

A Brief Introduction to Fantasy

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INTRODUCTION

Fantasy is a form of literary genre in which a plot cannot occur in the real world. Its plot usually involves witchcraft or magic, taking place on an undiscovered planet of an unknown world. In terms of literature, Fantasy is described as “imaginative fiction dependent for effect on strangeness of setting (such as other worlds or times) and characters (such as supernatural beings).” In view of its representation, Fantasy is called “the literature of unreality” or “literature which does not give priority to realistic representation”. Ursula Le Guin defines fantasy as, “the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul” (Le Guin, 64).

The Latin word phantasticus means ‘to make visible’; the broadest definitions speak of fantasy as an image-making faculty or a mental image. There are relational definitions which place fantasy in context of other genres on the basis of its features too:

Fantasy is a genre of art that uses magic and other supernatural forms as primary element of plot, theme or setting. The genre is generally distinguished from science fiction and horror by overall look, feel and theme of the individual work, though there is a great deal of overlap between the three. (Wikipedia)

Jackson traces the history of fantasy back to the oral tradition: “As a perennial literary mode, fantasy can be traced back to ancient myths, legends, folklore, carnival art.” (Jackson).

Carter goes back to classic epic, which stands at the beginning of the influential literary tradition of the stories set in wholly imaginary setting. Fantasy is defined by Carpenter and Pritchard thus: “A term used (in the context of children’s literature) to describe works of fiction, written by a specific author (i.e. not traditional) and usually novel length, which involve the supernatural or some other unreal element” (181).

It is in this strand of literature that the most popular authors of this era were successful, most of whom are still known and read today. Writers like Macdonald, Grahame, Kingsley, Carroll, Barrie, and Milne all produced literature in this period, which has been described as ‘The First Golden Age’ of children’s literature. It is imaginative where previously mass opinion held that children should read factual material; it departs from reality where many thought that such a thing would leave a child unable to detect the difference between reality and fantasy; and it is also moral, “a moral tale presented as a fairy tale. . .” (Knowles and Malmkjser, 16).

Fantasy has its roots in the fairy tale, however where the fairy tale world, . . . assumes magic in the same way a realistic novel assumes its absence, fantasy fiction may incorporate a magical element, but when it does, that element, far from being assumed, is fantastic relative to the realistic aspects of the work.

(17)

Probably the most important texts written at this time, instrumental in establishing not only a fantasy genre but also modern children’s literature, are Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871). The Alice books are the first books to truly break away from the moral tones of children’s literature and fully indulge in the imagination, establishing a new way of writing for children.

However, the true beginnings of the fantasy genre are seen by Carter in the nineteenth century where it appeared as a reaction to industrialization of society. Fantasy of the nineteenth century kept the characteristics of classical and heroic fantasy, and chivalric novels, and brought them into a prosaic novel form. A detailed description of the fantasy subgenres is provided by William J. Burling. He distinguishes two main kinds of fantasy due to the historical development of the genre – pre-radical and radical fantasy. Pre-radical fantasy with its many generic forms (such as chivalric romance, gothic

fantasy, horror fantasy, fairy fantasy or urban fantasy) precedes the radical fantasy, which is more contemporary and deals predominantly with the excesses of the capitalist society, industrialization and technological progress.

Fantasy Literature, one of the rising and the most powerful genres of children's literature is a genre, which has undergone an evolution from an earlier detached, light-hearted approach to a deep, didactic and powerful one, inculcating values of today, forcefully through the characters of fantasy. The very word 'fiction' perpetuates unreality, thus no work of fiction can be called real. No work of fiction eventuates exactly the way it was written; but an explicit work of realism like Alex Hailey's *The Roots* is clearly converse to a patent artifact of fantasy like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Yet, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* contains characters like those one could meet in 'real life'. Its protagonists speak English, Alice breathes air, has two legs like any other young child. As Eric S. Rabkin suggests in *The Fantastic in Literature*, an emphasis upon this antithetical relation to reality continually appears in the individual work itself:

While fairy tales use the World of Enchantment as their location, and are therefore highly fantastic, a true fantasy such as *Alice* continues to reserve its ground rules again and again [. . .] Fantasies may be generally distinguished from other narratives by this: the very nature of ground rules, of how we know things, on what basis we make assumptions, in short, the problem of knowing infects Fantasies at all levels, in their settings, in their methods, in their characters, in their plots. (37)

Fantasy and our conception of what is fantastic depend upon our view of reality: what we find improbable and unexpected follows from what we find probable and likely, and the fantastic will therefore necessarily vary with the individual and the age. Many of the basic assumptions which the Middle Ages or the eighteenth century made about society, human nature, the external world and the laws that govern it appears bizarre upon this bank and shoal, while many of our century's slant towards body and spirit, like its technological, artistic, and political creations, would appear as pure fantasy to earlier times. Air travel, telecommunications, lasers, and creation of appurtenance were found only in the realms of magic and faerie but a short time ago.

Nonetheless, obsolete ideas of reality in the early works of painting and literature do not, by themselves, create in us today a sense of the fantastic. This requires a second element and this is something disparate from the usual; the reaction of a character within a literary work or some other contrivance, which signals to us that certain elements have to be accepted as fantastic and certain as real.

Fantasy literature is a modern phenomenon, although certain ancient authors may be viewed in terms of fantasy (Homer, Ovid) and although some important features of fantasy can clearly be traced back to Jonathan Swift, fantasy literature owes its origins mostly to Romanticism, with its interest in folk traditions, its rejection of the previous, rational-age view of the world, and its idealization of childhood. It being, a conscious creation, authors choose the form which suits them best for their particular purposes. The purposes may be instructive, religious, philosophical, social, satirical and entertaining; however, fantasy has distinctly lost the initially sacral purpose of traditional fairy tales. Fantasy is also an eclectic genre, since, besides fairy tales, it borrows traits from myths, romance, picaresque, science fiction and other genres, blending seemingly incompatible elements within one and the same narrative, for instance Pagan and Christian images, magic wands and laser guns and many more. Fantasy is a genre under total and fast paced evolution. Many integrants which make literature fantastic completely depend on the writer

Fantasy can be divided into a random number of subclasses or genres. Fantasy offers children a rehearsed exploration of the too big, too wide, too dangerous world that is getting closer and more real every day. But fantasy needn't just be dungeons and dragons - it can be any element of pretend. This is why as they grow, children need stories that include divorce, bereavement, war, falling in love, becoming a hero and saving the world. Most importantly, fantasy isn't just for children but for adult too.