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Fantasy and Imagination: Discovering the Threshold of Meaning

David Michael Westlake

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**FANTASY AND IMAGINATION: DISCOVERING
THE THRESHOLD OF MEANING**

By

David Michael Westlake

B.A. University of Maine, 1997

A MASTER PROJECT

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Advisory Committee:

Kristina Passman, Associate Professor of Classical Language and Literature,
Advisor

Jay Bregman, Professor of History

Nancy Ogle, Professor of Music

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Kristina Passman

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This thesis addresses the ultimate question of western humanity; how does one find meaning in the present era? It offers the reader one powerful way for this to happen, and that is through the stories found in the pages of Fantasy literature.

It begins with Frederick Nietzsche's declaration that, "God is dead." This describes the situation of men and women in his time and today. The statement has to do with the general disconnection of humanity in the western world from its foundations. All society had been based on the mythological literature of the past, but beginning in the Renaissance these tales had come under criticism. By the time of Nietzsche, they had fallen to the wayside. Humanity focused more on its ability to think than on the wisdom of former ages to govern society. Unfortunately, western humanity needed mythology to survive. Mythology reconnected it to a primal wisdom that truly guided how one should live.

This thesis argues that Fantasy literature provides a way for humanity to once again have a relationship with the wisdom found in mythology. The evolution of consciousness has raised humanity's ability to think critically and reflect. As it

evolved, humanity outgrew the mythology of the past. Fantasy makes mythology relevant for the reader of today.

Fantasy does this through the use of symbols. The old myths were made of symbols that universally spoke to the human condition. When the myths became dated and consciousness changed, the symbols lost their power because they could not be understood. Fantasy takes these symbols and places them in fresh settings. This allows today's western mind the ability to once again access the wisdom found in mythology.

A method based upon the Medieval "Fourfold Reading" is described to help draw wisdom out of Fantasy. It involves reading a text as a narrative, symbolically, morally, and creatively. Several examples are given from popular fantasy books, including *Harry Potter*.

But the real hope of this thesis is that the readers of fantasy stories will become the creator of his their own tales. These stories will be embodied in their lives and actualize the wisdom found in the symbols of universal meaning discovered through the new myths of today.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Walk into any bookstore in the western world, and you will find a growing section, usually in the back and separate from the rows and rows of books in the literature area. This area is devoted to books falling under the relatively new genre, fantasy. If you stay and meander through this aisle you will come across volumes of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Orson Scott Card, and Ursula K. Le Guin just to name a few. Picking up several different volumes and thumbing through them a common nature will become apparent. They all have stories of swashbuckling adventures set in ancient or medieval worlds full of magic with the vilest of villains and fantastical beasts or more modern setting but with the inclusion of supernatural forces. At first, it may seem that these pages offer little else than mindless escape from the ever-raging demands of contemporary career and home. But, if you were to stay there long enough and observe the wild variety of people wandering into this area and buying books, another conclusion might surprisingly suggest itself. The businessman on his lunch break, the college student, the teenager, the possible housewife; all of them pick up copies. Why would so many different types of people select these books to read? Perhaps, fantasy is more than just a flight from the hardships of this apparent world!

I will attempt to grapple with this idea and defend the profound value of fantasy for many people in the western world. I begin by recognizing a deficit of meaning in today's occidental society that hinders a great number of individuals from discovering paths that lead to profound self-fulfillment. Rather than accepting an answer from the

pages of contemporary philosophy, I work from the premise that the difficulty in finding a meaningful life comes from the immense weakening of the mythological fabric woven through culture since the dawn of time. The myths of Europe have provided immense knowledge on how to live an authentic existence within their luminous depths of creativity for all who will explore them. Unfortunately, the secrets contained within these tales have either been lost or become intensely difficult to find in our current milieu. Nevertheless, a new system of mythology emerges in the pages of fantasy literature that grants new access to deep knowledge. If interpreted correctly, this relatively new form of literature offers a path for some who hunger for inspiration in their lives.

Chapter 2

THE DILEMMA

Fantasy literature far from suddenly emerged to assume its relevance for today. The ground of its being lies in the existential crisis facing the west as it evolved in history. Prior to recent period of history, past generations had structured all of life on a mythological view of the world, but that slowly changed. Richard Tarnas best describes how the west moved away from culture based on myth to one without. He outlines the development of western consciousness in his book *The Passion of the Western Mind*. Beginning with the Classical world, he shows how European society had gradually gone through a metamorphosis of thinking to our present era. A massive shift had occurred in the late Renaissance that had called into serious question certain truths that had served as the ground for all thinking. Men like Galileo, Newton and Bacon had worked outside the established mythological model of the universe and had shown that it now longer held a dominant place in the ordering of men's and women's lives. This way of thinking brought humanity up to what is called the Modern Era. This period of time of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries opened up new possibilities for men and women, one where intelligence could act with freedom and effectiveness outside the traditional structures of meaning. But this worldview outside the established myths had a cost. It is worth quoting a rather large passage from Tarnas' description of this trade off where,

“...that new world was disenchanted of all those personal and spiritual qualities that for millennia had given human beings their sense of cosmic meaning. The new universe was a machine, a self-contained mechanism of force and matter, devoid of goals or purpose, bereft of intelligence or consciousness, its character

fundamentally alien to that of man. The premier world had been permeated with spiritual, mythic theistic, and other humanly meaningful categories, but all these were regarded by the modern perception as anthropomorphic projections. Mind and matter, psyche and world were separate realities. The scientific liberation from theological dogma and animistic superstition was thus accompanied by a new sense of human alienation from a world no longer responded to human values, nor offered a redeeming context within which could be understood the larger issues of human existence. Similarly, with science's quantitative analysis of the world, the methodological liberation from subjective distortions was accompanied by the ontological diminution of all those qualities-emotion, aesthetic, ethical, sensory, imaginative intentional- that seemed most constitutive of human experience. These losses and gains were noted, but the paradox seemed inescapable if man was to be faithful to his own intellectual rigor. Science may have revealed a cold, impersonal world, but it was the true one nevertheless. Despite any nostalgia for the venerable but now disproved cosmic womb, one could not go backward."¹

A controversial philosopher of the modern era clearly described the situation when he declared that society had killed god. With these words, Frederick Nietzsche boldly described the experience of his own age and prophetically stated the situation in the present age. In my opinion, he made more than some outrageous theological statement about the existence of god. He was describing a much graver loss for humanity. He was reacting against the old order of western civilization and pointing out

¹ Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*, 326,327. For a more information of the evolution of thought I point the reader also to the works of Ken Wilbur and for a more esoteric understanding those of Rudolf Steiner.

its crumbling foundation. Nietzsche used the word god symbolically, describing all attempts to discover meaning based upon the collected wisdom of the western tradition.² This old path of knowledge had its foundation in the myths of the west, including the Judeo-Christian scriptures and Greco-Roman literature; with the dispelling of their truth for the western mind, the path to old wisdom was dead.

This state of loss that both Tarnas and Nietzsche dramatically described could be looked at with despair and rightly so: it is a crisis. Today, men and women have immense freedom and power, unchecked by mythological notions but many have lost their way in this new setting and fumble in the darkness for some light of meaning to illuminate their lives. This scenario is hardly one of bright epiphany and revelation. Instead it is a bleak and desolate landscape. The poet T.S. Eliot, writing in 1922 not long after Nietzsche's death clearly painted a picture of this bleak setting as *The Wasteland*. In this poem, Eliot points out the absolute loss of hope occurring in Europe as it lost its connection to the mythological tradition that had given it meaning for thousands of years. He writes, "He who was living is now dead/ we are who are living are now dying."³ This reason for this death is from the lack of existential nourishment for people as they pass through life. He used desert imagery to bring the point home by comparing his present age to a land without water.

"Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road/ The road winding above among the mountains/ which are mountains of rock without water/ If there were water we should stop to drink/ Amongst the rocks one cannot stop to

² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 98.

³ Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 40.

think/ Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand/ If there were only water amongst the rock”.⁴

This problem can be approached in many ways, some leading to emptiness. Victor E. Frankl, a man who survived the Holocaust and then went on to become a leading professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School during the nineteen fifties and sixties, founder of logotherapy, described the situation in modern terms. He wrote that meaning was the primary motivation of every person's life above and beyond instinctual drives. Without meaning, Frankl believed that humanity slumped into an existential vacuum.

“The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century. This is understandable; it may be due to a twofold loss which man has had to undergo since he became truly a human being. At the beginning of human history, man lost some of the basic animal instincts in which an animal's behavior is imbedded and by which it is secured. Such security, like Paradise, is closed to man forever; man has to make choices. In addition to this, however, man has suffered another loss in his more recent development in as much as the traditions which buttressed, his behavior are now rapidly diminishing. No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism).”⁵

⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁵ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 121.

Frankl confirms the situation that Nietzsche and Eliot described, and his thoughts put it into even more desperate terms. If the ultimate goal of every human life is to discover meaning and saturate existence with it, what is humanity to do if the ability to discover meaning has disappeared? Ironically, the move against the old meanings of the past for the sake of freedom has only led to an even greater threat of imprisonment. As Frankl described men and women either slip into conformism or totalitarianism.

Both of these choices, conformism and totalitarianism rely on a literalism. This literalism is concerned with pre-figured answers given to adherents with very little room left for questions. But, life is full of more questions than answers and often these are different for every person. There is no way that one answer to life's mysteries can give people what they need. Literalism promises to feed those who hunger, but it does so with false diet of easy answers. Like pre-packaged food, literalism offers an illusion of nutrition, usually with fancy, deceptive, and colorful marketing. Unfortunately, little nutrition remains in the plastic wrapped over processed food, and it is the same with any path that claims to have the answers in a convenient and systematic pre-fabricated package. A diet of such ideas leads to a desolate trail of existence; no substantial fulfillment ever comes, and hunger remains.

Ultimately, I believe that the only way to satisfy this deep hunger of the west is through finding once again a mythological framework to work from. I agree with Tarnas that humanity has emerged into a new period of time where the old myths fail to meet today's deep needs, and that it is impossible to return to them as if nothing has happened. This, in turn, creates a true existential vacuum that puts humanity at great risk. But, why

exactly is this the case? What does mythology offer that is so important to human existence?

Mythology is a set of fictional tales related to the divinities and heroes of a group of people. First, it establishes a common cultural identity for those acknowledging a certain mythology offering moral lessons for everyday life and worship. The Jews provide an example of this. Regardless of how strictly they interpret the myths of their Torah, a common identity is thrust upon them giving them a common reference point in their identity and how they engage life. At various levels, certain moral obligations are instilled in them that govern their actions. Of course, a group can get stuck in this process and slip into a strict literal interpretation of their myths which gives rise to fundamentalism. Nevertheless, this is opposed to the true spirit of mythology, which grants the chance to move beyond a literal understanding of life and toward the awakening of the imagination. On close inspection myths are rarely black and white in their description of identity or moral conduct. The same story can often be read from different perspectives and levels. The Jewish Rabbis who compiled the Talmud seemed to understand this because included in these interpretations and commentary on the Torah are found various and conflicting points of view side by side.

Other cultures pointed out the manifold meanings found in myths; take for example the adventures surrounding the trials of Greek Odysseus as he returns home after the sack of Troy. This myth certainly points out certain moral conduct that is wise to follow, like hospitality to strangers, but there is more. Later Hellenistic philosophers such as Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry pointed out that the story was an allegory for

higher spiritual truths such as the ascent and descent of the Soul.⁶ This ability to interpret the myth beyond the literal opens the door to the imagination, the greatest power of humanity. When a symbol is identified in a story, the imagination is called upon to create meaning and if accepted bring it to fruition in life. All human genius flows from this wellspring of insight. The more adept one is in finding symbolic meaning in myths, and then life, the more one is able to create a meaningful existence.

But, most importantly mythology gives one the ability to glimpse into the absolute, putting the existence into perspective. This experience, epiphanal in character, opens the possibility to order life on something higher and more ideal. The Romanian born scholar of mythology, Mircea Eliade describes this experience as going beyond the historical situation of life and seeing more to reality than what meets the eye.

“...one goes beyond the temporal condition and the dull self-sufficiency which is the lot of every human being simply because every human being is ignorant in the sense that he is identifying himself and Reality with his own particular situation. And ignorance is, first of all, this false identification of Reality with what each one of us appears to be or to possess. A politician thinks that the only true reality is political power, a millionaire is convinced that wealth alone is real, a man of learning thinks the same about his studies, his books, laboratories and so forth... The periodic recitation of the myths breaks through the barriers built up by profane existence. The myth continually reactualises the Great Time, and in so doing raises the listener to a superhuman and

⁶ For specific examples of this process see Plotinus *The Enneads* and Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs*.

suprahistorical plane; which, among other things, enables him to approach a Reality that is inaccessible at the level of profane, individual existence.”⁷

Without the experience of myths, one becomes stuck in a world of only the physical here and now as Eliade describes, and the opportunity to have a better vantage point from which to understand life is lost. The world becomes more and more limited, and the higher goals of life disappear. A world like Frankl described emerges, one of totalitarianism and conformism where people either create or follow empty ideologies. I believe that this is the quandary of western society today; it has lost its way. Without the ability to think imaginatively, and with the path to higher ground forgotten, there is little hope of receiving a glimpse as to where we should go.

⁷ Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, 59.

Chapter 3

FANTASY: A POSSIBLE REMEDY

It is easy to point out the grave difficulty facing the west and proclaim the end of authentic existence. But stopping at despair is hardly the end of the story; hope still remains. With the rise of fantasy literature, a new portal opens into the profound depths that had once inspired generations before. It does so without asking a person to live in denial of thousands of years of human development. Instead, fantasy creates an entire new set of mythologies that can be turned to for inspiration. By reading them, one is again asked to work with interpretation and see things from many angles, there a glimpse is given into something larger than the individual, and most of all the imagination is called upon to form a picture of the acts of the story and see life in a different way.

Fantasy in many ways eludes a solid definition. This comes from the fact that it communicates primarily through symbols, like mythology. Joseph Campbell in his comparative mythological work defined symbols as vehicles of communication for transcendent ideas that should never be given a final interpretation. The goal is to keep them translucent so that they remain open to reveal the kaleidoscope of meanings that lie behind them. Any attempt to suspend symbols and capture their meaning in a static definition has fallen far short of the mark.¹ Nevertheless, the human mind is partly rational and needs definitions to help direct its path towards the truths that lie behind symbols. This is true with fantasy as well, readers will need general characteristics of the genre to help them identify it.

On a very literal level, it has some basic features, which all literature claiming to be fantasy must have. It always has the appearance of an imaginary supernatural setting

¹ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 236.

in this or another world. The supernatural images hark back to the primal ones of our earliest ancestors. Once involved with a story, western readers may possibly recognize the old tales of myth but in new garments. Even if they have never read the old myths, the images are still a deep part of the human condition remaining there after years of evolution. It is because the stories are the same; it is the setting and presentation that changes. The imagination is able to redirect everything so that it is new and recognizable to people of this age but still remains true to its original form. There is no formula to follow; the union of the imagination symbols and the surrounding world will govern the experience.

Most importantly, fantasy stories always have the strong presence of nature within their pages. This sets the symbols in a context of nature thus once again showing the mind there is a great relationship between the two. Wherever there is the wisdom of ancient symbols, one will find nature coiled around it. It may be through detailed landscape descriptions like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the discovery of a pre-technological counter culture of witches as in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, or the invasion of extremely archaic and powerful natural forces as in Charles William's novel *The Place of the Lion*. The author's choice on how to do this is unlimited, but it must have both old wisdom and nature for a story to be labeled fantasy.

Although Fantasy takes place in an imaginary setting, it must be rooted in the reality of this world. Two primary principles of this world are reason and logic. At first, this may seem like a contradiction. Why does a make believe world have to conform to these rules? The late fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien gives the answer; he writes that fantasy, "...does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the

appetite.”² More will be said about this concept later when I describe the creative powers of fantasy.

² Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 69,70

Chapter 4

THE INKLINGS AND THE EMERGENCE OF FANTASY

Of course, fantasy has always been with us in one form or another. Poul Anderson, a fantasy author and contemporary of J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that,

“...the oldest stories we have in written form can be called fantasies-stories such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and numerous Egyptian tales of magicians and demons.”¹

This is true; fantasy has its roots there just as well as others up through the centuries like the medieval work of Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, and the far later writings of William Blake or the Curdy novels of George MacDonald. But, as an official form of literature that became a genre, fantasy emerged much later in the twentieth century with the works of the Inklings.

The Inklings were an informal literary group that formed in the nineteen thirties and gathered through the forties in the university town of Oxford. It began as an undergraduate society dedicated to reading Old Icelandic sagas and grew into a rather casual group of male friends interested in writing. When the undergraduate who had started the group graduated from Oxford and left to begin his life, the group kept the name and continued meeting every Tuesday morning at a local pub and Thursday evenings on campus in the sitting room of one of its members, C.S. Lewis. When they met they would talk over drinks and pipes then one of them would read a manuscript that he was working on, and the others would patiently listen and offer helpful criticism.

During its existence, many different Oxford dons attended the gatherings as well as occasional writers from London. Of all these, three truly rose to importance (J.R. R.

¹ Anderson, *Fantasy*, 266.

Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams) and published far read books set in a new genre that became known as fantasy. Although drawn together by common concerns their works primarily were of this new type of literature. This is important because their shared ideas centered on more than imaginary worlds. They all shared a suspicion of western modernity including a concern over the relativism of morals in education, attacks upon the occidental cannon of literature and the demise of the English countryside and a deep Christian faith.

I see this as an important point because these authors addressed the problems of their time through the creation of mythological realms and situations that can be interpreted to help individuals in a time of tremendous social change as described above by Tarnas. I would also suggest that the fact that they primarily wrote fiction suggests that they too felt the loss of the old wisdom and like all people of their time were unable just to return to the past. I believe that they had a deep awareness that what the western world needed were new mythologies and tales of wonder that would once again allow modern minds to access the wisdom of the past. Tolkien described the history of Middle-Earth, Lewis wrote of Narnia and the Philandrian conspiracy and Williams described the eruption of the supernatural in the countryside surrounding London. These stories contained the kernels of old stories such as fantastical beats, epic quests of heroes against staggering odds, the battle of good against evil, and high ideals of virtue.

Although fictional, they revealed a world where the old myths still had power to affect life, and by reading them, a person was asked to develop a broader vision of reality by escaping literalism and entering the landscape of the imagination. Just how this was done will be revealed as I discuss what I see as the most important works of these men.

I will begin by describing the most well known of this trio, J.R.R. Tolkien, whom I see as the primary architect of fantasy because he wrote both literature and an essay on the emerging genre. A scholar of philology at the University of Oxford, England, Tolkien became the greatest proponent and apologist for fantasy literature. Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892 where his father worked for a colonial banking and investing firm; when he was four, he moved to England with his mother, where he would spend the rest of his days except for a brief tour of duty in World War I as an officer at the bloody Battle of Somme, and very short holidays to France and Belgium. Upon her arrival to England, Tolkien's mother found out that her husband had died of a fever not long after she had departed from South Africa. She raised Tolkien as a widow and never married again. She found solace for her grief in the Roman Catholic Church and converted not long after her husband's death. This proved to be an important step for Tolkien. He followed the new faith of his mother and remained a staunch Roman Catholic the rest of his days.

As he grew up, Tolkien became intensely interested in languages, especially ancient European ones. This led him to enter Oxford University in 1911 and study English literature. This course of study brought him into a close relationship with the myths of Europe, especially those of Germanic and Scandinavian origin. The contact with these rich languages eventually led to him receiving a Doctorate of Philology from Oxford in 1920. After teaching for five years at the University of Leeds, he accepted a position at his alma mater as a professor of Anglo-Saxon literature and language. There he began to formulate his developing ideas about northern myths and fairy tales, both of which he referred to as fairy stories.

As he taught and investigated these stories, his work led him to begin writing his own works of mythology on pre-historical England. He believed that the works that had come down to him about early England were insufficient and a new mythology needed to be told. Later in his life, Tolkien reflected back on this,

...once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large to the cosmogenic to the level of romantic fairy story – the larger found on the lesser in contract with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths – which I could dedicate simply: to England; my country. It should possess the tone and quality I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our “air” (the climate and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and hither parts of Europe, not Italy or the Aegean, still less the east), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be “high”, purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of land long steeped in poetry. I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for the minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama.²

This quote is important because it illuminates the fact that Tolkien felt on a personal level the same experience with mythology as that of the entire western world, the loss of the old wisdom found in the ancient tales and an ever increasing difficulty in having them speak to the modern consciousness. But he expresses no loss or anguish but rather the hopeful task of creating a new mythology that would continue to inspire meaning. This

² Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, 89,90.

creation was to have certain qualities that would make it powerful and meaningful for him. First, it was to be appropriate for his life context, England. A myth that stretched out in a foreign setting would hardly do. Even though it was new, it would still contain the same epic scenarios of the former myths but in a new combination. Then, it was to be “high”. I take this as meaning that it would ring with an adult depth of imagination and literary splendour combining great descriptive prose, strong characters and poetic qualities.

The work he set off to write became known as *The Silmarillion*, a collection of writings that he never finished and were published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien. In the pages of this text, Tolkien attempted to describe the development of a land known as Middle-Earth and the struggles between good and evil beings that dwelt there. This world was set somewhere in the pre-history of our own but was a remarkably different world. He begins with the genesis narrative describing how the world came into being through the song of great god who was before all named Illuvatar. From there Tolkien weaves a tale describing how evil came to be through the discordant note of one of the lesser divinities that sprang from the original verse, setting the stage for all subsequent conflict in his writing related to Middle-Earth. Through this tale he introduces the birth of numerous races into the world such as Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, and of course men, and he describes all their roles in the cosmic unfolding of his world. Although Tolkien believed that some of his best writing could be found within these pages he had little time to work on its continuously evolving narratives due to his responsibilities as a husband, father and university professor. Nevertheless, it set a

remarkable stage for two books that would describe the struggle of men and their diminishing allies against a seemingly unstoppable foe.

These works branching off from the grand undertaking of *The Silmarillion* were to grant him world fame for his writing. In fact, no one knew about his original work until after he died. The first of these books emerging from his Middle Earth was called *The Hobbit* about a little fellow named Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo was one of the creatures after which the title of the book is called, a Hobbit, who lived in The Shire. Tolkien best describes Hobbits and their ways in his own words.

They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort, which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants, which they can hear a mile off. They are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural soles and thick warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads (which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it).³

As it turns out, Hobbits are rarely interested in grand adventures of any sorts and prefer to spend time at home enjoying the good life. Bilbo is just like his race in that regard; unfortunately, destiny has other plans for him. One fine day a famous wizard by the name of Gandalf pays him a visit. Bilbo is cordial but afraid of what Gandalf might want and promises to have tea the next afternoon with the wizard. The next day comes

³ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 3.

around and to Bilbo's surprise the wizard does indeed return but thirteen dwarves accompany him. It seems that they have heard that a famous burglar lives in these parts, and they have come to hire him in their quest to recover their gold from the last of the great dragons, Smaug; and to Bilbo's dismay, he is the one they seek. After a bit of persuading Bilbo agrees to go along, even though he is far from a burglar and has himself never left The Shire.

Bilbo sets out the next day in a great fluster, without a hat, a walking stick or any money, or anything that he usually took when he went out; leaving his second breakfast half finished and quite unwashed-up, pushing his keys into Gandalf's hands, and running as fast as his furry feet could carry him down the lane, past the great Mill, across The Water, and then on for a mile or more.⁴

After catching up with the dwarves, Bilbo journeys with them into the east towards their old home, Lonely Mountain. Here, Smaug rests upon a great horde of gold. As they travel on their way with the company of the thirteen dwarves, Bilbo and Gandalf come face to face with many obstacles including trolls, goblins, giant wolves, great spiders, and wood elves. Finally, they stand in the shadow of Lonely Mountain and prepare to confront the dragon. Through all of these adventures, Bilbo proves himself again and again to be a valuable member of the party by helping them find magic Elvish blades, escape from spiders and wolves but most of all in their last enterprise. He fulfills his role as thief by sneaking into the throne room of the old dwarf kingdom and conversing with the dragon unseen. Even though he infuriates Smaug during this time, causing the dragon to exit the mountain and seek the destruction of all without, Bilbo identifies a vulnerable spot in the beast's armour and alerts a local warrior, named Bard,

⁴ Ibid., 39.

who is able to put a black arrow in it and fell the mighty serpent, removing the threat to lands surrounding Lonely Mountain.

In all these trials and tribulations, Bilbo's greatest deed is one that involves him in the greater wheels of destiny without him necessarily realizing it. Earlier in the tale, the dwarves and Bilbo must cross the Misty Mountains. During a hideous storm they seek refuge in a cave only to find out later that it was one of the entrances to the goblin king's lair. The companions are captured, but with the aid of Gandalf make a daring escape. While they are being pursued, Bilbo becomes separated from the rest of the party and finds himself in a deep cavern at the very roots of the mountains. Here, he discovers a magical ring that gives him the power of invisibility. But, before he can escape the mountain with his glorious find, he meets the former owner named Gollum who had dropped it on the ground. Gollum is a tortured creature who has spent a very long time alone with only the ring to give him comfort. While he searches for the ring, Gollum discovers Bilbo and immediately begins to size him up as an appealing dinner. Bilbo talks him out of it at first. Then Gollum makes a deal with him that if Bilbo will play a game of riddles and win he will show him, the Hobbit the way out of the dark place. On the other hand, if Gollum wins, then, he gets to eat Bilbo. After a dueling match of cunning wit, Bilbo asks as his final riddle what he has in his pocket. Gollum doesn't know and is even more upset when he discovers it is his ring. He becomes irate, and Bilbo then uses the power of the ring to follow Gollum out of the mountain as he attempts to find him. This ring is more important than Bilbo ever imagines, but it is not for him to fully understand just what he has come across. This falls to his nephew and heir Frodo Baggins in a later book.

This later work, describing the awesome power of the ring and its connection to the destiny of Middle –Earth, began when Tolkien’s son, Christopher set off for World War II. Tolkien began writing a massive volume entitled *The Lord of the Rings* that would deal with the larger scenario of which *The Hobbit* took place. He sent chapters to his son, who was off at the front, for comfort and cheer, and when the war ended he had it published under the title of *The Lord of the Rings*.

This volume, so vast that it would later be broken into three volumes, continued the story of the ring bearer, Bilbo Baggins. In his later years in retirement in The Shire, Bilbo is visited by his old comrade Gandalf, and while there, the wizard makes an astonishing discovery. The ring is actually more than just a magic tool; it is the incredibly powerful creation of the evil Lord of Darkness, Sauron. To make matters worse, Sauron is seeking the ring because it contains all of his powers, and if the ring is destroyed he also perishes. Gandalf persuades Bilbo to give the ring to his nephew, Frodo who is younger and stronger and should be able to bear it to where it can be destroyed.

Frodo, like his uncle, sets out on a perilous task and leaves The Shire behind with only three fellow Hobbit companions at his side. After many dangerous encounters with foul spirits and the thralls of Sauron the three find their way to Rivendell, one of the last refuges of the Elves. Here, they meet once again old Bilbo and hear about the wicked power of the ring and its creator. From Rivendell, they set off as part of a Fellowship with representatives from different races against Sauron including Gandalf the Wizard, Aragorn the true high King of men, Gimli the Dwarf and Legolas the Elf. The goal of the Fellowship is the destruction of the ring. As the party makes its way across many wild

lands, it is broken apart by internal divisions about how the ring should be used before it is destroyed. This makes the Fellowship weak and it ends before completing its task. Nevertheless, Frodo, with his loyal friend Sam, continues towards the Mountain of Doom where the ring can be destroyed. Throughout the rest of the tale, these two plod along towards the mountain alone until an unlikely traveler, Gollum, joins them.

As Frodo, Sam and Gollum make their way to the mountain, the rest of the Fellowship becomes involved in the immediate fight against Sauron's evil. They all come together finally after many adventures at a great battle set at the gates of a great city known as Minas Tirith. There, Sauron's armies are defeated but more lie in wait. The war is hardly over. The only way to defeat Sauron is to destroy the ring.

Far away from the horns of battle, Frodo trudges along towards his destination. As he travels, Sauron attempts to take control of him through his connection with the ring. And, to make matters worse, Gollum reappears and tries to trick Frodo out of the ring so that he can have his precious treasure back. Finally, Frodo makes it to the mountain, and with his dear friend Sam's help he is ready to cast the ring into the volcanic crater at its summit. He finds it hard to destroy because of the temptations placed in his head by Sauron and attempts to keep the ring. At this point, it is Gollum who saves the day, but not out of goodness. He wrestles with Frodo for control of the ring and ends up retrieving it but topples into the pit of fire with the ring in his possession. Gollum perishes and ring is destroyed, leading to the end of Sauron.

With the end of the book, Tolkien proves that he was up to his own challenge. Without a doubt, the stories were indeed "high", full of great detail, rich characters, interweaving tales and scenarios harkening back to former myths. But, still it is

important to remember that Tolkien was setting out to do more than just write a gripping series of adventures that would keep his readers at the edge of their seats. These books or tales were to be a new mythology. As noted before, for Tolkien this was a task of great importance because for him mythology had true meaning.

He demonstrated this in a poem he wrote for a dear friend and colleague about mythology. This man, C.S. Lewis, was at the time hardly a believer in the power of myth for contemporary human beings. The poem was entitled *Mythopoeia* (creation of Myths), and he dedicated it to Misomythus (hater of myths) from Philomythus (lover of myths). In its lines, Tolkien described the inspiration of myth and its relevance to modern humanity. First, myth has a powerful creative force and in a certain sense shaping reality. It grants its audience a vision of the world and allows them to experience it. Only through mythology's poetic revelation can anything be recognized and understood. Tolkien wrote that a person,

...sees no stars who does not see them first/ of living silver that sudden burst/ to
flame like flowers beneath an ancient song, / whose very echo after music long/
has since pursued. There is no firmament, / only a void, unless a jeweled tent/
myth-woven and self-patterned; and no earth unless the mother's womb whence
all have birth.⁵

This ability to define reality and cause one to fully understand what he or she sees is on account of where mythology derives from. It arises up from an indwelling wisdom that has its source in a higher knowledge. For Tolkien, this higher state is from his conception of the Christian god he believes in and this deity's relationship to humanity. At one time humanity may have been very close to god and true wisdom. But humanity

⁵ Tolkien, *Mythopoeia*, 86

moved away from this primal experience finding it harder to fathom true wisdom, nevertheless there is still a bond.

...The heart of man is not composed of lies, / but draws some wisdom from the only Wise, / and still recalls him. Though now long estranged, / man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.⁶

Perhaps this is through a fall from grace as described in the Eden narrative found in Genesis but I think that Tolkien was thinking more of what he had seen around him, the ever-encroaching literalism and steady movement away from myths. Nevertheless, he believed that humanity still contained the truth and could touch it deep within the imagination. This indeed had its source in the great primal wisdom of the past and by creating stories reveals ancient laws of life established on a far superior structure than modernity. It is what humanity should do; without this act, the world is unrecognizable and the true form of things become lost and meaningless. He points this out as he paints a picture of human beings and their story telling.

Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned, and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned, his world dominion by creative act;/ not his worship the great Artifact, / man, sub-creator, the refracted light/ through whom is splintered from a single White/ to many hues, and endlessly combined/ in living shapes that move from mind to mind. / Through all the crannies of the world we filled/ with elves and goblins, through we dared to build/ gods and their houses out of dark and light, / and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right/ (used or misused). The right has not decayed. / We make still by the law in which we're made.⁷

⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

This act of creation also gives hope. The heroic tales that are woven into the fabric of life consider the fact that life is full of struggles yet tells of those who persisted even in the face of great obstacles. On one level these stories are untrue, fiction, but as described above they give a true interpretation of the struggles faced making them more than just time consuming hardships. “Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme of things not found within recorded time, declares Tolkien.⁸ Even when life is heavy and in the end death always wins, myths still continue to inspire and give a reason to continue to toil. It is because the authors of these stories,

...have seen Death and ultimate defeat, / and yet they would not in despair retreat,
but oft to victory have turned the lyre/ and kindled hearts with legendary fire, /
illuminating Now and Dark Hath-been/ with light of suns by no man seen.⁹

Tolkien further elaborated these ideas about the creative spark of human beings in his essay *On Fairy Stories*. He originally gave this speech at a conference held at St. Andrew’s University, Scotland in 1938. This entire speech is built upon the premise that fairy stories (his own designated words for mythology) could still be written as long as these new versions were true in character to their predecessors. He believed that fairy stories had three values,

...the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of Scorn and pity towards Man.¹⁰

All of these correspond to my own description of mythology earlier. The first and last gives humanity a true perspective on life from a greater divine point of view and the second (using the word “magic” which etymologically comes from the word “magus”

⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰ Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 39.

meaning wise one) connects to the primal wisdom found behind the obvious world of the senses.

Tolkien argued that fairy stories (being true to their origins) provided readers with four major benefits beyond just entertainment. These were fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation. Beginning with fantasy (a term important because after this essay all modern fairy stories would bear this name), he laid out the process in which this takes place. Tolkien believed that the imagination is where all creation takes place. He defines imagination as the "...forming mental images of things not actually present."¹¹ After this comes another level of creativity that is the ability to successfully express these images in the material world, commonly called art. Tolkien called this stage after original imagination, fantasy. This is essential to understand Tolkien because to create images and bring them forth is the true nature of human beings. This tied into Tolkien's belief in the Christian God. He saw this God as a creator and humanity having been created in its image. Tolkien wrote,

Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.¹²

The argument that humans are creators directly relates to the second gift of recovery. Simply put in Tolkien's own words, "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – regaining of a clear view."¹³ This return allowed men and women to clearly see that the power of creation resides in them, and that they are able to bring forth their ideas in the world. But, recovery also re-directs the gaze away

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Ibid., 48.

¹³ Ibid., 60.

from error and towards just exactly where the inspiration of true art comes from. The next attribute of fairy stories explains this, escape.

Tolkien believed that fairy tales offered an escape from ugliness. He critiqued his own era and much of the progress he saw taking place; he felt that the greatest weakness of this period was arrogance among certain intellectuals promoting a particular style of modernity. For these people, there was no concept of yesterday, only advancement towards the technological society of tomorrow, often at the expense of aesthetics. Tolkien firmly believed that this view only led to disaster and despair. His reason for believing this to be true came from the physical manifestation of this modernity, ugliness. The fact that what Tolkien saw created by the hands of these progressive thinkers turned out again and again to embody anything but beauty proved its error.¹⁴

I believe that at this point it is tempting to see Tolkien as being against progress and the advances that come with it. It is true that his critique of modernity sounds reactionary but he never condemns the benefits of the evolution of science such as medical advancements that prevent people from dying from outlandish sicknesses like the plague, or the benefits of mass communication that permitted him to have contact with colleagues around the world. I think he does a critique of poor planning that often comes with rapid advancement. An example of this is an urban landscape that prevents one from enjoying the surroundings because of waste and litter.

According to Tolkien, modern fairy stories provided a means to escape this ugliness. They offered another way to beauty that reflected in fairy stories a truer sense of reality than what he saw around himself in the byways of his beloved England. He wrote,

¹⁴ Ibid, 61,62.

For my part, I cannot convince myself that the roof of Bletchley station is more “real” than the clouds. And as an artifact I find it less inspiring than the legendary dome of heaven. The bridge to platform 4 is to me less interesting than Bifrost guarded by Heimdall with the Gjallarhorn. From the wilderness of my heart I cannot exclude the question whether railway-engineers, if they had been brought up on more fantasy, might not have done better with all their abundant means than they commonly do. Fairy-stories might be, I guess, a better Master of Arts.¹⁵

One can understand that this critical tone brought Tolkien’s ideas under attack as “escapist”. Tolkien admitted that escapism was indeed one of the gifts of modern fairy stories. First, he declared that the word “escape” suffered from a misunderstanding. This came from literary critics confusing “escape” with “desertion”. He believed the person escaping into a contemporary myth to be similar to a captive escaping from prison. The world that the person escaped from was the technological world of the late twentieth century. One had to escape it because it was false; the person who stayed in the world around him was actually the one deserting reality and surrendering the true ultimate human reality.

Just so a Party-spokesman might have labeled departure from the misery of the Fuhrer’s or any other Reich and even criticism of it treachery.¹⁶

This “escapism” is more than just a Luddite preference for a pre-modern utopia. New myths have, “...many more permanent and fundamental things to talk about.”¹⁷ The reaction against technology is truly against the woes of the world being ushered in by the

¹⁵ Ibid., 62,63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

modern age with little or no concern for beauty and a longing for the days when humanity existed harmoniously with nature in an intimate relationship.

These are the other things more grim and terrible than the noise; stench, ruthlessness, and extravagance of the internal combustion engine. These are hunger thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, and death. And even when men are not facing hard things such as these, there are ancient limitations from which fairy-stories offer a sort of escape, and old ambitions and desires (touching the very roots of fantasy) to which they offer a kind of satisfaction and consolation. Some are pardonable weaknesses or curiosities; such as the desire to visit, free as a fish, the deep sea; or the longing for the noiseless, gracious, economical flight of a bird, that longing which the aeroplane cheats, except in rare moments, seen high and by wind and distance noiseless, turning in the sun: that is, precisely when imagined and not used. There are profounder wishes: such as the desire to converse with other living things. On this desire, as ancient as the Fall, is largely founded the upon talking of beasts and creatures in fairy-tales, and especially the magical understanding of their proper speech. This is the root, and not the “confusion” attributed to the minds of men of the unrecorded past, an alleged absence of the separation of ourselves from beasts. A vivid sense of that separation is very ancient; but also a sense that it was a severance: a strange fate and guilt lies in us. Other creatures are like other realms with which Man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance, being at war with them, or on terms of an uneasy armistice with.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

Tolkien's idea of beauty and ugliness were more than mere taste. It had to do with a certain understanding of what beauty and ugliness represented. On this point, I find Tolkien to be expounding a philosophy coming very close to that of the Neo-Platonist, Plotinus. Teaching in the first half of the third century C.E. on the Italian peninsula, Plotinus expounded upon many doctrines relating to the writings of the earlier Greek philosopher, Plato. After his death, one of his students, Porphyry, went on to publish his lectures under the title of the *Enneads*. In one of the more well known of these writings (*Ennead I, Tractate VI*), Plotinus expounded his understanding of Beauty. This was in his words, "authentic existence". One could recognize the absolute reality of something if and only if it was full of Beauty. He even went on to declare that,

We may even say that Beauty is the Authentic existence and Ugliness is the principle contrary to Existence: and the Ugly is also the primal evil; therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is Good and Beauty: and hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugliness-Evil.¹⁹

When Plotinus refers to "authentic existence" he points to the source of all being, something he called by many names: Truth, Love, One and the Good.

Plotinus believed that Beauty was the First Principle of all. From this, everything that came into being remained part of it. At the same time, there is a three level chain of being that descends from it. It proceeds from Beauty to the Intellectual-Principles (the ideal forms of everything, physical and not, including the virtues) and finally to Soul that creates all of life out of matter. He explained that they are all related to original Beauty the same way that light is related to the sun. Light pours forth, but it is still made from the same substance that makes up the sun and is an emanation of that source.

¹⁹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 52.

According to this image, Beauty resides in all, making it the true form of everything. Men and women, being part of this system, have the capacity to recognize Beauty. As Plotinus describes,

... it is something that is perceived at the first glance, something which the Soul names as from ancient knowledge and, recognizing, welcomes it, enters into unison with it.²⁰

This experience comes when something beautiful is seen, heard, tasted and even felt like a virtue. And when it is recognized, individuals will understand that it is their true homeland or as Plotinus called it, “the beloved Fatherland”.²¹

Ugliness, on the other hand, is set against Beauty and therefore contrary to the natural order. It is the sure sign that something is wrong. The soul is repulsed by it and innately recognizes this. Of course, it is possible that people may become blind to Ugliness and have to go through a purification process to once again awaken that inner sense of Beauty.

If a man has been immersed in filth or daubed with mud, his native comeliness disappears and all that is seen is the foul stuff besmearing him: his ugly condition is due to alien matter that has encrusted him, and if he is to win back his grace it must be his business to scour and purify himself and make himself what he was.²²

And as this ability is recovered, men and women who identify Beauty will be drawn to it as lovers drawn to their beloveds. And as individual souls race towards their longing a deeper understanding will grow as to how to align their lives more and more with Beauty. All of this is similar to Tolkien’s concepts of return and escape.

²⁰ Ibid., 50.

²¹ Ibid., 54.

²² Ibid., 52

The last and most important gift is the hope of a happy ending. This is exactly what fairy-tales give. They allow the reader to experience a world where everything works out in the end and good overcomes evil, granting consolation.

It does not deny the existence of dycatastrophe, of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.²³

Tolkien truly believed that humanity must have this consolation or else be left unsatisfied. He believed that modern stories hoping to follow in the footsteps of authentic fairy tales would follow this pattern and give much needed hope to its readers. This hope will in turn inspire them to believe in a good outcome for their own lives and humanity in general even in times of great tumult and confusion.

Following on Tolkien's theories of what came to be called fantasy fiction, I will now move to describe the related work of his good friend and colleague, C.S. Lewis. Lewis, like Tolkien, was an academic and a professor at Oxford in the years between 1926 and 1954, then leaving for Cambridge University where he stayed until his death in 1963. He came to this position through a long series of events. Originally born in Northern Ireland in 1898, Lewis spent his youth close to his mother and older brother. During this time, Lewis attempted his first attempt of fantasy, a foreshadowing of his later works, by creating an imaginary world called "Boxen". As his brother described in his memoir of Lewis, this imaginary world served as a source of great inspiration for many years to come.

²³ Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 64.

When Lewis was ten years old, his mother died after a long sickness. He spent the rest of his youth bouncing around to different boarding schools and academies. When he was eighteen, Lewis entered Oxford University and began his study of English literature, especially the works of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Shortly after commencing his studies, Lewis entered the army with his classmates and fought in the trenches of northern France. There, he received a wound and returned to Oxford to continue. Lewis remained at Oxford and graduated with a Doctorate of Medieval Literature in 1925. Immediately afterwards, Oxford offered him a job as a professor. Lewis took the position and would stay there until 1954 when he would go to Cambridge. During his academic career he came into contact with Tolkien who introduced him to the idea of fantasy literature. Although, Lewis never wrote an essay on their nature like Tolkien, I believe that in the pages of his fantasy stories he described the condition of society and how this genre could inspire it.²⁴

One can find this clearly in the first book of his fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* titled *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This book was set in World War II England during the Battle of Britain. He begins,

...with four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of air raids. They were sent to the house of an old professor who lived in the heart of the country, ten miles from the nearest railway station and two miles from the nearest post office.²⁵

²⁴ Lewis describes his life in great detail in *Surprised by Joy*.

²⁵ Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 27.

While at this house, the children discover a very special wardrobe. It turns out to contain more than coats in storage for winter. The back wall is a portal to another world known by its inhabitants as Narnia. Many mythological beasts, both good and evil, dwell in Narnia. The children enter and find themselves caught up in a war against the White Witch, an evil creature set on ruling Narnia through fear and intimidation of its subjects who are all talking beasts. She does this by imposing a perpetual winter on the land and letting her legions of wolves terrorize anyone who questions her. She is especially brutal when it comes to any prospect that a prophecy predicting her downfall will come true. This is that human children will end her reign. The entrance of the four children deeply concerns her, and she immediately seeks their destruction. The children side with the animals and magic beasts of Narnia and finally help bring about her downfall by fighting alongside the magical lion Aslan. Afterwards the children become the rulers of Narnia and grow up there. But, during a hunt for a legendary white stag they return to Britain by mistakenly entering the wardrobe again from the other side. When they return, they have changed little and are surprised to see that they have only been gone for moments in this world.

My intention here is far from retelling the entire story. What is important for this study of fantasy is how Lewis sets up the story. I find that this story describes the benefits of fantasy (as described by Tolkien) and gives an example of how it could possibly affect readers. First, the major protagonists are children full of imagination (the true state of humanity) but like contemporary men and women are in a setting of confusion, meaninglessness and ugliness best described by the book as war. Then, the children “escape” to another realm full of mythological images ranging from Celtic to

Christian, which is what happens when people read fantasy. While there, the readers discover the conflict between beauty and ugliness and the absolute reality of the former, bringing about a recovery of identity and new vision of life. People following the story are drawn into the conflict and like the children may begin to believe that they too have a special role to play in this battle against ugliness even if at times all seems lost. At the end, they receive encouragement because ugliness is indeed defeated and hopefully will be inspired to live in harmony with beauty and contend on its behalf in the world outside of the pages of the book. This type of reading asks for a certain suspension of reality and one could argue that it has little to do with modern life, but its higher purpose is similar to that of older myths. These take place in different realms outside of reality but nevertheless inform it by giving a different viewpoint on what is truly taking place in the material world.

I find another example of this type of writing in Lewis' book, *This Hideous Strength*. Although, a literary failure as far as sales and reviews were concerned, it gives a very clear presentation of the power of fantasy and what it is attempting to communicate to its readers. This book concludes Lewis' Perlandian trilogy. This series begins as science fiction (a close relative to fantasy, though a different genre with other goals) but transforms into fantasy with the final book. This switch occurs because Lewis wants his readers to see just how the struggles taking place in the pages of a fantasy novel (usually in magical realms) are also relevant in a contemporary setting. He is fully aware that the images taken from fantasy are often beyond comprehension because of their remoteness. He writes in the introduction that he has called,

... this a fairy-tale in the hope that no one who dislikes fantasy may be misled by the first two chapters into reading further, and then complain of his disappointment. If you ask why – intending to write about magicians, devils, pantomime animals, and planetary angels – I nevertheless begin with such humdrum scenes and persons, I reply that I am following the traditional fairy – tale. We do not always notice its method, because the cottages, castles, woodcutters, and pretty kings with which a fairy – tale opens have become for us remote as the witches and ogres to which it proceeds. But they were not remote at all to the men who made and first enjoyed the stories.²⁶

I will describe the basic outline of the story, and the reader should keep in mind that this is only a skeleton of the tale; there are many details left out that I am unable to recount due to the limited purpose of this paper.

Lewis' modern fantasy story begins in a little English university town just after World War II. He almost immediately introduces the reader to the two major protagonists, a husband and wife named Mark and Jane Studdock. These two have recently married and moved to the tiny village of Edgestow where Mark was offered a fellowship at Bracton University, a very small and insignificant graduate school. The initial euphoria of marriage has worn off for both of them and there is little intimacy between them. Mark works late at the university, and Jane spends her time chipping away at the doctoral studies she had stopped just before marriage. Little does this unassuming couple realize that soon they will be caught up in a universal struggle centered right there in Edgestow.

²⁶ Lewis *The Hideous Strength*, 348.

The only miraculous thing about the university is an ancient wood that it owns at the edge of its land. In the center of this old grove is a set of stones, which, some superstitious people believe, is the resting place of the legendary wizard Merlin. Recently, the university has been approached, by an organization called N.I.C.E., to sell the wood. This organization has plans to develop the wood and build a research center there and include Bracton in its work. This would certainly help Bracton's reputation and hopefully put it on the map as a modern institution of learning. The fellows of the university agree to sell the wood on account of this.

In reality, there is more at stake than just research. N.I.C.E. is actually a rather diabolical foundation that is working to undermine most of western society and replace it with a new model, one based purely on its twisted use of the social sciences. They hope to create a society where their inner circle of thinkers will decide just what is beneficial for all of humanity, and they have few scruples. One of the horrific ideas they believe in is the absolute destruction of any remnant of former wisdom that they see as dated and hindering society. Included in these plans is the doing away with any study of the liberal arts, a controlled selection of human development that would exterminate certain groups of people, and the destruction of old forms of life, including that of the village.

Behind N.I.C.E.'s plans, Lewis places a Gnostic conspiracy that he had developed in his two books preceding *This Hideous Strength*. An evil spirit has held control of the earth for some time and is at war with the spiritual guardians of the other planets in the solar system. Now, it turns out the war has gone against it, and it is losing its grip on many people of the earth. It hopes to find the tomb of Merlin and use this wizard's

power to once and for all destroy the forces of good. This is the reason for the sudden interest in a forgotten wood behind an insignificant university.

After the sale of the wood, N.I.C.E. takes over the university and town by force with an armed police force and begins to rip up the old wood to recover Merlin. Unfortunately for N.I.C.E, when Merlin's crypt is opened his body is gone.

Meanwhile, Mark has taken a great interest in N.I.C.E. and has been recruited by some of its important members to become one of them. He leaves Bracton just before the seizure of Edgestow and travels to N.I.C.E headquarters. There he is manipulated into writing articles in favor of their work. At first, he enjoys this job and begins to feel that he finally doing something important. Over time, he becomes suspicious of the entire operation and he begins to discover that N.I.C.E. is hardly a true scientific operation and that there is something very peculiar behind all of its affairs. Unfortunately, it is too late for him to change his mind, and he learns the hard fact that once you have been initiated into N.I.C.E. there is no leaving. He discovers that others have also become disenchanted, but they always end up dead shortly after they leave.

Back in Edgestow, Jane gets caught up in the entire affair and watches the village go under a brutal martial law. Luckily, she makes friends with an older couple who help her escape the chaos and find refuge in a rather strange setting. This couple and several other people have moved to the country safely outside of Edgestow where they have gathered around a very special man. His name is Random, a former professor of Philology, and he is absolutely aware of the current struggle taking place between cosmic forces. He is serving as the main agent against the evil spirit ruling the earth. Heavenly

messengers visit his house regularly giving him counsel on what to do, and he has also been commissioned to find Merlin.

Indeed, Merlin has awakened. He has left his tomb by an old tunnel connecting it to the surrounding countryside. He eludes capture by N.I.C.E. agents and finally ends up with Random and his followers. There, although feeling rather out of place, Merlin agrees to help in the struggle against evil and a plan is devised that will end N.I.C.E.'s designs. Merlin goes to its headquarters disguised as a priest and begins to work his magic there. He drives the members against each other by playing mind tricks, and they end up killing one another. To finish the job, Merlin releases wild animals that have been caged up in the laboratory for cruel experiments. These beasts enter the main building and kill all of the remaining members of N.I.C.E.. As one last act of purgation, a great flood arrives and swells the local river around Edgestow so high that it breaks the dikes and washes away all of the village that is now filled with N.I.C.E. police, thereby bringing to a close all of its plans. Merlin disappears with the flood forever.

Mark manages to escape and is reunited with his wife, and the young husband and wife are filled with a new love for one another and a deeper sense of what is truly important in life.

Here, in this outlandish tale, readers are also taken on a journey by fantasy if they are able to interpret the story in light of their own lives. First, they find a very serious attempt being made against the imaginative principle of humanity in the form of a modern movement (even though it is overstated). This could be seen as symbolizing certain trends in contemporary society against the act of artistic creation. Readers like Mark may have been tempted to ignore works of the imagination because they seem out

of touch and hardly related to real life. But, with the entrance of Merlin (a representative of the old way) light is shed on reality and recovery occurs that directs readers to the true wisdom of life found in the ancient tales. Then, an escape occurs from the ugliness of this movement and its hatred for the beautiful. Here, the fictional N.I.C.E appears much like an extreme version of Tolkien's earlier description of what humanity escapes through fantasy. Finally, good triumphs over evil, giving readers hope that in their own lives it is possible to overcome dark struggles.

Another aspect of this story is the use of Merlin. He easily represents the old wisdom of mythology. It is important to point out that he decides to perish with his enemies rather than remain with Random. He is absolutely out of place in modern England with almost two thousand years of cultural evolution having occurred since he walked the earth. He works with a magic that is from a different time altogether, driven by strange ethics and beliefs unacceptable even to some of his new allies. I find this as a commentary on the relevance of old myths in today's times. They may be profound but for the most part are strange, hard to understand, and even unacceptable for contemporary readers. Still, there is wisdom there, but it has to be transformed into new versions accessible to modern readers. Lewis gives an example by writing one in this book and in his other fantasy novels.

Moving on to the last of the authors discussed in this section, I come to Charles Williams, least known of the Inklings. He followed a very different path to writing fantasy than his Oxford friends, Lewis and Tolkien. Williams was born into very humble circumstances in 1881 in London and would remain there most of his life. His parents were always struggling to make ends meet. Williams always dreamed of academia,

especially the study of writing and literature, but his financial situation prevented him from ever finishing a university degree. Although denied this opportunity, he still found work related to his dream and took a job working for Oxford University Press as a proofreader. Williams toiled at this job and demonstrated to his superior that he had talent. Rather than waste this talent, Williams was promoted again and again until he ended up as one of the chief editors for the press. As he progressed up the career ladder, Williams gained more time to pursue his own passion for letters and begin to write novels. He got them published through his press and were received by a small but dedicated audience.

One of his readers was C. S. Lewis. The Oxford scholar introduced himself to Williams and the two became friends. Lewis invited him to join the Inklings, and through this invitation, he became acquainted with Tolkien. Williams frequented this group when he could but found it difficult because of his responsibilities in London. He would take a train to Oxford and join the meetings, often seeming a bit out of place among the assembled pipe-smoking scholars with a cigarette hanging from his mouth and his current manuscripts wrapped up in copies of London newspapers to preserve them. Later, the Battle of Britain forced the Oxford University Press to move its London office to Oxford, and Williams was able to attend the meetings regularly. Before his death in 1944, Williams had several Fantasy novels, plays and theological works published as well as receiving an honorary Doctorate in Letters from Oxford University, thereby fulfilling his life long dream.

Like Lewis and Tolkien, Williams approached fantasy through the lenses of Christianity. But, unlike them, he had a deep appreciation for the mystical arts and their

interpretations of Christianity. As a middle-aged man he had been initiated into the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, an esoteric Christian secret society. Later, he resigned from this group but was said to at times to wear the garments of the society, and kept a sword from the order in his office, claiming that it contained magical qualities.²⁷

His leaning towards the more mystical aspects of Christianity certainly influenced his novels. Each one of them had two things in common, the city of London and its surrounding countryside as a setting, but, more importantly, the appearance of supernatural powers in contemporary England. The emergence of these powers manifested themselves in different ways, sometimes as an ancient artifact like the Holy Grail or the Stone of Solomon and other times as a truly otherworldly force such as spirits from those deceased or the primordial archetypal powers of creation. Each time these powers threatened to destroy the fabric of society, and the hero of each novel had to find a way resolve the spiritual tension that their presence caused.

Williams' Fantasy novels provide more than just suspense and esoteric lore. His works have a deeper existential message; they describe how characters discover solid meaning when everything falls apart. On this account his work also follows Tolkien's definition of fantasy but places a heavy emphasis on the act of this literature itself as a creative force. This is especially true in his most well-known book, *The Place of the Lion*. In the pages of that text, Williams creates a world on the brink of destruction and reveals just how it is saved. I will briefly describe the important events of the book in order to comment on them.

The work begins in the rolling countryside just outside London. There we meet the main character of the novel, Anthony Durant (coincidentally an editor for a London

²⁷ Gareth Knight briefly describes the life of Williams in *The Magical World of Charles Williams*

based periodical) and his best friend Quentin Sabot. These men had gone on a walking tour of the pastoral lands around London for the day. As evening comes, the two men find themselves far from London with the bus that should normally have taken them back never making an appearance. As they make their way down a country lane they encounter a mob of men who are hunting a lioness. Allegedly, she has escaped a traveling circus and now poses a threat to the meek sheep herds that dot the surrounding fields. After leaving this group of men behind, night falls, and they meet the creature but in a rather strange way. They come upon a house with a garden. There, a man walks and from nowhere a fierce lion, unlike a frightened lioness described by the mob, jumps on him and vanishes. The two adventurers run to his side and find him in a deep unconscious state.

The man they find lying on the ground is Mr. Berringer, a philosopher of sorts who, unbeknownst to them, has been experimenting for some time with meditative states that connect him to the archetypal realities of the universe. His practices have finally brought him to his goal. He has released the primal powers of creation onto the English countryside. They enter as supernatural versions of animals and begin to draw the physical world into themselves. First, all animals who belong to their family of species are drawn to these mystical creatures and are absorbed into them, the end result will be the destruction of everything as it is absorbed into the powers that made life possible to survive in the first place.

This absorption process has a special effect on human beings. Whatever thoughts people have aligned themselves with become more and more prominent until they are the overarching principles of their being, and they transform physically to represent this until

they are absorbed into the true idea of this thought. For example, if one is a hateful person then one is slowly transformed into a spiteful monster of a human and finally is destroyed by meeting the devouring perfection of their hatred.

Anthony and Quentin are unaware that this is happening at the time and return to London. Both of them, however, are different since this experience. Anthony is a man governed by love for his world, friends and girlfriend, a doctoral candidate named Damaris Tighe. As the story progresses, he becomes ever more concerned with the possible danger to his friends and the world in which he lives. Quentin, on the other hand, is governed by fear. The emergence of the primal ideas of creation drive him mad with fear, and he flees London in the hope of finding a place to hide from all that could do him harm. The fear builds and builds until Quentin is absolutely paranoid of all, even those who seek to help him.

Anthony's girlfriend, Damaris, aligns herself with egotistical ambition centered on her own wish to become an important scholar. Her obsession with success prevents her from having any meaningful relationships, seeking only those that could benefit her career as a scholar, including Anthony, because he is an editor for a journal in which she hopes to be published. The primal powers reveal themselves to her as a hideous slithering serpent that radiates a dreadful stench. Finally, she is left to her destruction as a demonic figure looking like a grotesque version of Abelard, the focus of her doctoral work, comes to take her away.

Other characters' transformations are also described, few of them positive. Mr. Foster is one these. He was a student of Mr. Berringer and very interested in the power of the supernatural world because he wants dominion over others. As the story proceeds,

he grows more violent and begins to look more bestial. Mr. Foster stalks the weak characters and finally lusts after the destruction of Quentin, who represents the absolute image of fear and weakness.

Anthony watches this entire happening and seeks a way to prevent ultimate destruction and save his friends. He does this by coming into contact with another of Berringer's students, a Mr. Richardson. This book clerk introduces Anthony to a text he was translating for Berringer on the celestial hierarchy. This document is a work entitled *De Angelis* by a Renaissance theologian named Marcellus Victorinus. This fictional author hopes to explain the divine order of the cosmos and the heavenly beings who govern it by elaborating on an earlier document by a Greek patristic author by the name of Alexander of Byzantium. This make believe text is a fictional version of the early patristic author Pseudo-Dionysus' book *The Celestial Hierarchy*. It describes to Anthony exactly what is happening. The created universe is composed of different levels of reality that begins with God as the primal source of being. Below God there are nine orders of angels reaching down to the level of reality where humankind is located. These levels are in an order of perfection spanning from the highest and most perfect, the cherubim and seraphim, which behold and reflect the purity of God, to the world of contemporary humanity. This highest level of the divine hierarchy contain the perfect archetypal forms of all of nature; everything below accepts these forms and makes them manifest in the material world.²⁸ These highest angels have begun to call back into themselves the orders of being below them. The text of Marcellus illuminates the cause of this. During this particular period of time, it has been given unto man to control these beings but only those who have dominion over themselves. It appears that certain individuals, perhaps

²⁸ Pseudo-Dionysys, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 160,161.

Berringer and Damaris, have called upon these angelic beings yet lacked the dominion to behold them. What they found were powers beyond their imagination that have begun to physically manifest. As this happens, the world of Anthony will finally disappear into the primal formless void from which it first came from.

Anthony takes this knowledge and uses it to connect with the primal archetypes. This act, when mixed with his love for all, gives him a certain authority over what is happening. He is able to mend the rift in the universe, once again placing a veil between the material world and the supernatural, thereby rescuing his friends and the earth from absolute destruction.

He completes this task by becoming a new Adam. The novel suggests that Adam had a special task set upon him by God; he was to actually be a second creator through the process of naming all that is. This act of Adam is more than just prescribing names to this and that beast. It is a symbolic naming that veils the power of God's creation behind images that mortals' eyes are able to behold because in its pure form it would absorb and destroy humanity. Like Adam, he is given freedom to name as he will thereby creating his own existence behind a vision of his own making. These aspects of pure creation are the forces now crashing into the world. Just as Adam named the beasts in the original Garden, Anthony goes before the threatening Ideas and again names all of them, returning nature to a non-threatening force.

He called and he commanded; nature lay expectant about him...at each word that he cried, new life gathered, and still the litany of invocation and command went on. By the names that were the Ideas he called them, and the Ideas who are the

Principles of everlasting creation heard him, the Principles of everlasting creation who are the Cherubim and Seraphim of the eternal.²⁹

In my opinion, Williams' creative act of fantasy writing gives the clearest account of how this genre truly relates to contemporary readers. It begins with the experience of return. All the characters of the book start off with a deep interest that governs their lives. When the primordial Ideas enter into the world, these drives reveal themselves, giving readers a glimpse into what is behind the characters' actions whether it be fear, hate, selfishness or love. At this moment, it becomes obvious if a life is governed by ugliness or beauty. For those held by beauty such as Anthony, a vision becomes clear as to what is truth and what is only an illusion leading to self-destruction, as is the case with Foster. Through this story readers may look into their own personal interests and decide for themselves if they are on a path of edification or misery. If they are capable of sincerely seeing the story in more ways than just as an entertaining narrative, they will be challenged to identify their own interests with higher ideals as Anthony does and redirect their lives to the good of all.

With a redirection of vision towards loftier ends, readers will follow Anthony and escape from the illusion of more base emotions like the ones that rule Damaris, Foster, and Quentin, and receive consolation. They will see that these lead to a miserable end and hopefully will acquire the ability to see through the false ideals that promise power, happiness and self-preservation. And just as Anthony achieves victory over the naked Ideas of the universe, they receive a model of hope that love does conquer all, and that a life ordered by a higher good will grant them a happy ending.

²⁹ Williams, *The Place of the Lion*, 198.

But, most importantly, this recovery of vision also reveals to the readers that there is truly a staggering ability within each human being to create. This is indeed the original nature of every person, and like the picture of the primordial Adam presented by the novel, they all have the ability to see beyond the chaos of their particular lives (as Anthony does) and give order to it. With this ability to name the things that hamper or benefit comes victory and inner serenity. Then, a future of love and happiness is possible.

Chapter 5

READING THE SYMBOLS

This discussion of fantasy has shown how it presents to today's world a new path of mythology. This path is rich in meaning providing for its readers much of the inspiration and guidance that mythology had for those of the past. But, it is important for the reader to know how to read the tales of fantasy so that they become a source of wisdom. The above examples demonstrated that this can be done, and I would like to propose a way for readers to approach these stories. I suggest that a method can be found in an adaptation of an early Christian technique used during the Middle Ages that taught how to draw wisdom out of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The reason I point to this system is because its sole purpose was to help ecclesiastical scholars find hidden meaning in the pages of the Bible. Today, the ability to see beyond the written word into the deeper levels of a book is dormant for many and includes those attracted to fantasy novels. Since fantasy comes forward as a contemporary mythology offering guidance and inspiration to its readers, much like the old tales of the past, why not approach it in a similar way as the early Christian fathers approached the system of inspiration coming into their lives. Their method of interpretation provides a place to begin and in the same way that they had adapted the methods of late antiquity to help them understand scripture, I suggest that readers use a variation of this system to aid them in interpretation of fantasy.

The technique, in its highest form, as referred to here, was called the fourfold reading of scripture. In his book, *God, Cosmos and Humankind: The World of Early*

Christian Symbolism, Gerhart B. Ladner (former Professor of History at U.C.L.A.)

describes how this system was used by the early Church Fathers. The four levels,

...were distinguished: (1) the literal and historical meaning (2) the typological and allegorical meaning...(3) the moral meaning, also called tropological meaning; (4) the anagogical meaning, in particular the eschatological one. All aspects of this fourfold sense of Scripture have their symbolic meanings, which were summed up in the late Middle Ages in a well known couplet: *Littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria,/ moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.* (The letters teach what happened, allegory what to believe; The moral meaning what to do, anagoge the goal.)¹

Most people are familiar with the literal approach to a text. It is the reading of a story and taking it at its face value, but for Christians it is also the belief that the, "... Bible is at the same time a revelation, and precisely for that reason it is symbolic redemptive history."²

The allegorical sense is the belief that in the text are symbols that are deep expressions of faith. The Christian use of allegory, always typological, points to the Old Testament prefiguring the New. An example of this is the use of the Red Sea narrative of Exodus as referring to the sacrament of Christian baptism by water and the Holy Spirit.

The third level revolves around morality and way of life that God intended his people to live. Often, these lessons are tropological, referring to the base of that word that means "a turn", interpreted as the ethical or moral turn to the higher life of a Christian virtue, love. One example is to interpret the design of the ark of Noah as

¹ Ladner, *God, Cosmos and Humankind: The World of Early Christian Symbolism*, 264.

² *Ibid.*, 265.

representing the Christian church. It was wider at the bottom and narrower at the top designating the broadness of the church that includes the body but at the level of the waves of sin, and above the swells, the narrow path of the Spirit. All this points to the fact that a Christian must rise above the impulses of the flesh and strive to live a life limited in indulgences.

The last level is the most elusive and important because it finds signs in the text pointing to the hope for the kingdom to come. An example could also be made of Noah's ark. It could also represent the church but this time in the same way God rescued the upright and judged the earth, he saved those who followed his commands. Noah's family represents the Christians who accept the teachings of the church, and on account of this, the faithful elect will be carried to a new land and spared the judgment that falls upon the rest of humankind.

In my opinion, these four levels of reading can be tailored to fit the interpretation of fantasy. I would change them, keeping in mind Tolkien's purposes of fantasy then correspond them with the different senses of the fourfold reading naming them: (1) Narrative; (2) Symbolic (3) Tropological (4) Creative. These levels are similar to the old method but at the same time different. First I will describe them and then give examples of how they work in specific texts.

The narrative is the literal reading of a fantasy book and accepts that if it is written in a high and serious form it is worthy of deeper consideration.

Symbolic is similar to the Biblical allegory in that it hopes to correspond one thing written about to another, but it is different because it is more open. It hopes to create symbolic comparisons between situations in the lives of readers with that of

different scenarios in fantasy novels. Through this experience, the conflicts and circumstances that take place in a book will begin to correspond to those of real life, and what appears to be either a boring day to day affair like preparing to go to work or a serious matter such as the loss of a job begins to take on more mythological aspects that gives the event substance. Getting ready for work symbolically becomes the preparatory moments before another day in the life of a great warrior. The laying out of the right outfit could become the choosing of correct gear before setting out on yet another day of adventure. On a graver note, the loss of a good job could become the hero's summons to set out on a new path.

The third level, tropological, keeps the same title as that of the fourfold reading because it involves a turning, combining Tolkien's gifts of return and escape. Through the sagas of fantasy, the readers will come across the ever-present battle between the ugly and the beautiful. A light is then shed upon the different paths of life, some leading to true happiness and others to dissatisfaction and internal misery. They will find that some characters choose the former and others the latter. As the different routes in life are revealed through characters, readers may begin to understand the best way to live and identify with the actions of heroes and heroines who follow goodness such as Anthony in *The Place of the Lion*. Inspired by these movements of beauty, readers may begin to emulate the characters they come across deciding how similar actions may be accomplished in the day-to-day operations of this world. An example might be that a person decides to spend time helping someone without the expectation of receiving anything in return.

The final sense of reading is the most important, the creative. It is built upon the others before it because it uses symbolism and turns away from a life of ugliness, but it is much grander in its outcome, and not all readers may rise to its calling. It is built upon the premise that all men and women are, as Tolkien suggested, creators, hence artists in their own right. Of course, this means that they are more than the way word “artist” is described today: painter, sculptor, singer, etc. It has more to do with an ability to create a beautiful life from the materials at hand. Biography and current situations become the colours and mediums that this creative impulse takes to produce a masterpiece of art called life. In fact, this is the natural act of humanity. Fantasy awakens this endeavor through identification with the characters and scenarios described above, but it asks now for a further step. This level inspires a person to now create their own symbolic Fantasy world and a vision as to how beauty may be incarnated in the here and now. I will discuss this special sense in the next chapter where it will be elaborated in great detail.

I will present a more contemporary fantasy novel to show how the new fourfold reading can be put to use. It comes from the first book of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea Trilogy*, *The Wizard of Earthsea*. In this story, we find a young boy named Ged who is discovered to have magical powers. This happens when he creates an illusion and conceals his village in a bank of mist, making it impossible for a marauding band of sea raiders to find it. When this happens, he is sent away to a school of wizardry where he learns the ways of the magical art.

While at the school, Ged finds a rival who often annoys him to no end. The two boys take up a challenge to compete against the other to see who the better wizard is.

The competition turns sour when neither one of them will admit that their rival is a wizard.

Ged becomes frustrated and declares that he will summon a spirit from the world of the dead. Students have been commanded not to attempt such things. Nevertheless, Ged goes through with it. The spirit that comes out is powerful and is only driven away by the old mages of the school. Ged lies in a coma-like state for four weeks. When he wakes from this state he learns that the dark spirit, resembling a great shadow, has been awakened by his arrogance. It will roam the earth seeking him out. As the evil he has unleashed wanders in the world; Ged's destiny becomes linked with it. He must confront and destroy it before the spirit consumes him and uses his gifts to bring evil upon the land.

The first level of the fourfold reading quickly presents itself. Simply put it is the story that has just been told. Understanding the general plot and the details therein, then believing that within the narrative there are lessons to be learned, accounts for this level.

On the second level, the symbolic seems to hide under the surface. It must be drawn out and identified. Ged's rival represents the obstacles that every person has in life regarding pride. It tempts Ged to use powers that are less than beautiful to prove his greatness. Readers too may have had a similar experience when a facing a situation where they wanted to win at any cost, possibly by even breaking certain codes of conduct that have been placed there to keep them from harm.

On the symbolic level there is a clear instruction that one act with humility and refrain from arrogance. Only evil comes out of it. Next, one's wise teachers should be

obeyed. These masters have one's best interest in mind. Doing what they suggest and avoiding what they warn against leads to further growth.

The next level, the tropological, is more difficult. Ged's rival represents the obstacles that every person has in life. The magicians represent wisdom in life's actions. The challenge to Ged by his rival symbolizes how one should deal with conflict. The dark spirited shadow describes a possible bad outcome of that experience. When Ged breaks the mandate against using magic that one is unprepared for a diabolical shadow is released in the world. This represents the same events that happen when readers disregard their own ethical codes because in that action they also reveal a dark side that could undo their lives and others around them. One only has to think of how humanity has used certain abilities such as the development of nuclear weapons. This amazing force originally was used to arrest the aggression against the Japanese in World War II, but now there are nuclear devices spread all around the world and a staggering amount of destructive capability at hand.

When Ged realizes the consequence of his actions it causes him to turn from his pride. If readers have entered into the story it could do the same, granting them a tropological experience. The sudden awakening to the ugliness of pride helps readers see that any path following this principle is truly an illusion, especially when it seems to promise a release from inner turmoil. They will have the opportunity to reflect and look to another response to a situation, one inspired by beauty. Again taking up the example of nuclear weapons, people have the chance to investigate the reasons for using such a devastating force and think of how to avoid future instances that could lead to such a scenario, seriously holding suspect the arguments in favor of such violence.

Contemplation upon these matters and the response of Ged to the shadow he releases, gives rise to the creative level of reading. Attaching a real world face onto the shadow such as nuclear power now opens the door for readers to decide on a much larger act. They have the opportunity to create the imagery needed to understand the nuclear age as a manifestation of that shadow released by their own culture's pride. The same way Ged goes out seeking his shadow at all costs before it brings destruction to Earthsea, readers could be inspired to confront a power the dangerous force that their own western culture has set free in this world. Evaluating their own circumstances and lifestyles, they may be inspired, through means driven by beauty, to dedicate their lives to finding this shadow and bringing it under control.

Another example of fantasy interpretation (this time with a less dramatic struggle than against nuclear power) comes from the present day author J.K. Rowling's book *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Coming from the five books written thus far describing the journey of Harry as he passes through the different grades of Hogwarts Academy, a school of Wizardry, located in the Highlands of Scotland. Here, young wizards from around the United Kingdom prepare themselves for a life of magic.

During his third year of training, Harry Potter has the good fortune of having a professor whom he truly respects, Professor Lupin. This man unfortunately has one problem; he is a werewolf. Every full moon he becomes a hungry, prey-seeking, beast. This is a serious problem for him and all of the people near to him.

On a very literal level, the story describes the trials of a person infected with this supernatural disorder. The pages of the book capture this dilemma, and for the readers

willing to look at this story as more than mere entertainment there is message there to be found.

Symbolically, Lupin's life represents the mixture of woundedness and vitality in every person. Deep within everyone there is something that haunts and at times thwarts attempts at success. Likewise, there is a brilliance in everyone, which allows him or her to shine. Lupin shares these characteristics. True, he is hindered at every turn by his problem, but his gifts as a brilliant Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts permit him to play an awesome role in the defeat of evil.

Tropologically, readers are presented with a choice to either reject or have compassion on Lupin; most choose the former. Rowling relates in an interview that Lupin represents a person who is literally broken or damaged by this problem. It is similar to one who suffers a mental illness or grave physical ailment. And the reaction of others is significant.³ Harry's reaction demonstrates the proper way to engage someone suffering so extensively; it is through compassion. Now the choice is obvious for readers, rejection or compassion for those in pain.

On a deep soul level, all people stand in Lupin's shoes. There are the hindrances originating from birth, environment, bad choices or freak mishaps of fortune that will always remain. Nevertheless, combined with these defaults are the gifts that may have the same origins. It is up to all to find out how to work with the bad and prevent it from permanently causing the good to be constantly overshadowed by it. The reality is that the good traits far outweigh the negative ones. Here is the readers' creative moment. They have the chance to structure their lives from that point on to all who suffer, including themselves.

³ Fraser, *Conversations with J.K. Rowling*, 40.

The above examples show how something higher may be drawn from the pages of fantasy literature. Through this fourfold reading, the imagination may extract what it needs on the journey called life. Like Moses who struck a rock in the desert and drew forth water, the imagination is able to bring forth the refreshment and sustenance to sustain its sojourn. There is volume after volume of true fantasy available. The canon is hardly limited. The only limitation exists in the imagination's own inability to see past the veil of the ink and paper.

Chapter 6

CREATION

The path of true meaning lies in a fantasy world of the reader's own creation that incarnates in the world of flesh and blood. If the reader only goes through the pages of a book and nothing changes, then critics prove their point, fantasy then does become escapism and desertion from life. This is why it is paramount that the last level of reading, Creative, be discussed in more detail, at all times keeping in mind that this is the final goal of fantasy literature.

The worlds that live and breathe in the pages of fantasy are an act of the author's imagination. It is his interpretation of the fabric of the universe that he discovered when confronting problems. This is the true mission of fantasy, to awaken the creator in every reader. It offers the possibility of unlocking the door to people's imaginations so that everyone may find their own thresholds of meaning and cross into a life worth living.

For the readers of fantasy, Nietzsche's famous declaration still stands, "God is dead". This indeed declares that the old path to meaning in the West has disappeared. It is a challenge for the occident to find another universal path, and I believe it is the time of the individual; each person must find a unique road, and fantasy can help those who turn to its pages. Albeit, one should keep in mind that fantasy offers a way to discover one's own creative road to meaning. Even the path of the finest fantasy author does little more than point towards this end.

Although hardly a fantasy author, Nietzsche painted a picture of this situation that is extremely relevant to one attempting to discover just how to create meaning for oneself. Using the images of the camel, lion, and child Nietzsche described the process

of one entering the process of creation. He felt that humanity had passed through a stage represented by the camel. This animal served one purpose, pack bearer in the desert. This represents the one who takes upon himself the old paths set before him and, "... like the camel, burdened, speeds into the desert..."¹ of meaninglessness.

There in the wasteland of despair, the camel throws off its pack and through this process metamorphoses into a lion. The lion realizes that the former ways have failed, but there in the moment of desperation a great dragon appears; it is the power of the old systems. The lion must fight and slay the past. It is a hard battle because the lion has been trained to believe that there is no other road. As the battle rages, it declares, "All value of all things shines on me. All value has long been created, and I am all created value."² At this moment, the lion sees an opening in the tightly linked scales of its oppressor. It must strike or else the dragon will win the day.

The English author and psychologist, Brian Bates elaborates this theme describing that a dragon is a symbol of change. For the ancient Anglo-Saxon tribes of the English Isles, a dragon represents the cyclical flow of time in the cosmos, one that is continuously dying and being reborn. This can be seen in old bronze and gold images that show a serpent swallowing its own tale. When a dragon is slain such as in the end of the tale of *Beowulf*, it marks the end of an era of understanding and the dawn of a new epoch of consciousness. Often the hero and his immediate culture perish with the dragon slain but only to emerge again in the next incarnation of time.³ (Bates pp. 95, 96.)

Tolkien presents us with an example of this confrontation in his description of Bard of Laketown, heir to the throne of Dale. He is an unsuspected human hero

¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 138.

² *Ibid.*, 139.

³ Bates, *The Real Middle Earth*, 95,96.

representing those who have reached the point in their lives who must confront the dragon. Bard remains at the dock of his beloved town, alone. All his comrades have flown. Above circles the old enemy, the one who has kept everyone from carving out any solid meaningful existence, Smaug, the last of the dragons, who has lit the entire village and valley on fire. Like Bard, people at that moment must draw their one family heirloom out of the quiver-the black arrow- this token that represents all that has been taught. They must stand ready to lose their symbol of all the glory that has gone before and launch it deep within the flesh of the dragon. Ultimately, all seems lost. Bard launches-the dark arrow and it brings down the great serpent, which in his death destroys the entire village of Laketown plunging Bard into the boiling waters below the town. Bard emerges from this destruction but as if having received a baptism of sorts he rises as a king who will now lead his surviving people into a new era.

Those who follow through, slaying the beast, die with its last death throws, but hardly forever. They resurrect as children. Why must the wayward soul become a child? It is the next logical step. The dragon has been slain; all meanings of the past lie dead at the lion's feet. A new set of meanings must be created; the children embody the ability to discover. They are new and unspoiled, seeking a way to live out their lives. It is the power of,

... innocence, and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'.⁴

Now, people filled with the rising hope of tomorrow may pick up cobblestones and build a path straight and firm under their feet leading to the land of dreams, ultimately the kingdom of meaning.

⁴ Ibid., 136

Fantasy literature prepares a person for this moment of confrontation. A scenario of victory is presented to the reader. The images that appear in the stories usually describe a hero or heroine who has to overcome an obstacle through the use of his own means. Often, it is a new evil that confronts them, one that has never been encountered before in its present shape. When this evil rears its ugly head, the hero pulls something from within himself that allows him to rise to the occasion and manifest a winning strength, images borrowed from the pages of fantasy describing the victory of good over evil.

When confronted by the desert of despair and the dragon of old worthless ways, an individual must create a new way of triumphing. Through this process, a creator is born. The reader moves from student to master. Tolkien suggested that this is the true purpose of anyone who begins a work of fantasy.

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: 'inner consistency of reality,' it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality of truth. It is not only 'consolation' for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that

question, 'Is it true' ... 'If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world.' That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist).⁵

When people are confronted with the ultimate question of this time, "How do I find meaning?" only one answer will do. An inner way must be found, a route that creates a fantasy world within resounding strongly with a melody of reality that shapes the world without. Then he becomes an artist.

An artist is anyone who creates an image of reality using one of a legion of means and media. It can take many forms: traditional arts, engineering, activism, culinary arts, the list continues *ad infinitum*. All that matters is that the image created resolves the tension in his own life that prevents him from living a life worth living. Then, as his life becomes one of joy, this will overflow, rushing and splashing into the world of matter around him, touching the ugly and transforming it into beauty. True alchemy takes place and gold emerges from the most common of metals.

As described above, Charles Williams created a picture of this experience with his hero, William Durant. Unwilling to see the world crumble, he wrestles with the situation. As the world surges and swells around him from the convulsions of a great serpent that is destroying the earth, he turns to the ancient symbols of the past to help him, the eternal wisdom that can be found only in the realms of myths and faerie. He touches these on the wings of his imagination in the form of Pegasus. This surrendering to the imagination raises him up to a place that few have dared to go. Here, he boldly assumes the role of the ultimate primal artist, Adam, one made in the image of God the first creator. This gives him the ability to create meaning out of chaos and name his surroundings thereby

⁵ Ibid., 137

bringing order back into the world. It is his act of bravery and creation that brings salvation.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

On first glance, western humanity lives in a barren room with no sign of a way out. Little remains to do in this room yet look at a book of mythology that rest on the center of the floor. This book contains all the symbols of days gone by. The faded pictures describe how men and women discovered the meaning of life. Thumbing through the pages only gives despair because these ways, regardless of how profound they were, have lost their power.

Nevertheless, if one sits quietly, attempting to ignore the voice of despair, light whispers are heard coming through the walls. "All is not lost; this room is an illusion". These are the voices of hope, among them fantasy authors inviting the desperate souls to come to new worlds where meaning abounds. If taken seriously, the listeners may feel a surging courage. Then, they who choose to heed the call are brought to their feet. As they rise, the room becomes faint; a blue sky appears above glistening with golden beams of light. In the center of this vision lies a road. The road leads to high distant mountains where a bright fiery sun shines and lush possibilities spring up from the fertile soil extending towards the heavens.

This is the load less traveled. Unlike the roads built of yesterday, those built upon the tombs of the dead and buried, it offers a route to authentic life. Yet, it is a hard path to follow. But those who tread upon it will be transformed. When these travelers become older, they might reflect upon the choice made many years before at the crossroads of

angst. With a smile, they will remember the one less traveled, the one of imagination, and like the poet Robert Frost declare that it, "...has made all the difference."¹

¹ Frost, *"The Road Not Taken"*, 48.

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

David Westlake was born and raised in upstate New York. He moved to Maine in 1992 where he attended the University of Maine and graduated in 1997 with a Bachelor's degree in History. Immediately after graduation, he began his Master's degree. While going to graduate school, he taught at The Bay School, a Waldorf inspired day school, on the coast in Blue Hill. Recently, he accepted a teaching position at the Parsifal Waldorf School, Ottawa, Canada where he now resides with his wife and two cats. David is currently a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Liberal Studies from the University of Maine in May 2005.