

Narnia, Middle-Earth, and Beyond: The Transcendent Vision of Mythopoeic Fantasy

By David S. Hogsette

Introduction

- **A Popularly Cherished yet Critically Undervalued Genre:** This opening section briefly discusses how fantasy literature, though popular with readers, continues to be critically undervalued, despite the best efforts of several literary scholars, and it establishes the main purpose of the book.
- **Most Ancient of Literatures:** This section traces the historical development of mythopoeic literature.
- **Fantasy as a Postsecular Literature of the Absolute:** Locates the critical perspective of the book within postsecular studies.
- **Literature of Imagination and Wonder:** Discusses the function of wonderment in mythopoeic literature.
- **A Literature of Transcendence, Vision, Spirituality, and Hope:** Discusses mythopoeic literature as a literature of transcendent vision and hope, referencing G. K. Chesterton's view of fairy tales and J. R. R. Tolkien's notion of transformative eucatastrophe.
- **A Brief Outline of Chapters:** This last section provides brief summaries of each chapter.
- 7800 words

Chapter 1—George MacDonald's *Phantastes*: The Redemptive Imagination and the Quest for Sacrificial Love

- **The Life of a Victorian Mythmaker:** Biographical sketch
- **More Than Mere Escapism:** Discussion of transformative escape versus mere escapism in MacDonald's fantasy.
- **Fairy Land: Imaginative Settings and Moral Structures:** This section discusses the thematic function of Fairy Land, namely the discovery of wonderment and a location of moral challenge and instruction through trial.
- **Anodos's Moral and Spiritual *Bildungsroman*:** Through the critical lens of *bildungsroman* narrative form, this section reveals a thematic coherence within the confusing, disjointed, and seemingly aimless narrative. It also discusses the metafictional elements of the Cosmo episode in the middle of the novel that are essential to the *bildungsroman*.
- **The Shadow and Understanding Pride, Cynicism, and the Purpose of Evil:** A discussion of the shadow figure as a doppelgänger to Anodos that represents materialistic demystification of wonderment as well as his own rebellious, sinful nature.
- **Conclusion: The Significance of Mythopoeic Reading:** An analysis of MacDonald's views on mythopoeic reading and the redemptive imagination—discovering eternal truths that can transform heart, mind, and soul.
- 16,000 words

Chapter 2—Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*: Clashing Worldviews and Recovering Communion through Sacrificial Love

- **The Aristocrat Writes of Elfland:** Biographical sketch
- **Erl and the Realm of Utilitarian Reason:** Analyzes how Dunsany explores tensions between imagination and reason and discusses his engagement with the utilitarian principles and assumptions of philosophical materialism in his post-WWI context.
- **Elfland and the Realm of Imaginative Enchantment:** This section analyzes the realm of Elfland as a space of wonderment and enchantment, a space of metaphysical realities contrasting the utilitarianism of Erl that is fearful of wonderment, magic, and the imagination.
- **Quests of Violence and Self-Alienation:** In most fantasy and fairytale narratives, the quest resolves the conflict within the narrative, driving the story forward. In Dunsany's fantasy, the quest, ironically, is the cause of the conflict and turmoil in the novel, and a selfless act that transcends the quests must be engaged before there can be resolution within the narrative.
- **The Clash of Worldviews:** In this novel, the theistic worldview of Erl conflicts with the pantheistic worldview of Elfland, causing turmoil in the relationship between Alveric and Lirazel. When this conflict is not properly addressed and resolved, the result is broken communion; Lirazel abandons her marriage and family and flees back to her father in Elfland. This section asks what was the underlying problem, and how should Alveric have handled it?
- **Engaging the Modernist Debates between Faith and Reason:** Underlying these various clashes of worldviews and violent quests within the novel is the larger cultural issue of Dunsany's day—the struggle between rationalism and imagination, reason and faith, realism and fantasy. This section analyzes Dunsany's philosophical worldview as a curious mix of the deification of nature with an awareness of how naturalistic science reduces the world and all of observable reality to a godless universe that is transient and without purpose or significance.
- **Reunion and Communion through Self-Sacrificial Love:** The people of Erl cannot reach Elfland by the power of their own works, and Alveric's efforts simply push the heavenly Elfland further and further away, because as a destructive figure of Erl, he is a threat to the beauty and timeless purity of Elfland. Only through a gracious act of self-sacrificial love does the King make Elfland available to those who wish to join it.
- 11,650 words

Chapter 3—J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*: Understanding Good, Evil, Friendship, and Free Will

- **The Hobbit of Oxford:** Biographical sketch
- **Escape as Recovery and Consolation:** According to Tolkien, reading fantasy is not a reactionary escape but, rather, a transformative imaginative act whereby truths are discovered and true vision restored such that the broken real world can be transformed, improved, and reshaped according to eternal principles of Truth (re)discovered in the luminary Secondary World of fantasy.
- **Fantasy as Faux History:** In writing his fantasy, Tolkien is drawing from his knowledge as a scholar of medieval epic tales and reader of ancient myth, crafting his own tale after the model of these ancient narratives. Tolkien saw himself as rewriting a truly English mythic history. He was not terribly fond of the Arthurian romances, noting that many of them were written by French writers, and he wanted something uniquely English written by an

Englishman. In his own creative mind, *The Lord of the Ring* was just that myth of England to replace the French Arthurian legends.

- **Phileo, Friendship, and the Power of Fellowship:** Close and spiritually binding friendship is clearly a central theme in the *The Lord of the Rings*, and the very title of the first volume bears this out: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This term *fellowship* is used quite loosely these days in both religious and non-religious circles, but for Tolkien, who was a committed Christian, the concept of fellowship goes much deeper than merely a community of like-minded people or a warm gathering of friends. This section analyzes how fellowship in the novel is a close spiritual bond between people who have a similar belief and a selfless commitment to that belief.
- **The Development of a Hobbit as a Young Man: *Bildungsroman* in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:** Most heroic tales or epic stories involve *bildungsroman* in some fashion, for it is the quest that serves as the main mechanism for character growth. Yet, some readers are a bit confused by Tolkien's narrative structure, or find it a bit tedious, because it seems to them to be nothing but a seemingly endless series of little adventures, one after another, without much cohesiveness. This section argues that the episodic nature of the narrative structure serves Tolkien's *bildungsroman* purposes.
- **Natural Law in Middle-earth: Understanding Good and Evil:** This section discusses how Tolkien draws from his Catholic intellectual tradition to create a fictional universe whose moral order is derived from Natural Law theory.
- **You Were Meant to Have It: Providence and Understanding Issues of Fate and Freewill:** One of the most perplexing intellectual, spiritual, and emotional issues facing humanity is the question of providence and freewill. This section analyzes how Tolkien relies upon the theological underpinnings of his Catholic faith to present the dynamic and seemingly paradoxical interactions of freewill and divine providence.
- **Middle-earth Multiculturalism:** Long before multiculturalism and diversity became mainstream cultural concerns, Tolkien and many of his contemporaries were concerned with and writing about matters of difference, multiculturalism, and the challenges of cultural interactions. This section discusses various critical perspectives related to depictions of race and cultural difference in the novel.
- 18,350 words

Chapter 4—C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: Fantasy as Evangelium and Apologia

- **Most Unlikely of Converts, Most Powerful of Apologists:** Biographical sketch
- **Allegory or Not, and Does it Really Matter Either Way?:** This section discusses various critical issues regarding the allegorical status of the novel.
- **Are We Ever Too Old for Fairy?:** This section discusses Lewis's views on fairytales and writing stories for children, and it explores how the novel works on multiple imaginative and spiritual levels, thus appealing both to children and adults.
- **Narnia and the Evangelium of Escape:** Continuing the book's theme of escape vs. escapism, this section discusses Lewis's view of escape in fantasy literature as an imaginative journey into other realms that serves a larger cognitive, emotional, moral, and spiritual purpose.
- **Giving Us Back Our Chests: Sorting Out Good and Evil and the Moral Law:** This section discusses how Lewis defines and constructs good and evil in his novel. Just as

Tolkien draws from his Catholic intellectual tradition, Lewis draws on Christian theism to construct an imaginative universe in which the absolute moral law is revealed through “deep magic.”

- **Finding the Truth of Grace in Imaginative Fiction:** Even as there is a moral law to which Lewis believed people would be held accountable, he also believed in divine grace, and this section discusses various examples of how Lewis reveals the transformative and redemptive power of grace in this novel.
- **The Logic of Belief: Fantasy and the Rationale for Faith:** This section discusses how Lewis narratively reveals that religious faith is not a mere blind faith in the unknowable but, rather, a faith grounded in logic—it is a reasonable faith.
- 16,500 words

Chapter 5—Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story*: Quenching Nihilistic Despair and Filling Postmodern Spiritual Voids with the Water of Life

- **The Misunderstood Mythopoeic Sage of Germany:** Biographical sketch
- **The Co-contingency of Fantastica and the Human Imagination:** This section discusses the unique qualities of Ende’s fantastical realm that distinguishes it from Fairy Land, Elfland, Narnia, or Middle-earth: Fantastica is both the means and the end of the imagination; it is both product of the imagination and the cognitive process by which the fantastical experiences are generated within the human imagination.
- **Reader-response and the Extension of Tolkien’s Subcreator:** This section discusses Ende’s fantasy escape in terms of Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory. Ende extends Tolkien’s notion of the fantasy author as a subcreator, revealing that through the reading process, the reader’s mind engages the author’s text to produce what Iser called the imaginative work. As such, the reader cognitively cooperates with the author to become a mythopoeic co-subcreator.
- **The Function of Fantasy: Recovery of Truth, Transformation of Self, and Healing of Relationships:** Ende’s creative incorporation of phenomenological understandings of reading is not mere reader-response escapism. Not only must the reader become a co-author or co-subcreator in order to right what has gone wrong through his own act of imaginative writing, but he or she must also return to the real and right what has been wrong in his or her own life through another act of writing or storytelling. This section analyzes how Bastian moves from co-subcreator of Fantastica to a loving storyteller who heals his relationship with his father and restores familial communion through his mythopoeic storytelling act.
- **The Ethics of Reading Considered: What Happens If We (Re)Make Reality after Our Own Fallen Image?:** Ende encourages us to consider what happens when we recreate reality in our own image. What results when our powerful imaginations create according to our fallen hearts in the absence of true and boundless knowledge? What happens if we are given creative omnipotence without a corresponding omniscience? The second part of the novel addresses these important questions, ultimately getting to the very heart of what Ende wants his readers to learn about such issues as the true nature of morality, the reality and necessity of hope and faith, and the transcendent power of love.
- **Confronting the Existential Despair of Skepticism, Materialism, and Nihilism:** The Nothing represents internal emptiness and is an image of nihilistic fear and existential despair. The nihilism of the twentieth century, in all of its various ideological and epistemological manifestations, is the ash, according to Ende, that destroys the world when

we dismiss imaginative play and deny the legitimacy of fantasy literature. This section discusses how Ende presents mythopoeic fantasy as the literary antidote to philosophies of skepticism and nihilism.

- **The Necessity of Faith, Hope, and Belief:** Ende illustrates throughout his novel the logical problems and existential shortcomings of postmodern relativism and nihilistic philosophical assumptions. However, it is not enough for Ende to simply critique postmodern nihilism; he also presents its antidote, namely the necessity of faith, hope, and belief.
- **Dispelling the Illusory Appeal of Postmodern Moral Relativism:** A consistent theme across mythopoeic fantasy literature is the question of morality: what does it mean to live morally, to behave rightly, to make good and just choices? Often, we see characters in these novels engaging adventures and quests in which they struggle not merely with doing the right thing but with distinguishing good from evil. Ende wrote this novel during the rise of postmodern relativism in the West, and this section discusses ways in which he raises the very serious questions surrounding Western culture's embracing of moral relativism.
- **Drinking the Water of Life: Love as the Ultimate Ethic:** This section argues that there is a difference in the novel between epistemological dualism and ontological dualism and that, ultimately, since *Fantastica* is based upon human perception and experience, morality within the fantastic seems dualistic because this realm is the product of human perception and experience. *Fantastica* is merely an imaginative expression of human dualistic experience, but that doesn't mean that ethics is an ontological dualism. For Ende, the highest ethic is selfless love; it is the source and basis for all ethical behavior.
- 18,400 words

Chapter 6— Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*: Ethical Complexities in Dualistic Mythopoeic Fantasy

- **The Way of the Fantasist:** Biographical sketch
- **Le Guin's Taoism:** This section provides background information clarifying some of the basic Taoist tenets Le Guin uses to create her Earthsea subcreation and that inform the ethos of the narrative.
- **Earthsea's Equilibrium and the Taoist Way of Nature:** Returning to the central mythopoeic theme of *bildungsroman*, this section analyzes the development of the central character Ged into a true wizard who understands the delicate nature of Equilibrium, a fundamental component of magic in Earthsea that is based upon the Taoist notion of balance and *wu wei*.
- **The Insufficiency of Necessary Moral Regulation:** Maintaining balance is the core ethical principle of Taoism. However, not everyone is willing or able to discern and maintain balance. Therefore, Lao Tzu recognized the necessity of moral and institutional regulation. However, he also noted that moral regulation is insufficient to end strife, conflict, war, pain, and suffering. Moral regulation deals with the symptoms but not the root causes. For Lao Tzu, the only way to address the root cause of immorality, pain, and suffering is to pursue the way of the Tao or, in the world of Earthsea, to abide by the principles of Equilibrium. This section discusses this lesser known tension within Taoist teachings and practice and analyzes how this tension informs the narrative structure of the novel.
- **Abandoning Desire in Taoist Moral Development:** According to Taoism, the only way to deal with the very heart of evil is to move beyond moral regulation and to seek the Way of the Tao, which is to abandon desire as the underlying motivation for action. Le Guin centers

her moral universe upon this basic Taoist principle. This section analyzes a significant paradox in this teaching that is evident in the novel, an issue that other scholars have not addressed.

- **Self-Sacrifice as Taoist Moral Development:** Abandoning personal desire is central to Taoist morality, and the most effective and challenging means for abandoning desire is to practice self-sacrifice. This section discusses Ged's development from a selfish seeker of power and glory to a mature young wizard who values the good of others even at the risk of his own wellbeing.
- **The Existential Problem of *Wu Wei* and Taoist Ethics:** Moral action, according to Le Guin's Taoist dualism, is contingent upon balancing the whole and integrating both good and evil, instead of fighting against evil in the service of good. The main problem, though, is that in this dualistic system in which equilibrium must be contemplated and balance maintained, any action, be it good or evil, upsets cosmic balance (what Le Guin calls Equilibrium in her novel). Thus, with all action, there is a cost, which is the potential unbalancing of the natural order of things. Moreover, there is the added challenge of trying to figure out if one's action is restoring a prior imbalance or causing new imbalance within that context. This section asks if this dualistic system is sufficient for sustaining the mythos of the novel.
- **Conclusion—Postsecular Escape, Recovery, and Consolation:** This closing section discusses Le Guin's unique place in the canon of mythopoeic fantasy writers, noting that she builds a wondrous fantasy world upon Taoist foundations that introduce many Western readers to the mysticism, paradoxes, incongruities, and unresolved perplexities of *wu wei*.
- 8,600 words

Chapter 7— Fantasy SF: Galactic Quests and the Struggle for Intergalactic Good in *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Out of the Silent Planet*

- This chapter examines the blurry boundary between mythopoeic fantasy and science fiction. The first part of the chapter focuses on Madelaine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). After a brief discussion of the literary differences between fantasy and science fiction, the chapter analyzes various ways L'Engle dances on the edge of these distinctions, writing a charming young adult adventure story that incorporates standard science fiction tropes while also integrating mythopoeic fantasy motifs. The chapter reinforces this analysis of mythopoeic science fiction by providing a comparative discussion of C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), which seems to have been a major influence on L'Engle's imagination, informing the narrative structure and thematic focus of *A Wrinkle in Time*.
- This chapter is yet to be written, and it will be approximately 10,000 words.

Approximate total words: 107,300