



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 40  
Number 2

Article 21

---

4-2022

## ***Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature: Tolkien, Rowling, and Meyer*** **by Lykke Guanio-Uluru**

Phillip Fitzsimmons

*Southwestern Oklahoma State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Fitzsimmons, Phillip (2022) "*Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature: Tolkien, Rowling, and Meyer* by Lykke Guanio-Uluru," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 21.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/21>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

*Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature: Tolkien, Rowling, and Meyer* by Lykke  
Guanio-Uluru

**Additional Keywords**

Stephanie Meyer; J.K. Rowling; J.R.R. Tolkien

comment to Harry Blamires, “You don’t know how I’m hated” (qtd. in Blamires 16).

This oversight aside, Dalfonzo clearly shows how Sayers and Lewis can help readers consider today’s concerns. She particularly excels at making her subjects topical without overselling what readers should learn from them. She doesn’t turn the discussion about Charles Williams into “10 tips for handling toxic Christian leaders,” although her comment about Williams’ charisma masking his behavior certainly feels applicable. She doesn’t turn Sayers and Lewis’ friendship into a textbook model of cross-gender friendship, but notes “the fact that both of them put such a high priority on friendship—cultivating it assiduously and considering it just as important as other kinds of love—meant that they had a proper category and role for their interactions” (101). All things considered, Dalfonzo gives a great overview of the under-discussed Lewis-Sayers friendship, and a clever argument for why Sayers and the Inklings continue to be worth studying.

—G. Connor Salter

#### WORKS CITED

- Blamires, Harry. “Against the Stream: C.S. Lewis and the Literary Scene.” *Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre*, Vol. 1 (1983), pp. 11-22.
- Dickerson, Matthew. *Disciple Making in a Culture of Power, Comfort, and Fear*. Cascade, 2020.
- Downing, Crystal. *Subversive: Christ, Culture and the Shocking Dorothy L. Sayers*. Broadleaf, 2020.
- Hooper, Walter. *C.S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works*. HarperSan Francisco, 1996.



**ETHICS AND FORM IN FANTASY LITERATURE: TOLKIEN, ROWLING, AND MEYER.** Lykke Guanio-Uluru. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 261p. 978-1-137-46969-4. \$109.99.

*E*thics and Form in Fantasy Literature: Tolkien, Rowling and Meyer by Lykke Guanio-Uluru is a stand-alone piece of literary criticism that analyzes the presentation of ethics in *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* books. The author writes in her introduction that she is interested in exploring “the ethical ‘patterns of meaning’ embedded in best-selling literature” (1). She chose the works of Tolkien, Rowling, and Meyer because of their immense popularity and influence upon the development of current fantasy literature. The book is divided into *Part I: Quest Fantasy* that includes the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, and *Part II: Paranormal Romance*, about Stephanie Meyer’s saga. The analysis of each writer’s works is of roughly equal length, but the balance of the book is more towards the Quest Fantasy, with three chapters, while only two chapters are devoted to Paranormal Romance.

Like in the book, this review will focus more on the author's examples from Tolkien and Rowling than from Meyer.

The analysis of "form" in the title means the author describes the constituent parts of the books that contribute to their presentations of ethics. These constituent parts include descriptions of the covers of various editions of the books because the covers are the starting points of the presentation to the reader of the texts containing the ethics under discussion. To the same end, the author explores how focalization contributes to the presentation of ethical choices made by characters and consequently drives the direction of the stories. Guanio-Uluru does a lot of summarizing of plot lines and gives descriptions of character attributes and motivations as evidence in her overall analysis of both ethics and form in the books under discussion.

The author examines both deontological and consequentialist theories of ethics as they appear in the books. In brief, the deontologist has a Kantian value of duty and makes ethical decisions based on rules, while the consequentialist takes a Utilitarian approach and is guided in ethical decisions by seeking good, long-term outcomes for the greatest number of people. Thus, the consequentialist relies on emotions and intentions, rather than prescribed rules, when making an ethical decision. Guanio-Uluru's first example of deontological ethical reasoning is described as follows, "In the case of both Aragorn and Sam the refusal to abandon their friends, which would be wrong, here takes precedence over the good: the task that must not fail. Thus their decision making reflects the deontological mode of moral reasoning" (70). She follows up with a discussion of how Frodo and Sam are each duty-bound to carry out their quest to destroy the ring, though Sam's duty to Frodo is also dictated by his heart. The author gives the following third example: "Gandalf also invokes duty, when speaking to the Lords of the West, counselling them to use themselves as bait in order to enhance Frodo's chances of destroying the Ring" (70).

Guanio-Uluru provides multiple examples of the consequentialist thinking that shows Gandalf being guided by his emotional intelligence. The author writes, "Gandalf relies on his heart no less than do the others. The feeling of his heart frequently serve as premonitions, as when he predicts that Gollum's fate is connected with the Ring: "My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when it comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the [fate] faith (*sic.*) of many—yours not least" (qtd. 71). The author continues to discuss the wisdom of the wood-elves' kindness to Gollum when they imprisoned him. Another example is "when Galadriel scrutinizes each member of the company, testing their dedication to the quest against the bribe of receiving their heart's desires" (71).

I, the reviewer, share the characteristic, with many Mythopoeic Society members, of being a habitual re-reader of books. When I've read a book six times it probably means I like it, upon ten times I start to think of it as one of my favorites, and approaching reading twenty times probably means I am a fan for life. Therefore, a thing that I like about the Guanio-Uluru book is her discussion of a reader's changing interpretations of the Harry Potter books through multiple readings. She points to things learned from the first reading that affects interpretation of the story and experience of characters during the second reading and beyond. Her discussion particularly focuses on Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape but also specifies other details in the books.

For example, the Sorting Hat's mulling whether to place Harry in Slytherin House appears to a first-time reader to be an obvious mismatch because he or she knows about Harry's background, character, and rejection of Draco Malfoy's friendship. However, Guanio-Uluru points out that the reader later discovers that Harry contains a piece of Voldemort's soul because he was accidentally made into a Horcrux when Voldemort murdered Harry's parents. With this knowledge during a second time through, the reader sees the Sorting Hat's suggestion of Slytherin as sensing Voldemort, a former Slytherin, within Harry and thus not entirely a mismatch but instead a foreshadowing.

Other major reinterpretations that the author explores are a reader's viewpoints of the characters of Dumbledore and Snape through multiple re-readings of the books. During a first reading Dumbledore is seen as a loving, wise, and ethical father-figure to Harry, while Snape is the villain on stage. Guanio-Uluru writes the following about the many scenes in which Snape angrily criticizes and punishes Harry when he is caught sneaking out of the castle at night, "Reread in the light of the information that Snape's willingness and ability to perform sacrifices for the sake of love rival Harry's own, the reader is bound to feel sympathy for Snape and his righteous anger at Harry here—a sympathy that surely was not there on a first reading, when Snape's motives were unknown" (123).

By the last volume of the series the reader discovers that Dumbledore has a plan, not simply to protect Harry for the boy's well-being, but to keep him alive so that he can die at the right time, thus destroying the last of Voldemort's Horcruxes. Yet, Guanio-Uluru emphasizes that *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* has moved away from being a children's book, as were earlier volumes of the series, and presents ethical choices with the ambiguity that adults experience. The author writes, "Here, Dumbledore makes it clear that he is partial to Harry. [...] Seemingly overcoming this partiality, he proceeds with the plan that leads Harry towards death. Furthermore, he goes about accomplishing this plan by deliberately and carefully hiding aspects of it from Harry, as well as from Snape" (129). She describes the scene in which Harry and Dumbledore

meet at King's Cross Station in London, where Dumbledore explains the reasons for his actions and apologizes for withholding information from him when they were alive. Guanio-Uluru stresses that Dumbledore's explanation appears to have satisfied Harry, but that not all readers will reach the same conclusion; indeed, the newly negative view of Dumbledore will affect future readings. The author states: "While Dumbledore emerges as a consequentialist, suppressing personal bonds of love in pursuit of an impartial idea, such emotional bonds are important to Harry in his moral decision-making processes" (133).

Finally, in Chapter Four, *Ethics and Form in the Quest Fantasy*, the author particularly shines when discussing the comparisons and contrasts between the wizards Gandalf and Dumbledore and explaining how their personalities and approaches to relationships affect the way they live ethics in their stories. She makes the interesting point that while Dumbledore repeatedly described love and relationships as being the most powerful magic and giving meaning to life, yet he was also secretive and usually remote in his interactions with others. Contrarily, Gandalf is described by the hobbits as mysterious and prone to anger. But the reader sees the wizard in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* also being warm and nurturing and having genuine, long lasting relationships with many characters in Tolkien's books. Both wizards had plans that they kept to themselves. However, Dumbledore's conniving and remoteness can be interpreted as symptoms of the terrible moral burden of his plans for Harry. The author discusses the ethical implications of their individual plans and their separate ways of carrying them out.

Guanio-Uluru provides a thorough of a description and analysis of the *Twilight* series as she does with *The Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter series. She does a great job of describing its constituent parts and giving the reader a compelling presentation of the plot, characters, and ethical issues dramatized in the series. Following is her tight overview of the *Twilight* series, "In *Twilight*, Bella is educated in both ancient werewolf legends and in vampire lore, and drawn into the conflict between werewolves and vampires because of her love for her werewolf best friend Jacob and her passion for her vampire love interest Edward. The secret history is still to an extent secret, however, in *Twilight* vampires must answer to one law only; that of not disclosing their own true existence" (165-166). The author also provides an overview of the *Twilight* phenomenon and of its academic scholarship. She introduces her analysis of form and ethics in the book with the following, "For *Twilight*'s main focalizer and heroine, Isabella ('Bella') Swan, and thus for the reader, the vampire Edward and the shape-shifter Jacob represent differing sets of values and ways of life. These parallel strands of possibilities running through the narrative are part of the textual rhetorics that open the series up ethically. And this degree of 'ethical possibility' may help explain its wide appeal" (166).

Ethical issues in the books include Edward's reluctance to turn Bella into a vampire. There are issues regarding Bella's loyalty, lack thereof, and friendship with Jacob. There are ethical issues regarding roles of the three focalizing characters within the conflicts between vampires and werewolves. Also, the question of how to treat Bella's own life-threatening pregnancy of a half-human, half-vampire child is part of the dramatic presentation of ethics in the book. About the Twilight series Guanio-Uluru writes, "The base line message of the series in terms of its progression, then, is that it makes a strong case for following one's deepest romantic inclinations or obsessions with no regard for the personal cost or immediate consequences of such a path as 'all will be right in the end'" (181). A thoughtful and understated comment regarding the books by Guanio-Uluru is, "Given the nature of vampires, however, it may seem overly optimistic to expect healthy relationship dynamics in a vampire romance series" (208).

In conclusion, *Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature* would sit nicely on the shelf with *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in "The Lord of the Rings"* by Matthew Dickerson and "The Lord of the Rings" and *Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All* edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson. Guanio-Uluru does a fine job of exploring her topic in the works of her three chosen authors. The book is particularly strong in describing and discussing the plots and characters of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series. Guanio-Uluru's book would be appropriate for undergraduate and advanced high school literature students or metropolitan libraries, and I also think it would be very good for book discussion groups.

— Phillip Fitzsimmons



**TOLKIEN AND THE SEA: PROCEEDINGS OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY SEMINAR 1996.** Edited by Richard Crawshaw and Shaun Gunner. Tolkien Society; Luna Press Publishing, rev. ed. 2021. xi + 99p. 978-1-913387-55-6. £9.00. Peter Roe Memorial Series VII.

*T*OLKIEN AND THE SEA IS A RECENT REPRINT of Tolkien Society proceedings featuring five papers delivered at the 11th Tolkien Society Seminar held at the George Hotel in Colchester on June 15, 1996. Originally published as *Tolkien, The Sea and Scandinavia* (Telford: The Tolkien Society, 1999) as a folded and stapled paper booklet, this revised edition is available as an e-book or a paperback. I was provided with a PDF copy for review, so I cannot evaluate the book's final formats, but I'm familiar with a number of other recent Tolkien Society proceedings published by Luna Press and I like the handsome, small