Reality and Fantasy in British Children's Fantasy Fiction: Protagonists at the Cross Roads

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Abstract

Fantasy fiction is often discussed as a dichotomous entity rolling between hard reality and mere imagination. In such a shallow conceptualization, the former represents the reader's world while the latter serves as a reflection of imagination. These two may seem contradictory, yet many researchers acknowledge that fantasy needs reality in order to depart from it, suggesting a reciprocal and codependent relationship. Hence, although many fantasy books are initially set in the real world, protagonists travel to secondary worlds so that the fantastic aspect starts evolving. Keeping this reciprocal relationship in mind, this study analyzes the initial settings and entrances of the secondary worlds in British children's fantasy fiction, namely by reading, L. Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. It is seen that, the initial settings in the works studied are situated either in the real world or in a place in which a realistic setting is dominant. The results of this study show that the protagonists, except for Harry Potter, often find darkness and danger in the secondary worlds. Thus, it can be inferred that Harry is an exceptional protagonist as he finds "sunshine and excitement" when he first enters his secondary world, making him a distinctive character among the others.

Keywords: *English literature, fantasy literature, children's fantasy fiction, secondary worlds*

Introduction

Fantasy literature has become a popular genre in the last two decades, as readers look forward to the release of new episodes or volumes of the series. Despite its commercial popularity, within academia, the study of fantasy literature "is relatively recent and in some ways still underdeveloped" (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016, p. 1). In fact, the number of significant critical texts related to fantasy is less than ten and some scholars continue to focus on defining and defending fantasy. Although a consensus has emerged among many critics such as Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, Colin Manlove on the nature of the concept (Levy & Mendlesohn,

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2016), Zipes (2015) enunciates that fantasy is "ambiguous in literary criticism and children's literature". Furthermore, he also argues that fantasy "has been treated as a genre, a style, and a narrative technique" and more importantly "no comprehensive definition of it has been established so far" (pp. 180-181). Therefore, what is literarily inherent in fantasy fiction is open to discussion in theory and the genre remains worth studying in all aspects.

Etymologically, the word 'fantasy' is derived from the Latin word '*phantasticus*' which means 'to make something visible or to manifest' (Jackson, 1981; Huck, Hepler & Hickman, 1993). Today, in daily language the word fantasy connotes unreality and imagination, thus it can be inferred that a fantasy is nothing but a product of imagination. However, this paves the way for a larger problem in the context of literature simply because such an understanding assumes that fiction is nothing but the product of an author's imagination no matter how realistic his or her portrayal is. According to Rabkin (1976, p. 8):

> "one of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted. The reconfiguration of meanings must make an exact flip-flop, an opposition from up to down, from + to –".

In other words, for many, what distinguishes fantasy fiction from other genres is its distance to reality. As Short et al. (2014) simply put, the term fantasy fiction (also known as modern fantasy and fantasy literature) refers "to the body of literature in which the events, the settings, or the characters are outside of the realm of possibility" (p. 128). In a similar vein, Manlove (1999) defines fantasy fiction as "'fiction involving the supernatural or impossible" (p. 3). To be more exact, Harvey (2003) comprehensively defines fantasy fiction as follows:

> "Fantasy is an attempt to create a complete, imaginary worlds with its own creatures, cultures, and lands that are governed by their own set of physical laws and guided by their own morals and principles" (p. 13)

Despite the fact that fantasy is often explained or described in terms of its relationship with imagination and reality, some others articulate that fantasy cannot exist without reality. Hume (1984), for instance, approaches to the genre from a different perspective and underlines that fantasy needs reality so as to depart from it. According to Hume (1984, pp. 20-21), all literary works are "the products of two impulses"; one of these being mimesis which is "the desire to imitate reality", and the other one is fantasy which is defined as "the desire to change the givens and alter reality", thus "fantasy is any departure from the consensus reality". Similar to Hume (1984), Jackson (1981) underlines that "the fantastic cannot independently exist of that 'real' world" (p. 12). She further explains that any subject matter is linked to reality although the fantastic subverts it whereas the mimetic imitates it.

> "They proceed to break the assumption of realism by introducing what is unreal. They pull the reader from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and everyday world into something more strange, into a world whose improbabilities are closer to the realm normally associated with the marvelous" (p. 20)

Many fantasy fiction writers firmly ground their stories in reality before gradually moving into fantasy (Huck, Hepler & Hickman, 1993), thus it is not surprising that the real world is often preferred as the initial setting in many fantasy books (Zipes, 2015). It is often portrayed as a departure point from which the protagonist somehow enters to the secondary world. Keeping this reciprocal relationship between fantasy and reality in mind, this study analyzes the initial settings and entrances of the secondary worlds of protagonists in British children's fantasy fiction to understand the close relationship between the initial settings and the secondary worlds. Protagonists traveling to the secondary worlds were chosen as the focus of this study

to spate the fantasy from reality. To this end, five major British fantasy books were selected, namely, L. Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997). Results of such studies may shed light on reality and fantasy relationship as it pertains into theoretical work on fantasy literature.

The First Steps into the Unknown

Stepping into the unknown is not a unique characteristic of fantasy fiction. As Campbell (2004) states, although there are a considerable number of stories told or written all around the world, there is actually a single story one of whose patterns is stepping into the unknown. By stepping into the unknown, the hero goes beyond the limits of the known world. Campbell's description of the unknown is open to interpretation, yet what is certain about his description is there are two worlds; the hero's world and the unknown world. In the context of fantasy fiction, there are two different worlds as well. The first one is called the primary world which is the reflection of the real world from the author's perspective whereas the second one is called the secondary world which reflects the author's imagination. Accordingly, the first one involves limits, possibilities and what is familiar whereas the second one incorporates the unknown and impossibilities.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland opens with a scene set in a riverbank in Oxford, England, yet Carroll prefers an abrupt transition to the secondary world. Therefore, almost no description about the primary world is given to the reader in the first scene as Alice is described as "beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on bank, and of having nothing to do" (p. 7) and when she is about to die of boredom, she sees a well-dressed white rabbit with pink eyes who murmurs about being late. Alice sees him jump down a hole as she starts to chase him. Undoubtedly, it is not an ordinary rabbit hole as Alice's fall takes a very long time to complete. Carroll (2010) describes this action as follows:

> "Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her […] First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything […] Down, down, down. 'Would the fall never come to an end ?' 'I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time ?' she said aloud. 'I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think'[…]" (Carroll, 2010, pp. 8-9).

At last, she safely sets foot on the ground once again, showing her first steps into the unknown as she finds "herself in a long, low hall lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof" (p. 10). This opening scene fits well into the traditional opening scenes of many fantasy tests which, as mentioned before, start in the real world ad then followed by a travel to the fantastic, thus the unknown one.

A similar travel to the unknown can also be seen in the first book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Like Carroll, Lewis also gives readers almost no description of the real world in the beginning. Four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are sent to the house of an old family friend living in the countryside of England. While exploring the house, they see a big wardrobe in one of the rooms and Lucy decides to get into it although the other three leave the room as they think there is nothing interesting in the room. While Lucy is moving forward in the wardrobe to "find the back of it", she finds "herself in the middle of a wood at a night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air" (p. 7). Taking her steps into the unknown,

Lucy comes across with a faun named Mr. Tamnus as she turns back to the real world following the same path to tell the others what she has found in the wardrobe. Then, Edmund, Peter and Susan enter Narnia, following the same path in order to experience what this new setting offers to them.

What is noteworthy in both of these literary works is that the secondary worlds in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are hidden, and the only way to enter these worlds is by passing through hard-to-find passages. Although these worlds are somehow linked to the primary worlds, this is not 'a world-within-a world' situation as can be seen in the *Harry Potter* series. To give an example, when Lucy's travel begins, it is summer in England whereas when she steps in Narnia it is winter. Thus, rather than structuring his text in a world-within-a world fashion, Lewis sends his characters away to a world of fantasy through not only spatial but also temporal means. Mendlesohn (2008) categorizes both Carroll's and Lewis' fantasies as portal-quest fantasies "in which a character leaves his or her familiar surroundings" and "passes through a portal into an unknown place" (p. 1). What is more, as Campbell (2004) underlines, what the hero finds beyond the known world is darkness and danger. Hence, the first thing both Alice and Lucy find in the unknown is darkness while Alice faces danger after consuming sweet liquid and a piece of cake, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lucy is in danger of being kidnapped by Mr. Tamnus, a faun, who is the first person with whom Lucy meets in Narnia.

Initial setting as the unknown is given in a rather different way in Tolkienian fantasies which are considered to be the examples of high fantasy. Although it was Lloyd Alexander who coined the term in his comparative study on fantasy fiction and heroic romances, it was actually Zahorski and Boyer's (1978) study titled *The Fantastic Imagination: An Anthology of High Fantasy* that developed this term (Stableford, 2009). High fantasies are "set in otherworlds, specifically secondary worlds" and such fantasies "deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds" (Clute & Grant, 1997, p. 466). As described by Clute and Grant (1997), the majority of Tolkien's fantasies are set in in Middle-earth. With an aspiration for creating a mythology for England (Chance, 2001), Tolkien skillfully merges the major characteristics of epics, legends, quest stories and myths into a single pot with creating new races, entities and languages so as to make Middle-earth more believable, coherent and consistent as a fantastic land (Noel, 1977). From Mendlesohn's (2008) standpoint, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are portal-quest fantasies although each work seems be characterized by a quest initiated by the protagonist.

The initial setting both in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is Hobbiton, the Shire, which is in many ways regarded as the idealized portrayal of the English countryside (Pearce, 1998; Hunt, 2001). Tolkien (2003, p. 30) describes hobbits as little people who "are inclined to be at in the stomach", "dress in bright colors, wear no shoes, have long clever brown fingers, good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs" and he also describes the Shire as follows:

> "[…] there were now many houses of wood, brick, or stone. These were specially favoured by millers, smiths, ropers, and cartwrights, and others of that sort; for even when they had holes to live in. Hobbits had long been accustomed to build sheds and workshops." (Tolkien, 2004, p. 10)

In the opening scene of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo suddenly takes a call to an adventure from a mysterious wizard named Gandalf who brings thirteen dwarves to Bilbo's hobbit-hole. Soon, Bilbo sets out on a journey to the Misty Mountains with the dwarves and Gandalf. When the company passes the known limits of the Shire, they find themselves in an ominous atmosphere:

> "Now they had gone on far into the Lone-lands, where there were no people left, no inns, and the roads grew steadily worse. Not far ahead were dreary hills, rising higher and higher, dark with trees. On some of them were old castles with an evil look, as if they had been built by wicked people. Everything seemed gloomy, for the weather that day had taken a nasty turn… Somewhere behind the grey clouds the sun must have gone down, for it began to get dark." (Tolkien, 2003, p. 65)

As Hume (1984) explains, fantasy needs reality so as to depart from it. Accordingly, the Shire represents reality what lays whereas beyond it represents fantasy just as all those supernatural and impossible events occur outside the Shire. Furthermore, just like Alice and Lucy, what Bilbo primarily finds in the unknown is darkness and danger as Bilbo and the company are caught by a group of trolls.

In the first book of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Tolkien's story line leads Frodo into the unknown and fantastic in a gradually escalating manner. The trilogy opens at Bilbo's and Frodo's birthday party during which strange events begin such as Bilbo's unexpected disappearance in the middle of the crowd. Bilbo sets out on a long journey leaving everything he has to Frodo, including the One Ring. Although Frodo is not aware of the power of the Ring, Gandalf becomes suspicious and leaves the Shire to investigate the Ring. When he comes back after seventeen years, he does one last test, throwing the Ring into the fire to ensure that it is the One Ring. Shortly after that, Gandalf and Frodo decide that Frodo has to leave the Shire because he is in grave danger there, yet he leaves the Shire after several months. When it comes to Frodo's first steps into the unknown, a similar pattern can be seen. Tolkien locates the Old Forest on the edge of Buckland, the Shire, and the forest is surrounded by a barrier called the Hedge so as to protect the people of Buckland from the attack of hostile tress. It is the place where the unknown for Frodo begins as darkness and danger await him beyond the Hedge. Merry Brandybuck's detailed account clearly portrays the tempestuous and perilous nature of the Old Forest in a way to show its break from the real world:

> "But the Forest is queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you […] But at night things can be most alarming […] I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind. They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in." (Tolkien 2005, p. 110)

As the company moves forward in the Old Forest, the trees begin to attack them. An old tree pushes Frodo into the water and tries to catch him with its roots. In addition, Merry and Pippin are also trapped by another old tree named the Old Man Willow. Fortunately, Sam saves Frodo in person while Marry and Pippin are saved by a supernatural figure named Tom Bombadil, exemplifying an amalgamation of human of reality with supernatural fantasy.

Similar to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the initial setting in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is Privet Drive No. 4, London. As Gamble and Yates (2002) state, the *Harry Potter* series is a different type of high fantasy set in a unique space, an alternative world with a unique additional characteristic:

> "The alternative world is a world-within-a-world, marked off by physical boundaries. This seems to most closely match the world of Hogwarts in the Harry Potter novels. Although there is an invisible barrier that Harry has to pass through in order to board the Hogwarts Express, the school is still in our world. Muggles and wizards inhabit

the same space, although there are some areas that muggles cannot access because they do not have the necessary powers." (Gamble & Yates, 2002, p. 103)

Obviously, Rowling creates a world-within-a world type of fantasy and the secondary world is under the Muggles' noses but they cannot see anything related to this world. There are no hidden portals or secret passages to the world of witches and wizards as can be seen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*; those witches and wizards are among us, or Muggles. However, Rowling does not amalgamate these worlds. Just the opposite, there are still boundaries between them as what separates these two worlds is magic. However, Mendlesohn (2008) asserts that the *Harry Potter* series is an example to intrusion fantasy in which "the fantastic enters the fictional world, it is the bringer of chaos, and fantasy and reality are often kept strictly demarcated" (p. xxii). Hence, Westman (2011) defines the *Harry Potter* series as hybrid fantasy because:

> "Rowling is much more interested in how fantasy provides perspective on everyday experience and the individual's place in society. Her inclusion of certain genres like – bildungsroman along with the school story – align her primarily with the domestic (or low) fantasy of authors such as E. Nesbit […] as well as authors like P. Pullman and J. Stroud, who are also interested in the intersection of the personal and political within quotidian experiences. The result of Rowling's strategy is a hybrid fantasy" (p. 100).

Harry's path to the unknown begins with his acceptance letters from Hogwarts. Yet, as sson as action starts in the beginning of the novel, Rowling emphasizes that there is something special and unusual about Harry. Despite Vernon's efforts to prevent Harry from reading the letters, he fails when Hagrid brings Harry's acceptance letter in person. From Mandlesohn's (2008) standpoint, this moment can be interpreted as fantasy as the bringer of chaos for the muggles. As Hagrid takes Harry to the Leaky Cauldron which is "very dark and shabby" wizarding pub in London (Rowling, 1998, p. 68) in whose backyard Hagrid taps the bricks in the wall three times.

> "The brick he had touched quivered – it wriggled – in the middle, a small hole appeared – it grew wider and wider – a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight […] The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop." (Rowling, 1998, p. 71)

Thus, unlike Alice, Lucy, Bilbo and Frodo, Harry does not find darkness and danger in the unknown. On the contrary, he finds sunshine and excitement because he belongs to the world of witches and wizards, that is; the world of the fantastic. Just like his deceased parents, Harry is a wizard, and thus he feels at home when he is in the secondary world. Rowling portrays this contrast throughout the series. In the primary world, Harry is no one; he does not have a real family; he does not have any friends; he is not wealthy whereas in the secondary world, he is one of the most famous people. The Weasleys treat him as if he was a family member; Ron and Hermione become his true friends, and he also learns that he has inherited a small fortune from his parents.

Conclusion

For some scholars fantasy literature is still criticized on the grounds of being formulaic, childish and escapist (Hunt & Lenz, 2001). It is further stated that as an academic field of study, it needs time to mature in its methodological and conceptual assets. Therefore, there is strong need for studies in fantasy literature apart from defining and defending the genre from a readership

standpoint. Fantasy and reality are often discussed "as if they were at opposite ends of a spectrum but a good fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience" (Gamble & Yates, 2002, p. 101). In short, fantasy needs reality to exist. However, as Manlove (2003) states, the reason why fantasy fiction writers prefer the real word as the initial setting of their books may not always be related to bend reality; these reasons may vary depending on authors' impulses to create their fantasies along with the messages that they want to convey. For instance, the rules of the Victorian society are radically thwarted in Carroll's secondary world which may also be regarded as a dream world (Herring, 2010). Therefore, Carroll is often criticized that he has no particular direction in his writing as some parts in his works are digressive (Manlove, 2003). Furthermore, Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Tolkien in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* elaborately employ fantasy as an effective agency for change, renewal and liberation in order to restore the world or a certain place into its former state, suggesting the codependency of the two worlds described above.

Whatever reasons fantasy fiction writers have, reality and fantasy are often contrasted through primary and secondary worlds. In addition, secondary worlds are often portrayed as exciting but mysterious and dangerous places where the impossible can happen. This study examined the initial settings in relation to the very first steps of the protagonists studied into the unknown. Prominent examples of British children's fantasy fiction were selected for textual analysis, and it can be concluded that the *modus operandi* of the authors in question within this study is to initiate their fantasies either in the real world or in a place in which a realistic setting is dominant, and lead their protagonists who is a part of the real world to the unknown only to find darkness and danger. Such a travel to fantasy is often presented in line with the monomythic structure in which the protagonist slips into a tempestuous realm, leaving his secure and tranquil environment. Thus, Harry appears as an exceptional protagonist who finds sunshine and excitement when he first steps into his secondary world. This is most probably because of the fact that Harry originally belongs to the secondary world unlike the other protagonists analyzed, making him a unique character among the others. Thus, theoretically speaking, what separates reality from fantasy in British children fantasy fiction can easily be found in the beginning of the novels studied as protagonists depart from a setting that is originally situated in reality.

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