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From Lemuria to Lugburz: A Comparison of Sword & Sorcery and Heroic Fantasy

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Abstract

Discusses and defines heroic fantasy vs. sword & sorcery.

Additional Keywords

Fantasy literature—Heroic fantasy—Definition; Fantasy, sword & sorcery—Definition

*From Lemuria to Lugburz:
A Comparison of Sword & Sorcery and Heroic Fantasy
by Bonnie Belgastrom*

In the course of my myriad readings in recent months, inspired by contact with the Society, I have been privileged to discover many things concerning the fantasies I have read. Being a lifelong sub-creator myself, I have grown curious as to the facets of this type of literature; what makes one work an epic while hundreds more pass as flashes in the pan? What goes into a Lord of the Rings that doesn't into a Conan?

Tolkien's writings, I have learned, belong to a literary genre termed "Heroic" or "Epic" fantasy, while such tales as those of Conan or Thorngor can be classified under "Sword and Sorcery". One can attempt to delineate such categories, then try to apply them to works of literature. However, if such an exercise is carried out too completely it becomes too rigid, a useless exercise; for no one label ever neatly encompasses a whole span of books. Nevertheless, a rough denotation can be given of these literary forms according to theme, plot, and character.

HF - Heroic fantasy - can be defined in one sense as literature which is concerned with human values and thoughts, and which tries to present a basic underlying theme through the events of the tale. Sword and Sorcery - S&S - seems not to have such an intellectual preoccupation. It is written so as to create the least amount of pondering possible, quite for entertainment's sake. As a result of these focii, HF comes off with a more thoughtful depth and richness to it, while S&S can appear to be a slick concoction of happenings out of the nearest book of clichés. Both types often deal with the common conflict of Good vs. Evil. In HF, one finds the good and evil expressed with more or less subtlety and reasoning; neither are total in their quality, and may be intermingled within individuals. The Good-Evil struggles of a S&S tale seem far more cut and dried, and one dimensional. Good is White and Evil is Black, no ifs, ands or buts. The powers of darkness are dire, unreasoning, inexplicably and unmitigatedly hostile; it's Conan against the Nameless Elders right down the line.

Any tale is created with a goal in mind, within its structure, to be attained through the actions of the story. In many fantasies, the goal often is expressed as the object of a Quest. (A fine olde mythopoeic tradition!) A person, place, or thing is to be reached, an event to be accomplished. In The Lord of the Rings, great complexity is woven about the Ring of Power and how it must be destroyed. Its effects on the societies and individual minds of Men, Elves, Hobbits and others are interwoven, causing subplots and crises. The goal is powerful enough to sustain interest and thought throughout a great length. Compare this to a novelette concerning "Nightmaster braving the Eldritch Horrors of the Castle of the Zombies to rescue the faire Princess." It's indeed difficult to write an epic length tale of great length concerning this type of theme!

The Hero of HF is the character who is implemental in the attainment of the goal, in resolving the problem. Such a hero is a person of free will who is compelled by outside events acting upon his innate sense of values to achieve the goal. A well drawn hero of this type can be empathized with. The adventure and intrigue which happen to him along the way are manifestations of the steps and tasks which are the means to achieving the end. The events result in a growth of the hero and accompanying characters; physical, mental, spiritual. (Even death can be interpreted as growth, it may ennoble a character.)

Right away, one can see that the Epic Hero and the S&S swashbuckler seem worlds apart. Here you may have a being who is something more than human, yet not thoroughly human; a superficial superbeing, if you will. He undertakes his quest merely because he wants to, it will satisfy a whim or desire for excitement. Only incidentally does he perform his task for anyone else, and the fruits of his labor are revelled in. He emerges unchanged and ungrown. The adventure which has occurred to him along the way has been the prime thrill for the reader, the core of the tale which is savored.

The fantasy and mythological elements of course figure in both genres. They can be turned to the purpose of titillation, or to the expression of different levels of meaning not as apparent in the mere recounting of reality. The magical element of S&S tales exists to tickle the fancy of the reader while it thwarts the hero. One can always sense, however, that it will break down before the onslaughts of none other than the hero. It is an inconsistent magic. The magic of HF is more complexly interwoven, more consistently real. There may be monsters, and occasionally they come out on top for a time. There may be a Caradhras which is never overcome, which sets back the progress of the tale. Yet even here, it is always sensed that the goal will be reached despite the worst strifes.

One can sample these forms of literature and form his personal taste, but curiosity may occur on certain points. Out of these forms of literature and all their shadings, which has more universality? Which will stand the test of time and which will be forgotten? One might tend to say that HF will live because it is philosophical and altruistic, while S&S wasn't written to last, and written probably only for the author's material gain. But then, one may recall that Shakespeare's great plays were written to rake in the shillings!

Perhaps from our present view in time, we can't guess which will last. For all we know, HF might go the way of S&S because it too makes frequent use of contemporarily familiar stereotypes (as the Fauns and Centaurs of Narnia). It seems doubtful though, for the following reason: In S&S an image is employed as it is, it is not greatly elaborated or given depth of expressive power beyond its appearance. In HF, however, the cliché creature can be subtly altered, molded into a three dimensional form, even be made a symbol for more universal aspects of life.

In the preceding paragraphs, I've denoted various aspects of these literary forms. Perhaps, in the process, it has seemed apparent that there is a favoring of HF. I confess to such a bias, having read and experienced both forms of fantasy, I personally find that the reading of the stock situations of a S&S hero open no new horizons for me. But, to take the admitted splendour and exotic flavor of well done S&S, and blend it with the delicacy, philosophy, and empathy of a HF tale is a far more fulfilling result to savor. Even so, let this not dissuade anyone else from grooving on S&S if he sees fit!

