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Why Readers should take Fairy Stories Seriously: War in Tolkien and Le Guin's Fantasy

“High fantasy” is termed as such, not just because of the authors' use of language or the insertion of magic and wizards into their story, but because of the study of social, moral, and psychological issues that relate to the real world. J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin both use the fantasy world setting in their observations of the affects of war. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien explores the larger picture of both the battlefield experience and society—how a world changes as the result of war; whereas Le Guin, in the early books of the Earthsea cycle, analyzes what happens to the individual while in a state of war or unbalance. The explorations of both authors leads to a discussion of Tolkien's ideas of recovery and escape. War in fantasy allows the reader to recover what he or she knows about war in reality from a distance, because one escapes to another world.

Tolkien's theory of recovery allows the reader to look at particulars in our world in a new way, or with a fresh perspective. Tolkien clarifies this in his essay “On Fairy Stories”: “I do not say ‘seeing things as they are’ and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say ‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’—as things apart from ourselves” (19). When readers free themselves “from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity,” which is achieved through a fantastic setting, they are able to look at their own reality through a clearer window (19). Escape, an idea

closely related to recovery, provides a sense of leaving one's own world in order to come back to their world and having a new relationship with it. In "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien uses the example of a prisoner to clarify how he uses the word escape:

Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics . . . are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. (20)

Tolkien is placing importance in the fact that escaping from the "real world" is not dangerous—in fact, it is a good thing to go somewhere else, if only inside one's own mind, in order to get away from reality and then recover knowledge from a fantasy world. This recovered knowledge can then be applied to the real world.

In *The Lord of the Rings* the reader sees war in Middle Earth, but it makes a person recall what he or she knows about war in their own reality, which is a different recollection than that of a newspaper headline. The new perspective that a fantasy story supplies allows for the realization that reality is also not limited to one perspective. Tolkien describes war from the battlefield—a perspective that is not attainable from the news media. That is not to say that Tolkien has a "political or didactic purpose," because that cannot create a quality story (Le Guin, "Plausibility in Fantasy"). Tolkien distinguishes that the "real war does not resemble the legendary war": "If it had inspired or directed the development of the legend, then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against Sauron; he would not have been annihilated but enslaved, and

Barad-dur would not have been destroyed but occupied” (xxiv). This also refutes the belief that Tolkien’s story is an allegory, only that it is applicable to “the thought and experience of readers” (xxvi). Tolkien explains the idea of applicability: “the one [applicability] resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author” (xxvi). In other words, allegory is a forced meaning; whereas applicability changes with the reader. Even though the wars are very different, and there is no intention by Tolkien for his story to have a political purpose, there is a natural infusion of politics or societal unrest, because it is apart of his experience. For a writer to create anything other than complete escapist fiction means that an author cannot escape his or her own experience. Tolkien agrees and writes in the Foreword of *The Lord of the Rings* that, “An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience” (xxiv). His only motive, as Tolkien states, is to write a long, attention-grabbing tale that would move and excite the reader (xxiii).

The soldier’s eye point of view is portrayed in high intensity combat scenes like the battle in Moria:

Frodo felt a hot wrath blaze up in his heart. “The Shire!” he cried, and springing beside Boromir, he stooped, and stabbed with Sting at the hideous foot. There was a bellow and the foot jerked back, nearly wrenching Sting from Frodo’s arm. Black drops dripped from the blade and smoked on the floor. Boromir hurled himself against the door and slammed it again. (Tolkien 324)

Scenes like this bring the reader to the front lines of battle. The reader can know what is going through the mind of a soldier before wielding his sword against the enemy, can feel

the strength of the foe as it pulls away from the pain, can smell than burning blood, can feel the effort and strength of Boromir, and the reader can hear the satisfying bang of the door as the heroes shut out the enemy, if only for a moment. In a more involved battle, the defense of Helm's Deep, there is another dimension of war that the reader is able to see—the responsibilities of the commander in chief. In this battle, the reader can listen in on the directions of Theoden, “We must draw all our forces now behind the walls,”(Tolkien 531) or the decisions made between Aragorn and Eomer:

“The doors will not withstand another such battering.”

“Yet we cannot stay here beyond the walls to defend them,” said

Eomer. . . . “Come! We must get back and see what we can do to pile stone and beam across the gates within. Come now!” (534)

These directions and last minute decisions that change as the enemy surprises them are only truly seen for what they are worth when it is heard as it is happening. Details like these are not normally made aware to anyone outside the battle, thus allowing the reader to have a close view of the inner workings of battles and wars.

Along with detailed, epic battle scenes that show war from the front-line point of view, there is also a thorough look at post-war Middle Earth. In the chapters “Many Partings” and “Homeward Bound” the Company takes the reverse route of their journey, and the reader gets a sense of what everyone else in Middle Earth was doing while the heroes were fighting for them. There are both physical changes of the land and societal changes within the different towns. Isengard, for example, is taken over by the Ents: “All the stone-circle had been thrown down and removed, and the land within was made into a garden filled with orchards and trees, and a stream ran through it” (Tolkien 978).

In this case, there is a change in power over the Tower of Orthanc (as it is now Treegarth of Orthanc) and the landscape is changed from the affects of war. A trip back to Bree shows that they were not wholly aware of what was going on outside of their town.

Things changed—people were more careful of ruffians and they did not travel as much: “‘No one comes nigh Bree now form Outside,’ he [Barliman] said. ‘And the inside folks, they stay at home mostly and keep their doors barred. It all comes of those newcomers and gangrels that began coming up the Greenway last year’” (Tolkien 992). The people of Bree, however, were not exactly clued in as to why these things were happening:

“Most of the things which they had to tell were a mere wonder and bewilderment to their host, and far beyond his vision” (991). Through conversations such as these, the reader can see what the other half of Middle Earth was doing during the war, and how the war affected them as a society.

Le Guin takes a more personal, psychological approach to the affects of war, or in this case, unbalance of a fantasy world. In Le Guin’s essay “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” she states how fantasy relates to reality, which reinforces Tolkien’s idea of recovery: “It is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence” (145). She goes on to call fantasy a “heightening of reality,” an idea that points to the fact that “high fantasy” is as much of an extension of reality as it is an imagined reality. Fantasy helps the reader see his or her world in a new way. Le Guin studies the psychological changes of characters in a fantasy world, which allows the reader to look at the psychological workings in their own world. She is able to develop her characters psychologically because she does not rely on “stock characters,” “violence to replace feeling,” or feelings that are not connected to thought

out ideas (“Where Do You Get Your Ideas From?” 195). Those bad qualities that Le Guin avoids are not suggesting that her work is strictly a stream-of-consciousness psychological study either—the reader simply learns about the character through the decisions that it makes and its actions. There are no long discourses on personal conflict, just as there are no gratuitous scenes of war and violence.

The first book of the Earthsea cycle, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, is perhaps the most rooted in the psychological development of a character. Ged, a young wizard-in-training, loosens a shadow when he summons the dead—an act that is highly frowned upon because of the disruption it causes to the equilibrium. This shadow is not only a physical menace, shown by the scars on his face, but also a psychological burden. The reader watches Ged start as a young, cocky trainee, then after he releases the shadow he grows physically as well as mentally. Ged realizes the evil that he has done and vows to stop it, no longer wanting to show off his power, only wanting to learn how to control it. It is only after he crosses the line and upsets the equilibrium that he becomes concerned with the balance of Earthsea. This shadow becomes the personification of the evil side of, not only Ged, but all people. This becomes clear when Ged names the shadow “Ged” in the final chapter: “Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one” (194). Of course, none of this would have happened, perhaps, if it weren’t for the fact that there is no king in Earthsea at this point in the story.

In her book, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, Elizabeth Cummins blames the lack of a king in Earthsea as a cause for disturbance. This is explored in the third novel of the Earthsea cycle, *The Farthest Shore*. In this story, the people of Earthsea are

experiencing a loss of interest in their crafts and lives because of their search for immortality. There is hope that, once the throne is occupied again, peace and balance will be restored to Earthsea, because of the sense of stability that is associated with the inhabitation of the throne. Cummins defines a world as a “creative relationship among all things that exist” (26). This is an idea that goes for both created worlds and the world we live in. If an action or person affects one thing, it affects all things—the war and unbalance affected Ged as a young boy in Gont just as much as it affected him as the Archmage in Roke. The disturbance of a kingless throne trickles down to Ged, not only because he helps defeat the army that invades his town, but also because that event triggered his wizardly education. Ged’s education led to his feeling out of balance, which led to the loosing of the shadow, and that of course further disrupted the equilibrium of both Ged and Earthsea. These connections are important because “knowledge of the self and of the potential to do good or evil is essential for protecting the delicate balance of cosmos, kingdom, and community” (Cummins 28). It is this knowledge of the self that Le Guin investigates in order to show how every action is connected to the balance of the world. This is a principle that is thoroughly drilled into Ged’s head while he learned with Ogion and the masters at Roke. Even though Ged knew what his actions may cause, it seemed inevitable that he would do them, simply because the first domino (the missing king) had already been tipped over. Unlike with Tolkien, the reader does not take a journey over landscape, but inside the mind of a changing force. Le Guin states, “A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and *it will change you*” (“From Elfland to

Poughkeepsie” 153). This change is much like Tolkien’s idea of recovery, only Le Guin takes a more personal approach.

According to Simon Schama, visions are filled with memories—everything we see in our minds has some context of memory, myth, or meaning (6). Although Schama is not talking about fantasy, it is easy to see how, by applying his ideas, fantasy is connected to reality by the memories and myths within the minds of writers. A reader cannot escape from the experiences of a writer. When Schama quotes Rene Magritte on how we see the world: ““We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside”” (12), it suggests that even though we see fantasy worlds as outside of our reality, the experiences of this reality are what ultimately make up the “mental representation” of the fantasy world. Schama also states that landscape and memory is “rediscovering what we already have” and “what we may yet find” (14). This rediscovery is exactly the fresh view that Tolkien claims in his theory of recovery. The new worldview that the reader should take away from fantasy is what makes the text important literature. If it were ““above politics”” or only about entertainment (as Le Guin describes in “Where Do You Get Your Ideas From?”) there would be nothing to recover by reading it—therefore rendering it useless. The usefulness of “high fantasy” is what puts it in that category.

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