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## The Rewards of Reading Fantasy

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### The Rewards of Reading Fantasy

#### Abstract

Examines what is appealing to the reader about fantasy as a genre, what its specific functions are and how it affects us.

#### Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Characteristics; Fantasy—Criticism and interpretation

# The Rewards of Reading Fantasy

Karl Schorr

At the close of an enlightening essay, after listing what he considers to be the twelve or fifteen best works of fantasy literature, C. S. Lewis remarks, "I am not sure that anyone has satisfactorily explained the keen, lasting, solemn pleasure which such stories can give."<sup>[1]</sup> Lewis himself does not attempt an explanation. In fact, many commentators seem reluctant to account for man's abiding love of the fantastic. It is often safe enough to trace the basic themes of, say The Lord of the Rings, to conduct character analysis, or to speculate as to the author's "point." However, it is more challenging—and no less important—to explain why the entire tale grips us as it does and why many a reader emerges from Middle-earth a changed person. What is it about fantasy that we find so appealing? (and, indeed, what is it that some find so appalling?) What are the specific functions of the genre? How do tales of dragons, wizardry, and other worlds affect us? This study shall address these questions.

Analyzing fantasy can be a dangerous business. Faerie, that world wherein all fantasy takes place, "is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold."<sup>[2]</sup> The critic is no more immune than the average reader to elvish trickery, and the traditional tools of criticism at times prove less helpful than reason is in Wonderland. In addition, there exists what Lewis calls the genre's "inflexible hostility to all analysis."<sup>(Of Other Worlds, p. 36)</sup> Lewis is, of course, exaggerating—he scrutinizes his share of fairy stories—but there is nevertheless something about fantasy that resists critical study. Often Faerie doesn't want to be analyzed. Its hills, fields, and crystal lakes would rather be left pristine. Its inhabitants usually object to human travellers toting microscopes and note pads, and the wondrous creatures may react by making the critic's job difficult. They do so in order to protect something, something dearer to the knight than his chainmail, dearer to the dragon than his ancient hoard: they want to preserve the magic of Faerie. For there is always the frightening possibility that the fabulous realm, once mapped and sounded, will lose its power; perhaps everything within its borders will perish, delicate wax figurines held before the torch of rationality. J. R. R. Tolkien, one of this century's foremost fantasists, recognizes just this possibility. The realm of fantasy, he says,

is wide and deep and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of the traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.

(*"On Fairy Stories,"* p.33)

Thus, we must be careful in examining the appeal and

functions of fantasy. There is no doubt that such analysis can deepen our understanding and increase our appreciation of the genre. It may also teach us of ourselves, of our inner dreams, desires, and needs. But rashness and stupidity will quickly ruin everything. Just as the possessed physicist in Lewis' *Perelandra* mutilates nature in order to inspect it, so may the incautious fantasy critic "murder to dissect." He may take apart the genre, piece by piece, labeling and cataloging everything, until no trace of mystery, enchantment, or enjoyment remains. In this way Faerie may be drained of its marvelous powers. And nothing is worth that price.

The scene in bookstores is always the same: one wall—usually the largest—is covered from top to bottom with works of fantasy. Their covers are brilliant orange, glowing yellow, deep, mysterious blue, and myriad other fabulous hues. Among those racks prows every conceivable creature (and some inconceivable) in every imaginable environment. The shelves are always crowded with titles. In fact, the only area of the store more congested than the book-filled shelves is the adjacent aisle, where customers pardon themselves around each other, trying to decide which of a dozen works to buy. People love fantasy. They love to enter other worlds and to experience the impossible. This is not true of everyone, of course, but most enjoy at least an occasional plunge into the marvelous. Strangely enough, few seem able to explain their affection for the genre. A number of fantasy devotees were interviewed in the course of this study. They were asked short and seemingly simple questions: "Why do you read fantasy?" or "What does LeGuin do for you?" These questions, however, proved difficult for most of the people. Many could not respond at all. They wrinkled their brows and remained in a baffled and somewhat embarrassing silence. Others attempted to explain, but said little that was meaningful. After some thought, one gentleman replied, "Fantasy makes me feel good—I mean, I feel different after reading it." Then he shook his head, as if dissatisfied with his explanation. "I mean, sometimes it's so amazing that I—" he stopped and shook his head in frustration, and said nothing more. Others responded similarly. As hard as they tried, they could not account for their fondness of the genre. Often their faces would light up, as if in a moment of realization, only to drop again as the answer escaped. It was as if the people were leaning over the rim of a large barrel and trying to grab an unseen item at the very bottom. They could touch it with their fingertips, but the barrel's sides were a fraction of an inch too high, and the item remained just out of reach.

Had one of them been able to grasp the mysterious object, had one been able to explain his love of fantasy, he probably would have echoed Tolkien's statement that the genre satisfies "certain primordial human desires" (*"On Fairy Stories,"* p.41). "When we read fantasy, we are fulfilling wishes and needs shared by virtually all men. We are sating a group of desires that 'cries out in us from the roots of our being.'"<sup>[3]</sup> These are thirsts which are as old as man himself, and which will last as long as he lasts.

Tolkien points out that men have always longed to hold communion with other living things ("On Fairy Stories," p.43). "We desire to converse with animals, fish, even plants, and to see what they might have to say about themselves, us, and the world in general. Even as prehistoric man, crouched low in a jungle thicket, met the vicious stare of a saber-toothed tiger, a trace of curiosity must have been mingled with his fear and dread. He must have wondered, 'What is going on inside this great beast? What would it say to me if it could talk?' Perhaps our ancestors tried to communicate with animals like the saber-tooth. Maybe they didn't know initially that other creatures of the world lacked the power of speech. Indeed, some outgoing souls probably regretted their attempts to strike up conversations with less than talkative carnivores."

Most of us today realize that we cannot converse with nonhuman creatures. This is not to say that we do not communicate with animals; pet owners do so every day through simple commands, and remarkable advances have been made in the areas of dolphin and primate languages. But communication and communion are two different things. The former consists in the transmission of information—any information. The man who commands his dog to sit and the dog which does so are communicating. Communion, on the other hand, is a much deeper experience. It involves the sharing of complex thoughts and feelings, the free exchange of ideas, perspectives, and beliefs. It implies some degree of intimacy between the two or more parties, who come to know each other better as a result of the process. This is the kind of relationship man dreams of establishing with the beast and plant kingdoms. And this is the kind of dream that only fantasy can fulfill.

Since we long to converse with animals and plants themselves, stories which present humans masquerading as nonhumans only cheat our desire. We expect cows to act generally like cows, not like politicians or athletes. We expect fish to be concerned with natural "fish concerns"—namely, food, nets, bigger fish, and so on. Talking beasts are delightfully fantastic; but those which only mimic the actions of men are less so, because they tend actually to become human. Our primal desires are in no way satisfied when "animal form is only a mask upon a human face" (Ibid.). "The character in beast fables are usually of this variety, as is one of the most famous of all fantastic animal, the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland:"

Very soon the Rabbit noticed Alice, as she went hunting about, and called out to her, in an angry tone, "Why, Mary Ann, what are you doing out here? Run home this moment, and fetch me a pair of gloves and a fan! Quick now!" [4]

However charming this scene may be, the Rabbit is a rabbit in appearance only. Otherwise he is a forgetful Victorian socialite. He patters about Wonderland only in his waistcoat, looking for his gloves and fan and issuing commands like the one above. He nervously glances at his pocketwatch and worries about missing his engagement with the Duchess. Toward the end of the tale, he plays something of a bailiff at Alice's trial. He doesn't act like a rabbit; he doesn't express any rabbitlike desires. Consequently, the reader does not hold communion with a nonhuman creature. The White Rabbit is essentially as human as Alice herself.

The Mouse in Alice is much truer to the nature of his species. He wears no clothing, has no jewelry, and, as far as we know, makes no appointments with people of royalty. He generally acts like a real mouse. We meet him in the pool of tears. When Alice first hears him, he "gave a sudden leap out of the water and seemed to quiver all over with fright." This is precisely how we would expect a small rodent to act when approached—nervous and timid. In addition, the character has typical mouse-like concerns. What do mice fear most? Cats, naturally:

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" cried Alice hastily, afraid that she had hurt the poor animal's feelings. "I quite forgot you didn't like cats."

"Not like cats!" cried the Mouse in a shrill passionate voice. "Would you like cats, if you were me?"

"Well, perhaps not," said Alice in a soothing tone: "don't be angry about it. And yet I wish I could show you our cat Dinah. I think you'd take a fancy to cats, if you could only see her. She is such a dear quiet thing," Alice went on, half to herself, as she swam lazily about the pool, "and she sits purring so nicely by the fire, licking her paws and washing her face—and she is such a nice soft thing to nurse—and she's such a capital one for catching mice—oh, I beg your pardon!" cried Alice again, for this time the Mouse was bristling all over, and she felt certain it must be really offended. "We won't talk about her any more if you'd rather not."

"We, indeed!" cried the Mouse, who was trembling down to its tail. "As if I would talk on such a subject! Our family always hated cats: nasty, low, vulgar things! Don't let me hear that name again!" (Ibid., pp.38-9)

This is just the way most small rodents would probably respond, if they could, to a girl who repeatedly brought up the subject of cats. About the only thing unusual about the Mouse in Alice is his ability to speak. He still looks like a mouse. He still behaves for the most part like a mouse. [5] Whereas the White Rabbit is little more than a solicitous man, the mouse is a genuine animal. Rather than talking to a human in a beast costume, we speak with the actual beast. Our desire to hold communion with other living things is satisfied as we make friends with the Mouse and learn what mice in general might have to say about the world. Their thoughts and feelings are explained by the most qualified of spokesmen—a mouse himself.

Thus, one of the reasons we read fantasy is that much of it allows us to converse with beings usually estranged from us in speech and spirit. In fact, with some searching a reader could probably locate and commune with almost any type of plant or animal he wishes. It is important, however, that these creatures, once able to speak, retain their nonhuman identities.

There are other primordial desires fulfilled by the genre. Much fantasy permits us to "survey the depths of space and time," to pierce prehistoric mists and dimensional walls (Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," p. 68). We are able to connect past, present, and future, viewing them as a single, unsevered cord. Likewise, the deepest recesses of space may be illuminated, and our curiosity thus satisfied. We desire also to overcome

the physical limitations common to our species. In Faerie we may fly along with the eagles, instead of just envying them from below, and we can swim deeper than any fish. Man has sought these abilities for as long as he has sought food. In fantasy he finds them. Finally, the genre satisfies what is perhaps our deepest primal desire: immortality. Death does not reign supreme within Elfland's borders. He may be overcome through magic, or he might not have power to begin with. When we identify with characters who never have to die, we feel as though ourselves are immortal; we shall forever keep our strength and spirit. The fulfillment of such primordial desires gives the reader pleasure and often a sense of deep contentment. Fantasy's power to quench natural thirsts shared by virtually all men accounts for much of the genre's appeal.

During a memorable episode in Lewis' *Perelandra*, the philologist Ransom crawls out of the Perelandrian sea upon a wooded island. The island itself is not stationary; it is not anchored to the ocean floor, and it floats about on the water's surface. As Ransom explores the place, delighting in its strange and beautiful flora, his attention is suddenly attracted by something:

Over his head there hung from a hairy tube-like branch a great spherical object, almost transparent, and shining. It held an area of reflected light in it and at one place a suggestion of rainbow colouring. So this was the explanation of the glass-like appearance in the wood. And looking round he perceived innumerable shimmering globes of the same kind in every direction. He began to examine the nearest one attentively. At first he thought it was moving, then he thought it was not. Moved by a natural impulse he put his hand out to touch it. Immediately his head, face, and shoulders were drenched with what seemed (in that warm world) an ice-cold shower bath, and his nostrils filled with a sharp, shrill, exquisite scent that somehow brought to his mind the verse in Pope, "die of a rose in aromatic pain," [6]

The surprised Ransom soon realizes that

Each of the bright spheres was very gradually increasing in size, and each, on reaching a certain dimension, vanished with a faint noise, and in its place there was a momentary dampness on the soil and a soon-fading, delicious fragrance and coldness in the air. In fact, the things were not fruit at all but bubbles. The trees (he christened them at that moment) were bubble trees. (Ibid.)

How does the reader react to these "bubble-trees"? Although we may not immediately recall the line from Pope, we are very likely to share in Ransom's amazement. We have never seen such trees before; certainly none exist on Earth. The colorful, glistening spheres delight us, as does their diffusion of perfume upon bursting. Perhaps we imagine ourselves in the wood, wandering childlike from tree to tree, marveling at the unfamiliar plants, bathing in the fragrant moisture. The bubble-trees of Lewis' story thoroughly enchant us. The produce in us imagin wonder, something whose realization Tolkien calls "the primal desire at the heart of Faerie ("On Fairy Stories," p. 42)." Says critic C. N. Manlove: "By wonder is meant

anything from crude astonishment at the marvelous, to a sense of 'meaning-in-the-mysterious' or even of the numinous." [7] But this description, it seems, is vague and too inclusive. What Manlove means by "meaning-in-the-mysterious" is indeed mysterious, and "crude astonishment" should not be considered wonder. We may experience the former when we find that something of ours has been stolen, when an athletic team suddenly comes from behind to win a game, or when we receive an unexpected mark on an exam. This is simple surprise or shock. Wonder is a much more powerful emotion. It is no less than an altered state of being, wherein astonishment does play a part; but it is a different kind or level of astonishment. Instead of being surprised by earthly events involving commonplace objects or being, we are struck, rather, by entirely new and unfamiliar things: other worlds brimming with unearthly beauty or danger; strange creatures often as uncommon to our dreams as to our sight; fantastic happenings that challenge the imagination. Wonder is like a spell, under which we neither can nor wish to do anything but drink in the arresting strangeness. We are wholly enchanted. There is delight in this enchantment, even when the source of wonder is less pretty and potentially more threatening than bubble-trees. How can our eyes help but widen, for example, when the Ancient Mariner's dead crew wakes?

The loud wind never reached the ship,  
Yet now the ship moved on!  
Beneath the lightning and the Moon  
The dead men gave a groan.

They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,  
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;  
It had been strange, even in a dream,  
To have seen those dead men rise.

The helmsman steered, the ship moved on;  
The mariners all 'gan work the ropes,  
Where they were wont to do;  
They raised their limbs like lifeless tools--  
We were a ghastly crew. [8]

"Even in a dream," says the Mariner, this would be an amazing occurrence. As we read the passage (and others in the *Rime*) we are gripped by imagined wonder. None of us have ever seen the dead rise; we believe that they cannot. This experience at sea therefore astounds us. We cease to think of other things, of previous lines in the poem or the consequences of this resurrection; our complete attention is focused on the "ghastly crew." Of course, repeated readings of the work may diminish this particular effect.

Wonder can be produced only when our conception of reality is defied--that is, only when we come across what Eric Rabkin terms the "anti-expected." The anti-expected is that which could not actually happen on this plane of reality. [9] Dead men do not actually get up and perform their former chores. This is our belief, our expectation; when it is contradicted, sublime awe follows. If wonder is to be maintained, the anti-expected cannot be explained away. The fantastic elements should not be made to accord with our physical laws and other fundamental beliefs. If it turned out that the Mariner's crew was never really dead, there would be nothing marvelous about their rising. Were we to learn that they were indeed dead, but that their movements were accomplished through some complex wire and string apparatus, any awe in the reader would be quickly destroyed.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we enjoy experiencing wonder is that it returns us to a childlike state of innocence, of naivete. To the young child's eyes the Earth is often as strange as any fantasy world could be. He wonders at every new thing he encounters, and his experience is so limited that he meets new things every day. Colorful birds, which sing awhile among the branches, then vanish; ocean waves, great weltering forms that build, rush, and pound blue-green upon the shore; trains and mighty trucks that roar past in clouds of steam and sound—these evoke profound awe in children. Take a small child to the zoo, and he'll not blink once the entire day. When we become adults, however, birds, waves, and trains do not usually move us as they once did. Zoo animal seem interesting, perhaps, but rarely marvelous. We are so familiar with these and many other things that we can no longer experience true wonder. The lines of Wordsworth become sadly appropriate:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and  
stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Appareled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore;  
Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no  
more.[10]

The physical objects around Wordsworth have not changed since his childhood. The meadows are just as lush, the groves just as green, the streams just as clear. It is the poet who is different; it is he who have changed. Yet we long to behold things as we did as children, to feel that rush of uncontrollable excitement and overpowering awe. We therefore look to fantasy. Birds and trains may not stir us, but centaurs and spell-casting dragons are another matter. When we encounter the supernatural, there have been no earthly experiences to dull our response, and we are plunged into deep, euphoric wonder. We are once again children, wide-eyed, unsure, a bit fearful, and continually delighted. Wonder is a powerful emotion; its generation is one of fantasy's most important functions.

Another function of the genre is to produce "recovery" in the reader. According to Tolkien, recovery

is a re-gaining--regaining of a clear view. I do not say "seeing things as they are" and involve myself with philosophers....We need, in any case, to clean our windows, so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity....("On Fairy Stories," p.77)

This "blur" is a result of repeated contact, either direct or indirect, with the objects concerned. As mentioned above, we tend to take for granted the things we often see. After we have looked at a thousand trees in the course of many years, each elm or cypress seems to lose its vividness. Its color fades; the shape of its leaves and the pattern of its branches grow less distinct. Its sharp lines are bleared and the fuzzy image melts in with its surroundings. We may never even notice that a certain tree exists, although we pass it every day. Only when it is cut down do we look twice at the spot, which now seems curiously empty. "Something's missing," we think to ourselves, and continue on our

way. People fall asleep to the aesthetic value of "common" objects. We do not usually notice, let alone appreciate, the beauty and individuality of everyday things. We glance here and there without really seeing.

Fantasy helps us recover items lost to familiarity. The genre invites us to reconsider the commonplace, to find in it freshness, lustre, uniqueness. Coleridge speaks of this process in reference to the division of labor in writing the *Lyrical Ballads*. He says that he was to convey truth through the use of the supernatural, and to produce in the reader a "willing suspension of disbelief," which "constitutes poetic faith."

Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us, an inexhaustible treasure....[11]

In short, Wordsworth was to work toward producing recovery in the reader. Whether or not he succeeded is not our concern here. The above passage is intended to help clarify the concept of recovery and to show that the Romantics were acute to the "film of familiarity" (Coleridge's term) which our eyes develop.

Now, then, does fantasy bring about recovery? Precisely how does it wash away the "film?" Tolkien says much about the phenomenon and its effects, but he does not explain the means by which recovery is produced. Manlove, in discussing Tolkien's works, outlines the process in this way:

Tolkien's stylistic aims are associated with his conception of "Recovery": the writer is to generalize and depersonalize his descriptions (though not emasculate them) and make them universally available. The reader will hopefully come thereby to a fresh view of objects he has long taken for granted, and through that to a recovery of what are for him their archetypes. (*Modern Fantasy*, p.193)

Manlove is correct in saying that Tolkien wrote with recovery in mind. Of that there can be little doubt, considering the stress Tolkien places on the regaining process in his critical essays, and the success with which his fiction produces the effect. However, Manlove's description of the recovery process is off the mark. The writer who wishes to restore vividness to a common thing does not "generalize and depersonalize" his description. For it is through generalization that we have become unable to see an object clearly, that hues have been dulled and forms blurred. When we hear a word like "elm," we tend to generalize, and our mind therefore paints a fuzzy, lifeless picture, rather than a sharp, detailed one. Instead of vague, sweeping descriptions, it is particularization that is functional in producing recovery. Likewise, depersonalization never brought about an ounce of recovery. If an everyday object is presented devoid of individual character, then the reader is likely to substitute for that object his own shapeless splotch of an image, and nothing is accomplished. If the reader were able to "connect the dots" with his own specific details, he wouldn't need to experience recovery in the first place. The author whose work makes the trite seem

new is the one who heeds Blake's famous (if severe) words, "To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit." Let us look at the description from The Lord of the Rings:

Hardly had Sam hidden the star-glass when she came....Most like a spider she was, but hugher than the great hunting beasts, and more terrible than they because of the evil purpose in her remorseless eyes. Those same eyes that he had thought daunted and defeated, they were lit with a fell light again, clustering in her out-thrust head. Great horns she had, and behind her short stalk-like neck was her huge swollen body, a vast bloated bag, swaying and sagging between her legs; its great bulk was black, blotched with livid marks, but the belly underneath was pale and luminous and gave forth a stench. Her legs were bent, with great knobbed joints high above her back, and hair that stuck out like steel spines, and at each leg's end there was a claw.<sup>[12]</sup>

Is this a "generalized" or "depersonalized" description? Certainly not. Tolkien seeks to produce recovery in the reader by painting the creature, named Shelob, in great detail. Note that the author does not begin by saying, "She was a huge spider." Such an introduction would defeat his purpose. The reader, upon encountering that sentence, would mechanically call up the image that familiarity with arachnids has clouded, and he would maintain this image throughout the rest of the novel. Instead Tolkien says, "Most like a spider she was...."(underlining supplied). What exactly is a spider like? We are forced to ask ourselves this question. We are forced to dig deeper than the muddy figure in our minds, and to unearth the essence of spidership. At this point we are unlikely to know just what Shelob looks like. Even if our knowledge of spiders has helped us, we are told that Shelob is only "like a spider," and we do not yet know the extent of this likeness. So we read on. Next Tolkien describes the creature's physical form, beginning with its head, moving back to its head and abdomen, and finally to its legs. Note the author's detail. The spider's "great bulk was black, blotched with livid marks," and its "legs were bent, with great knobbed joints high above her back." Many of the nouns in the passage are modified by two or more adjectives. Tolkien carefully relates every feature of the beast, as if he were speaking to one who had never seen a spider. We realize ultimately that Shelob is in shape little more than a large arachnid, similar in all respects but size to the web-builders in our garden. Along with this realization comes the awareness that normal spiders are just as complex, just as fascinating and worthy of attention as Shelob. The vigor that the author gives to Shelob he gives to all spiders. The vividness with which he describes her awakens us to each arachnid's distinctiveness. After meeting Shelob in Middle-earth we return to our world with a new appreciation of spiders. Appreciation—not fear. Tolkien is not suggesting that web-builders are by nature evil or dangerous, only that they should draw an emotional response from us; they should affect us in some way. The Shelob episode dispels the mist, leaving the sharp, striking image. The "film of familiarity" is cleared, and we "recover" spiders—that is, we are able to behold them freshly in all their intricacy and uniqueness.

Fantasy is not the only genre capable of producing recovery. Indeed, any writing which stresses the

physical details of an object may "clean our windows" to some extent. But fantasy has an advantage over other types of literature. In a work of, say, nonfiction or realism, the author deals with his subject (spiders, tree, or whatever) in this world, on the same plane of reality where that subject has lost its novelty. Therefore, it is usually under familiar circumstances that the reader encounters the object, and there is not always reason to take special notice of it. Nothing is really different; why should the reader's perception of an object suddenly become so? In fantasy, however, the item to be recovered is placed in an entirely new and foreign context. In a world where the impossible occurs daily, every creature and thing demands our full attention and close consideration. We meet the dryad and marvel at her loveliness; we meet the demon and shudder at his power; and when we come across a common object from our world, we are likely to give it as much regard. After all, how do we know that it actually is a common object? In Faerie the most ordinary tree has been known to walk and speak. Frogs have changed into princes, rocks into gold and shimmering jewels, sea birds into demigods. When reading fantasy, we are never sure or completely familiar with anything, and commonplace objects are therefore pried easily from their slots of banality.

Of course, not all fantasy helps us to recover items lost to familiarity. Some works make no attempt to so affect us; others try but fail. When recovery is produced in us, however, deep pleasure is a frequent byproduct. We return from Faerie to a world new and wonderfully exciting. We awake to an environment that is more vivid, more colorful, more meaningful. And there could be few greater joys.

Sooner or later, it seems, every reader of fantasy is charged with being an "escapist," one who escapes unpleasant realities through self-deception. Fantastic literature is cited as facilitating this alleged tendency. These accusations have perhaps been made less often in recent years, but we still hear them. There are those who disapprove of the genre. There are those who generally consider it mind-threatening drivel, or at best a frivolous pacifier. Some actually believe that fantasy is some kind of insidious hallucinogen that invites the reader into a plastic land of illusion and deceit, then walls up the exit. These people stuff their ears so as not to be musically beguiled and wrecked upon the reefs of madness. Many others see the genre as less dangerous, but they still scorn the explorer of other worlds. They feel that "reality"—a word they too often leave undefined—should be our sole concern. Cars, television, sickness, and war are what life is about; thinking even for a moment about anything else is irresponsible; it's insubordinate; it's escapist. The best thing that a misguided fantasy lover can do is return to Earth and concentrate on "serious" literature written by authors who would never think of dealing with the less than tangible—authors like Homer, Shakespeare, and Coleridge....

There is no doubt that fantasy provides escape, that it allows us to leave our world and enter others. This escape, however, is in no way dangerous. It does not blur the line between reality and illusion or lead the reader into a state of confusion. Psychologists tell us that even at an early age we have nothing to fear of fantastic literature. In The Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim has the following to say:

After the age of approximately five...no normal child takes these [fantasy] stories as

true to external reality. The little girl wishes to imagine she is a princess living in a castle and spins elaborate fantasies that she is, but when her mother calls her to dinner, she knows that she is not. And while a grove in a park may be experienced at times as a deep, dark forest full of hidden secrets, the child knows what it really is....[13]

Of course, the same is true of adults. Many of us love to romp in Faerian meadows, to chat with elves, and to sway the magical rod of empire, but after the last page in our book is turned we know that it has all been a dream—a wonderfully rich and satisfying dream, but a dream nevertheless. Only a person who was mentally imbalanced in the first place would have trouble returning to the real world. This is not to say that our adventures in Faerie never influence our thoughts and actions in this world. They certainly do. They should. But escape is above all a temporary experience. It does not cause any psychological problems because it ends along with the work that produces it. There are no such things as goblins or talking rabbits. Rings of invisibility do not actually exist, and the only dragons are those of the Komodo variety. These facts readers of fantasy may not like to dwell on or admit, but each of them really knows the truth.

In discussing what some consider to be the "hazards" of reading fantasy, Lewis makes an interesting observation:

I am only saying that [realistic stories] are far more liable to become "fantasies" in the clinical sense than fantastic stories are. And this distinction holds for adult reading too. The dangerous fantasy is always superficially realistic. The real victim of wishful reverie does not batten on the *Odyssey*, *The Tempest*, or *The Worm Ouroboros*: he (or she) prefers stories about millionaires, irresistible beauties, posh hotels, palm beaches and bedroom scenes—things that really might happen....(Of Other Worlds, p. 30)

Bettelheim echoes this comment:

Stories which stay closer to reality by starting in a child's living room or backyard, instead of in a poor woodcutter's hut hard by a great forest; and which have people in them very much like the child's parent's, not starving woodcutters or kings or queens; but which mix these realistic elements with wish-fulfilling and fantastic devices, are apt to confuse the child as to what is real and what is not. (*Enchantment*, p. 64)

Thus, it is not imaginative fantasy that threatens our rationality, but rather certain stories of a more realistic nature. Even an impressionable reader knows that dragons and wizardry are the stuff of fantasy, of make-believe. But when he comes across stories of beggars who inherit great wealth or of robbers who are always caught, then it becomes difficult to separate the real from the unreal. These tales take place in our world, rather than in an imaginary one, and a reader may easily develop false ideas from stories apparently so akin to reality. Normal people do not live in constant anticipation of defeating a giant or riding Pegasus. It is instead the pleasures of this world that lead men into confusion and encourage dangerous fantasizing. From reading quite "realistic" books we

may come to believe that money always brings contentment, or that sexual pleasure can always be had without responsibility. These are truly dangerous dreams. This is the kind of dream that threatens mental balance. The people who fear the psychological effects of fantastic literature would do best to turn their eyes from fantasy to some of the more "serious" writing they so sternly recommend.

Not only is the escape into Faerie harmless, but it often has very positive effects. Escape by definition puts distance between the reader and his native world, and this temporary separation results in a regaining of perspective. Lewis describes the process well through metaphor; for this reason the following (rather long) quotation is included here. While discussing the contempt in which readers of fantasy are sometimes held, he sets our world afloat:

If we were all on board ship and there was trouble among the stewards, I can just conceive their chief spokesman looking with disfavour on anyone who stole away from the fierce debates in the saloon or pantry to take a breather on deck. For up there, he would taste the salt, he would see the vastness of the water, he would remember that the ship had a whither and a whence. He would remember things like fog, storms, and ice. What had seemed, in the hot, lighted rooms down below to be merely the scene for a political crisis, would appear once more as a tiny egg-shell moving rapidly through an immense darkness over an element in which man cannot live. It would not necessarily change his convictions about the rights and wrongs of the dispute down below, but it would probably show them in a new light. It could hardly fail to remind him that the stewards were taking for granted hopes more momentous than that of a rise in pay, and the passengers forgetting dangers more serious than that of having to cook and serve their own meals. Stories of the sort I am describing are like that visit to the deck. (*Of Other Worlds*, pp.66-7)

Escape allows us to stand back and look at our world, and to see things as we never would have seen them up close. When given a taste of the other, we can view our world more objectively. Many customs, in which most people mindlessly participate, show themselves to be no more than arbitrary (and sometimes dangerous) habits. Institutions too often taken for granted betray their true nature to him who has trodden Faerie paths. Indeed, numerous "facts" of life are shown to be not facts at all, but absurd suppositions, even lies. The things we are told we "have to do" are revealed as nonmandatory. We learn there are alternatives. What "everyone does" turns out to be what perhaps everybody needn't or shouldn't do. We find that "the way it is" is not the way it has to be. After spending some time in our world people are quick to take things for granted. Like the stewards on the ship we become locked in our own cramped spheres of reality. Our immediate problems seem like the only problems in all the world; our desires the only desires in the universe; our goals the only goals in existence. This severely limited outlook results in a limited and often monotonous daily life. We wake, work, eat, sleep, wake, work, eat, sleep—like mindless, choiceless machines. We do not ask why we are spending our lives this way, and we do not think to seek alternatives. Instead, we toil blindly until our parts break or our plug is pulled.



Through escape we become aware that alternatives do exist. We enter Faerie, our minds are freed from their small spheres of abridged reality. We remember that there is much more to the universe than subways, tax forms, and political squabbles, that reality and possibility extend—both physically and spiritually—far beyond the ruts we've worn in this round puff of stardust called Earth. We experience what might be called "sublime recovery." Ideas and concepts are put in a new light, and, rather than taking them for granted, we notice them, examine them, and make our own decisions as to their nature and value. The process liberates the mind from the shackles of dreary custom and social pressure, allowing it to soar in new directions and to new heights. We see connections between things that formerly seemed unrelated. We recognize differences between things once indistinguishable. Certain elements of the important and unimportant might even switch places. Our entire conception of reality is broadened and transformed.

It is therefore easy to see why some people disapprove of fantasy and look down upon him who reads it. Besides those who mistakenly believe that the genre threatens our sanity or is simply frivolous, there are people who know that it can produce the effects just described. They are aware that through escape we come to view this world more clearly, to take less for granted, to analyze and question, to think for ourselves. And this is precisely what these people want to prevent. They would rather that we remain ignorant and swayed. They want us to consider custom law. Their efforts are devoted to keeping us in the ship's stuffy pantry, rather than allowing us to cool and enlighten ourselves on deck. In Lewis' words, they

wish to keep us wholly imprisoned in the immediate conflict. That perhaps is why people are so ready with the charge of "escape." I never fully understood it till my friend Professor Tolkien asked me the very simple question, "What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?" and gave the obvious answer: jailers....[There] is perhaps this truth behind it: that those who brood much on the remote past or future, or stare long at the night sky, are less likely than others to be ardent or orthodox partisans. (Ibid., p.67)

Fantasy will always have its critics; but it will have its loyal readers, too. The genre offers too much satisfaction and insight to ever perish. As long as there are people there will be primordial desires, and as long as those desires exist, so will the literature that best fulfills them. Only through fantasy can we commune with nonhuman creatures. We share our thoughts with venerable trees, converse with fish about far-off seas, and listen intently to birds in the hope that they will divulge the secret of flight. The genre does more than allay primal desires. The production of wonder is one of its major functions. The heart that no longer thrills or marvels often finds in Faerie a great deal to thrill and marvel at. Fantasy can wake us from a state of ennui by generating, through the use of the supernatural, profound and delicious excitement. And when we return from the fabulous realm, everyday objects of our world seem more vivid and intriguing. We recover trite items and see them in a new way. Colors and shapes jump out at us, as if we were encountering them for the first time. Our entire environment is changed; it becomes sharper in form, deeper and more brilliant in hue, and more interesting in every way. The escape that fantasy provides can be a soul stirring

experience. Not only can it give us a moment's relief from earthly burdens, but it also broadens our perspective on reality. After beholding other worlds we view ours with more care and objectivity. We take less for granted. Instead of bowing before tyrannical custom and arbitrary convention, we are encouraged to think for ourselves, to set our own priorities. Escape is cathartic: it purges the mind of countless impediments.

"Fantasy," says Tolkien, "is a natural human activity ("On Fairy Stories," p.74)." The abnormal person is not the dreamer, but rather he who has no dreams. Fantasy is invigorating, healing, illuminating, and can sharpen our perception of reality. Tales of imaginary lands and of creatures fair and hideous do more than entertain; they nourish and sustain, as well. Fantastic literature gives us not only what we want, but what we need.



### Notes

- [1] C.S. Lewis, Of Other Worlds. Essays and Stories, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., 1966), p.71.
- [2] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p.33.
- [3] Clyde S. Kilby, Tolkien and the Silmarillion (Chicago: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), p. 82.
- [4] Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1962), p. 49.
- [5] I say "for the most part" because the Mouse does at one point give a short lecture on the Norman Conquest. This is something that even a talking mouse would probably be unable or unwilling to do.
- [6] C.S. Lewis, Perelandra (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1944), pp.47-8.
- [7] Colin Nicholas Manlove, Modern Fantasy: Five Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 7.
- [8] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Rime of the Ancient Mariner, ll. 327-340.
- [9] See Eric S. Rabkin, The Fantastic in Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976). Rabkin distinguishes between the "unexpected" (that which is simply surprising), the "dis-expected" (that which seems to defy reality, but does not), and the "anti-expected" (that which truly defies reality).
- [10] William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," ll. 1-9.
- [11] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV.
- [12] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 425.
- [13] Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p.64.