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Is Children's Literature Childish?

Abstract

Opening address at Mythcon 24. A discussion of the value of "children's" literature supported by quotations from Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" and Lewis's "On Three Ways of Writing for Children."

Additional Keywords

Children's literature; Lewis, C.S. "On Three Ways of Writing for Children"; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

Is Children's Literature Childish?

GLEN GOODKNIGHT

This is the address given at the Opening Ceremonies of the 24th Annual Mythopoeic Conference.

I am here to say a few words on "Children's Literature and Childishness" and how this relates to us as members of the Mythopoeic Society. It may seem peculiar to some that I, a middle-aged man, should be dressed as an Elvish Lord, Elrond of Rivendell. Have I, and perhaps some of you, become lost on the road of life, diverted into some bizarre *cul de sac*, reading, among other things, children's stories? Why aren't we out pursuing some more mature and fulfilling pastime, such as cheering at a wrestling match, watching jaloopies crash together, or collecting match book covers or beer cans? (I apologise if any of you participate in any of these activities.)

On the subject of the relation of children to imaginative literature, two authors of this Society's primary focus, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, have both written on matters that relate directly to it. Let us briefly review what they have said.

In 1938 J.R.R. Tolkien gave an "Andrew Lang Lecture" at the University of St. Andrews. Slightly enlarged, it was later published as his essay "On Fairy-stories" in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* in 1947, two years after William's death. Today we can find it in copies of *The Tolkien Reader* or *Tree and Leaf*. I have always maintained that one cannot fully understand *The Lord of the Rings*, or any of his Middle-earth writings, without grasping what he has to say in this pivotal essay. Here we can taste the flavor of his thinking at the prime of his life, written before most of *The Lord of the Rings* had been written out. Besides the brief introduction, the essay has six major sections, the third of which is entitled "Children."

Tolkien does not accept a peculiar connection between children's minds and fairy stories. Rather he feels that children are members of the larger human race. He states that the connection between children and fairy-stories is a modern "accident," occurring after adults lost interest. Children did not decide this. They are like the rest of the human race, some liking fairy-stories and some not. They are not a separate class, regardless of their individual tastes. Tolkien feels writing or "adapting" stories for children is a dangerous process, a process that is saved from disaster because both the arts and sciences are not wholly relegated to the nursery. Indeed stories banished from the potential of a full adult life are ruined. Tolkien takes issue with Andrew Lang's statement that these stories represent

the young age of man true to his early loves, and has his unblunted edge of belief, a fresh appetite for marvels....

'Is it true?' is the great question children ask. (36)

Tolkien feels that belief and an appetite for marvels are not closely related, but radically different. He feels that

Lang's sentiments stripped of sentimentality imply that writers of children's tales trade on the child's credulity, based on lack of experience, and that this makes it harder for the child to distinguish fact from fiction, a distinction he believes fundamental to a sane human mind.

It is at this point that Tolkien describes the idea that nearly all of us have heard attributed to him many times, his definition of Sub-Creation and the Secondary World a Sub-Creator makes. He then continues his disagreement with Lang, stating that Lang's descriptions do not fit Tolkien's own childhood memories. He says 'I had no 'wish to believe.' I wanted to know.' Fairy stories to Tolkien are not primarily concerned with possibility, but with *desirability*.

Tolkien feels that when children ask "Is it true?" it does not indicate "unblunted belief" but rather a desire to determine what kind of literature the child is encountering. Tolkien's own personal taste for fairy stories awoke much later than the nursery. It was "wakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war."

Tolkien argues that fairy stories should not "specially" be associated with children; rather that they are naturally associated with children, because children are human and fairy-stories are a natural human taste, although not a universal one.

Tolkien does not seriously disagree with Lang's statement: "He who would enter into the kingdom of Faërie should have the heart of a little child." He says that is necessary to high adventure in kingdoms both lesser and far greater than Faërie, and it does not necessarily mean uncritical wonder or uncritical tenderness. He goes on to say:

Children are meant to grow up, not to become Peter Pans. Not to lose innocence and wonder, but to proceed on the appointed journey: that journey upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive. But it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories (if we can speak of the lessons of things that do not lecture) that on callow, lumpy, and selfish youth peril, sorrow and the shadow of death can bestow dignity and even sometimes wisdom. (44-45)

Thus Tolkien rejects a dichotomy that treats children and adults as separate species. He feels fairy-stories written with art will benefit children and adults equally, with values these stories share with other literary forms. He feels fairy-stories primarily offer "Fantasy, Recovery, Escape and Consolation," — things that older people have a greater need of than children.

In 1952, some fourteen years later, C.S. Lewis gave an address to the Library Association entitled "On Three Ways for Writing for Children." It can be found today in his posthumous book *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*.

The first way of writing he refers to is finding out what children want, and giving them that, "however little you

like it yourself." (22) The second way is a printed story growing out of a story "told to a particular child with the living voice and perhaps *ex tempore*." (23) Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame and Tolkien are cited as examples.

The third way, which Lewis says is the only way he could write a children's story, is when a children's story is the best art-form for something the writer has to say.

Where the children's story is simply the right form for what the author has to say, then of course readers who want to hear that will read the story or re-read it, at any age. (24)

When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret, and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. (25)

To him growth means adding as a tree adds rings, not mere linear progression, moving from one thing to another.

C.S. Lewis affirms Tolkien's theory of sub-creation on the one hand and agrees with one of Jung's on the other. "For Jung, fairy tale liberates Archetypes which dwell in the collective unconscious, and when we read a good fairy tale we are obeying the old precept 'Know Thyself.'" (27)

He shares with us:

Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us. No reader worth his salt trots along in obedience to a time-table. (28)

Lewis feels that so-called realistic "school stories" and other "Boy's books" and "Girl's books" which were popular in his time are far different from the children's books we love. These other stories contain a flattery of ego, where we become immensely popular and successful, as when we discover the spy's plot or ride a horse the other cowboys cannot. These stories, which have no fantastic element, are very serious. They compensate for the disappointments and humiliations of the real world, but they also send us back to the real world, undivinely discontented. If there is longing in them, it is the longing to be the object of admiration.

The longing created by the fairy story is very different. In a sense the child does not long for fairy land, as a child long to be the hero of a "realistic" adventure story.

Does anyone suppose that he really and prosaically longs for all the dangers and discomforts of a fairy tale? — really wants dragons in contemporary England? It is not so. It would be much truer to say that fairy tales arouse a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing. The boy reading the school story of the type I have in mind desires success and is unhappy (once the book is over) because he can't get it: the boy reading the fairy tales desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring. For his mind has not been concentrated on himself, as it is often in the more realistic story.

I do not mean that school stories for boys and girls ought not to be written. I am only saying that they 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, that ought to happen, that would have happened if the reader had a fair chance. For as I say, there are two kinds of longing. The one is a spiritual exercise, the other is a disease. (29-30)

To speak personally, although I enjoyed reading books of all kinds as a child, including fairy tales and modern children's stories as well as history and science books, it was not until adolescence that lighting struck, upon reading in short succession, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and the seven Chronicles of Narnia.

That double forked electric strike changed me intrinsically in how I saw the world and it has not abated to this moment. I repeat what I said on another occasion, but is applicable to what is said now: those of us who enjoy and have not lost the love for "children's stories" are often considered childish and escapist. But in reading Tolkien and Lewis especially, I think about a different kind of escape, or actually a different kind of "no escaping." By slightly adapting a page from C.S. Lewis' excellent short book, *An Experiment in Criticism*, (a jewel unto itself) will put it well:

If you find two people reading their fantasy, you must not conclude that they are having the same experience. Where one finds only danger for the heroes, the other may feel the "awful." When one races ahead in curiosity, the other may pause in wonder. Reading a particular story, one will ask "will the hero escape?" The other feels "I shall never escape this. This will never escape me. These images have struck roots far below the surface of my mind." (adapted from pp.48-49, emphasis added)

When one has experienced this kind of "no escaping," one feels a humbling shyness, yet at the same time a desire to find others — few though they may be — who have had a similar experience. It is one of life's supreme joys to find others who share your very personal delight and electric pang, with whom you can say, "What, you too! I thought I was the only one." That was the original impetus that led to the formation of The Mythopoeic Society some 26 years ago, and I hope we may experience and reexperience it here at this Conference. To do so is far from childish, but one of the deepest and most joyous events of the human experience.

Thank you.

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