

THE WISDOM OF WIZARDS: The Cognitive Value of Fantasy Literature



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the cognitive value of fantasy literature. Using Immanuel Kant's and Jean-Paul Sartre's discussions of the imagination, and J.R.R. Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories," I argue that fantasy literature is cognitively valuable when it confers phenomenal knowledge. I move on to demonstrate what a work of fantasy literature requires to confer this phenomenal knowledge. Fantasy literature has the potential to reveal true insights into this world when it brings the reader into a state of "secondary belief" and confers phenomenal knowledge through the union of world and story.



I. INTRODUCTION

In an article on the science fiction literature of his day, English author and academic C.S. Lewis wrote, “If good novels are comments on life, then good stories of this sort...are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience.”¹ Lewis believed that fantasy literature is not simply aesthetics or escapism, but that it can offer something truly meaningful. He takes a stand in the debate over the cognitive value of literature dating back to Ancient Greece. Plato called this the “old quarrel between poetry and philosophy.”² In the *Republic*, Plato argues that poets should be dismissed from the well-ordered city-state for, as Melvin Chen summarizes, “poetry is an imitative art that presents scenes that are far removed from reality.”³ Plato makes this strong claim but acknowledges that he is willing to readmit the poets into his well-ordered society if one could present a case in their defense.⁴ Fantasy literature is not equivalent to poetry, but Plato’s critiques of poetry apply *mutatis mutandis* to fiction and to fantasy literature especially. If fantasy literature does not deal with reality, what can one gain from it that is true or cognitively valuable?

In this paper, I argue that fantasy literature is valuable when it confers phenomenal knowledge. Additionally, I demonstrate what a work of fantasy literature requires to achieve this end. Importantly, the author must build a world that effectively engages the imagination, bringing the reader into a state of “secondary belief.” Another key criteria to give way to phenomenal knowledge is the crucial union of world and story. Fantasy literature, as Lewis recognized, need not quarrel with philosophers.

II. THE QUESTION OF COGNITIVE VALUE IN FANTASY LITERATURE

Plato’s ancient quarrel continues today in debates between cognitive and anti-cognitive interpretations of fiction. Erik Schmidt, in an article on the value of fiction, defines the cognitivist position well:

Cognitivists endorse two basic claims about fiction: (1) Fiction can have cognitive value by revealing or supporting insights into the world that properly count as true. (2) The cognitive

value of a work of fiction contributes directly to that work’s literary value.⁵

This paper intends to argue that fantasy literature specifically can reveal or support insights into the world that properly count as true. It will also outline what a work of fantasy literature requires to be considered cognitively valuable.

Many have argued that fictional literature has something of value to offer, but fantasy is easily cast by the wayside as escapism or aesthetics. After all, fantasy literature is not based in fact, is entirely fictional, and is set in a different world. It is, in reference to Plato’s critique, “far removed from reality.” This presents a challenge to the case for the value of fantasy literature. However, fantasy literature can be valuable, and this value is most clearly displayed in the phenomenal knowledge one can gain.

Phenomenal knowledge, as defined by literary cognitivists, is not propositional knowledge—knowledge that can be clearly stated through propositions. It is rather, in the words of Wolfgang Huemer, “a knowledge of *what-it-is-like* to have a certain experience or be a certain character.”⁶ This kind of phenomenal knowledge applies more immediately to a fictional story set in the world as we know it. For example, one could read a story about a kid who grows up in poverty on the streets of New York and gain phenomenal knowledge through an imaginative experience, helping one to understand the suffering of homeless and impoverished people. However, since fantasy literature is farther removed from reality, this phenomenal knowledge is not manifested so immediately; yet it can certainly still be realized in this medium.

The phenomenal knowledge possible in fantasy literature is not literally experiencing what it is like to go into battle against a wizard with an elf by one’s side but rather being drawn into an imaginative experiential understanding of ideas that are difficult to articulate outside of the context of the story—ideas of death, mortality, evil, etc. Because the story is set in a separate world with different rules governing reality, fantasy literature has the potential to actualize and “enlarge” abstract ideas in the imagination that fictional stories set in our world struggle to demonstrate.⁷ Fantasy literature can be valuable because it is able—by the imagination immersing the reader in the story and world—to confer something very difficult to portray in analytic terms or primary-world fictional literature.

1 C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 70.

2 Plato, *Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 311.

3 Melvin Chen, “Philosophy and Literature: Problems of a Philosophical Subdiscipline,” *Philosophy and Literature* 41, no. 2 (2017): 476, 10.1353/phl.2017.0052.

4 Chen, “Problems,” 477.

5 Erik Schmidt, “Knowing Fictions: Metalepsis and the Cognitive Value of Fiction,” *Res Philosophica* 93, no. 2 (2016): 484, 10.11612/resphil.2016.93.2.9.

6 Wolfgang Huemer, “Engaging with Works of Fiction,” *Rivista di Estetica* 70, no. 1 (2019): 14, 10.4000/estetica.5170.

7 Lewis, *Other Worlds*, 70.



Fantasy is a difficult word to define with precision. To answer the question “what is fantasy?” the essay “On Fairy-Stories” by fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien can be applied. Tolkien writes, a “fairy-story is one which touches on or uses Faërie...Faërie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is a magic of a peculiar mood and power.”⁸ Tolkien’s language is vivid, fantastical, and somewhat ambiguous, but his definition brings insight for outlining what fantasy literature is at its core. Fantasy literature is not just stories about elves, dwarves, and wizards in a distant, medieval land—although stories of that kind are included in this definition. Fantasy literature is literature in which the author creates an imagined world, where a kind of magic permeates its existence. Yet in that imagined world, the magic is not strange and foreign—although it may be uncommon—but rather a familiar part of that universe.

Additionally, a fantasy world could resemble our world in most every aspect, or it could be almost entirely different. Fantasy is lost when the imagined world has no magic, or when it is totally removed from reality—when it resembles the primary world too closely, or not at all. Furthermore, fantasy literature ought to present its imagined world as if it were true and existent. Thus, stories that end up being an illusion or dream of sorts, like Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, are excluded.⁹ Although this definition of fantasy may not be as precise as the philosopher may prefer, it is sufficient for the argument of this paper. However, for fantasy literature to confer phenomenal knowledge, it must do more than simply fit into these categories; it must engage the imagination.

III. IMAGINATION

In a simple sense, imagination is at the heart of fantasy. It is through the faculty of the imagination that one is able to perceive the cognitive value of fantasy. To convey how fantasy literature engages the imagination, one must first define the imagination and how it functions.

The imagination does not just recall images from the memory to direct itself to absent objects, but rather has the ability to produce something new. Immanuel Kant makes an important distinction:

Now insofar as the imagination is spontaneity, I also occasionally call it the productive imagination, and thereby distinguish it from the reproductive imagination, whose synthesis is subject solely to empirical laws, namely those of association.¹⁰

8 J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 114.

9 Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 117.

10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 256-57.

One can use their imagination to mentally reproduce something—like recalling an image to memory—but one can also use the imagination to produce something new out of familiar materials of perception.¹¹ When engaging the productive imagination, one does not create a new color or sensation in their mind; rather, they create new forms out of the colors, shapes, and dimensions already known.

But the imagination is not limited to images in the mind; it is rather, as Paul Ricoeur calls it, “both a thinking and a seeing.”¹² This idea applies especially to the role of the reader’s imagination. When one reads literature, they are constantly creating images in their mind as well as incorporating the story, thinking through how the plot might continue. One is constructing an entire world in their imagination. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that the act of imagining through reading is less abstract than thinking. Reading can bring the reader into the presence of “concrete beings.”¹³ Lior Levy summarizes Sartre’s argument in this way, “‘Anna Karenina’ and ‘Sherlock Holmes’ are not abstract concepts that one forms after reading, nor are they names given to objects that were already encountered in experience...Instead, they are unreal entities that become concrete as reading advances.”¹⁴ Imagining specifically through the process of reading allows one to create something concrete, albeit unreal, but still solid and knowable. Therefore, reading fantasy literature should not just be, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it, a “willing suspension of disbelief,”¹⁵ but rather, as Tolkien calls it, an enchanted state of “secondary belief.”¹⁶ The reader enters a “secondary world” inside of which one experiences the events and features of that world as true as concrete.¹⁷

One can only imagine the concrete world of a fantasy story after the author first creates a concrete world through their own imagination. In his work *What is Literature*, Sartre writes “the literary object though realized through language, is never given in language.”¹⁸ Although Sartre is referring to how fiction conveys the narrative as a whole to the reader, this thought clarifies how fantasy can confer phenomenal knowledge. In this example, “literary object” could be replaced with “phenomenal knowledge.” Phenomenal knowledge is not knowledge received through the propositions of a text or the individual words but rather through

11 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, ed. P. Guyer, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (New York: Cambridge, 2000), 192.

12 Lior Levy, “Sartre and Ricoeur on Productive Imagination,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 1 (2014): 48, 10.1111/sjp.12049.

13 Levy, “Productive Imagination,” 47.

14 Levy, “Productive Imagination,” 47.

15 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Chapter XIV,” in *Biographia Literaria* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834), 174.

16 Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 140.

17 Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 140.

18 Levy, “Productive Imagination,” 52.



the creation of the world of the text in conjunction with the story. So, the language of a fantasy story that confers phenomenal knowledge must “realize” said knowledge in its secondary world as opposed to delivering it in the form of propositions. The two essential aspects of a work of fantasy literature that realizes phenomenal knowledge are sub-creation and story.

IV. SUB-CREATION

“Sub-creation”—to borrow Tolkien’s designation—is taking a world from one’s own imagination and delivering it to the reader through literature; it is the process of creating a secondary world.¹⁹ Effective sub-creation brings the reader into a state of secondary belief. So how does one create a work of fantasy literature that effectively encapsulates the many aspects of the above-mentioned discussion? How does one effectively sub-create?

Mark J.P. Wolf outlines effective sub-creation in his book, *Building Imaginary Worlds*.²⁰ His criteria do not explicitly refer to how a text can confer phenomenal knowledge but rather what makes an imaginary world believable and effective. His work is worth mentioning, however, because the first thing a fantasy story requires to confer phenomenal knowledge is an effective world—the reader must be brought into a state of secondary belief. Wolf’s three criteria for creating this ideal imaginary world are invention, completeness, and consistency.

A successful secondary world requires invention. Wolf defines invention as “the degree to which the default assumptions based on the primary world have been changed.”²¹ Too much invention could totally disconnect a work of fantasy fiction from the primary world, and if that work loses all connection to the primary world, then the reader has nothing to relate to. Yet the divergent aspects of a secondary world make a cognitively valuable fantasy work possible; a balance is required. Invention can be broken down into four primary categories: the nominal, the cultural, the natural, and the ontological.²² The nominal deals with names of things in the universe. The cultural invents new customs, institutions, countries, cultures, religions, etc. The natural creates new continents, planets, species, and races of creatures. The ontological invents new laws for the world’s existence.²³ A balanced

19 Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 139.

20 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

21 Wolf, *Imaginary Worlds*, 34.

22 Wolf, *Imaginary Worlds*, 35-36.

23 The ontological realm has the potential to go beyond the scope of fantasy literature by creating a world that is not wholly conceivable by the human mind, i.e., a world that transcends or entirely alters space and time.

level of invention changes enough in these four realms that the reader enters a separate world that can still be related to and clearly imagined.

Additionally, completeness and consistency are necessary features of a story that produces secondary belief. Completeness refers to the level to which the world contains descriptions and explanations pertaining to background details and characters’ experiences which together create a feasible world.²⁴ Ultimately, no fantasy story creates a wholly complete world, yet authors strive to make their fantasy worlds as complete as they can, for the more complete a fantasy world, the deeper the reader is immersed. Additionally, an effective fantasy story must have consistency—consistency in its plot and world. As mentioned earlier, the fantasy story presents its imagined world as true, so the laws of the world—even if they are strange or invented—must remain consistent. Fantasy author and successful sub-creator George Macdonald wrote on the issue saying:

His world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist...To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it.²⁵

Even if the laws of the fantasy world are far different from our own, the laws must be upheld. Invention, completeness, and consistency are necessary aspects of successful sub-creation, and successful sub-creation is one of the necessary aspects of fantasy literature that confers phenomenal knowledge.

V. STORY

A fantasy story cannot confer phenomenal knowledge through the secondary world alone. Another aspect is required: story. Story is very simply the series of imagined events in the work of literature, and it is through these events that an imaginary world is brought to life. However, the story and the world of a fantasy novel are not separable. Rather, they must work in conjunction to convey phenomenal knowledge. The story must also be complete, consistent, and sufficiently invented for many of the same reasons. Importantly, as mentioned earlier, phenomenal knowledge emerges from an experience of the imagination. So, one may look for phenomenal knowledge in allegory or symbolism, but in the fantasy story, phenomenal knowledge is not contained there. Rather, phenomenal knowledge is contained in the union of the secondary world and story—in this conjunction itself. The literature must be written in

24 Wolf, *Imaginary Worlds*, 38.

25 George MacDonald, *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), iv-v.



a way that the fantasy object in itself presents something cognitively valuable. Tolkien demonstrates this idea well in a letter to Herbert Schiro on *The Lord of the Rings*:

There is no “symbolism” or conscious allegory in my story...To ask if the Orcs “are” Communists is to me as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs. That there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is....But I should say, if asked, the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness.²⁶

Tolkien’s “about” in his text is not displayed through any kind of allegory, symbolism, or direct propositions. Rather, using imagination and story, Tolkien explores aspects of death and humanity’s desire for deathlessness. He can bring the reader into a deeper understanding—he is able to “enlarge our conception”—of death and deathlessness because of divergent aspects of his secondary world.²⁷

In *The Lord of the Rings*, this idea is most directly explored in the dichotomy between men in the knowledge that they will die, and elves in the knowledge that they will live forever. When the reader is brought into the world of Middle-Earth in a state of secondary belief, they can go deeper than a simple, primary-world, hypothetical discussion on mortality and immortality. A reader constructs real characters in their mind who wrestle with what it is like and what it means to be mortal. When one sees death for what it is in this secondary world, Tolkien can show something about death in the primary world—something that is not easily articulated in propositional, primary-world terms.

As one reads *The Lord of the Rings*, they are brought into a state of secondary belief. This is not simply an escape from this world; the book can reveal insights into reality. But whatever conclusions Tolkien ultimately reaches, even if one rejects these ideas on death or other cognitive aspects in his fantasy epic, Tolkien manages to confer phenomenal knowledge in his work. He brings the reader to secondary belief and manages to “reveal insights into the world that properly count as true.”²⁸

Lewis’s Space Trilogy is another, non-Tolkien example of phenomenal-knowledge-conferring fantasy literature. In the first story, *Out of the Silent Planet*, an English academic, Elwin Ransom, is flown on a spaceship to Mars (Malacandra), an ecologically diverse planet that is not tainted by human evil and is inhabited by natural, mortal, intelligent

beings. Ransom befriends an inhabitant of this planet and comes to recognize that these creatures live in total harmony with one another and have no conception of evil.

Lewis creates a world that allows for an exploration of many human ideas not tainted by human selfishness, greed, or other vices. For example, at one point in the story, Ransom is having difficulty explaining the concept of war to his *hross* friend, Hyoui. To help explain human motivation for war, Ransom turns to pleasure—something the *hross* should understand. Ransom asks, “is the begetting of young not a pleasure among the *hrossa*?” Hyoui tells him it is. Ransom explains that if something is pleasurable, a human wants it extremely, even to the extent it hurts himself or others. However, this is incomprehensible for Hyoui as he has an entirely different understanding of pleasure. After describing the lifelong process of finding a mate, he explains that *hrossa* only “beget young” for one or two years of their life and are content in this, for, as Hyoui says, “a pleasure is full grown only when it is remembered.”²⁹ This example in Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet* explores what may be a right understanding of pleasure when it is not defiled and abused by humans, and what it is like to live in a world that understands this. But even if one disagrees with Lewis’s conclusions, this book offers a cognitively valuable exploration of pleasure and human nature—an exploration of pleasure that is not tied to human nature; this exploration no other kind of literature can achieve. By bringing the reader into the world of Malacandra, Lewis indeed manages to “reveal insights into the world that properly count as true.”³⁰

VI. THE QUESTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

One who reads a work of fantasy literature will certainly not imagine the secondary world in the exact way that the author imagined it. The question then arises, since a secondary world has subjective aspects, how could one create a work of fantasy that effectively confers objective phenomenal knowledge? Phenomenal knowledge is a kind of imaginative experiential understanding, not clear propositions. Phenomenal knowledge has subjective aspects, but this knowledge—as well as the imaginary world of a fantasy story—is not entirely subjective; it has objective boundaries. For example, two people will imagine the features of an elf differently, but they have a shared understanding of those creations of the imagination as “elves.” Language has its limits, yet its referential aspect is not entirely subjective. So, although many aspects of a secondary world are subjective—a character’s face, the design of buildings, etc.—the core aspects that hold the world and story together are

26 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. H. Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 262.

27 Lewis, *Other Worlds*, 70.

28 Schmidt, “Knowing Fictions,” 2.

29 C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 76.

30 Schmidt, “Knowing Fictions,” 2.



not entirely subjective. Additionally, if the author writes with cognitive intention, this subjectivity can be further avoided. The fantasy author can intend an objective core of the literature, allowing one to gain something objective from the work. As mentioned earlier, Tolkien wrote with intention to convey something “applicable” to objective reality.

VII. CONCLUSION

The imagination is a powerful tool that can take one into another world. While some fantasy is only an escape, cognitively valuable fantasy literature can reveal insights into our own world. In this paper, I demonstrated that fantasy literature is valuable when it confers phenomenal knowledge. I also outlined the necessary criteria for a work of fantasy fiction to give way to this knowledge. Once the reader has been brought into a state of secondary belief, fantasy literature can confer phenomenal knowledge through the cohesive whole of a secondary world and a story. Although set in other worlds, fantasy literature does have real insight to offer. It is not totally disconnected from reality but can rather “enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience.”³¹ So pick up a fantasy story, go to battle against the orcs, witness a wizard’s magic, or write a poem with a *hross*. You may be surprised and delighted at what you gain.³²

³¹ Lewis, *Other Worlds*, 70.

³² Many thanks to Dr. Edward Glowienka and the *Stance* reviewers whose insights and suggestions helped to greatly improve this paper.



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