

KATE FORSYTH

Heroic Fantasy the Literature of Transcendence

The turn of the millennium is hurtling towards us. The closer it looms, the more our apprehension and anticipation about what the next thousand years will bring us grows.

Never mind that the much-anticipated one is a totally artificial construct, based on an imprecise division of time and built into a calendric system that has had to be totally re-calculated many times during the course of human history. We seem to have this need to control and regulate everything and that especially includes time, the measure of our days. As the little fidget wheels of our lives tick towards that New Year's Eve, the more we wonder whether the year 2001 will bring us apocalypse, exaltation, esoteric revelation, or merely a very bad hangover.

Millennium fever has been blamed for everything from the Heaven's Gate suicides to road rage, while hysteria about the impending collapse of world computer systems battles with prophecies of environmental disaster for headline space. The millennium is like turning forty, only much worse, because it is universal and is synergetic – it makes us think about where we, the human race, are going and what is the true meaning of life. These are questions most of us manage to avoid thinking about quite successfully in the day-to-day treadmill of our lives. Such questions gash through the stuff of our lives like the steely barb of the infinite Baudelaire described.

It's surely no coincidence that the closer that big triple-0 looms, the more frantic our search for new answers becomes. The rejection of traditional religious systems has led to an explosion of 'New Age' sects, cults, and creeds that would have seemed improbably fifty years ago. There has been a corresponding surge of interest in all things mystic, spiritual, and transcendental. People no longer believe that science has all the answer, God, as William Blake wrote, is not a mathematical equation. Our culture's insistence on the cold light of reason has only made the shadows of our ignorance darker and longer.

Aldous Huxley said "a totally unmystical world would be a world totally blind and insane". Perhaps it is because the world does at times seem both eyeless and deranged that the search for the transcendental has grown so intense and so widespread. Mysticism can be defined as a quest for a hidden truth or wisdom – "the reassurance hidden in the centres of our souls". The current resurgence of interest in all this mystical is very much driven by the feelings of alienation that many people experience in our modern world. As John Clute (Clute & Grant, 1997, p900) wrote in *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*: "more than perhaps ever before, human beings live (and perceive the meanings of their lives) in a maze of realities and illusions so multiplex and inchoate that for many it is almost impossible to make sense of being alive."

For most of the latter part of this century, writers have responded to this sense of alienation and existential angst by focusing on the grim, the grungy and the grotesque. Literary movements have had names like “the lost generation”, “angry young men”, and “dirty realists”. We have had despair and disillusionment; we have had Derrida and deconstructionism. God is dead, and so is our innocence.

One major consequence of this ontological maze of mirrors is that somewhere in there, twentieth century literature lost its emphasis on story and, one can argue, lost its way. The emphasis on dismemberment and disintegration of text and character has made such contemporary fiction dense, dull and downright depressing.

It should come as no surprise then, that heroic fantasy fiction has had a slow, inexorable rise in both popularity and critical recognition. For several years, best selling lists have been dominated by epic fantasies by writers such as Tad Williams and Katharine Kerr. The US *Realms of Fantasy* magazine has claimed that “fantasy outsells SF by a factor of three to one” while Tolkien’s epic heroic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings* was recently chosen as the most popular and influential book ever published, by readers in three separate continents.

When it was published, one critic dismissed Tolkien’s mammoth and scholarly work as a “don’s whimsey”. Yet it has never been out of print, has spawned countless imitations, and is now an industry in itself, ranging from scholarly critical appraisals to pictorial guides to the habits of hobbits. There is graffiti in university toilets that reads “Frodo lives”; and you can buy car-stickers that say: “Tolkien Is Hobbit-Forming”. Very few people have ever read James Joyce; most have read Tolkien.

Stephen Donaldson (Nicholls, 1993, pp266-267) has said: “one of the oldest and most enduring forms of literature in all languages is fantasy. We need metaphors of magic and monsters to understand the human condition. It’s only in modern times that we have suddenly decided this narrative language isn’t serious, that it’s for children; grown-ups don’t believe these things... We’ve reached the point in our sophistication of our self-perceptions when it no longer seems possible to make epic statements about the meaning of life. You get laughed at for doing it, and epics ceased to be written. But in order for us to have this type of heroism, beauty, glory, magic and power we have to get away from real life.”

It is because fantasy so closely parallels the whimsy of myth and fairy stories that the genre is so often dismissed as mere kiddies’ stuff. Yet the essential power of such ‘tales of wonder’ have been acknowledged by thinkers as diverse as Carl Jung, Bruno Bettelheim, Joseph Campbell and C. S. Lewis, among many others. As Jung said, fantasy is the living union of our inner and outer worlds.

The marvels and prodigies, the seven league boots and enchanted mirrors, the talking animals... all the wonders that create the atmosphere of fairy tale disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives. The verb ‘to wonder’ communicates the receptive state of marvelling as well

as the active desire to know, to inquire, and as such it defines very well at least two characteristics of the traditional fairy tale: pleasure in the fantastic, curiosity about the real. The dimension of wonder creates a huge theatre of possibility in the stories: anything can happen. “The very boundlessness serves the moral purpose of the tales, which is precisely to teach where the boundaries lie.” Marina Warner (1994, pxx) wrote in *From the Beast to the Blonde*.

One of the great successes of modern cinema is the *Star Wars* trilogy, which has earned more than \$4 billion, including income from associated books, toys and comics. “I wanted to make a kid’s film that would strengthen contemporary mythology and introduce a kind of basic morality,” Lucas explained in 1983. “Everybody was forgetting to tell the kids, ‘Hey, this right and this is wrong.’”

Lucas was particularly influenced by the writings of the late Joseph Campbell, in particular *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Campbell lifted the neologism of the hero’s dangerous and difficult journey into what Joseph Conrad called the heart of darkness. Ultimately the hero achieves self-fulfilment, power and wisdom, though it is usually at a price. This idea of a quest is, of course, the basis story for tales from *The Odyssey* to Cervante’s *Don Quixote* to *Lord of the Rings*. Luke Skywalker’s adventures clearly follow this trail, as do just about every heroic fantasy novel written, including my own.

Just as James Joyce drew upon the monomyth of the *Odyssey* to give his widely influential novel *Ulysses* a deeper resonance, so too do heroic fantasy writers tap into the deep well of myth and fable we all carry within us. Jung called this well our ‘collective unconscious’ – recurring symbols and motifs shared by all people in all places, that act as a common language for the expression of ideas, values and emotions..

Robert Irwin, in his 1994 introduction to *The Arabian Nights*, describes such archetypes as ‘selfish word-genes’ which, like a selfish gene, continue to reproduce themselves in different host bodies: the enchanted prince, the unwilling hero, the wise old man or woman, the dark lord.

“It is partly this sense of familiarity – not only with the tale’s earlier incarnations but with its whole relationship to the whole inherited body of tale-telling – that gives the effect of *resonance* characteristic of so many fantasy stories” says *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* (Clute & Grant, 1997,p900).

Of course, many fantasy novels draw upon the basic quest plot-line - and tell a damn good story – without achieving that moment of epiphany that Tolkien called an eucatastrophe – a term he coined to argue the uplifting effect of fairy stories and fantasy in general (Tolkien, 1996).

The ever popular “sword and sorcery” tale (S&S) is the perfect example. Lin Carter (Sprague de Camp, 1976) define the genre in the following terms: “S&S is the term by which aficionados affectionately refer to that school of fantastic fiction wherein the heroes are pretty much heroic, the villains are thoroughly villainous and action of the derring-do variety takes place the sober social commentary or

serious psychological introspection ... In a word, then, S&S is primarily written to entertain: a motive generally suspect and largely obsolete in modern letters”.

Diana Waggoner (1978, p36) defined the difference between heroic fantasy and what she calls ‘adventure fantasy’, writing: “As a recreation of the medieval epic and romance forms, heroic fantasy lends itself to the creation of wholly different geographies, but is not confined by them. Heroic behaviour is possible in any setting and is the real criterion of the type. It means that physical courage and exciting events are not enough; every action must have a serious purpose. Adventure fantasy is an unambitious form of heroic fantasy, with the heroism left out. The reader identifies with the hero not because he is good, but because he is strong, clever and resourceful. His conflicts with his opponents are interesting only as action; he does not necessarily deserve to win ... Most adventure fantasy remains what it has always been – escapist trash.”

Similarly, C. N. Manlove (1975, p11) wrote: “Two broad classes of fantasy may be distinguished: ‘comic’ or ‘escapist’, and ‘imaginative’ fantasy. The line of division is simple enough: it is between fancy versus imagination where ‘fanciful’ works are those carrying either no deeper meaning or one lacking in vitality ... Any number of waste lands, broken lances, grails, eucharistic or baptismal symbols may appear in a story without the story having any *potent* meaning.”

George Macdonald (1893) drew much the same distinction more than eighty years earlier. Of the creation of fantastic worlds and beings, Macdonald wrote: “When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of Fancy ... “

The primary difference between heroic fantasy and S&S is therefore its possession of a “potent meaning”, a “serious purpose”, the embodiment of some sort of universal truth.

S&S definitely has its place in the fantasy spectrum – just remember Arnie Schwarzenegger first swaggered his way to world-wide prominence after his 1982 movie *Conan the Barbarian* grossed more than \$100 million worldwide, while TV shows such as *Xena, Warrior Princess* have achieved cult popularity.

However, such works rarely bring that “piercing sense of joy” that Tolkien referred to, the sense of “regaining a clear view” (Tolkien, 1966). As Marshall B. Tymn (Tymn, Zahorski & Boyer, 1979, pviii) said in his Foreword to *Fantasy Literature*: “Great fantasy has the direct impact of a dream and the strength of a metaphor. Dreaming, indeed, is to consciousness what metaphor is to language. And what metaphor is to language, fantasy is to literature.”

Thus heroic fantasy is one of the few forms of contemporary literature to concern itself with the deep, troubling questions of human life, while still harnessing the seductive power of the story. AT one and

the same time, it delights and entertains us while engaging effortlessly with the deepest and most abstract questions of theology, cosmology and metaphysics. Because it's deeper moral purpose is camouflaged in all the beguiling trappings of the 'wonder tale', heroic fantasy is able to both push the boundaries of the impossible and give that sudden shock of recognition and understanding that can lead to renewal and recovery. For, most significantly of all, heroic fantasy holds out hope for the future. Its heroes triumph over death and despair and, although the price is sometimes high, at the end they discover that "treasure hidden in the centres of our souls" – and teach it to us, their readers, who have travelled the journey with them.

References:

Clute, John and Grant, John (1997), *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*, Orbit.

Macdonald, George (1893), "The Fantastic Imagination", *Gifts of the Child Christ: Fairy Tales and Stores for the Childlike*, ed. Glenn Edwards Sadler.

Manlove, C. N. (1994), *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Cambridge University Press.

Nicholls, Stan (1993), *Wordsmiths of Wonder*, Orbit.

Sprague de Camp, L (1976), *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1966), "On Fairy Stories" reprinter, *The Tolkien Reader*, Ballantine Books, NY.

Tymn, Marshall B., Zahorski, Kenneth J. and Boyer, Robert H. (199), "Foreword", *Fantasy Literature – A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, Bowker Company.

Waggoner, Diana (1978), *The Hills of Faraway: A Guide to Fantasy*, Atheneum Press.

Warner, Marina (1994), "Introduction", *From the Beast to the Blonde – On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, Chatto & Windus.