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Blood on the Snow, Soot on the Carpet: Belief as Pedagogy in Terry Pratchett's *Hogfather*

Abstract

In Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels, children largely refuse to conform to the ideas that adults form about them as a class. While the adults of the Discworld seem to regard childhood as a time of innocence and wonder, the children who inhabit Pratchett's universe show themselves to be violent, cynical, manipulative, and naturally skeptical of any phenomena which they cannot directly sense. As such, when the beloved seasonal figure of the Hogfather, a former Winter Solstice deity transformed over time into a gift-giving fat man with a taste for sherry and pork-pies, is assaulted by entities who want to make human beings less fanciful, the Discworld's anthropomorphic representation of Death takes it upon himself to keep up the pretense that the Hogfather is alive, well, and making his usual rounds. This is necessary because, as the novel argues, belief in fantasies is necessary for children to grow into functional adults – the child must start by believing in something relatively concrete, like a jolly fat man who delivers toys to children who behave themselves all year, in order to believe in abstract concepts like 'justice' and 'mercy.' Belief in figures like the Hogfather tempers the natural cruelty of children, teaching them how to live in harmony with one another as adults, but this belief must be encouraged through empirical evidence, since the children's natural skepticism leads them to see through the pleasant illusions conjured for them by adults.

Additional Keywords

Pratchett, Terry. Hogfather; Pedagogy; Children in fantasy

BLOOD ON THE SNOW, SOOT ON THE CARPET: BELIEF AS PEDAGOGY IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S *HOGFATHER*

MICHAEL A. COIR, JR.

Like most of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels, *Hogfather* (1996) begins with a brief disquisition on the cosmology of the Discworld. Mirroring real-world mythological accounts of the universe, its structure, and its origins, Pratchett describes the Discworld as mounted upon the backs of four enormous elephants who are themselves carried through space by an even more enormous turtle, Great A'Tuin (*Hogfather* 2). Since the Enlightenment, science and philosophy have encouraged educated people to regard such descriptions of the cosmos as fanciful and ignorant. Pratchett flips this script, using the novel instead to argue that it is our propensity for fantasy that is the essence of our real education: belief in things that might seem ridiculous trains us to believe in the ideals that are necessary for society to function. It is children in particular who need to believe in things like Tooth Fairies, Hogfathers, and Soul Cake Ducks, and their belief makes these figures real. Pratchett's Hogfather is not a seasonal allegory for giving and generosity; he is a literal fat man in a red and white robe who flies through the air on Hogswatch Night in a sled pulled by enormous boars, who drops down chimneys, consumes pork pies and copious amounts of sherry, and leaves gifts for children who behaved themselves in the past year. Pratchett depicts children as *in need* of this belief in order to make them into functional adults, as most of the children in the novel are not only naturally skeptical of anything they can't directly sense, but are also selfish, violent, and cynical. In *Hogfather*, myth and fantasy become necessary to a child's education because they encourage the creative power of belief, making ideas that have no firm existence in reality concrete.

A conflict between two different modes of understanding the universe is set up in the very first paragraph, outlining the disagreement between Death (and the worldview he represents) and the Auditors of Reality that occupies much of the novel's primary plot. The first sentence reads, "Everything starts somewhere, although many physicists disagree" (*Hogfather* 1). The Auditors of Reality, as Death explains to his granddaughter Susan near the end of the novel, are absolute materialists for whom narrative explanations are not only unnecessary, but problematic:

THEY HAVE NO NAME. CALL THEM THE AUDITORS. THEY RUN THE UNIVERSE. THEY SEE TO IT THAT GRAVITY WORKS AND THAT ATOMS SPIN, OR WHATEVER IT IS ATOMS DO. AND THEY HATE LIFE.

“Why?”

IT IS . . . IRREGULAR. IT WAS NEVER SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. THEY LIKE STONES, MOVING IN CURVES. AND THEY HATE HUMANS MOST OF ALL. Death sighed. IN MANY WAYS, THEY LACK A SENSE OF HUMOR. (*Hogfather* 367-8)

The Auditors are clearly aligned with ‘physicists,’ but, given that Discworld exists in a pre-Enlightenment paradigm, they are actually ‘wrong’ about the rules that govern the physical universe. By eliminating the Hogfather, they hope to replace the existing paradigm, in which natural forces are represented by anthropomorphic personifications, with one in which natural forces are represented by mathematical equations, charts, and graphs that map out regular and predictable results. Even the name ‘Auditors’ suggests a similarity with accountants, a profession that is often stereotyped as reducing everything in life to numbers and lacking in creativity and humor.

The problem for the auditors is that what is ‘real’ is dependent on consensus; reality on the Discworld is something like a shared delusion rather than a definitive explanation for why impersonal forces like gravity work the way they do. Consensus is something that the Auditors do understand, as they lack individual personalities and make all decisions as a group without the friction that personal beliefs and desires would cause:

The consensus beings that called themselves the Auditors did not believe in anything, except possibly immortality. And the way to be immortal, they knew, was to avoid living. Most of all they did not believe in personality. To be a personality was to be a creature with a beginning and an end. And since they reasoned that in an infinite universe any life was by comparison unimaginably short, they died instantly. (*Hogfather* 52)

To be a ‘personality’ means, for the Auditors, to be moved from infinity into a human time scale. And compared with infinity, anything which has an end is brief. Since the auditors want everything to continue working the same way all the time for an infinite period of time, they aim to eliminate anything that produces friction within the system—like death, or its anthropomorphic personification, Death.

They hire the Guild of Assassins to ‘inhume’ the Hogfather because the jolly fat man’s origins in rituals designed to make the sun come up after the Winter Solstice are exactly the sort of fantasizing that the Auditors want to replace with clean, orderly, scientific thought. This suggests the Auditors have a Tylorite notion of the social function of myth. The late 19th-century

anthropologist E.B. Tylor argued that myth was a device used by pre-scientific societies to explain natural phenomena. In his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, Tylor elucidates what he views as the gap between scientific and mythic thinking:

Science, investigating nature, discusses its facts and announces its laws in technical language which is clear and accurate to trained students, but which falls only as a mystic jargon on the ears of barbarians, or peasants, or children. It is to the comprehension of just these simple, unschooled minds that the language of poetic myth is spoken [...]. The poet contemplates the same natural world as the man of science, but in his so different craft strives to render difficult thought easy by making it visible and tangible, above all by referring the being and movement of the world to such personal life as his hearers feel within themselves [...]. (316)

Tylor's use of words like 'barbarians' and 'peasants' (along with his frequent references to non-European societies as 'savage'), is not only colored by the prejudices common to his moment in history, but is also clearly hierarchical. Scientific explanations, he claims, are only accessible (or even comprehensible) to a technologically savvy caste with specialized training. To 'barbarians' and 'peasants,' scientific language sounds 'mystical.' For example, volcanoes might erupt due to the pressures of gases building up beneath the Earth's crust, but the people Tylor regards as too simple to understand this say it is because an angry god or demon who has not been sufficiently appeased with virgin sacrifices is forcing fire up from the depths of Hell. According to such an understanding of myth and belief, only 'primitive' societies and unsophisticated people understand the world in terms of metaphor and narrative. Once a society is sufficiently developed to adopt advanced science and engineering, mythic explanations will eventually be cast aside in favor of less eccentric theories.

The most important problem with Tylor's theory of myth for our purposes is that it assumes that myth and scientific and technological sophistication cannot coexist—in order for the latter to flourish, the former must give way. Even a cursory study of human societies will demonstrate that this is erroneous—a "flaw in [the Auditors'] logic" (*Hogfather* 52), as Pratchett notes. Moreover, the mythological beings in the Discworld do operate by predictable sets of rules, though these rules are metaphors made literal. The Hogfather only goes abroad on Hogswatch, and he must eat the pork pies and drink the sherry that the children leave out for him, while leaving gifts that suit the child's particular economic circumstances. In order for an inhabitant of the Discworld to die, Death or one of his designated agents must appear and swing a scythe to 'harvest' the soul. The behavior of Death's best-known underling, the Death of Rats, offers a case in point:

The Death of Rats nibbled a bit of the pork pie because when you are the personification of the death of small rodents you have to behave in certain ways. He also piddled on one of the turnips for the same reason, although only metaphorically, because when you are a small skeleton in a black robe there are also some things you technically cannot do. (*Hogfather* 56)

So we see that whether a particular action can be reduced to an equation or a scientific law has nothing to do with the rules by which the Discworld's reality operates. Instead, the actions permitted to metaphorical representations of ideas and natural phenomena are determined by what people believe about them. In other words, Discworld is a *literary* world rather than a physical one, in a sense beyond the obvious one. As Gray Kochhar-Lindgren writes, "the literary [...] can [...] create whatever words can imagine. Pigs *can* fly" (85). In *Hogfather*, putting one's thoughts or beliefs into language can cause them to spring to actual, physical life, and all individual lives are recorded in books that are stored in Death's domain, in a library so vast that it consists of canyons (*Hogfather* 132). The (dead) metaphor 'the story of your life' is made concrete and literal.

The world thus adjusts itself to human language and human belief, conforming to the overall contours of metaphor. According to the wizards at the Unseen University, the cosmos operates according to what Pratchett calls the "Anthropic Principle":

Many people are aware of the Weak and Strong Anthropic Principles. The Weak One, says basically, that it was jolly amazing of the universe to be constructed in such a way that humans could evolve to a point where they could make a living in, for example, universities, while the Strong One says that, on the contrary, the whole point of the universe was that humans should not only work in universities but also write for huge sums books with words like "Cosmic" and "Chaos" in the titles. (*Hogfather* 124)

The Anthropic Principle, Weak or Strong, suggests that the universe is designed to suit the individual human who is perceiving it and operating within it—essentially, that everything in existence was put there with your personal comfort and convenience in mind. What's more, Pratchett's omniscient narrator endorses this philosophy in a footnote to the original footnote: "And they are correct. The universe clearly operates for the benefit of humanity. This can be readily seen by the way the sun comes up in the morning, when people are ready to start the day" (*Hogfather* 124). While this is clearly meant for comic effect, it is also an accurate explanation for the way nature works on the Discworld; it may

not necessarily always work things out for the *convenience* of humans, but it always fashions and re-fashions itself according to human belief.

Lack of belief renders humanity impossible in Pratchett's universe. Andrew Rayment argues that, in novels like *Small Gods* and *Hogfather*, Pratchett illustrates "the dimension of belief that is lacking in fundamentalist thought. He has used the Fantasy vehicle to explode the most commonsensical of positions: That fundamentalists *believe too much*. In the real of the Discworld *Pragmatikos*, it is demonstrable that fundamentalists *do not believe at all*" (57). In one of *Hogfather's* best-known passages, Death explains to his granddaughter Susan the relationship between humanity and belief in things that seem unlikely or impossible in order to illuminate why it matters that "the sun rises" rather than that "a flaming ball of gas appears on the eastern horizon":

"Ah," said Susan dully. "Trickery with words. I would have thought you'd have been more literal-minded than that."

I AM NOTHING IF NOT LITERAL-MINDED. TRICKERY WITH WORDS IS WHERE HUMANS LIVE.

"All right," said Susan. "I'm not stupid. You're saying humans need . . . *fantasies* to make life bearable."

REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE. (*Hogfather* 380)

Here, Death distinguishes himself from humanity by noting his own literal-mindedness. He is bound to a particular set of rules, which he has arguably bent in order to preserve the larger Discworld paradigm of belief by standing in for the absent Hogfather. But in his separate roles as Death and as temporary Hogfather, his appearance and activities are determined by the human beings whose belief brought these walking, talking metaphors into being. When he is Death, he must look and behave the way humans believe Death should look and behave; when he is the Hogfather, he must operate within the role human belief has established for the Hogfather.

What's more, Pratchett makes it clear that this is *learned* behavior. The novel is deeply concerned with children, and, more particularly, with the beliefs of children. In her short entry on "Children in the Discworld Series" in *The Unofficial Companion to the Novels of Terry Pratchett*, Juliana Froggatt notes a particular concern with "psychological development." For Pratchett,

childhood is a state of being. It is a period in which important things can (and should) happen, making it a vital concern of those undergoing it and (if the former are lucky) those guiding them through. Children are

remarkably open, and this is the prime characteristic of theirs that Pratchett wants us to see. (Froggatt 65)

In *Hogfather*, this openness cuts both ways. Just as children are open to believing in the Tooth Fairy or the Hogfather or the Soul Cake Duck, they are open to *not* believing in these entities if they are not provided with evidence of their existence. Like Death, they are literal-minded. Virginia Prood's letter to the Hogfather, discovered by the Death of Rats, ends with the line "*I hop the chimney is big enough but my friend William says you are your father really*" (*Hogfather* 56). What is perhaps most interesting about Virginia's letter is that it is phrased almost as a schoolyard challenge to the Hogfather to prove that he exists. She writes to him under the apparent assumption that he *does* exist, but also leaves her options open in case it turns out that he doesn't. E.B. Tylor included children in his list of "primitive" or "simple" personalities who are unable to understand the way the world *really* works, but in Pratchett's fiction, children are often much more skeptical than the adults around them, having not yet learned to believe in the non-literal the way their elders have. Children on the Discworld, *contra* Tylor, are anything but simple.

This is demonstrated in the gap between the responses encounters with anthropomorphic representations evoke in more-or-less normal adults and the responses of their children. When Death appears as the Hogfather in the Grotto at Crumley's, he replaces an illusion that is based on what adults think childhood and its fantasies ought to be like. The store's owner, Vernon Crumley, congratulates himself on the construction of a particularly pleasant façade of goodness and niceness:

It was a magnificent Grotto this year, Vernon Crumley told himself. The staff had worked really hard. The Hogfather's sleigh was a work of art in itself, and the pigs looked really real and a *wonderful* shade of pink.

The Grotto took up nearly all of the first floor. One of the pixies had been Disciplined for smoking behind the Magic Tinkling Waterfall, and the clockwork Dolls of All Nations showing how We All Could Get Along were a bit jerky and giving trouble but all in all, he told himself, it was a display to Delight the Hearts of Kiddies everywhere. (*Hogfather* 116, emphasis in original)

On one hand, this passage is evidence that adults do not understand children particularly well. Crumley is like many of the parents who visit his store and speak for their children when they are sat upon the Hogfather's knee. They assume that their children want toys that teach them how to imitate normal middle-class adult behaviors: "You want a Baby Tinkler Doll, don't you, Doreen? And the Just Like Mommy Cookery Set you've got in the window. And

the Cut-Out Kitchen Range Book" (*Hogfather* 119). The emphasis on the word "wonderful" in Vernon Crumley's internal monologue, though, suggests that he realizes that all of this is a sham. While in contemporary usage the word "wonderful" means something like "exceptionally good," the meaning of the word *used* to be "capable of exciting wonder." Perfectly pink piggies do not excite our wonder, unless we realize on some level that real pigs are rarely, if ever, perfectly pink. And the misbehaving pixie and the glitchy clockwork dolls demonstrate just how fragile this illusory version of Hogswatch really is.

The children aren't fooled by any of this, once presented with a more realistic alternative. The fantasy Grotto is no match for the crude energy and physicality of the real thing, complete with genuine boars that have contemptuously trampled and desecrated Crumley's pallid imitations:

The four pink papier-mâché pigs exploded. A cardboard snout bounced off Mr. Crumley's head.

There, sweating and grunting in the place where the little piggies had been, were . . . well, he assumed they were pigs, because hippopotamuses didn't have pointy ears and rings through their noses. But the creatures were huge and gray and bristly and a cloud of acrid mist hung over each one. (*Hogfather* 117)

The children and their parents react to this unexpected turn of events in opposite ways: the parents try to pull their kids away, but "The children were gravitating toward it like flies to jam" (*Hogfather* 118). When Death is asked by a child if he is real and he responds by inviting the child to form her own judgment, she happily declares "I saw your piggy do a wee!" (*Hogfather* 121), as if this vulgar materiality is all the evidence she needs that yes, Virginia Prood, there is a Hogfather.

The requests that children make of the Hogfather demonstrate another, slightly more disturbing element of Pratchett's depiction of childhood—that children are naturally drawn to violence. Among the gifts that young Virginia Prood requests are "a drum an a dolly an a teddybear an a Gharstley Omnian Inquisition Torture chamber with wind-up Rock and Nearly Real Blud you can use again" (*Hogfather* 56). The combination of innocence and bloodthirstiness, alongside the demand for realism, are hilarious, telling, and disturbing. Meanwhile, the child whose belief in the Hogfather was confirmed when she saw one of the pigs urinate says, in defiance of her horrified mother, "I wanta narmy. Anna big castle wif pointy bits [...] Anna swored" (*Hogfather* 121). And the children in the store take more interest in the clockwork dolls when the Hogfather's appearance completely destroys the illusion of cooperation and niceness they represent:

But the animated display of Dolls of All Nations was definitely in trouble. The musical box underneath was still playing “Wouldn’t It Be Nice If Everyone Was Nice” but the rods that animated the figures had got twisted out of shape, so that the Klatchian boy was rhythmically hitting the Omnian girl over the head with his ceremonial spear, while the girl in Agatean national costume was kicking a small Llamedosian druid repeatedly in the ear. A chorus of small children was cheering them on indiscriminately. (*Hogfather* 119)

This episode not only cheers the heart of anyone who has ever wished that they could bring a bag of softballs onto Walt Disney World’s cloying *It’s a Small World* ride, it also provides an effective demonstration of one of the novel’s most important themes. First, it is important to note that the title of the song isn’t “Isn’t It Nice That Everyone Is Nice,” it’s “Wouldn’t It Be Nice if Everyone Was Nice.” It describes an aspiration the designers of the clockwork display hope to call into being rather than an actual state of affairs—per Kochbar-Lindgren, it is *literary* in that it is an attempt to use language to bring about a change in reality. In addition, the display is a fictive construct built by adults, and the children, who have not yet been initiated into adult notions of belief, cheer its breakdown into chaos and violence, which the novel regards as humanity’s natural state. Once again, crude reality wins out over sophisticated illusion in *Hogfather*.

Though they seem to suffer nearly constant defeat at the hands of rational and disturbingly vicious children, these illusions do at least demonstrate that belief shapes children into adults who believe a society that isn’t simply a Hobbesian state of nature is both possible and desirable. In order to obtain the desired gifts from the Hogfather, children must agree to respect “the arrangement”:

Uncle Heavy nudged the Hogfather.
“They’re supposed to *thank* you,” he said.
ARE YOU SURE? PEOPLE DON’T, NORMALLY.
“I meant they thank the *Hogfather*,” Albert hissed. “Which is you, right?”
YES, OF COURSE. AHM. YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO SAY THANK YOU.
“nk you.”
AND BE GOOD. THIS IS PART OF THE ARRANGEMENT.
“es.”
THEN WE HAVE A CONTRACT. The Hogfather reached into his sack
[...]. (*Hogfather* 122)

So in order to receive their Hogswatch gifts, children must respect the social contract peculiar to the Hogfather. This contract includes not only *belief* in the

Hogfather, but also suppression of their own natural violent impulses. Over time, belief will condition these children into (relatively) well-adjusted adults who presumably won't cheer when one malfunctioning doll repeatedly clouts another over the head with a spear, and, more importantly, won't go around indiscriminately whacking other people with weapons or otherwise behaving cruelly and selfishly. Those who violate the arrangement in any way, like poor skeptical Aaron Fidget, will find themselves punished rather than rewarded (*Hogfather* 132).

Before children can become functional members of society free of adult supervision, then, they have to learn to control their violent impulses by believing in beings like the Hogfather, who has his origins in ancient sacrificial rituals intended to cause the sun to rise in the winter. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard argues that religious violence in the form of sacrificial ritual originates in an attempt to control violence within a community: through ritual sacrifice, "society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented upon its own members" (4). By directing ritualized violence towards a specific approved individual, usually someone who is not regarded as a full member of the community, yet who is in some sense a stand-in for the entire community, the community's impulse towards internecine violence is dissipated:

The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice. (Girard 8)

The community is held together by the spectacle of the sacrificial victim's death, in which they confirm their connections to one another. Any other explanations given for the sacrifice are largely beside the point. And this is why it matters that the Hogfather himself is a memory of a bloodier age, tamed by the times but still carrying the original connotations of his role as victim underneath (or perhaps on the surface of) his red and white robe. As Death's pet raven explains to Susan, in the beginning the Hogfather

was probably just your basic winter demi-urge. You know . . . blood on the snow, making the sun come up. Starts off with animal sacrifice, y'know, hunt some big hairy animal to death, that kind of stuff. [...]

Anyway, then later on it sinks to the level of religion and they start this business where some poor bugger finds a special bean in his tucker, oho, everyone says, you're *king*, mate, and he thinks "This is a bit of all right" only they don't say it wouldn't be a good idea to start any long books, 'cos next thing he's legging it over the snow with a dozen other buggers chasing him with holy sickles so's the earth'll come to life again and all this snow'll go away. (*Hogfather* 134-5)

The newer, gentler version of the Hogfather still respects the "arrangement" that governs the original. He appears on or around the Winter Solstice, is feasted by the community with as many porkpies and glasses of sherry as anyone could want, and gives of himself for the overall good of the people—only he no longer *literally* has to die in order to accomplish his purpose. Under the influence of belief in myth and the "arrangements" that it entails, human beings have tamed their violent impulses, meaning that the rituals that sustain belief have also become less violent. The Hogfather, who once died to ensure that the sun would rise again on the Winter Solstice to warm the community from which he was selected, becomes a more or less universal figure (though not entirely—the monotheistic, fundamentalist Omnians don't acknowledge his existence), and his metaphorical function is still a matter of human survival in the face of impersonal natural forces. The threat to human survival is temporarily laid to rest by the Hogfather's "giving," whether of his life or of toys and sweets, at least until the next Winter Solstice.

The beliefs embodied by anthropomorphic personifications like the Hogfather cannot stray too far from the original "arrangement" under which each was conceived, however. Much as the Hogfather's function as seasonal gift-giver is derived from his prior Girardian role as sacrificial victim/savior, the new beings that appear each time a wizard at the Unseen University makes a joke exist to provide explanations or justifications for some previously unexplained phenomenon, much like Tylor's idea of "myth" among people he regarded as "primitive," or Kochbar-Lindgren's notion of the "literary." When Susan discovers Bilious, the newly-created "Oh God of Hangovers," at the Hogfather's Castle of Bones, he is being pestered by a small imp that hammers on his cranium and coats his tongue with yellow gunk who, when chased away by Susan, protests that he is "part of the arrangement" (*Hogfather* 147-8). Other new beings that are called into existence due to the surplus belief left behind by the Hogfather's absence—the Verruca Gnome, the Hair Loss Fairy, the Eater of Socks, the Cheerful Fairy—obey a similar set of rules. They only make an appearance if they provide a metaphorical explanation for a known phenomenon:

“You’re calling things into being,” said Susan.

“Things like the Give the Dean a Huge Bag of Money Goblin?” said the Dean, who could think very quickly at times. He looked around hopefully. “Anyone hear any fairy tinkling?”

“Do you often get given huge bags of money, sir?” said Susan.

“Not on what you’d call a daily basis, no,” said the Dean. “But if—”

“Then there probably isn’t any occult room for a Huge Bags of Money Goblin,” said Susan. (*Hogfather* 180)

Susan’s point is that these new anthropomorphic personifications only pop up if they explain something that regularly happens, like people getting warts on their feet, or socks disappearing seemingly at random from the laundry. The “arrangement” is the thing that binds the anthropomorphic personification to its form and function, without which it cannot exist. The Give the Dean a Huge Bag of Money Goblin could only exist *in potentia* if the Dean was often given huge bags of money at random with no existing plausible explanation. And shared belief in these fanciful explanations for everyday occurrences creates the same kind of social glue that the annual sacrifice of the proto-Hogfather would once have provided.

In applying these rules to the workings of belief in his invented world, Pratchett seems to act in accordance with J.R.R. Tolkien’s rules regarding the construction of fantasy. In his famous essay “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien writes that good fantasy must express “the inner consistency of reality,” which he defines in a footnote as that “which commands or induces Secondary Belief” (59). The secondary worlds created by writers, Tolkien insists, must behave according to a consistent logic:

Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough [...]. To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, storytelling in its primary and most potent mode. (Tolkien 61)

Pratchett’s anthropomorphic personifications are “fantasies” in Tolkien’s sense here—they don’t exist in the primary world, but are imaginative creations that demonstrate the “inner consistency of reality” in the secondary world they inhabit. The world the Auditors desire, of stones moving in curves, is actually inconsistent with the ‘reality’ of the Discworld—it doesn’t fit “the arrangement,”

and, perhaps more importantly, in being disenchanting it is emptied of any moral significance.

And it is through fantasy that inhabitants of the Discworld develop their moral sense. The most childlike adults in the novel—the assassin Jonathan Teatime and the developmentally-delayed criminal Banjo Lillywhite—are, in the first case, lacking any sort of moral or ethical compass, or, in the second, are only capable of recalling specific instructions given by an authority figure (“‘Our mam said no hittin’ girls,’ [Banjo] rumbled” [*Hogfather* 342]), without much real comprehension of a moral philosophy underneath the directions themselves. Since Banjo can at least carry out instructions and cares more about means than ends, he is to some extent redeemable and is incorporated into “the arrangement” as the new Tooth Fairy; Teatime, on the other hand, cannot be integrated into human society, as even other members of the Guild of Assassins view him with mistrust and his violence cannot be channeled in socially useful directions (*Hogfather* 18, 21). Teatime doesn’t care about preserving any community of which he’s a part, and his violent actions serve only to further his own pet theories. Adults cannot *remain* genuinely child-like in *Hogfather* if society is to function at all, which is the ultimate point of Death’s conversation with Susan after the restoration of the real Hogfather:

AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE
LITTLE LIES.

“So we can believe the big ones?”

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

“They’re not the same at all!”

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO
THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN
SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET—
Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT LIKE THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER
IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME . . . SOME *RIGHTNESS* IN THE UNIVERSE
BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

“Yes, but people have *got* to believe in that, or what’s the *point*—”

MY POINT EXACTLY. (*Hogfather* 380-1)

If the Tylorite Auditors’ plot succeeds and the human impulse for fantasy is euthanized, the very premises on which human society rests, which the novel has already revealed as useful fictions, disintegrate and life reverts to a Hobbesian contest of all-against-all as everyone tries to selfishly grab as much as they can for themselves while indulging their natural impulse towards senseless violence. It is telling that here Death speaks of “atoms” and “molecules,” adopting the Auditors’ language to discuss moral and ethical concepts in order to underscore the fact that ideas and beliefs cannot be reduced

to elementary particles moving in predictable patterns. But the fact that justice and mercy are technically fictions, in that they are, like the Hogfather, “literary” inventions of the human imagination, does not make them less *real*, so long as people continue to believe in them, and so long as these beliefs continue to ameliorate humanity’s antisocial impulses.

In the final analysis, the Dolls of All Nations display at Crumley’s and the song “Wouldn’t It Be Nice If Everyone Was Nice” seem a lot less absurd, presenting as they do human society not as it is, but as it *could* be so long as children continue to believe in all of the Tooth Fairies and Hogfathers and Soul Cake Ducks and, in doing so, learn how to be human. The vision of society the doll display depicts, in which children of different ethnicities dance in a seamless cooperative unity, is bound to break down now and again as children (and the adults they will become) question the premises of the entire enterprise and wonder if the Hogfather is *really* real, and not just your parents waiting until you go to bed and stuffing some toys and an orange into your sock. But the fact that adults like Vernon Crumley can imagine a world in which everyone is “nice” shows that they’ve learned to at least paper over their base instincts with a veneer of civility that allows them to live in harmony with other people. Even if the illusion is not an especially deep or convincing one, and even if it exists primarily to help Crumley and his associates wring a profit out of the festive Hogswatch season, it still shows that human beings can learn to aspire to higher ideals by using metaphor to explain the logic of their material reality. Pratchett’s Discworld is itself an imagined place, a secondary world conjured up out of language by an act of human creativity; like justice, mercy, and the Hogfather, it only exists in the minds of Pratchett and his readers. But that need not mean that it lacks substance.

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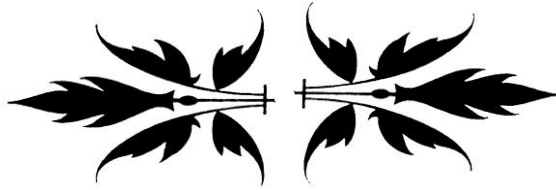
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