

ENTERING WORLDS OF FANTASY

What is fantasy?

*Fantasy is true, of course.
It isn't factual, but it's true.*

Ursula K. Le Guin

In the Middle Ages, ordinary people believed in witches, witchcraft and magical powers. Today, we call that superstition. We know that witches do not exist, that it is impossible to fly on broomsticks, turn princes into frogs or survive being thrown into deep water with a stone tied to one's feet, for that matter. We know that belief in the supernatural was a way to explain things that seemed inexplicable, unfair, meaningless. Today, we are able to explain so much more than they were able to, and some people would argue that we do not need witches and all that any more. If we want to know why the year's harvest failed, or why a child was still-born, we will find a scientific explanation. However, we remain fascinated by the old world and its ways.

Generally speaking, witches along with magic have been relegated from the sphere of what is possible to what is impossible. That sphere is called fantasy. One way of defining literary fantasy is simply to say that it deals with what is impossible – it is only a fantasy. This is a somewhat broad definition, though, and a more precise description will be given here. Fantasy stories often unfold in a world that does not really exist, and which is therefore impossible, or sometimes fantasy stories unfold in a world that looks like our real world, but the events taking place there are unrealistic, impossible. In this way, you could say that fantasy explicitly denies what we know about the world.

But fantasy is not only the literature of the impossible, the opposite of reality. When you think about it, it is quite remarkable how many traits even the weirdest fantasy world contains that are quite similar to traits in our *real* world. The inhabitants, for instance: whether they are trolls, dragons or witches, all need food, drink and sleep. The landscapes are mysterious and often alive, but there are still mountains, valleys, rivers, plants and animals depicted on a carefully worked out map. The same idea applies to events and actions. These must happen according to laws that seem plausible and realistic *within* the fantasy world in order

to be accepted by the reader and thereby achieve existence. Eventhough fantasy is gifted with the consolation of a Happy Ending, you cannot let a fairy solve everything with a wand on the last page. Summing up, we can say that a certain degree of realism is required to both diminish and emphasize the gap between the real and the unreal worlds.

Fantasy has more affinities with reality than have been mentioned so far. Apart from being a literary genre, fantasy is also a synonym for imagination. In general terms, imagination is the ability to (un)consciously imagine the consequences of a certain action. Obviously, children need it all the time: "What will happen if I touch that flame? Eat a snail? Hit my brother? Hide in that wardrobe?" Gradually, experience and reprimands will teach the children how to manage in everyday situations, but imagination is also necessary in most other aspects of a human being's life. You need it to create visions: "What do I want my life to be like? How do I meet challenges, overcome obstacles, death and agony? How do I deal with the unknown?" One might ask how fantasy stories can be of any help here. Certainly, it makes no sense to believe that you will learn how to handle unicorns by reading about them, let alone the fact that in our world you will not need this skill. But you may learn to handle the emotional phenomena which unicorns symbolize in a given fantasy story. For fantasy stories deal with a metaphorical description of inner conflicts, they express an inner world. More often than not, the actions of the hero in the fantasy world correspond to an inner development in reality.

Fantasy has often been seen as children's literature. It is argued that it represents an escape from school, parents – the thou-shalt-not world – and the hardships of growing up. This would be a rather limited way of understanding the genre. Firstly, it should be recognized that the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, loss and powerlessness that life bids a developing child, are not restricted to children. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that fantasy offers us all images of how to deal with these matters in a – maybe – more creative way. In this way, fantasy is a cross-over literature, which addresses both children and adults by establishing a double text in which each layer has its own recipient.

Good fantasy even goes beyond the individual level and addresses the big ethical and philosophical issues in a narrative form: the ideal world order, human nature, justice, the question of good and evil. Unfortunately, one's ideals, dreams and sense of justice are not always satisfied in the

achieve *vb*. opnå
gifted *adj*. begavet
consolation *sb*.
trøst, forløsning
fairy *sb*. fe
wand *sb*. tryllestav
require *vb*. kræve
diminish *vb*.
formindsk
emphasize *vb*.
understøge,
fremhæve
affinity *sb*. fællesskab
wardrobe *sb*. skab
reprimand *sb*.
irettesættelse
challenge *sb*.
unfolding
obstacle *sb*.
forthindring
agony *sb*. smerte
unicorn *sb*.
enhjørning
let alone *idiom* for
ikke at tale om
escape *sb*. flugt
hardships *sb*. pl.
trængsel
recognize *vb*. indse,
anerkende
develop *vb*. udvikle
sig
restricted *adj*.
begrænset
acknowledge *vb*.
anerkende
offer *vb*. tilbyde
address *vb*. henvende
sig til
establish *vb*. etablere
recipient *sb*.
modtager
beyond
/bi'jɒndjɪbr'a:nd/
prep. ud over
ethical *adj*. etisk,
moralisk
issue *sb*. sag, problem
narrative *adj*.
fortælle-

super' stition *sb*.
overtro
broomstick *sb*.
kosteskift
inex' plicable *adj*.
uforklarlig
argue *vb*. hævde
harvest *sb*. høst
still-born *adj*.
dødfødt
relegate *vb*. forvise
sphere *sb*. område,
sfære
unfold *vb*. udspille
sig
ex' plicit *adj*.
uvetydig
trait *sb*. træk
valley *sb*. dal
depict *vb*. fremstille
apply to *vb*. gælde for
plausible *adj*.
sandsynlig

righteous *adj.*
 reffering
 prevail *vb* vinde
 sacrifice *sb* offer
 'infinite *adj* uendelig
 appropriate *adj*
 passende
 recount *vb* fortælle
 spiritual *adj* åndelig
 concept *sb* begreb
 in bold type *idiom*
 med fed skrift
 proto 'typical *adj*
 arketyrisk
 map *vb* kortlægge
 sole *adj* eneste
 latter *adj* sidstnevnt
 portal *sb* indgang,
 passage
 platform *sb* peron
 blurred *adj*
 udflydende, sløret
 remi 'niscnt *adj*
 som minder om
 fictional *adj* fiktiv
 fail *vb* svinde
 recog'nition *sb*
 klarsyn, indsigt
 assign *vb* tildele
 ine 'scapable *adj*
 uundgåelig

real world. This is where fantasy offers hope and consolation, because it insists that the righteous will prevail – though not without sacrifice and loss. Through its mysterious worlds of infinite possibilities, fantasy can help us to “repair” reality.

Fantasy is the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul.

Ursula K. Le Guin

The elements of fantasy

Like all literary genres, fantasy has its set of musts: elements that make up the genre, and whose existence is what we use to identify it by. The following description of the most characteristic elements will also be useful as a list of “What to look for” when you analyse a fantasy text. The most important words and concepts are in bold type.

Setting

The prototypical setting of a fantasy story is a very precisely described or mapped universe. A whole new world is created with its imaginary beings, witchcraft, magic and supernatural elements. This new world may be the sole setting of the story, and if that is the case, we call it a **secondary world**. If, on the other hand, the fantasy world co-exists with the *real* world, we talk about **parallel worlds**. In the latter case, you will often find a portal through which you may pass between the two worlds, such as a wardrobe, a looking-glass, or a specific wall at Platform 9 ¾. To complete the picture, you will also find stories in which the worlds overlap in a blurred co-existence.

The time in a secondary world is often reminiscent of the Middle Ages, but it would be more correct to say that it finds inspiration in the Middle Ages but takes place in its own fictional time or age.

Structure and plot

1. **Conflict**: something is wrong. A conflict or a struggle between good and evil is breaking out, and signs of this may be that magic is beginning to fail.
2. **Point of no return**: The hero/heroine realizes that something must be done = **moment of recognition**, OR the hero/heroine is assigned the inescapable task of setting things right

3. **Quest**: The hero/heroine sets out on an impossible mission. The dangers he/she meets are not small, petty dangers: not a normal snake, but a dragon; not a bossy teacher, but a witch (or worse). What is at stake is not only the survival of the individual, but that of the whole world.

4. **Happy Ending**: The bigger and more imminent the disaster, the more hopeless the success of the quest seems, the more euphoric is the happiness of the Happy Ending. It provides the reader with one moment of breathless joy. Tolkien calls it **eucatastrophe**: “the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’”.

Characters

The prototypical **hero/heroine** is the fool: basically innocent, ignorant of the world and its dark sides – often even of his/her own fate and the role he/she has to play. Hence we often see a child/child-like protagonist, equipped with special and magical abilities. Furthermore, it is obvious that he/she is the **chosen one**: the only one who is able to set things right and save the world. Traditional fantasy tends to portray its characters as either good or evil in an absolute contrast. Modern fantasy casts some doubt here, endowing the protagonist with a more nuanced personality.

Luckily, the hero/heroine rarely struggles alone. A gallery of beings may offer their assistance but you can be sure that there will always be a **wise sage** or a **wizard** to guide the (young) hero.

The greatness of the hero/heroine is measured by the power and ruthlessness of his/her enemy. So the enemy will typically belong to the race of the irredeemably evil monsters. Though the hero/heroine might not be entirely good, there is seldom any doubt about the utterly evil nature of the enemy.

Magical inventory

Magic is the essence of fantasy. There is no end to the list of inventions you will meet here: wands, supernatural powers, potions, flying objects, shape-shifting, familiars, invisibility cloaks, magical rings, strange instruments, secret languages, spells, curses, incantations... The imagination knows no bounds.

Genres

To distinguish fantasy and its subgenres from other related genres, match genre and definition.

Can you give examples of stories written in these genres?

quest *sb* søgen,
 mission
 petty *adj* små
 at stake *idiom* på spil
 'imminent *adj*
 overhængende
 euphoric *adj*
 euforisk, lykkelig
 provide *vb* forsyne
 'ignorant *adj*
 uvidende
 fate *sb* skæbne
 hence *adv* følgelig
 pro'tagonist *sb*
 hovedperson
 equip *vb* udstyre
 endow *vb* udsyre,
 forlene
 sage *sb* vismand
 ruthlessness *sb*
 hensynsløshed
 irre 'deemable *adj*
 uforbederlig
 'inventory *sb*
 inventar
 potion *sb* trylledrik
 familiar *sb* nær ven;
 heksens følgesvend
 (fx kat)
 invis'i'bility cloak *sb*
 usynlighedskappe
 spell *sb* fortryllelse
 curse *sb* forbandelse
 incan'tation *sb*
 trylleformular
 bound *sb* grænse
 distinguish *vb*
 skelne

