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On Fantasy Stories

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On Fantasy Stories

Abstract

Elaborates on the value that fantasy stories (and indeed all literature) have: "as sociological and enculturating strategies, in the creation and exchange of meaning, and as a means of empowerment to writers and readers equally."

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

On Fantasy Stories

Cath Filmer-Davies

Humans inhabit a world of stories shaped by language. Indeed, humans see their lives in terms of stories—so much so that little escapes the craft of the story-teller: news, political events, myths, morals, legends and sporting contests, all take the shape of stories.

Arguing the worth of stories and the language of which they are made is almost redundant, because sheer usage overwhelms the argument. Yet, as with anything, the value of stories relies upon the value of the language in which they are expressed and on who is using it and for what purpose. Stories are, whether overtly or covertly, highly polemic, arguing substantial issues, such as the nature of good and evil, from a particular authorial world-view. Here I shall argue, not that stories have value, but what value they have: that is, as sociological and enculturating strategies, in the creation and exchange of meaning, and as a means of empowerment to writers and readers equally.

George Orwell's essay, "Boys' Weeklies" criticised the English boys' comic papers of the 1930s by arguing that the view they presented of the world—a middle-class, hierarchical view—could persuade readers that this was a value-free rendering of aspects of English society, whereas the stories were silent on controversial issues which might critique the social structure of the time (*Inside the Whale and Other Essays* 45). Conversely, G. K. Chesterton suggests that stories, especially fairy-stories, can "judge" human society according to a peculiar moral code. He writes:

The things I believed most [in the nursery], the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies [Chesterton uses the word in its pre-Victorian sense of 'delusions']: compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised the earth. (*Orthodoxy* 85)

Stories, then (at least for Chesterton) activate the moral imagination and provide a yardstick by which life in the mundane world can be measured. But although

there is merit in Chesterton's argument, contemporary studies into the effects of narrative (especially fantasy narrative) and language raise even more essential issues.

Human socialisation depends upon stories. Cautionary tales have long been part of the process of socialisation; "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" is one example; *Aesop's Fables* provide many more. As one critic puts it, ". . . whatever else literary texts are, and whatever pleasure they may afford us, they are also expressions of the values and assumptions of a culture and a significant way of embedding readers in those values and assumptions" (Yolen 9). This argument is close to Orwell's, though there is less disapproval in Yolen's comment. Both Yolen and Le Guin observe that stories can change the way readers, especially young readers, relate to the world. Le Guin suggests that reading fantasy literature is rather like psychoanalysis and that "*it will change you*" ("From Elfland to Poughkeepsie" 90, emphasis hers); and Yolen writes that "What slips in shapes the man or woman into which that child will grow. Story is one of the most serious intruders into the heart" (qtd. in MacRae 243). The children's author, Susan Cooper, also asserts the power of an author to drop into the "shadowy pool of their unconscious minds a few images that—perhaps with luck—will echo through their lives and help them to understand and even improve their world, our world" (*Dreams and Wishes* 70).

But important as socialisation may be, there is a theological importance to stories as well, which can play a part in socialisation and certainly in the development of spiritual awareness. In a seminal work titled *The Story-Shaped World*, Brian Wicker argues that stories originate from the way in which the unknowable God made himself knowable by human beings by becoming a character in stories—the stories of the Old Testament. God is anthropomorphised in these stories, becoming almost a human who can change his mind and repent, and who deals with his creation through demonstrations of wonders and signs which they can understand. This act of becoming a finite character in a set of stories written by the hands of human beings is one of profound humility, considering that the Being represented in these stories is the very potentate of the universe. Furthermore, in the New Testament, God is actualised in the incarnation of his Word in the person of Jesus Christ. The ministry of Christ is itself characterised by stories in which he explains the nature of God (as in the parable of the Prodigal Son), the nature of heaven (as in the parable of the vineyard) and the relationships among humans (as in the

parable of the Good Samaritan). Of course, stories do not have to be biblically based in order to be theological. As James B. Wiggins writes,

Stories present us with gifts. We may choose to manipulate them by skilful interpretative devices, but stories that matter are greater than and outlive their interpretations. The temptation of theology has been to interpret the foundational stories given by religion and then to treat the interpretation as if it were that which was originally given. Perhaps that is what we have grown so tired of in theology and perhaps that is one of the contributing reasons for the return to stories in some quarters of the study of religion. ("Within and Without Stories" 9)

Of course, as we see in the relationship between God and the stories in the Old Testament and Christ in the New, language and story are necessarily inextricably related. For language to constitute story, language must have intrinsic meaning, *pace* postmodernist theorists. Two of the strongest defenders of language, meaning, and story are perhaps the twentieth century's most influential writers, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. In several essays, most notably those which constitute the slim volume titled *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis argues that the kind of language used by a person indicates their moral and ethical stance. People who eschew the language of emotion and compassion, Lewis argues, will have well developed intellects and bodily appetites, but will lack "chest" or heart. At other times, his defence of the notion that language has, and makes, meaning (in *That Hideous Strength*, for example), is close to that of his contemporary, Orwell (as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, especially the "Newspeak" appendix).¹ If God expresses himself as Logos, then, from a theological perspective at least, language and meaning cannot be separated; if God expresses himself in story, then language, meaning, and story are similarly inextricable.

Lewis and Tolkien are not alone in their defence of language and meaning. The American fabulist James Thurber also wrote children's books in which he made strong points about the relationship between story, words, and meaning. In his story *The Wonderful O*, Thurber laments the truncating of meaning achieved by the systematic removal of letters from the alphabet. The first to go is the letter 'o'. The characters Andrea and Andreus comment upon the effect that the loss of just one letter has upon language and meaning:

'When coat is cat, and boat is bat, and goatherd looks like gathered, and booth is both, since both are bth, the reader's eye is bothered.'

'And power is pwer, and zero zer, and worst of all, a hero's her.'

The old man sighed as he said it.

'Anon is ann, and moan is man,' Andrea smiled.

'And shoe,' Andreus said, 'is she'.

'Ah woe,' the old man said, 'is we.' (136)

Thurber, it should be noted, wrote before the feminisation of nouns was dropped from common use, but this interchange signifies much more than a mere series of word-games played for the amusement of young readers. There is a serious point, which is essentially the same as that made by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: if the language is truncated in any way, meaning is lost—not only meaning for words, but meaning for human experiences as well. The issues of human identity are embodied in language, and concepts of the self and of relationships are expressed in and through language.

All these concerns are expressed in the literature of fantasy, which deals very much with notions of identity and self (which lie at the heart of the human apprehension of meaning) and, in the work of most fantasists, the heroic renunciation of self for others. Consequently, when Tolkien addresses the matter of fairy stories and fantasy in his famous essay on the subject, he identifies three essential functions of stories which illustrate his position on the validity of the relationships between language, story and meaning. He says, in short, that fantasy stories provide "Recovery, Escape, [and] Consolation" ("On Fairy-Stories" 53-56). These terms require definition: but in defining them, Tolkien refers constantly to the human experience of reading, and the psychological and spiritual impact of stories upon the reader.

Recovery means, essentially, the recreation in the mundane world of a sense of wonder which has been stirred by encounters with the imaginary worlds of story. "[I]n fairy stories," says Tolkien, "I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine" (53).

By escape, Tolkien does not mean the sort of dangerous psychological escape that can be found in some kind of surreal, delusional world. Rather, he deals with the "escape of the prisoner" from the world of mundanity into the world of the imagination (53-54). Such an escape relies on the reader's reason and logic, to agree to suspend disbelief, or more strongly, to participate in the story and "abide by its laws" (36). This agreement is a conscious and deliberate act. The escape which stories provide is that of confrontation with the reader's own

value system and with the reader's own imagination. By engaging with stories which deal with issues of good and evil, for example, readers are compelled to clarify for themselves exactly what constitutes good and evil, and whether they are treated, in the story, in a believable and acceptable way. To argue against escape, Tolkien insists, is to behave like a jailer. Moreover, story points to the final "Great Escape: the Escape from Death. . . . Few lessons are taught more clearly in them [stories] than the burden of that kind of immortality, or rather endless serial living, to which the 'fugitive' would fly" (59).

Consolation, the third element of story in Tolkien's fantastic lexicon, refers to the reassurance and safety ensured by the happy ending, which prefigures, of course, that final 'happy ending' to all human lives. To that end, the storyteller uses the *eucaastrophe*—the happy, unexpected turn which produces the happy ending (60, 62). Stories which provide these elements provide for their readers a sense of safety and security to be found in story if nowhere else. In today's troubled world, there are many instances of psychological practitioners using works of fantasy to empower young readers whose domestic situations are dysfunctional; in such cases, hardly foreseen by Tolkien, the provision of escape, recovery, and consolation by fantasy stories becomes a most practical outworking of the usual benefits of reading. The element of hope is missing from many aspects of contemporary life; and it might be postulated that the high suicide rates for young males correlate with the statistical records that they read less often and less well than do young females.

Of course, theorise as we will, the reason that people read stories is essentially for enjoyment. The theorists analyse the issue of reading pleasure and account for it in many different ways, but to the reader, the idea of enjoyment is always paramount, even for textbooks and scholarly tomes. It is apparently much easier to learn from a text which is well written and entertaining (without losing its literary *gravitas*) than from a musty volume with shiny pages, small print, and smudged black and white photographs. And there is something to be learned, I suggest, from every piece of reading. I am reminded of a train journey I made in the UK from Cardiff to Crewe several years ago. I was reading a Raymond Feist novel; across from me was a young man also reading a different Feist novel. Inevitably one of us commented about the common taste in reading matter for the trip.

"I am a science and mathematics student at the University of Wales," my companion of the way informed me. "But I love to read fantasy, because it

opens up to me all sorts of avenues for thought and contemplation which my studies do not allow. *I learn so much from it*" [emphasis mine].

But if there is benefit to readers in reading, there must be some benefit to writers in writing. Again, drawing from Tolkien's insightful essay, we learn that the act of imaginative writing is quasi-godlike: it is an act of what Coleridge called the Secondary Imagination from which Tolkien coined the term "subcreation." Using an idiosyncratic sonnet form, Tolkien expounds his theology of story in his poem "Mythopoeia" (c. 1931), which, Humphrey Carpenter suggests, he addressed to C. S. Lewis (*J. R. R. Tolkien* 148):

Dear Sir, I said—Although now long estranged
 Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed
 Disgraced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
 And keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
 Man, Sub-Creator, the refracted Light
 Through whom is splintered from a single White
 To many hues, and endlessly combined
 In living shapes that move from mind to mind.
 Though all the crannies of the world we filled
 With elves and goblins, though we dared to build
 Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
 And sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right
 (Used or misused). That right has not decayed:
 We make still by the law in which we're made. ("On Fairy Stories" 49)

Applying this notion of the human right to "subcreation," Tolkien argues the traditional Christian viewpoint that humanity, created by God in the image of God, will inherit, as it were, the creative attributes of God, albeit on the finite plane. As Humphrey Carpenter points out, the making of myth and story is an activity of subcreation and therefore a fulfilment of God's purpose, revealing a reflection of a "splintered fragment of the true light" (*Inklings* 43).

Language, especially language shaped into story, has a special power over readers, Tolkien suggests, since the word "spell" etymologically "means both a story told, and a formula of power over living men" ("On Fairy-Stories" 56). A writer exerts this magical power by combining words and phrases into stories that admit readers into worlds created and maintained by the writer, and into which a reader can only enter by an "agreement," as it were, with the writer.

Of course, the "spell" cast by the writer hardly turns readers into toads (a gift which Tolkien's Gandalf possesses but never uses); rather, the spell is more

spiritual than merely magical, opening up to readers insights into divine truth. That C. S. Lewis endorsed this view can be seen by Lewis's own definition of myth (which lies at the heart of all fantasy writing):

Myth . . . is not merely misunderstood history (as Euhemerus thought) nor diabolical illusion (as some of the Fathers thought), nor priestly lying (as the philosophers of the Enlightenment thought) but, at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination. (*Miracles* 138n)

Something of Lewis's appropriation and adaptation of Tolkien's ideas can be seen from Lewis's late work of literary criticism, the book he intended as a response to the Cambridge Leavisites among whom he found himself after his appointment to the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge in 1960. The book, titled *An Experiment in Criticism*, was never the significant contribution to criticism that perhaps it deserved to be; its timing, in the climate of change and the influence of semiotics, was unfortunate. Nevertheless, it fits without discomfiture with some of the basic philosophies of semiotics, emphasising the active participation of the reader in engagement with the text. It scorns the notion of a literary canon; Lewis had never venerated the notion of a 'great tradition' as his own catholic tastes make clear. For Lewis not only writing but also reading was a transcendental and quasi-religious experience:

. . . in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do. (*Experiment* 141)

Of course, it is easily argued that Christian writers would necessarily develop a critical approach to writing and reading stories which would have about it elements of divine mystery. Their views can be seen as having been shaped by the system of theology to which they adhere. But other writers, hardly Christian, have something like the same view. Here is an extract from nihilist writer Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. The character Philip Castle is speaking to 'Jonah':

"I'm thinking of calling a general strike of all writers until mankind finally comes to its senses." "Would you support it?"

"Do writers have the right to strike? That would be like the policemen or firemen walking out."

"Or the college professors."

“Or the college professors,” I agreed. I shook my head. “No, I don’t think my conscience would let me support a strike like that. When a man becomes a writer, I think he takes on a sacred obligation to produce beauty, enlightenment and comfort at top speed.”

“I just can’t help thinking what a real shakeup it would give people if all of a sudden, there were no new books, new plays, new histories, new poems . . .”

“And how proud would you be when people started dying like flies?” I demanded.

“They’d die more like mad dogs, I think—snarling and snapping at each other and biting their own tails.”

I turned to Castle the elder. “How does a man die when he’s deprived of the consolations of literature?”

“In one of two ways,” he said, “putrescence of the heart or atrophy of the nervous system.”

“Neither one very pleasant, I expect,” I suggested.

“No,” said Castle the elder. “For the love of God, both of you, please keep writing!” (153)

Vonnegut’s nihilism is apparent from this and other of his novels, yet here he still uses the language of religion —“the sacred obligation” of writers—for almost the same reasons that Tolkien gives: to provide beauty, enlightenment and comfort to readers. The appreciation of the power of story and the power of the writer are both as evident here as in Tolkien’s essay, so obviously neither are limited to theological thinkers. Ursula Le Guin’s often quoted passage from “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” tells us that fantasy stories, while not factual, are nevertheless “true” (40). Stories are both spiritually and psychologically empowering; such novels as *The Neverending Story* allow children from dysfunctional families to see themselves as heroes as they actively participate, like Bastian Bux, in a story. Fantasy heroes are very often ‘underdogs’ who grow and mature into heroic figures by learning to live for others rather than for themselves (like Bastian, the hobbits Bilbo and Frodo are examples of this kind; Lewis Gillies, Stephen Lawhead’s rather inept character in *The Song of Albion* trilogy, is another). And since fantasy stories depict the countries of the mind and the spirit, we can appreciate the moral struggles, translated into tales of witches and evil swamps and deserts of doom, that the heroes of stories confront. We confront them, too.

What value stories have, then, lies in their expression of our common humanity. They can break down barriers between cultures, for all cultures express themselves in story. As Ghanian writer Wilson Harris writes, in story there is an

. . . art of a universal genius hidden everywhere in the . . . mystery of innovative imagination that transforms concepts of mutuality and unity, and which needs to appear in ceaseless

dialogue between cultures if it is to turn away from a world habituated to the pre-emptive strike of conquistadorial ego. (Harris 131)

Through story, then, the human imagination can understand and validate the culture into which it is born. Readers learn to value the stories and values of other cultures as well, recreating human relationships and apprehensions of the world. Stories reassure us of our own humanity and show that we appreciate and acknowledge the dignity of ourselves and others. They create meanings for the rituals of daily life and awake a sense of wonder for those who read of enchanted worlds. Stories separate us from the rest of the animal world, and make us aware, whether we have an intrinsic faith or not, that as sub-creators, we are made and are operating in the image of God. In short, stories shape our being, our relationships with others, and the world in which we live.

Were Thurber's characters to eradicate, as well as letters from the alphabet, all stories; were Vonnegut's writers to stage the suggested strike, the results would be incalculable. To all authors, in Vonnegut's words: please, *please*, keep writing!

Endnotes

¹ See my *The Fiction of C. S. Lewis: Mask and Mirror* (London: Macmillan 1993), in which I discuss the influence of Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* on Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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