reinforce understanding of the ethical conflict that drives the narrative. Rather, they exist independently of the narrative, as parts of that narrative's setting in their own right. The serpent and the lion are the emblems of two of the Hogwarts School Houses, where they stand for the traditional defining

characteristics of students selected to become members of those Houses. The lion, as previously mentioned, is the emblem of Gryffindor House, which is reserved for the "brave at heart" (*Philosopher's* 88). The snake is the emblem of Slytherin House, which is oriented towards cunning and "great ambition" (*Goblet* 157)—and the two Houses are traditional rivals. At the beginning of the series, Harry Potter is Sorted into Gryffindor House—he is moved into proximity with the lion emblem and its symbolic meaning, rather than carrying it with him from the outset. And some fifty years before the beginning of *Philosopher's Stone*, Tom Marvolo Riddle[7] is Sorted into Slytherin House; after seven years' proximity to the serpent emblem, he emerges as Lord Voldemort (*Philosopher's* 62). The system of imaginative engagement with the environment articulated by Lord Voldemort, symbolised in the wizarding world by the serpent, is thus positioned not as an alien intrusion from a hostile culture such as the dominant Muggle culture, but as an institutionalised element of the wizarding world, validated by being passed on through the formal system of education and then utilised by individuals to enable them to interact with their environment. In *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, Joseph Meeker links the transcendental ethic and the adaptive ethic with two literary modes which have been informing imagination in Western societies since at least the Renaissance: tragedy and comedy. Rowling's House emblems are derived from the names and/or personal devices of the Hogwarts founders Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin (who lived over a thousand years before the beginning of *Philosopher's Stone*). They represent a similar continuity and influence of ideas; because of their location within a school, the emblems also suggest the way in which these worldviews are transmitted by such media as literary modes—informally, while the attention of teachers and students is elsewhere.

Rowling's lion- and serpent- imagery exists, like the assumed and bestowed names of her characters, simply as part of the setting of her narrative: so the ethics of transcendence of and adaptation to the limitations of physical existence within an environment are inherent parts of modern Western cultures. They may be articulated most clearly and passed on most concisely by the literary modes such as tragedy and comedy, but they are not confined to literature (Meeker 41). And as the symbolic meaning of the imagery built into Rowling's wizarding world is mostly latent until narrative intrudes on setting and begins to articulate it, so the ideals of transcendence and adaptation in Primary Reality remain unarticulated—and hence unexamined—except through the actions of the people who adhere to

them. This is the point at which the obverse faces of these paradigms of imaginative involvement with reality become apparent: the destruction which attends upon the tragic hero's struggle for transcendence of the environment, and the potential for stifling conservatism inherent in the comedic mode's preservation of the status quo.

In wainscot fantasy the lines of conflict are usually drawn between the wainscot culture and the dominant culture. But by modifying the structure of the wainscot fantasy—by containing the characteristic conflict of the genre fantasy within a wainscot world—Rowling makes a point which is beyond the reach of either genre alone: that counteracting the disengagement of modern Western cultures from their environment is not as simple as identifying the problem makes it sound. Rowling constructs imaginative engagement with the environment as a problematic practice rather than a simple cure-all for a society's perceived deficiencies. She argues that because there are different paradigms which can inform the ways in which individuals may engage with their context, it is necessary not only to be exposed to them and to reproduce them in action, but to learn to identify and consciously access them, to articulate them—and their implications—and to discriminate between them on the basis of the harm they do, not so much to the individuals who adhere to them as to the context within which that individual exists. Thus Harry Potter's developing narrative within the dominant and wainscot settings of his series serves as not only a working-out of this argument, but a map of the process.

Notes

[1] The elements of a high fantasy scenario discussed here are derived from original research towards my PhD thesis, which has the working title *Exploring wihtout Explaining: Genre Development in Three Twentieth-Century High Fantasies* (work in progress).

[2] Royalty and family are both institutions which exploit the principle of *succession* to ensure their survival: although the first generation dies, the institution survives through the second, which may be similar to the first but is never the same.

[3] In her article "The Magician's Niece: The Kinship Between J. K. Rowling and C. S. Lewis," Joy Farmer suggests that some readers perceive the Harry Potter series to be informed by an "unrelenting theme of vengeance against Voldemort" (60). In fact, the concept of vengeance is throughout the series associated most closely with Voldemort himself. Enough information is given regarding Voldemort's history and the culture of the wizarding world that his entire career can be understood as a vengeful turning on the community that would not fully accept him because of his "half-blood". status; certainly Voldemort's three attempts to murder Harry (in *Philosopher's Stone, Chamber of Secrets,*

and *Goblet of Fire*) are motivated partly by a wish for revenge for the loss of his power and body. In contrast to this, characters such as Dumbledore and Sirius Black (Harry's godfather) do not set out to hunt Voldemort down and extract revenge for his crimes after his fall from power. They only defend themselves and their community against him when he begins to act again, because in his quest for immortality and power Voldemort does material harm to their world (if he had achieved his immortality quietly and without harm to others as Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel did, he would, the juxtaposition of the three characters in *Philosopher's Stone* implies, be as little reviled as they are). By associating the ethos of revenge with the antagonist of her narrative and the ethos of survival with her protagonists, Rowling in fact argues against vengeance as a valid paradigm for interacting with one's environment, because of its personal and physical consequences.

[4] The serpent's connotations of malice, deceit, and destruction are highlighted more by the name and character of Harry's schoolboy enemy Draco Malfoy. This naming also suggests a potential connection between Draco and Lord Voldemort: either thematic, with Draco representing the material out of which Lords Voldemort are made, or foreshadowing a future turn of the narrative (Draco may prove to be another dragon Harry must defeat in order to save his world). Rowling's loaded language often works to create meaningful connections between events or people separated by time and space within the narrative in this fashion.

[5] Harry and Voldemort are surrounded by other images which have similar symbolic resonances. For instance: Lord Voldemort's wand is made of yew wood, which is associated with graveyards and poison, but also with death and resurrection (Jobes 1706), and which Robert Graves links with the winter solstice, in the northern hemisphere the moment of the death and rebirth of the sun and the year (194); while Harry's wand is made of holly wood, which Graves links with the summer and the harvest month (181) and which he suggests rules the waning half of the year. However, these loaded images are positioned very early in the narrative, before the introduction of the serpent- and lion- imagery, and are rarely repeated; they serve mostly as foreshadowing of the major theme.

[6] There are enough clues scattered throughout the four books—such as James and Lily Potter's home being in the village of Godric's Hollow (*Philosopher's* 14), Harry pulling Godric Gryffindor's sword out of the Sorting Hat ("'only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat, Harry,'" *Chamber* 245), and Voldemort's original determination to murder James Potter and Harry, *but not Lily Potter*, who was not a blood member of James' old wizarding family—for readers to speculate that as Voldemort is the Heir of Slytherin, so Harry might be the Heir of Gryffindor and thus Voldemort's hereditary opponent, the wizarding world's natural defence against Voldemort's destructive malice.

[7] Another loaded name, planted early enough in the narrative for readers aware of the importance of naming to decode its meaning: *Tom*, his father's name, as ordinary as Harry (as in the common saying "every Tom, Dick and Harry") and thus suggesting the initial likeness between them; *Marvolo*, suggesting both "marvel" for his magical ability and "Malvolio," a traditional name for a malicious character; and *Riddle*, which both

signals how the name itself should be read and suggests the disjunction between the character's appearance and his true nature.

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