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Laura Pecoraro

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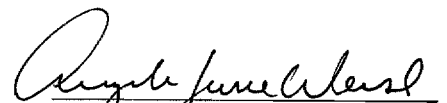
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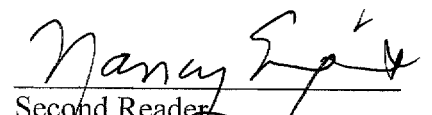
TO THE FUTURE AND BACK AGAIN: THE FUNCTION OF FANTASY IN THE
STEAMPUNK AESTHETIC

LAURA ANN PECORARO

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Seton Hall University

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Trying to pin a specific definition to a broad subject like imaginative literature is like trying to give a first-hand description of the C'thulu creature of H.P. Lovecraft fame: It is a subject area teeming with such unusual, contradictory, and insubstantial concepts that one could very easily go mad just by thinking about it. The word 'imaginative' itself assumes the presence or presentation of ideas or concepts that do not exist at any period of time in our reality as we know it. There is no factual evidence supporting the existence of fairies that have a history of playing merry hob with the affairs of unwitting mortals on midsummer evenings, Romulans have never fought the Federation in epic galactic battles in space, and dinosaurs and early man certainly do not coexist in an uneasy harmony in hidden caverns somewhere deep under the surface of the earth. Steampunk is an area of imaginative literature that bridges two separate worlds: it falls backwards an improbable number of light years away from the realm of science fiction and lands in a fantastic edenic reality that bears very little resemblance to the world we know.

Steampunk may be defined as a stylistic or thematic element which may be found in a historically based work of literature, media, or art that purposely includes accelerated technologies and information. It is predominantly represented as a replication of a Victorian age which features modern machines (such as computers or robots), although a work of

steampunk does not need to be limited exclusively to that period. A replication of Victoriana is currently the most popular manifestation of the aesthetic and is therefore the best indication of its presence in popular culture. Essentially, a work may be classified as steampunk if it is founded on anachronistic properties and obscures the dividing lines between the past and the present to create one or more alternate realities. These alternate realities allow us to view our own reality from a new and different perspective. In his article defining the origins of steampunk, Steffen Hantke used William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* as an example of the genre, explaining how Charles Babbage altered reality in the novel by inventing the first computer over a century ahead of historical schedule. The consequences that resulted from this momentous event completely galvanized social and technological changes in Victorian England (246).

The steampunk genre emerged from the cyberpunk genre, which, according to Thomas Foster, focuses on how the definition of a human being changes and culturally mutates through its relationship with complex, space-age technologies. It asserts the use of science fiction type "utopian/dystopian dialectic structuring" to the point that the two spheres of human consciousness and technology eventually become so co-dependent that any

attempt to separate the two becomes impossible, so much that both are bound up in an unbroken circle of influence (Foster xii). Furthermore,

The result is to conceptualize our relation to technology in exclusively instrumental terms: in this view, technologies are tools whose use does not reciprocally transform the user in any fundamental way, and this view of technology is implicit in the utopian/dystopian polarity structuring so much of science fiction. Whether we control our tools or they control us, "they" remain outside "us." (Foster xii).

Like cyberpunk, the steampunk aesthetic deconstructs and probes the principles that guide the human relationship to technology and assumes that the human relationship with space-age technologies will be capable of galvanizing changes that are both fantastic and terrible to behold. However, steampunk also differs from cyberpunk in that it asserts a level of control over those changes-- by reconfiguring the inner workings of human relationship to technology, until technology can be manipulated to improve some detail of the original plan so that the new product is significantly changed from the original. In other words, the steampunk aesthetic appears to wield a certain level of power over reality, not unlike a Wikipedia-esque version of history where the events of the past can be defined by common consent. According to Steffen Hantke, "Steampunk constitutes a special case among alternative

histories, a science fiction subgenre that postulates a fictional event of vast consequences in the past and extrapolates from this event a fictional though historically contingent present or future" (246).

Steampunk's point of entry into the past generally begins with a reconstruction of the Victorian era, but the version of the era that steampunk builds off of is unfettered by the bleak realities of widespread religious/scientific crises, grassroots attempts to improve the living conditions of common workers, and desperate efforts to effect significant changes in the brick wall that was women's rights. Indeed, the foremost muses of steampunk, chiefly H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Mary Shelly, are not generally remembered for the Victorian concerns present in their best-known works. Rather, the core aspect of their influence in the foundation of the steampunk genre is grounded in the elements of their works that eventually went on to build the foundations of the speculative fiction subgenre.

According to Paul K. Alkon, Felix Bodin once argued that authors should turn to speculative fiction because it "...can appeal to our hunger for the marvelous while also remaining within the bounds of verisimilitude in a scientific age, thereby providing an artistically satisfying vehicle for rational speculation" (3). Should Bodin wake up one day to find that his remains

were exhumed and cloned by mad scientists one hundred seventy-nine years after he officially died, he might not find science fiction so satisfyingly marvelous. Indeed, this is one of the points that Mary Shelley was trying to make when she wrote *Frankenstein*: that scientific, reality-based horrors can be equally, and sometimes even more terrifying than supernaturally based ones (Alkon 2). These same elements, the uncontained terror at rational and scientific-induced horrors, the feverish infinitude of possibilities, and the perverse intrigue to see how far the rabbit hole goes, are the reasons why steampunk has become so popular in recent times. Hantke affirms this when he talks about the nature of the “uncanny” in steampunk literature: “The interplay of the familiar and the alien, the sense of distortion, hyperbole, and defamiliarization, about which the narrator muses in this passage constitutes the basic principle of steampunk” (249).

In order to understand how these principles apply to the cyberpunk attitude of exploring humankind’s changing relationship to technology, the Steampunk Workshop website run by Jake von Slatt features several step by step demonstrations of how technology may be transformed in a way that is quintessentially appropriate for the steampunk aesthetic. Von Slatt is fond of the do-it-yourself aspect of steampunk, and is best known among steampunk enthusiasts for his transformative modifications of common, everyday

technologies such as an old IBM keyboard, a new Dell monitor, an iPod, and even a car. For instance, in the case of the keyboard, von Slatt used certain tools and machines from his workshop to deconstruct the entire object and proceeded to reconstruct it using the same basic framework it had before it was deconstructed. However, he also included certain whimsical enhancements to the original model, such as a bronze cradle for the frame and old typewriter keycaps for keys. Even with only the imagination to provide a visual description, it goes without saying that the final product is far more visually poetic than the original. One may see how the cyberpunkian circle of influence between human beings and technology has been carried to the point where normal people like von Slatt can rather easily use older principles and more basic technologies in such a way that can reshape the larger, more iconic technologies of our own time. Moreover, since our reality and cultural inheritance are only as stable as the technologies they use to define themselves, time itself takes on aspects of mutability. In this way, the sense of intimacy that cyberpunk creates between humans and technology is reinvented: steampunk turns technology into a tool of the past in order to create a familiarity with the subject where there wasn't any before.

Although the earlier steampunk texts, such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine*, relied mainly on a specific twitching of

one aspect of history and extrapolating the remaining fictionalized Victorian reality around that alteration, recent interpretations of steampunk have become less grounded in factual possibilities. In a genre that has roots in time travel, dystopian futures, and distorted realities, historical reality becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the more a work distances itself from the original time period and literature. The idea that steampunk would naturally branch out from historical-based speculation into realms of real fantasy is supported by the presence of *historical mythologies*. Historical mythologies are teeming with cultural bias, which would explain why the Golden Age of England happened long ago during the reign of King Arthur when no one was ever covered in lice, feces, or blood from post-coconut head trauma as a result of African (possibly European) airborne bombers.

The inclusion of any historical mythologies in a work of steampunk should not be considered a disadvantage of any sort. Indeed, the presence of historical mythology contributes wonderfully to the authenticity of steampunk's historical realism, since the practice was not an unfamiliar one in Victorian times. Many poets and artists such as Tennyson and Morris turned to the legends of King Arthur and the golden age of his reign in Camelot for inspiration and hope during a time in which much of England felt a need for

a unifying force in the midst of social difficulties such as women's oppression, religious tumult, miserable conditions for the working class, etc. Indeed,

When Victorian thinkers wanted to work through difficult intellectual problems—such as, say, how to articulate the relation of history to literature, Jubilee to Ode—they often turned to parables. The 1880s and 1890s marked the culmination of a century-long resurgence of interest in parabolic forms of narrative: folktales, fairy tales, myths, romances, ballads, sagas, allegories (Arata 52).

Furthermore, according to Roland Barthes, “Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance” (110). In other words, the historical signifiers that stand in as representatives of the myth do not need to be perfectly matched to the real events that occurred in order to convey the same message in a work in the steampunk genre.

Steampunk's ability to mythologize the Victorian age comes out of its easy affiliation with that other ubiquitous bastion of mytho-gothic romanticism, *Frankenstein*. Ostensibly, “The imaginative genesis of

Frankenstein, as of so much science fiction, is thus in the transition from contemplation of scientific possibilities to writing a story that preserves something like the effects of a disturbing dream, while grounding those effects in plots that do not depend on supernatural events" (Alkon 5).

Nevertheless, the eternally suffering villagers of Transylvania, long since inured to any feelings of horror for unnatural monstrosities, would probably argue that reanimated corpses are less supernatural and terrifying than the reality of living in a chronically frozen feudal system where most people's lives begin in a thatched cottage and extend, economically speaking, about as far as the end of a pitchfork. Indeed, any work that invokes the familiar appearance of the three most famous icons of the gothic genre may be said to form a subgenre unto themselves: A glimpse of the ghastly visage of Dr. Frankenstein's reanimated monster as it seeks endlessly for a companion to ease the ache of its alienated state; the thrill of fear that freezes the helpless victim of Dracula's bloodthirsty passion in the brief moments before his teeth pierces their neck; the tragic dualism of the werewolf as it howls its lonely elegy to the full moon; all are figures of such imaginative potency in the popular consciousness that one could argue that any work which features one or more of these three icons qualifies as part of the *Transylvanian mytho-gothic* subgenre. All three icons contain elements that are capable of operating on a

level metaphorically and thematically independent from the actual works they were based upon. For instance, a writer who creates a novel that combines different elements from various genres to create a new one could reasonably be considered a manipulator of fiction in the same way Dr. Frankenstein manipulated aspects of scientific reasoning in order to create something extraordinary. Other metaphorical comparisons may be drawn with equal justification between any individual who drains the life force out of others and vampires, and outcasts who have difficulty fitting into one single societal structure and werewolves.

The 'gaslight romance' or fantasy steampunk subgenre most closely resembles the type of historical romanticism associated with Transylvanian mytho-gothicism, yet still retains a strong emphasis on the Victorian aesthetic and technology implied by the 'steampunk' signifier. As a prime example of a gaslight romance that infuses Transylvanian mytho-gothicism and steampunk, the webcomic *Girl Genius* features a "Transylvania Polygnostic University," the reanimation of two deceased robots by a scientist of dubious sanity, and zombie-based biological warfare. *Girl Genius* owes much of its success to its elegantly plotted Campbellian bildungsroman, but for all of its steampunk accoutrements (i.e. mad scientists, steam powered engines, etc.) it bears very little resemblance to the definition of steampunk laid out in *The*

Difference Engine. *Girl Genius* is at its heart a work of fantasy in steampunk clothing, and this difference manifests itself most clearly in the fact that the heroine's journey is not to understand how or why her world is different from others, but rather to make sense of her own past, her destiny, and her place in society as she struggles to save the world against evil. However, the comic does serve as an example of how much the genre has changed since its origins in early steampunk novels like *The Difference Engine*, and may explain why the term *steampunk* itself came to acquire a broad definition in online culture: the comic is self-described as being steampunk on the basis of its combination of modern scientific forms of technology (such as proto-sentient robots) and Victorian costumes and architecture, and the description is uncontested even though the subject matter has nothing to do with any alternate realities stemming from our own. Regarding the comic's relevance toward understanding how steampunk may be understood on a wider basis, Hantke notes that "This uneasy coexistence of a deeper, more pertinent reality underneath the surface appearance is what drives the plot of the majority of steampunk novels" (251). This statement may also be applied to that of the emerging heroic consciousness of the protagonist who ventures on a monomythical journey. According to Joseph Campbell in his famous work *The Hero of A Thousand Faces*,

...if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolic figures (any one of which may swallow him) which is no less marvelous than the wild Siberian world of the *pudak* and sacred mountains (101).

For instance, Agatha, the heroine of *Girl Genius*, inherits her superhuman skill at manipulating technology from her parents, both of whom were legendary heroes in their own time. However, she is completely unaware of her extraordinary origins or abilities until she receives the epic call to adventure. It is during this time that she makes a sudden but inevitable discovery that her mother was involved in an arcane cult that was naturally hell bent on world domination. Although he is not referring specifically to *Girl Genius*, Hantke notes that “Since these characters all start out as proponents of the official view of society, the moment of recognition is also one of profound disillusionment” (251). If one were to imagine what sort of superficial mask a “deeper, more pertinent reality” would most likely wear, almost no one would be surprised if it breathed distinctly while offering Agatha the keys to the universe in deep, bass James Earl Jonesian tones. Essentially, steampunk

and fantasy are two genres that are complementary in many respects, and both are united in having a wealth of advocates that make frequent use of their store of pop culture references.

However, in order to better understand how and why the works of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne inspired a genre so unusual for its treatment of time and scientific progress, one must examine the themes that form the focal point of their works. Even to his contemporaries, Wells' science fiction romances found their greatest appeal in their application of "scientifically explained phenomena as a basis for looking at the present from new angles of vision" (Alkon 43). Moreover, "Wells used his fiction to illuminate change, celebrating it as he warned of what change could mean" (Gaiman xv). Wells often portrayed these changes in terms of how they might be perceived in a wider social context, and although his tales were not always entirely true to the spirit of scientific realism, the message they conveyed through metaphor was usually quite plain. For instance, *The Time Machine* is a demonstration of Wells's speculation that the future of humanity would at some point be divided between what he perceived as the brutish laboring class and the indolent yet more preferable aristocratic class, and also that such a division would inevitably result in the complete collapse of human civilization. There is no real evidence to support the idea that the sort of social schism that he

predicted in the novel will ever come to pass. However, *The Time Machine* does prove to be an excellent case subject for G.K. Chesterton's theory that the difference between a good novel and a bad novel is that the former informs the reader with the truth about its hero, and the latter informs the reader with the truth about its author. In any event, Wells's allegorical equation of the unknown and the other as an object of fear is also present in the works of Jules Verne. According to Roland Barthes, Verne demonstrated an obsession with the "appropriation of the world" (66), by which we may say that his realm of interest was limited to the boundaries afforded by what could be drawn into the safe, protective iron and steel walls of reason and understanding. In Barthes words,

Verne in no way sought to enlarge the world by romantic ways of escape or mystical plans to reach the infinite: he constantly sought to shrink it, to populate it, to reduce it to a known and enclosed space, where man could subsequently live in comfort: the world can draw everything from itself; it needs, in order to exist, no one else but man. (65-66)

From these descriptions, one may see that both authors sought to investigate diverging realities – H.G. Wells saw an apocalyptic future based on the social evidence that he had gathered from his own time, and postulated that it could

crescendo be changed for the better by knowing what to do differently. Jules Verne was more interested in staying in one place and seeing the world from a different perspective. As different as they were, both authors endeavored to change something about the times they lived in, but what they actually did was change the way time itself is viewed – their works helped people realize that what happens in the future is a direct consequence of living in the present, and imagination is the real time machine that allows one to see far enough into the future to find value in being aware of the absurdity of some of our actions in the present.

There are also small elements of universal mythology present within the works of science fiction. Both the science fiction and fantasy genres have a tendency to focus the main source of antagonism in the form of a dark, malevolent, unknowable external force, but where fantasy usually portrays this as an alien force which invades the familiar soil of our own world, science fiction works from the opposite direction and portrays the human being as an alien in an unfamiliar landscape. Alkon points to science fiction writer Samuel Delany and critic Darko Suvin to demonstrate that science fiction is primarily interested in “cognitive estrangement,” or the examination of the founding principles of an unfamiliar society (Alkon 10), but this concept is also true in many works of fantasy, which tend either to create new worlds

and examine their underlying principles from the perspective of its own people (such as in the *Lord of the Rings* series) or shifts the focus to a contemporary period to examine a subculture that was previously ignored or hidden from our own society (like in the *Harry Potter* series). Both versions of fantasy demonstrate the universal application of metaphor and the monomythical journey.

The steampunk hero's path ranges across an infinite galaxy of allegorical realities, running the gamut from the dawn of a bright Technicolor utopia to the broiling cauldron of a primordial dystopia and everywhere in between. Knowledge, information, and the shapes they adopt *must* be altered in order to accommodate such circumstances, and this is why the hard facts that apply to 'our' reality do not always apply in a culture that is based around a mutable reality. According to Hantke, in steampunk, "Scientific knowledge appears as an inadequate, conceited, or mystifying set of dogmas that have little to do with the newly revealed reality" (251).

Although this sort of ideology is rather problematic in its dangerously idealistic (or cynical) refusal to accept that not all realities can be altered as easily as we can change our clothes, it is a practice that has been used in fiction as a way of dealing with the idea that whatever form one perceives reality to take, it will always be sustained in a perpetual state of

metamorphosis. For instance, the epic poem *Beowulf* is one of the oldest existing texts that reflects nostalgically back to an earlier, golden time when heroism and valor were determined in battle, despite the real overwhelming difficulties that pervaded all aspects of ordinary life during that period.

However, it is a testament to our human nature that most people prefer to overlook the worst memories, the greatest embarrassments, the most crushing defeats, and all other unpleasant remnants of remembered time until the 'truth' is cleansed of all painful impurities and defects and attires itself in the golden threads of legend. One might argue that nostalgia is a false ideology which prevents us from dealing rationally with the social problems of the present reality, but it is also true that such ideologies are necessary in order to function in a world that at times seems determined to destroy us in so many wretched, terrible ways. In his essay, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," J.R.R. Tolkien notes,

But though with sympathy and patience we might gather, from a line here or a tone there, the background of imagination which gives to this indomitability, this paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged, in full significance, it is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme, and has drawn the

struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war
with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time.

(18)

If one treats the epic structure and admiring language of the original poem as a specialized art or technology that exalts its hero and his society in the clothes of an historical mythology, one may gain understanding of the principles which founded Middle Earth and Narnia, as well as insight into the minds of honorary Inklings like G.K. Chesterton. Interestingly, the recent cinematic treatment of *Beowulf* attempted to combine the traditional sense of Medieval historical mythology with the violent, testosterone-fueled displays of carnage found in *300*, so popular among fans of Frank Miller and people who believe that the art of landscaping would be much improved by the use of the blood of one's enemies as a novel alternative in fountains and ornamental lakes. The film itself possesses none of the usual hallmarks that are usually associated with steampunk, but the intellectual and philosophical issues being raised about the intentions of storytellers and the nature of heroes impose a different self-awareness of fiction at a level than was perhaps intended by the original Anglo-Saxon storyteller, although admittedly there were questions raised in the original poem that the film fails to consider. Primarily, the reason why the *Beowulf* film may be regarded as a work of

steampunk is because it employs story-telling techniques such as a post-modern skepticism of the author's ability to relate an unbiased account of the hero's actions and applied it to a story that predates such creative licenses in a work of fiction. The anachronistic innovation of speculating what the story might have originally contained marks the film as employing the accelerated technology of textual reinterpretation that qualifies it as a work of steampunk. As such, the defamiliarization of the text begins to yield a few interesting thematic points that might not be noticed on a first viewing.

In a way reminiscent to the poem's suspicious attitude towards the nature of Beowulf's heroism, the recent film version sought to show that Beowulf's godlike heroism is a product of historical mythology, an idealization on the part of the poet and the myth consumer. According to Joseph Campbell, "The tyrant is proud, and therein resides his doom. He is proud because he thinks of his strength as his own; thus he is in the clown role, as a mistaker of shadow for substance; it is his destiny to be tricked" (337). Although Campbell is referring to the sort of villain that must be faced by a warrior-hero, screenplay writers Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary combined the technology of modern cinema and postmodern intertextual storytelling to shift the curse of pride to Beowulf's shoulders, offering an alternate version of the canonical realities of the original story. The result

alters the viewer's impression of the original story, and forces one to question the strange alchemy that exalts a 'hero' who is also sculpted out of human clay. In the film, Beowulf is shown to be less a noble warrior than a powerful man who just happens to be worshipped by the victims of a violent tragedy. He knows that he is not a divine entity, merely a human who possesses enough impossible strength to pass for one who is divine, but his own pride prevents him from admitting this before the people at Hrothgar's Hall. The disconnection between the reality that Beowulf provides for them and the truth that he hides supports the idea that "[Iconoclasts'] metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination" (Baudrillard). In other words, although Beowulf was meant to represent a true hero, Gaiman and Avary recognized that all heroes are constructs that shine most brightly within the human heart.

Gaiman and Avary also inserted points of faithful accuracy to the poem in order to give viewers a point of familiarity with the original text, but such details tend to make the different perspective even stranger by comparison. For instance, Grendel's dislike of the noise from Hrothgar's hall, Beowulf's decision to battle Grendel without armor, and even his report that Unferth's

Hrunting was lost in the battle with Grendel's mother were elements that were present within the original poem. The engines of difference, however, shift the focus to what was *not* mentioned in the original poem, creating a sense of cognitive dissonance as the fabric of the fantastic, heroic myth is torn and shown to contain a flaw. The most inconceivable change to the plot comes in Beowulf being seduced by a golden, dripping wet CG-Angelina Jolie and becoming the father of the dragon that defeats him at the end of the film. Indeed, although this marks a significant change from Beowulf's noble fall in the original poem, it is interesting that both versions seem to find symbolism in the representation of a dragon as the death-bringer who arrives to complete the heroic cycle of Beowulf's story. Baudrillard once noted that

the iconolaters possessed the most modern and adventurous minds, since, underneath the idea of the apparition of God in the mirror of images, they already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which they perhaps knew no longer represented anything, and that they were purely a game, but that this was precisely the greatest game - knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them). (Baudrillard)

The original storytellers knew that each retelling of the *Beowulf* poem would find the eponymous hero tragically trying and failing to conquer the cruel monster of time itself. However, the new version of *Beowulf* saw the final battle as an opportunity to demonstrate how and why Beowulf will always die glorified in the image of the hero, precisely because he recognized the falseness of his own title, repented, and sought to rectify his mistakes with his final breath. In many ways, the final minutes of the film seem to represent the “unmasked image” as the defeated dragon transforms into his human shape before melting away into golden sand and sea foam, paralleling Beowulf’s own heroic image being stripped away to reveal the man beneath the fantastic shape.

Interestingly, by portraying Beowulf as the father of the dragon, the film also examines the idea of the hero as trickster storyteller and subtly compares him to the mythological Norse god, Loki. Beowulf is praised constantly and literally as a giant among other men, and even though he does not make a completely convincing liar, he remains one nonetheless. This mythological association is alluded to a few times during the film, such as when he relates the tale of his fight with the sea serpents during the swimming race, deliberately leaving out the neon-bright foreshadowing of his being ‘caught’ by the final ‘monster.’ Beowulf’s manipulation of perspective

and the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the grateful revelers of Hrothgar's hall demonstrate that most people prefer lies to truths when it comes to storytelling. Even Beowulf's sole challenger, Unferth, put aside his own questions when Beowulf comes back with the report that Grendel's mother was dead.

One *Beowulf* movie commentator noted that many of the subsequent alterations from the original text worked because they "suggests the story is a deliberate invention — it's a myth, in other words" (Gee 1). By challenging the accepted truths of the story, inventing the love hexagon between Beowulf, Wealtheow, Hrothgar, Grendel's mother, and later, the young and completely fabricated character Yrsa, the film manages ironically to compliment Tolkien's declaration that, "Beowulf is not, then, the hero of an heroic lay, precisely. He has no enmeshed loyalties, no hapless love. *He is a man, and that for him and many is a sufficient tragedy*" (Original italicizing, 18). In an eerie sort of way, as if it has rippled across the sea from some far distant realities, the slayer of Grendel echoes this last sentiment when he asks Wealtheow to remember him not as a hero and to see him instead as a flawed man no greater than any other. For this reason, the *Beowulf* film appears to be making a point that while gods will often mask themselves in various human disguises, a human being may not disguise himself or herself in the mask of a god. It also

demonstrates that no singular idea, person, or period in time can survive for long without the enabling technology of myth. As the ability to manipulate myths from the point of view of a passive observer and a participant becomes more widespread, a person's view of the world also shapes and reforms itself to incorporate new knowledge which will in turn help to reshape the viewpoints of others in an endless cycle of reflection and change.

Although the mythological underpinnings of steampunk illuminate its easy association with speculative fiction, one final application is necessary to demonstrate the wide and interesting implications it has for works of literature as well as for works of media. Let us then draw back the curtain of time and space and stroll once more down the dusty dream paths to the village of Wall, nestled somewhere in the rolling green country folds of an imaginary Victorian England. Like *Girl Genius*, Neil Gaiman's novel *Stardust* features a replication of a Victorian setting, but the fact that it introduces modern concepts to make the story's time period makes it a work of steampunk that has more in common with the *Beowulf* film.

Gaiman establishes an historical and thematic correlation between the state of affairs of the country's government, specifically, that passion was the ruling force governing the actions of the characters who were in power immediately preceding the birth of the main character, Tristan: "Queen

Victoria was on the throne, but she was far from being the black-clad widow of Windsor: she had apples in her cheeks and a spring in her step, and Lord Melbourne often had cause to upbraid, gently, the young queen for her flightiness. She was, as yet, unmarried, although she was very much in love” (7). Gaiman also is careful not to mark down any specific date during which the novel takes place, offering instead a series of hazy, happy snapshots of a period of history that does not seem clouded by the spectre of socio-political change. He mentions only that seventeen years before the main character makes his journey into Faerie, *Oliver Twist* was in the process of being serialized, that the first photograph of the moon had just been taken, and that certain technological advancements were being opened up that allowed people to communicate with one another over long distances (Gaiman 7). Such specific yet equally indeterminate hallmarks of time allowed Gaiman to wrap a misty mythology around the Victorian setting of the novel, generating an exciting steampunk-like air of possibilities. He also managed to incorporate themes and concepts that would normally be considered anachronistic in the Victorian age in his creation of the Faerie realm that lies just beyond the wall of Wall. Although the novel is grounded in the language of romance and fairy tales, historical realities manifest themselves in metaphorical character models and realistic details that anchor the story in a

genuinely Victorian way. These manifestations include steampunk hallmarks such as, “Early forms of the feminist movement, the glory days of British imperialism and colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, and proletarianization – they all can be construed as variants of contemporary issues as long as the paradigm of historical continuity is upheld” (Hantke 245). Furthermore, “the specific study of forms does not in any way contradict the necessary principles of totality and History. On the contrary: the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism” (Barthes 112). In this manner, although *Stardust* is not strictly a work of steampunk, it may be considered as such for the ways it depicts an alternative history through the use of fantasy and metaphor.

The ripples of historical reality that echo throughout the events that occur in *Stardust* seamlessly blend into the story’s plot in such a way that the line that separates reality and imagination is blurred, and one really cannot tell where the real Victorian history lesson ends or where the fairy tale fantasy begins. For instance, the beginning and end of the novel is focused around the appearance of a Fairy Market, an event somewhat similar to the one Christina Rossetti describes in her poem “Goblin Market,” which only comes to the village of Wall for one day and one night every nine years. Gaiman has included the fairy market device in other works such as *Neverwhere*, but all

incarnations of this market serve the same purpose, which he describes in the book as “commerce between the nations” (22). Gaiman’s fairy markets are more than just places in which people barter and exchange goods – they also exchange ideas and concepts, a kind of free-spirited dialogue of mythology and culture which allows him to draw from as many mythologies as suits his fancy. Although there is an echo of the Great Exhibition of the Crystal Palace in the market’s splendor, in *Stardust*, it is clear that Gaiman is drawing directly from the fading market town culture for inspiration, which was also a feature in early Victorian literary works. Moreover, the following statement made about the market town commercialism in Thomas Hardy’s works could be a perfect description of what goes on in *Stardust* itself:

His pseudo-imaginary country of Wessex is largely rural and agricultural but contains several market towns, and many of his works feature the surviving rural tradition of the market fair as a pivot of their action. These traveling market fairs were held at regular intervals in the larger towns – thus their name – and drew people from far-flung villages to join in trading their wares or foodstuffs, at the same time as they enjoyed entertainments like music, dancing, games, and festivals. (Wicke 261)

Gaiman's most potent description of the Fairy Market in *Stardust* illuminates how much this tradition had in common with Victorian spectacle: "There were wonders for sale, and marvels, and miracles; there were things undreamed-of and objects unimagined (*what need, Dunstan wondered, could someone have of the storm-filled eggshells?*)" (22). Ultimately, however, *Stardust* shows that the relationship that exists between desire, possession, and love is one fraught with many complications and difficulties.

Thematically, the Fairy Market is an important element in *Stardust* because it is a great indicator of love's close relationship to material and commercial concerns. Once the first Market is concluded, the plot begins to exhibit *A Midsummer Night's Dream*-like quality, but rather than let fairies work out the business of arranging his marriage to his true love for him, Tristran Thorn, the main character of *Stardust*, discovers his progress hampered by many of the Victorian cultural preconceptions that he carries with him when he enters into the world beyond his home village of Wall. Tristran is besotted with Victoria Forrester, the most beautiful girl in Wall, and, upon seeing a shooting star falling to the earth, swears to retrieve it for her if she'll marry him. Both adolescents make rash promises, but when Tristran ventures into Faerie to find the star, he is amazed to discover that all stars which fall into this green place take on a human form, unlike what

happens in our own world. Instead of a cold stone hurled from heaven, he finds a very angry, very injured woman named Yvaine. He immediately chains her and begins to try to drag her back to Victoria, but loses her in the forest when she escapes on the back of a unicorn. When they speak again, it is under much different circumstances, as Yvaine is now in Tristran's debt for saving her life, and Tristran has finally begun to recognize the mistakes he has made and undergoes a change of heart.

Not too long after Tristran commences his journey, it is made strikingly obvious by the narrator and by the names the other characters (particularly Yvaine) hurl at Tristran that the hero's search has as much to do with proving himself capable of rising above his foolish ways as it does with his quest to obtain his Heart's Desire. More than once, Tristran imagines himself as the sort of hero found in a penny dreadful, a willing perpetrator of a tradition that curls itself around the whims and preconceptions of a mass consuming society. He thinks back to them as a guide to his adventures, both for romantic advice and when he is at a loss to proceed when he finds himself at a dead end. In his proposal to Victoria Forrester immediately preceding their agreement over the star, he completely fails to give any sort of indication that he would love her for anything besides her peerless beauty. Rather, he lists a number of exotic, romantic places he would visit and beautiful riches he

would obtain in exchange for her love, obviously hoping to prove his feelings for her by offering his own courage as collateral for the opportunity to buy her. This reinforces the idea that Tristan is an unwitting product of his time, a character flaw which persists until the hero is nearly destroyed by another character whose problems with possession and desire outweigh Tristan's. Horrifyingly beautiful and as dangerous as a hurricane in a house of glass, the Heart's Desire of the Witch-Queen is literally Yvaine's heart; She desires to capture and eat the heart of a star in order to ensure the eternal youth of herself and her sisters, the Lilm. Since she is powerful as long as she possesses her youth, the Witch-Queen's plots and schemes have a frightening urgency to them. She is as implacable as a hunter who single-mindedly baits traps without compassion or interest in anything except the satisfaction of desire. Yvaine's life, by comparison, is merely a minor problem that must be solved with logic and cunning. In "Simulacra and Simulcrum," Baudrillard also notes that,

The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production. For that purpose it prefers the discourse of crisis, but also - why not? - the discourse

of desire. "Take your desires for reality!" can be understood as the ultimate slogan of power, for in a nonreferential world even the confusion of the reality principle with the desire principle is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality. (Baudrillard)

Ironically in spite of the fact that the story is, as the subtitle of the novel imports, a "romance within the realms of Faerie," there is a great deal of realism, both historical and metaphorical, in the actions and behaviors of the characters and the situations they find themselves in. Readers know that, being a romance, *Stardust* should and does end happily, but by the time the second Faerie Market rolls around, Tristran has become older and wiser, and is no longer the same person that he was before he left. He is also now so accustomed to strange happenings that it never occurs to him that the lessons he learned changed him in such a way that he does not recognize nor is recognized by any of his former neighbors or acquaintances (Gaiman 186).

Indeed, it is Yvaine who is mostly responsible for Tristran's change in perspective. On a symbolic and intertextual level, Yvaine's role in the story is highly interesting one. In our reality, a star would have fallen to earth as a stone meteorite with no real inherent worth except that which would be attributed to it by a collector of such things. In other words, it would have been considered to be the legal property of whoever had found it, just as

women in Victorian times were considered to be the property of their male relatives. However, in *Faerie*, the star fell to the ground in a different form – that of a woman – and she is subsequently treated as if she were still an object. What’s more, Yvaine’s heart is also considered an object of worth, but unlike Victorian women who were not allowed by law to possess their own property, she is allowed to keep or to give her heart (symbolically, of course) as she wishes. The Witch-Queen was foiled from forcibly taking it from her by Tristan first and then again later as an old and feeble woman, because Yvaine had already given her heart (metaphorically) to Tristran (Gaiman 208).

These gender concepts are so subtly modern compared to Victorian ideas that her restriction against crossing the Wall into the real world, a fact which is only made explicit to her in a private conference with Tristran’s long lost mother, Lady Una, just before Yvaine crosses the gap into Wall (Gaiman 187), suddenly becomes fraught with significance. Her fierce independence and force of will also slowly penetrates and alters Tristran’s Victorian perceptions, forcing him to reconsider the way he thinks about objects, and people, and the idea that possession of the latter is wrong. This is the reason why a gulf of cultural differences suddenly opens up between Tristran and his former neighbors in Wall, ultimately leaving the hero no other choice but to return to *Faerie* once his affairs in Wall are put in order. His character

progression throughout the story may be partly measured in the way he and Yvaine gradually become co-dependent for survival (Gaiman 168), and also in the way he ceases to rely on his penny dreadful heroes and comes to depend more on a greater variety of literary examples. For instance, a short episode is briefly mentioned in which Tristran draws on his memory of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, the Twenty-Third Psalm, the 'Quality of Mercy' speech from *The Merchant of Venice*, and "a poem about a boy who stood on the burning deck when all but he had fled" (Gaiman 168) as a demonstration of his great wealth of esoteric knowledge before the patrons of a drinking establishment in a place called Fulkeston. His memory of these poems proves useful, at least for a while: "[Tristran] blessed Mrs. Cherry for her efforts in making him memorize verse, until it became apparent that the townsfolk of Fulkeston had decided that he would stay with them for ever and become the next Bard of the town" (Gaiman 168).

By the end of *Stardust*, Tristran has relinquished his Victorian concept of relationships and fulfilled his destined task of becoming the Master of Two Worlds: the historical Victorian past and the strangely modern reality of Faerie. Indeed, "His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, anonymity" (Campbell 237). Even though Tristran's

tale is now finished, the memory of his adventures will survive and grow as the creative perspective passes into the hands of the novel's readers.

Although steampunk is most commonly associated with Victoriana and futuristic technologies, its emphasis on the fluid nature of time and its ability to blur the past and present is the key element that demonstrates its ability to transcend and shape reality. The universality of this element is the reason why steampunk seems to be at home among works of fantasy and mythology, especially when reality shows an increasing tendency to imitate science fiction more than ever before. The definition of steampunk may have changed since it was first created by the genre's founders, but readers continue to enjoy combining creative anachronism and history because good stories that are told over and over grow stronger with each repetition. The story of the hero's journey, as filtered through works like *Beowulf*, and *Stardust*, are living proof of this because they both demonstrate that all individuals are subject to constant change and improvement. The worth of a well-told story is greater than its individual parts because history is the culmination of individual stories.

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