

## Fairies, Faith and Fantasy

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER?

**THE NEW AGE BRIGADE** have recently been giving the traditional Fairy Stories a bad name.

Some websites and bookshops have listed "FAIRY TALES, NEW AGE AND PAGAN BOOKS FOR KIDS" — hence guilt by association for fantasy/fairy stories.

However, the more level-headed Christian does not throw out the baby with the bathwater, and the more learned quote *Abusum non tollat usum* — "Let not abuse take away use." Nor does the level-headed Christian throw out fairy stories, fantasy stories and fiction generally as though they rivalled the Gospel. As C.S. Lewis said, "The higher does not stand without the lower," and J.R.R. Tolkien said:

I would venture to say that approaching the Christian story from this direction, it has long been my feeling (a joyous feeling) that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels — peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe [a word coined by Tolkien for a "good catastrophe", the turning-point in a story]. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfilment of Creation. **The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation.** This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality'. There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath... Because this story is supreme and it is true.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, pp. 72-73

*TREE AND LEAF* combines Tolkien's essay/lecture of 1938/39 under the name 'Tree' (from the tree of tales) and 'Leaf' — a sample story fallen from the Tree. Harper Collins Publisher brought out a new edition in 2001, and it is a great pity it was not strenuously advertised at the time of the films and DVDs of *The Lord of the Rings*, because it showed how profoundly Christian was Tolkien's masterly fantasy.

See Fr Tierney's *Catechetical Texts in THE LORD OF THE RINGS* in *Catechetical News* n. 179 pp. 3-6.

### NARROW KNOCKERS

Tolkien brings his vast learning to support the common sense of countless fathers and mothers who always knew that imaginative stories were good for children — and for adults, just as Our Lord knew it and practised it in His parables.

Do not be put off by the Devil's New Age perversions of what is good, nor stand by silently while the Devil imbues good souls with narrow Puritanism. Do not reject *Tom Sawyer* as "a naughty boy" and miss noticing how noble he was.

Does a story's descriptions of evil, sin or naughtiness, does wickedness in the Bible, lead the readers to copy them? "The first thing to do is not to do any harm" — *primum non nocere*.

### WHAT FANTASY ACHIEVES

- Fantasy does not necessarily have fairies;
- it both entertains and leaves long-lasting delight;
- it purifies ideas and ideals, loves and loyalties; cf. Æsop's Fables, Greek dramas, Dickensonian novels;
- it instructs in practical morality, that things have a reciprocity, there are rewards and punishments, e.g. the importance of keeping promises even with intolerable consequences, such as 'for better or for worse in marriage, and the importance of observing prohibitions, such as 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'

cf. *Tree and Leaf* p. 67.

- And fantasy persuades rather than proves; e.g. good is to be done, evil avoided.

cf. Baden-Powell's simple psychology using 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular indicative: e.g. "A Scout is cheerful," rather than "A Scout should be cheerful"... Very effective!

### DESIRABILITY

But is there a place for fantasy? Yes, says Tolkien: it is not a question of possibility, but of desirability:

The prime motive [in writing *The Lord of the Rings*] was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them. As a guide I had only my own feelings for what is appealing or moving, and for many the guide was inevitably often at fault. Some who have read the book, or at any rate reviewed it, have found it boring, absurd, or contemptible; and I have no cause to complain, since I have similar opinions of their works, or of the kind of writing that they evidently prefer...

Author's Foreword, *The Lord of the Rings* p. 6

...But I cordially dislike allegory or topical reference. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory', but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.

*ibid.*

### BIBLE ECHOES FOUND IN FANTASY

- good is rewarded, evil punished
- courtesy always upheld, never rudeness
- virtue, not material security of riches, pomp, power
- from lowliness to exaltation, and riches incidentally
- blessedness of marriage — after chaste courtship
- favouring youngest sons, far countries, other kingdoms
- passing tests and temptations on the journey
- incidental evils for literary effect (cf. Christ's parables)
- heroic deeds, efforts, sufferings, even martyrdom
- "Better dead than a scoundrel"
- mercy and forgiveness
- humility always triumphs over pride
- lurking menace of malevolent beings
- perverseness of lust, greed, envy
- respect for the old, poor, widows, orphans, strangers
- parables in words, actions, marvels and miracles
- hidden strengths of character
- abiding Providence of God.

## HOW FANTASY WORKS

Fantasy is a legitimate form of fiction and fairies are a legitimate invention in fantasy. And, as Chesterton said, literature is a luxury, fiction a necessity.

Others, of course, have complemented this truth by its inversion: fiction is a luxury, literature a necessity.

Fantasy, when well-done, works by **entrancing** the reader. He is in the enchanted state of pure delight while he is inside the story. This is true not only for children, but all who are young at heart. It brings with it the blessing of self-forgetfulness. And it is not achieved by hypnotism, nor by drugs, nor any sort of manipulative psychological trickery, but by the literary riches of the author's imagination.

If you like, it is a legitimate form of magic. It has nothing to do with that evil magic of the magicians in Exodus 7-9, nor with the signs (=miracles) by the second beast, demonic spirits and the false prophet in Apocalypse 13:14; 16:14; 19:20.

## IDEAS AND IDEALS IN FANTASY

Tolkien quotes Andrew Lang, a fairy-story editor:

He who would enter into the Kingdom of Faërie [=fantasy] should have the **heart of a little child**.

*Tree and Leaf*, p. 44

and follows up with his own comment:

**For that possession is necessary to all high adventure, into kingdoms both less and far greater than Faërie.**

ibid.

To many, Fantasy, this sub-creative art which plays strange tricks with the world and all that is in it, combining nouns and redistributing adjectives, has seemed suspect, if not illegitimate. To some it is has seemed at least a childish folly, a tiling only for peoples or for persons in their youth. As for its legitimacy I will say no more than to quote a brief passage from a letter I once wrote to a man [C.S. Lewis] who described myth and fairy-story as 'lies'; though to do him justice he was kind enough and confused enough to call fairy-story making 'Breathing a lie through Silver.'

Dear Sir, I said — Although now long estranged,  
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.

Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned:

Man, **Sub-creator**, the refracted Light  
through whom is splintered from a single White  
to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.

Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build  
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sowed the seed of dragons — 'twas our right  
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:

**we make still by the law in which we're made.**

**...Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess.** It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. **But of what human things in their fallen world is this not true?** Men have conceived not only elves, but they imagined gods and worshipped them, even worshiped those most deformed by their **author's own evil**. But they have made false gods out of other materials: their notions, their banners, their monies; **even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice.** *Abusus non tollit usum.*

Fantasy remains a human right: **we make** in our measure and in our derivative mode, **because we are made in the image and likeness of a Maker.**

*Tree and Leaf* pp. 54-55.

## BEDTIME STORIES and CAMPFIRE YARNS

Many of the best-loved stories in the darkened room or around the flickering flames outdoors, begin and end with the formulas, "Once upon a time..." "And they lived happily ever after."

There are different sorts:-

1. Fantasy **without fairies**: *Goldilocks and the Three Bears & The Three Little Pigs & Little Red Riding Hood & Jack and the Bean Stalk...* All these fantasies have a common theme of good and evil in a make-believe world. **And this is good!**

2. Fantasy **with fairies**: *Cinderella & Pinocchio & Peter Pan & Sleeping Beauty & Thumbelina... and a series The Little Round Garden, Fairy Tales for Children* by Gladys Lister.

Angels and saints can be present in fantasy as *fantastic* creatures, as also are the Devil and demons: hence fairies, elves and 'the wee folk', dwarves and heroes, the Dragon (which is a Biblical image of Satan, and maybe modelled on dinosaurs) and imps and goblins, right through to the Abominable Snowman....

In addition, there are Australian fantasy creatures of evil, such as The Bunyip, yowies, right through to The Big Bad Banksia Man etc.

Be wise, like John Paul II approving *Strega Nona* "Grandma Witch" by Tomie de Paulo or Benedict XVI as a cardinal panning the Harry Potter stories.

## EFFECT ON CHILDREN

— for better, for worse...

Secure children like **being made scared by stories**. Fr Tierney knows because children have told him so: "I like being made scared!" Scary stories seem to enrich their conviction that "underneath are the everlasting arms," both of parents and ultimately of God (cf. Deuteronomy 33:27). On the other hand, insecure children are shrivelled up with fear at scary stories: Fr Tierney knows, because he has seen it happen...

Then there is Saint Nicholas, one of Our Lord's many saints, through whom He Himself helps us. St Nicholas suffers diminution, not enhancement, when commedicalized as Santa Claus. However, for a Catholic child who believes in the Communion of Saints, there is no rivalry between Christmas with Christ and Christmas with good Saint Nicholas who brings the presents for good children. Some would say he is like icing on the cake. The growing realization as we mature that "Santa Claus is just your father" is not an exposure of fraud but a cause of even greater joy at the goodwill Providence has shared with man through parents and family life. We don't teach something we would later have to unteach; rather, we develop it.

Fr Tierney has used campfire yarns to scare lively boys into staying in their sleeping bags after 'lights out'— instead of wrecking the tents. A non-parent disapproved, but a Baptist lay preacher and father of boys who had run camps wanted to get hold of the stories, to use them!

## OTHER READING — besides *Tree and Leaf*

For *discernment between good and evil*, such as was granted to King Solomon, 1 Kings 3:9 (before he went bad), see:-

- *A LANDSCAPE WITH DRAGONS, The Battle for Your Child's Mind* by Michael D. O'Brien;
- *The Elf Child* or *Little Orphant Annie* by James Whitcomb Riley, in *The Coo-ee Reciter*, or a modern 'translation in *THE BOOK OF VIRTUES, A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, edited by William J. Bennett.