

The world of fantasy literature has little to do with the exotic worlds it describes. It is generally tied to often well-earned connotations of cheap writing, childish escapism, overused tropes copied and pasted straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*, and a strong commercial vitality.

Perhaps it is the comforting predictability that draws me in—but the same could be said of the delight that I feel when some clever author has taken the old and worn hero-cycle and turned it inside out. Maybe I just like dragons and swords. It could be that the neatly packaged, solvable problems within a work of fantasy literature, problems that are nothing like the ones I have to deal with, such as marauding demons or kidnappings by evil witches, are more attractive than my own more confusing ones. Somehow they remain inspiring and terrifying despite that.

Since I was a child, fantasy has always been able to captivate me. I never spared much time for the bland narratives of a boy and his dog or the badly thought-out antics of neighborhood friends. I preferred the more dangerous realms of *Redwall*, populated by talking animals, or *Artemis Fowl*, a fairy-abducting, preteen, criminal mastermind. In fact, reading was so strongly ingrained in me that teachers, parents and friends had to, and on occasion still need to, ask me to put down my book. I really like reading, and at some point that love spilled over and I started to like writing, too.

Telling a story does not have to be deep or meaningful in its lessons. A good story is a lot of things, and sometimes those things are light, sweet, and trite. I write what I want to read, and if all I had to read was as intense as Margaret Atwood's works, I might not like reading so much. Of course, there are always going to be people who write terrible books, so it is not an imperative that I supply the masses with lightweight, easily consumed novels. The loftiest goal I have is to make something that could potentially influence people to reconsider their world and see it anew, not change their entire mindset, prophesy about the foolishness of our current attitudes, or indoctrinate them into something.

Reading, and reading fantasy because that is the majority of what I feed myself¹, is not just an escape. It is a way to calm myself before some nerve-racking event, a way to pull my world back into rationality by reading something that has rules and guarantees, and a relief after stressful incidents. Fantasy is constant, predictable, and consistent.

It is well agreed upon that humans all like telling stories. Still, the best question is, why write anything at all? And, how can you call fantasy—true genre fantasy—really something worth reading, not just for pure entertainment value, but as something that added to the hours you spent with it?

The first is a question often considered by psychologists, anthropologists, and other-ologists, as well as the odd journalist and blogger. Storytelling is an urge and a social phenomenon that has been readily explored, and its impact through human history, as well as on it, is both broad and deep, but with a fairly small range of opinion.

Lots of people like to talk about the second question. In fact, when researching this topic, many of the results are a debate over cultural perceptions of the fantasy genre by different authors, writers, journalists, and laypersons and/or diehard fans. The opinions are, of course, scattered far and wide and maybe right into new dimensions. This paper seeks to add to that raging debate between trolls,² bloggers, and the dragons of the Internet³ that does indeed reach epic proportions in both length and intensity.

¹ I actively try to read hard non-fiction because of my awareness of this habit. Moderation is key, right?

² Trolls are both the lowest common denominator of an Internet user- argumentative, foul-mouthed and illogical- and an unintelligent, mean-spirited Scandinavian fairy. Surprisingly, the terms originated from different sources.

The beginning of the modern fantasy story is rooted in the release and reception of the most well known, and most commonly imitated fantasy work in existence. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien was written in the middle of the twentieth century and birthed an entire genre with three small novels. To some degree, nearly every work of fantasy literature has some relationship to it, whether it is homage, plagiarism, an attempt to leave it behind, or simply the inclusion of pretty elves (Austin). The concept of a fantasy novel bloomed once it became evident that the masses craved stories about strong, heroic male⁴ characters that triumph against dark forces under the guidance of some elder creature (Kammerund).

The beginning of writing is far older than fantasy's dawn. Long guarded as a sign of status, the materials and labor prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthiest of patrons, and the time and expertise demanded by what could only be considered a true art form, writing did not become easily accessible to even the upper middle class until the beginning of the Renaissance (Jackson 50). As scribes began to work separately from monasteries, commission-based work from aspiring nobility supplied them and caused some small falls in price. Still, the only written works were theological, instructive, or related to government, with perhaps a book of courtly love thrown in to spice things up.

Gutenberg's printing press robbed many scribes and illuminators of their jobs, sped up the process of making a book exponentially, and made it far cheaper to produce written works. Now laypeople could express themselves directly to an increasingly literate population, and the market for books expanded rapidly (Jackson 108).

However, it was not until the serialized novelists in the eighteen hundreds that writers began to reach people directly, without having to bypass the "cultural gatekeepers" or seek patronage. At that point a truer freedom of expression was achieved. Previously, patronage would have guaranteed that a work had a specific enlightening goal, likely tied to deeper and *very* meaningful moral or social commentary (Stephenson). This was work intended to connect to average humans without the education the wealthy had, for entertainment value and immediate monetary gain that was not dependent on patronage or other subsidies (Gundlach).

While the concept of marketing to masses was not recognized until a little over two hundred years ago, the practice of telling stories is as old as humans can remember- for, after all, telling a story is the way people pass on information from the days before writing. According to Scientific American's article "The Science of Storytelling," it is part of the collective human makeup. Those who could most effectively rationalize and keep track of the complex relationships of a hunter-gatherer band were the most likely to keep getting fed, and thus evolution has selected for storytellers.

Reading fiction has also been tied to higher levels of empathy, though whether that tie is because empathetic people prefer fiction, of which fantasy is a sub-genre, or because fiction teaches empathy has yet to be established. Still, to tell a story like *Aesop's Fables*, as an example of proper behavior, or to use it as an imaginative situation—a "flight simulator" for interactions with other humans—is simple and memorable. After all, people remember and are persuaded far more by a story than statistics (Hsu 2).

³ Intense, scary-angry people on a forum.

⁴ In past years female heroines have gained an ever-increasing share of the shelves, driven by the growing dominance of teenage girls as book-buyers. The well-ridiculed *Twilight* series has helped this trend grow into the "supernatural romance" sub-genre.

As an art form, storytelling is a medium of personal expression as well. Much as someone might imagine how they interact with another human in a story, they might be a vehicle for romantic desire, hunger, and social status, common themes throughout early myths and newer stories as well. In this case, it would not be used to explain why lightning strikes or leopards have spots, but to speak to the twistings of nature within humans.

Science, civilization's system of belief, has transformed our understanding of the world, "but [people] are already sufficiently imbued with it to be almost completely disabled from comprehending the thoughts of [their] ancestors" (Fiske 17). The word "scientist" itself is a recent invention. People have little time today for explanations of the world according to the whims of gods or heroes, instead preferring science to help them understand. Yet as recently as the twentieth century parents in Ireland were still accidentally killing their children by roasting them over fires, thinking them to be replaced by fairies (McDonagh 189). Stories help people reconnect to the curious and somehow nonsensical mindset of the past.

Much in the way stories serve as proving-grounds and examples for connections to other humans, so do they help people connect to the thoughts, concerns and desires expressed in the tales earlier people told. However, the most enduring stories are of the persistent struggles everyone faces from day to day, such as love, revenge, and betrayal that weave their way through what are considered classics, from Shakespeare's plays to *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Returning to Tolkien, consider how he created his Middle-Earth⁵. His work was a disassembly of European mythology, pieced back together into a completely new world with its own history, languages, and species that was independent of human reality. When he did this, the basis of his writing had only the most tenuous relationship with human history and mythology, and while it is possible to trace the ancestry of many of his fantastic races or the symbols he used, they are no longer tied down to the connotations of folklore that their parents had. The work was invented almost from the ground up, new, unknown, and inviting. There were stories inside *The Lord of the Rings* that no one had read or heard before.

The repetition of the motifs found within it throughout the expansion of the fantasy genre has made it intrinsically part of modern human mythology, commonly referred to within casual speech and art. It is a "natural human activity" to fantasize, and beneficial to read it as a way to remember that "things are so in this world as it appears under the sun", but humans have the intellect to recognize they do not have to be in "slavery to it" (Tolkien 9). Likewise, it is a reminder that the familiar is not always friendly, boring, or ugly.

Tolkien took the stories of his Celtic and Northern European ancestors, and in the way they must have changed their own predecessors' tales, made them resonate with his own feelings about war, loss, and evil that spoke to a generation of people born into the aftermath of WWII. Those children transformed those stories into what their children wanted to hear: the modern genre of fantasy, so easily found and consumed.

This re-appropriation of the older stories echoed in fantasy literature, humanity's heritage of mythology refitted to modern human needs, reflects a change in human attitudes towards writing. It is casually done, cheap as a paperback, the ability to write only as expensive as the elementary-school education that is the entitlement of the First World. The world that consumes fantasy media wants to remember stories again, perhaps as an ongoing human hunger, or as a backlash against an increasingly chaotic yet rational world.

⁵ Middle-Earth is the fantasy world *The Lord of the Rings* as well as many of Tolkien's other works are set in.

The tales that inspire and link people today are stories told in new media, and few of them are non-fiction. It is far easier to discuss *Star Wars*, another imported mythology⁶ with a five-year-old than it is to talk about Thomas Edison (indeed, whose own life story has been quite fictionalized over the years). Humans have role-playing games, first-person video games, *Dungeons and Dragons* (yet another *The Lord of the Rings* spin-off) as a way to immerse themselves in the role of hero saving the world. And there is no way that non-fiction, so unforgivingly *true*, allows for the freedom of imagination that the storyteller of self seeks as a way to realize his or her own potential- at least, what he or she thinks that is.

The increasing personalization of the Internet, so readily visible in the tailoring of Google Ads and the age of the smartphone, brings its own Gutenberg-esque innovations to the realm of storytelling. Twitter is one—the forty-letter story, literally linked to video footage, photographic “illuminations” of the text, and its evolution of communication, allows anyone with access to the Internet to tell their very own story however they like, and blogs, Tumblrs, and Facebook act much the same way (Leith 38).

Video games grow ever closer to real life in their gameplay and graphics, and with controllers that use the movement of a person’s body encourage the player to really become the character they play, for better or worse.

There might be an app for that too. A popular science-fiction author, Neal Stephenson, is developing an app that is an interactive book (Eaton), likely allowing the purchaser to create a character that they move through the story, and personally influencing the direction of the story and their fates with their decisions.

Is this change in perceptions of what makes a story, and how a person experiences it, good or bad? Indulging the laziness of spirit that might be borne out of easily realizing ambition, however hollow the victory, in digital media, is bad. Tolkien speaks of total immersion in a fantasy realm, dreaming a dream that another mind is weaving, as dangerous, and reminds the reader that it is easy to forget the gravity of reality (Tolkien 8).

The increasing individualism of the tales is simply cultural, neither good nor evil. It is itself inescapable, and a tool for capturing ever-wider audiences. Even as the pinpoint accuracy of demographic shrinks, the audience grows wider. Films, books, and music are shared around the globe and the rising prevalence of the Internet only speeds their spread. Though not everyone enjoys a stack of books about wizards, the nearly insidious spread of Facebook and Twitter into our lives allows us to create a filter of stories around ourselves that we both create and consume. We have all become masters of fantasy, however much we may or may not realize it.

⁶ It has literally become a religion. The Force is a legitimate system of belief followed by at least hundreds of people today.

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