Introduction

Like M. Jourdain, who discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, readers of this book may find they have been reading fantasy, teaching it, and writing about it without ever having brought their critical consciousness to bear on the fantastic elements. To many academics, after all, "fantasy" is a subliterature in lurid covers sold in drugstores; or it is a morbid manifestation of the romantic spirit found in the works of Hoffmann, Poe, and less reputable gothic writers. Or fantasy means Tolkien and his ilk -- nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors whose œuvres are not part of traditional literature courses. But fantasy encompasses far more than these phenomena. It informs the spirit of all but a small part of western literature. We are curiously blind to its presence because our traditional approaches to literature are based on mimetic assumptions. Philosophy and Christianity have denigrated the non-real on various grounds, with the result that we have never developed an analytic vocabulary for exploring and understanding fantasy. Even now, we can form ideas about it only with difficulty, and must struggle to wrest our insights from the inchoate imprecision of wordlessness.

Part I of *Fantasy and Mimesis* will briefly examine what has been done to remedy our lack of critical understanding. Chapter one analyzes definitions of fantasy that have emerged in the last two decades and shows how they relate to one another. Chapter two sketches the history of fantasy as a literary phenomenon. When has it been most common? Why did it fall into disrepute? Why is it reappearing so frequently in contemporary writing? Only when we have become sensitized to the prevalence of fantasy can we go on in Part II to study literary responses to reality, both fantastic and mimetic. These responses are complexly varied. Imitation and imaginative transformation, metaphor and allegory, whimsy and myth interact in such elaborate patterns that creating divisions for
critical purposes may seem as impracticable as separating the dancer from the dance.

But one can enjoy watching the dance the better for knowing the steps, can better appreciate the grace with which figures are executed for understanding how difficult they are. Recognizing and responding to the fantasy element in literature requires such knowledge. Part I will attempt to supply the foundation on which such knowledge can be built.

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Critical approaches to fantasy

The doctrine of mimesis was the foundation of the Greek aesthetic; it is probably the best foundation for any aesthetic. (John Crowe Ransom, "The Mimetic Principle", *The World's Body*, 1938)

The disenfranchisement of fantasy

Today, Ransom's naive statement leaves much to be desired as a critical dictum, given our belated recognition that texts cannot transcribe reality, and indeed mostly refer to other linguistic conventions. Barthes' *S/Z* exposes some of the insufficiencies of mimetic assumptions even when those assumptions are applied to literature we think of as realistic. Robbe-Grillet insists that although description of things "once claimed to reproduce a pre-existing reality... Now it seems to destroy them, as if its intention to discuss them aimed only at blurring their contours, at making them incomprehensible." The extreme position posts that there is no discussable relationship between literature and reality but, in practical terms, most words in any normal narrative refer to the commonalities of human experience, and few readers can be persuaded to relinquish all expectation of meaning in a text. They will put the book down rather than try to respond to words which are being offered only as aesthetic squiggles or melodic sounds or even as infinite interplay of signifiers. Literature bears an inescapable resemblance to reality, and the more the work tells a story, the more necessary the presence of the real. Nonetheless, it is an astonishing tribute to the eloquence and rigor of Plato and Aristotle as originators of western critical theory that most subsequent critics have assumed mimetic representation to be the essential relationship between text and the real world.

The tribute, though deserved, is not altogether a happy one. We might rather say that Plato and Aristotle between them tore a large and ragged
hole in western consciousness. Ever since their day, our critical perceptions have been marred by this blind spot, and our views of literature curiously distorted. To both philosophers, literature was mimetic, and they analyzed only its mimetic components. Moreover, insofar as their assumptions allowed them to recognize fantasy at all, they distrusted and disparaged it. Aristotle judged literature according to how probable its events and characters were; realistic plays he held to be better than those using fantastic gimmicks like the deus ex machina. Although Plato frequently used fantastic myths to clarify his more mystical arguments, he too tended to insist on the mimetic nature of literature. He banned it from the Republic because this essential feature made it a shadow of a shadow and because the object of the mimesis was too often unworthy emotion. In the Phaedrus, moreover, he seems unenthusiastic about the fantastic elements in traditional myths. He certainly derides attempts to rescue them through rationalization, and does not seem well disposed to the mythic monsters taken at face value.

In truth, the passage from the Phaedrus quoted in the Preface has cast a long shadow on literary theory. Plato may have approved fantasy in some guises, since he entrusted important ideas to its images, but his negative views are the ones to have influenced later generations. Its mythic avatars, the winged horse and the chimera, leave their trail throughout later expressions of disdain for fantasy. Tasso, for instance, mentions flying horses, along with enchanted rings and ships turned into nympha, as permissible for the ancients, but a breach of decorum for his contemporaries. Hobbes concedes that impenetrable armor, enchanted castles, and flying horses were apparently not as displeasing to the ancients as they should be to men of good sense in his own day. George Granville’s “Essay on Unnatural Figures in Poetry” (1701) admits Parnassus, Pegasus, the muses, and the chimera to be acceptable poetic fictions, but condemns dwarves and giants as extravagant. David Hume disparages literary fantasy as a threat to sanity: romances, he claims, deal with nothing but “winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants”, and he fears that “every chimera of the brain is as vivid and intense as any of those inferences, which we formerly dignified with the name of conclusions concerning matters of fact, and sometimes as the present impressions of the senses”.

Christianity unconcernedly perpetuated mimetic assumptions, and at the same time it further muddled critical perceptions of fantasy. The seductive attractions of classical literature included fantastic creatures and deities of an alien faith, so early Fathers of the Church developed a rhetoric of rejection that debarred these fantasies and, by implication, did the same to other fantasies as well. To many earnest Christians, literary fantasy has seemed a species of lie. The enemies of poetry addressed by Boccaccio and Sir Philip Sidney evidently numbered such literalists in their ranks; the Plymouth Brethren parents of Edmund Gosse considered all fiction whatever to be reprehensible lies. We see the secularization of this literal-mindedness, and its extension as a mingling of Protestant and scientific seriousness, in Hard Times. Dickens is sensitive to the irreducible issue of fact versus non-fact, and he choreographs an elaborate battle between the two. An instructor expounds the literalist position to the hapless pupils:

You are to be in all things regulated and governed . . . by fact. We hope you to have before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don’t walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don’t find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery.

However, more sophisticated Christians throughout the ages have contented themselves with dismissing popular fantasy as a frivolity and therefore not deserving of serious notice. Moreover, despite hostility to the fantastic, Christianity did not quickly give rise to a realistic literary tradition, partly because it was also hostile to our fallen world and therefore could not consider realistic representations desirable or enlightening; partly, too, because it fostered allegory and other forms of fantasy deemed compatible with Christian morality. Marie de France can claim in the prologue to her lais that the fantastic adventures she describes conceal significant moral messages. Acceptable fantasy appears in the miracles stuffed into saints’ lives. Bede, who wrote the sober and realistic Lives of the Abbots, adds miracles to his source for his Life of Cuthbert, composing this fanciful story juxta morem, or according to the custom, of that particular literary form.

Christian fantasy encouraged the non-real, but did not sharpen critical awareness of the phenomenon because fantasy, if it served the cause of morality, became “true” and therefore ethically distinct from the lies of fable. Even today, the vitae of the fictitious Saints George and Christopher are held to contain moral truth, despite their unhistoricality. Christianity did nothing to repress the balance between fantasy and mimesis, although Christian poets made much use of fantasy in allegory and romance and pious tale. At most, acknowledged fantasy was tolerated as nugatory entertainment, but it received no separate, positive status, with the result that fantasy continued to seem a fringe phenomenon.

Socrates’ repudiation of chimeras and pegasi directed the attention of his successors away from fantasy’s richness as a literary impulse. He also deflected inquiry away from the relationship between fantasy and the unconscious, thus discouraging systematic analysis in that direction until psychoanalysis. Now, as we focus on the psychological validity and artistic effectiveness of fantasy, we must struggle to correct our distorted
perceptions and invent the requisite critical vocabulary. Since our terms evolved to meet the needs of mimetic assumptions, only the mimetic elements in literature have hitherto worn faces. However, as we finally begin to recognize the presence of this faceless, silent partner, its form gradually grows more perceptible.

In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss the theories of fantasy which have recently been put forward, their strengths, their weaknesses, and the ways in which the theories complement or challenge each other. Then, when readers have had a chance to weigh the advantages of an inclusive definition against those of exclusive definitions, I will look more closely at the idea of fantasy as literary impulse, and will spell out the assumptions I make about the nature of literature. Throughout the present chapter, from different angles, I am trying to offer answers to the question “What is fantasy?” When we have some answers, we will be in a better position to consider the questions that inspire Parts II and III, namely, “How is fantasy used?” and “Why use it?”

**Exclusive definitions**

Ultimately, I shall argue that recent theories of fantasy work from faulty assumptions about the nature of literature, so let me outline what these premises seem to be. The recent theorists assume, along with Plato and Aristotle, that the essential impulse behind literature is mimetic, and that fantasy is therefore a separable, peripheral phenomenon. Viewing fantasy as separable and secondary has led these critics to try to create exclusive definitions. They assume that fantasy is a pure phenomenon, that a few clear rules will delimit it, and that the result will be a genre or form which can be called fantasy. They frame their definitions in such a way as to exclude as many works as possible. What remains, for most of these critics, is a small corpus of texts, all fairly uniform in their uses of departure from consensus reality, and this small corpus is duly declared to be “fantasy” – with little thought given to all the works that have departures from reality which somehow fail to fit the rules. The resulting definitions do delineate various minor strains in literature, but are incapable of telling us much about the larger problem of departures from consensus reality: their nature, their aims, their effects. We can be grateful for these many insights, but I feel we need to take a broader view. If we are to unify various disparate subfields of fantasy, we shall need an inclusive definition. But first let us see what contributions the exclusive definitions can make.

Comparing the explicit and implicit definitions of fantasy put forward by three such diverse critics as Harold Bloom, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Eric Rabkin is like trying to compare interferon, saffron, and platinum. All the substances are valuable, but we need a common standard against which to measure them, some kind of framework that will highlight their similarities and differences.

The framework I would like to offer is a diagrammatic model of literature in its context. Something like this scheme is propounded by M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1**

Work, artist, and audience are self-explanatory. Universe is Abrams’ term for “nature”, or “people and actions, ideas and feelings, material things and events, or super-sensible essences”. This universe lies within the fictive work. Abrams uses his scheme to compare critical theories of literature. As he points out, “Although any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories . . . exhibit a discernible orientation toward one only.”

Author, work, and audience, as I shall call those same elements in my diagram, seem unexceptionable – they are necessary units in any communication situation – but “universe” is an oversimplification. First causes and final effects of a piece of literature are not confined to its author and audience. In addition to the universe within the work, we have to keep track of two other cosmoi in which those first and final effects are worked out – namely, the world surrounding the author (world-1) and that enfolding the reader (world-2). World-1 is everything outside the author that impinges upon him, consciously or unconsciously. It both reflects and shapes his scale of values. The elements an author creates with come from world-1. If the literature is especially successful, it makes its mark not just on members of the audience but, through them, on world-2, everything that impinges on the lives of members of the audience. These worlds of experience, world-1 and world-2, differ even if the artist and reader are contemporaries; world-2 indeed differs for each member of the audience. If artist and audience are separated by time, language, religion, culture, or class, the amount of shared reality may be small. The nature of what each considers significant reality will overlap even less. The universe or world within the work differs yet again. In order to compare theories of fantasy and see how they operate, we need first to be clear on the network of reciprocal relationships surrounding any work of literature. Hence, I propose the following diagram of a text surrounded by its successive contexts:
The descriptions labeling each arrow reflect my concern with fantasy, but the diagram is usable for discussing any critical orientation. Solid arrows indicate material covered by the critical theory; dotted arrows, as seen in figure 3 below, are areas that are lightly covered or only implicit; no arrow or parentheses around a blank indicate that the theory pays little or no attention to that part of the total system. The orientation of the arrows simply alludes to the direction of the relationship being discussed: "author←work" refers to the demands made on the author by the work through its generic conventions, and through the needs of the developing personalities of the characters. Within the work, I have labeled the third world "universe", Abrams' term for it, in order to reduce the confusion with worlds -1 and -2. Characters I treat as a sub-category within the fictive universe. They are part of that fictive universe, but some theories of fantasy make a distinction between the characters and their universe, so I mark them as separable.

One can use this scheme, for instance, to characterize the concerns of schools of criticism and thereby establish grounds for comparison. The characteristic configuration of the patriarch or Robertsonian approach to medieval literature might be diagrammed as follows:

The individuality of the author is for all practical purposes denied. Any literary work is assumed to reflect the same set of world-1 realities, and the medieval audience supposedly brought essentially uniform and predictable assumptions to the literary experience. If the message of charity is effective, there should be a change in the audience's relationship to world-2; hence the dotted arrow. By way of contrast, New Criticism leaves worlds -1 and -2 and the author out of its field of focus. It assumes a response identical to the critic's, and concentrates on work and audience:

Figure 4

A critic treating a heavily didactic work will often implicitly set the work aside and concentrate on the flow of moral ideas which moves from author to audience:

Figure 5

Though few critical theorists pay much attention to the effect of literature on world-2, that relationship is stressed by moralists who wish to ban the sale of pornography, and by Marxists interested in social change.

The misguidedness of thinking fantasy to be a pure phenomenon relevant to a small portion of literature becomes apparent as we look at the various ways that fantasy can enter the picture through the contexts surrounding the work of literature. Let me explain the complete framework shown in figure 2, paying special attention to the reciprocal relationships numbered one through four, and to the ways in which fantasy can enter the picture.

If we think about world-1 at all in relation to the author, we normally picture world-1 as influencing the author (world-1→author), and it does indeed provide his sense of what is real and what a departure from reality. But the relationship also works in the other direction; the author manipulates and distorts the givens from world-1 (world-1→author), at least in his mind, and from its purely realistic phenomena he can create fantasy – a classical example of this process being the fantastic centaur made by joining the realistic givens of man and horse. In contemporary literature, the author may also alter his world-1 reality with drugs, or he may work with association and metaphor: Borges transforms a library into a universe; Barth makes a university the universe; Blish creates one of his universes out of a shallow pond. The author's own perceptions may incline him to see reality in terms other than the consensus; the result may be
insight or insanity, mysticism or muddle, but what comes into the text will seem fantastic to readers.

In the relationship numbered 2, we tend to think only of the author as creating the work and hence as inserting fantasy into it, consciously or unconsciously; but the work also exerts an influence on the author, and calls fantasy into being. A romance needs marvels; satire calls for caricature and distortion; a saint’s life demands miracles; science fiction needs galactic travel or other pseudo-scientific novelties. Fantasy may thus enter as an expression of authorial vision and psychology, or because of the demands of the genre.

Fantasy enters the third numbered relationship as something which is seen in the work by the audience; it flows from work to audience. We know surprisingly little about the effect it has on readers’ outlook and behavior. Does escapist fantasy refresh readers and send them back to their real world renewed? Or does it make their real world less tolerable? Or does it undercut the readers’ abilities to act— as Marxists feel? But the audience can also take some credit for calling it forth. The science fiction fans reinforce what the author feels as the demands of genre through their power as the buying public. Readers’ interpretation of the nature of fantasy is also crucial. If the story goes too far beyond readers’ sense of what is permissible, they may well reject the work, as many readers did Coover’s The Public Burning on account of what the readers considered fantastic distortions of history. Readers may also introduce one kind of fantasy that is uncontrollable by the author; what the author meant literally may be interpreted as fantasy by readers of different backgrounds and eras: the monsters in Beowulf may be a case in point.

Finally, in the fourth numbered relationship, we see how world-2 provides the audience with its standards of what is real and what fantastic, but the effects of fantasy may be felt in the reciprocal relationship too: as C.S. Lewis points out, reading about an enchanted forest can make all subsequent woods in the real world seem a bit enchanted to the susceptible and sensitive reader.* If the text encourages one to look for angels dancing in a sunbeam, one may indeed see them. And if readers try to realize the fantasy in world-2, they may sometimes believe they succeed—as we can see in religious matters—and for some kinds of fantasy they can theoretically succeed if they bring a utopian community or some scientific breakthrough into being.

Theories of fantasy can be characterized by what portion of the contextual system they emphasize, and by the amount of the system they encompass. These variables, location and inclusiveness, bring out the contrasts between the theories quite sharply. Naturally, the theorists mention all of the elements in the diagram at one time or another. My identifying the focus with a limited portion of the scheme is an oversimplification, but I agree with Abrams that one can validly talk about a discernible orientation in any of these theories, and this is what I am trying to do. Since inclusiveness seems to correlate with the theory’s capacity to answer basic questions, I shall discuss the authors, starting with those who focus narrowly on one element of the diagram, and ending with those who more or less encompass the entire scheme.

One-element definitions

Some critics exclude from consideration all elements but the work and its component parts, universe and characters. Two one-element, work-oriented definitions are those by Louis Vax and Brian Attebery. Vax, in L’art et la littérature fantastiques, despairs of defining fantasy formally, and settles for a definition based on subject matter. Fantasy is that literature which deals with werewolves; vampires; portions of the human body which become detached and autonomously active; personality troubles, especially of an extravagantly sexual sort; the invisible; changes in causality, space, and time; and human degeneration—quite a grab-bag that encompasses le roman noir, his main concern, but would also embrace such later works as Gogol’s “The Nose” and Roth’s The Breast, and such science fiction stories as abrogate the limits of space and time. A more formal definition confining itself to the work is that of Brian Attebery. His initial rule is very flexible, being based on W.R. Irwin’s “overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility”, but he concentrates on the gradual advances achieved by American authors as they strove to assemble an American equivalent to the European realm of Faerie. Fantasy for Attebery is thus signalled by the presence of a vividly-realized secondary creation which gives readers the sense of its having a history beyond the fragments presented in the tale: Baum’s land of Oz and Le Guin’s Earthsea are such magic realms for Attebery.

Erik Rabkin also concentrates on the work, but he subdivides his material into the work’s universe and its characters. Fantasy, for him, appears where “the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted”. The changing of the ground rules must be recognized by the character as such. Carroll’s Alice books offer especially clear examples. Alice realizes that her norms have been reversed when she cannot reach the garden by walking toward it, so she very intelligently walks in the opposite direction and reaches her destination. She knows that her slow fall down the rabbit hole is a fantastic reversal. She knows that when you run, you should get someplace. She thus knows that the ground rules have been changed on her. For Rabkin, much popular literature generally called fantasy does not qualify because the characters themselves accept the fantasy as normality. They are unaware of any reversal. Other works he considers true fantasy are Cortázar’s “The Continuity of Parks”, and Moorcock’s The Warlord of the Air.
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Two-element definitions

Critics whose definitions rely on only two elements in the framework are Tzvetan Todorov and Christine Brooke-Rose. Since Brooke-Rose adopts Todorov's definition, I shall concentrate on this, which concerns the two elements of work and audience:

The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character...and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work...Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations...The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled.

Doubt in the reader's mind about the fictive events and refusal on the reader's part to allegorize them: these are what matter. Author satisfactions or aims are irrelevant; even the characters' attitudes towards events are secondary. Fantasy is defined by the relationship between reader and work. Works that fit Todorov's definition are Jan Potocki's Saragossa Manuscript, Cazotte's Le Diable Amoureux, and I would add James' Turn of the Screw and Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49. One inescapable drawback of Todorov's definition is that many works conform to it up until their last pages, at which point they either explain the mystery (thus becoming merely unanswerable), or affirm the reality of the supernatural event and thus become examples of the marvelous.

Three-element definitions

One critic, Harold Bloom, focuses on an unusual selection of elements, namely on world-1—author—work:

fantasy, as a belated version of romance, promises an absolute freedom from belatedness, from the anxieties of literary influence and origination, yet this promise is shadowed always by a psychic over-determination in the form itself of fantasy, that puts the stances of freedom into severe question. What promises to be the least anxious of literary modes becomes much the most anxious, and this anxiety specifically relates to anterior powers, that is, to what we might call the genealogy of the imagination. The cosmos of fantasy, of the pleasure/pain principle, is revealed in the shape of nightmare, and not of hallucinatory wish-fulfillment.

In other words, fantasy should free the writer from his sense of being a dwarf following after giants, although, paradoxically, the promised freedom from the ever-threatening oedipal predecessors usually elicits extreme anxiety from the author. Notice that the right side of the diagram hardly exists for Bloom: literature is the product of an author's dialogue with his predecessors (world-1) and its significance lies in the degree to which the author can assert himself. Bloom's chief example is David Lindsay's A Voyage to Arcturus, but he also talks about E.T.A. Hoffmann, Blake, Kafka, and his own gnostic fantasy, The Flight to Lucifer.

More conventional theories to rely on three of the framework's elements are those by W.R. Irwin, Marcel Schneider, and Ann Swinburn, all of whom draw on the communication sequence of author→work→audience. Irwin's definition works in two stages, the first being text-centered:

Whatever the material, extravagant or seemingly commonplace, a narrative is a fantasy if it presents the persuasive establishment and development of an impossibility, an arbitrary construct of the mind with all under the control of logic and rhetoric. This is the central formal requisite. Without it, even the most bizarre material may be mobilized to produce something other than fantasy.

The second stage involves author and audience:

To repeat, narrative sophistry, conducted...to make nonfact appear as fact, is essential to fantasy. In this effort, writer and reader knowingly enter upon a conspiracy of intellectual subversiveness, that is, upon a game. Moreover, this game, led by the writer prompting participation by the reader, must be continuous and coherent.

Examples of fantasy according to this definition are Kafka's The Metamorphosis, Garnett's Lady Into Fox, Bruller's Sylva, and Walter de la Mare's Memoirs of a Midget.

Marcel Schneider, like other French theorists, stresses themes, but he also makes a most welcome, if melodramatic, allusion to the relationship between fantasy and the psychological desires of both authors and audience:

The fantastic lives on illusion, on delirium sometimes, always on hope and above all on the hope of salvation. For each of us hopes to be saved, and not only in another world but from now on, here below, thanks to the assurance that serves at the same time as talisman, secret, and recourse to the invisible powers.

He mentions as the concerns of fantasy such subjects as time, destiny, the hereafter, the countenance of God, salvation, and love. He goes on to say that both author and audience may be "interested in the nocturnal portion of our existence, in dreams, daydreams, misgivings, intuitions, frenzies, phantasms, chimeras; in non-rational manifestations, portents, presages, auguries, etc., rather than in that which we do in all reason and consciousness". Schneider discusses a wide variety of authors, some of whom are Beckford, Potocki, Poe, Hoffmann, Nodier, Nerval, and Gautier.

Swinburn hardly defines fantasy at all, but she emphasizes themes (e.g., talking beasts, secondary worlds), and authorial desire to communicate ideals—religious, philosophic, social, political—to the audience. Her focus on works published since 1945 is unusual and welcome.
Four-element definitions

Darko Suvin is defining science fiction, so he is somewhat outside of my direct concerns here, but he shows an unusual four-element orientation, stretching from world-1 to audience: "SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment." For the audience, the defining criteria are cognition and estrangement - the latter term including the effects of both Shklovsky's ostranenije (defamiliarization) and Brecht's Verfremdung; for the author, the defining feature is that the work's imaginative realm be an alternative to the author's empirical environment. Suvin stresses this role of fantasy-work as comment on the author's world-1 when he analyzes the political subtexts in fantasies by Wells, Bellamy, and Verne.

Five-element definitions

Finally, we find approaches that embrace the entire, five-element framework in the Christian and Marxist theories of J.R.R. Tolkien and Rosemary Jackson, respectively. Tolkien is discussing fairy stories, so his primary emphasis is on the creation of Faerie within the text, but he is heavily concerned with justifying the form. This causes him to include a definition of fantasy and a description of what his fairytale texts should do, which prompts him to touch not just on author and audience but on world-1 and world-2 as well. He defines fantasy as a "natural human activity" which, he points out, "does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity". "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. ... If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen."

Tolkien as a natural human activity engages both writer and reader. For the writer, the attraction is the act of creating a secondary world. He must know reality, but he must also know what readers desire, and create out of his knowledge of these two. For the audience, the rewards of the fairy story are the fantasy for its own sake, and the experiences that the story gives us of recovery, escape, and consolation, all adding up to joy. By recovery, Tolkien meant the refreshing effect of defamiliarization, the newness available to us only after we have freed ourselves from our sense of possessing the familiar. Escape from the ugliness of industrial life and from death is for Tolkien one of the legitimate gifts of literature. The consolation offered by fairy stories is the assurance of a happy ending both for the story and for ourselves. Tolkien draws an extended comparison between fairy stories and the Gospel, stressing the spiritual impact that effective fantasy can have on the audience, and he acknowledges that fantasy can affect the audience's subsequent interaction with world-2.

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Very different from Tolkien's religious sense of fairytale fantasy is Rosemary Jackson's Marxist and Freudian approach. She speaks of fantasy as:

... a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.

In expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (according to the different meanings of 'express'): it can tell of, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can express desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force). In many cases fantastic literature fulfills both functions at once, for desire can be 'expressed' through having been 'told of' and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader. In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'."

Whereas Todorov emphasizes hesitation, Tolkien joy, and Irwin game, Jackson stresses fantasy as subversion and as a means for dealing with that which has been repressed and hence is inexpressible:

The fantastic is predicated on the category of the 'real', and it introduces areas which can be conceptualized only by negative terms according to the categories of nineteenth-century realism: thus, the im-possible, the un-real, the nameless, formless, shapeless, un-known, in-visible. What could be termed a 'bourgeois' category of the real is under attack. It is this negative relationality which constitutes the meaning of the modern fantastic. (Ibid., p. 26)

Fantasy within the text, Jackson defines as a kind of oxymoron holding together contradictions and sustaining "them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis" (p. 21). Like Tolkien but on different grounds, Jackson expresses the belief that fantasy, because of its subversive qualities, "may lead to real social transformation" (p. 10). In other words, it may affect world-2. Some of her texts are Frankenstein, Melmoth the Wanderer, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and Dracula. Although she focuses on the nineteenth-century English tradition, she also comments on later works from Europe and America, including some by authors like Kafka and Pynchon.

Let us sum up the characteristics of the various definitions, using figure 6 to aid comparisons. Critics have who concentrated on work (itself consisting of fictive word and characters) include Vax, Atteberry, and Rabkin:
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Todorov’s definition is simple:

At the level of inclusiveness represented by three elements, we find different selections of elements. Bloom concentrates on the authorial side of the diagram:

W.R. Irwin and Marcel Schneider pay attention to the three elements basic to a communication situation — author, work, and audience:

This collection of definitions of fantasy irresistibly reminds one of the blind men describing an elephant. Each observation is accurate for that part of the whole to which it applies, but none can stand as a description for the entire beast.

My evaluation of these definitions corresponds roughly to their inclusiveness. Those that embrace more of the contextual system are more readily usable. One can at least think of works that fit their criteria, whereas one is hard put to scrape up examples of the one- and two-element definitions. But ultimately, all of these are exclusive. And note, too, the relative unimportance or eccentricity or peripherality of so many of the texts these definitions confine themselves to. I am not denying that exclusive definitions can be useful. They do sensitize us to particular strains in literature and help us understand the conventions of those delimited forms. But the insights remain fragmented. They do not lend themselves to integration with the broader concerns of literary theory. Nor do most of them have much to offer as answers to such major questions as “Why use fantasy?” “What do audiences get from it?” “What good is it to authors?” “Why was fantasy displaced from the mainstream by the realistic novel in
Fantasy and Mimesis

the nineteenth century?" The approaches best able to tackle some of these questions are those of Tolkien and Jackson, but overall, exclusive definitions seem to me a dead end. They will always be inadequate to the full range of non-realistic phenomena in literature. They make themselves insufficient through self-limitation.

Inclusive definition

I suggest that any major improvement in our ability to handle fantasy critically will not come from refining any of the approaches just described. It will not come from any sort of exclusive definition, nor from trying to isolate fantasy as a genre or form. The limitations of that paradigm should now be clear. Il faut reculer pour mieux sauter: we need to go back and rethink the original assumptions, those being (1) that the essential impulse behind literature is mimesis; (2) that fantasy is a separable and peripheral phenomenon; and (3) that, because separable, it is pure and best defined by exclusion.

I propose a different basic formulation, namely, that literature is the product of two impulses. These are mimesis, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and fantasy, the desire to change givens and alter reality – out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience’s verbal defences. We need not try to claim a work as a fantasy any more than we identify a work as a mimesis. Rather, we have many genres and forms, each with a characteristic blend or range of blends of the two impulses. Tolkien’s identification of fantasy as a “human activity” seems pertinent. It is necessary and useful both to the author and to the audience. Its manifestations in the text serve several purposes: relieving authorial tensions or giving voice to authorial vision; manipulating and releasing audience tensions; shocking, enchanting, and comforting. Above all, fantasy helps activate whatever it is in our minds that gives us the sense that something is meaningful.

I would like to propose a working definition of fantasy whose aim is to be as inclusive and as flexible as possible. Far from trying to avoid other definitions, it will be successful to the extent that it overlaps and includes their specifications, and makes a place for as many of their insights as possible. I shall try to analyze a wide and varied range of fantastic elements in literature, rather than extract a short list of uniform texts to be identified as a separate genre. Too frequently, studies based on exclusive definitions rouse a sense of frustration, for most stories generally called fantasy simply do not fit their definitions. If we look at western literature historically, we find all sorts of departures from consensus reality throughout its span, in the works of such major authors as Homer and Virgil; Chaucer,

Critical approaches to fantasy

Shakespeare, and Pynchon; Crétiën de Troyes and Rabelais; Gottfried von Strassburg, Thomas Mann, and Kafka; Dante and Calvino. There are genres and works that eschew fantasy throughout this span, and in the nineteenth century fantasy was consciously pushed to the periphery by the upholders of the realistic novel, but fantasy has generally been a well-established part of mainstream narrative, and is now well re-established in contemporary fiction. To do justice to this all-but-universal phenomenon, we must abandon the assumption that mimesis, the vraisemblance to the world we know, is the only real part of literature; give up the notion that fantasy is peripheral and readily separable. We must start instead from the assumption that literature is the product of both mimesis and fantasy, and talk about mimetic and fantastic elements in any one work. Only then can we hope to approach literature without the distortion of perspective bequeathed to us by Plato and Aristotle.

My working definition is therefore of the simplest sort, and much like W.R. Irwin’s. Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor. It includes transgressions of what one generally takes to be physical facts such as human immortality, travel faster than light, telekinesis, and the like. Telepathy, although it may show up as a statistical effect in Rhine Institute studies of card-calling, does not work on the communication-as-if-by-telephone principle that some fiction displays, so that too is fantasy. I would include as a departure from consensus reality some technical or social innovations which have not yet taken place, even though they may well happen in the future: cloning of humans and utopian societies are both examples of this sort of fantasy. I would include alternate worlds and universes, for though other forms of life probably exist elsewhere in the cosmos, any current literary portrayal is the embodiment of our desires, a metaphor and a subcreation from matter we know in our own world, not an intuition of another world. We can also include as fantasy those stories whose marvel is considered “real”, although not in the same fashion that a chair is real. Miracles and some monsters may have been thought to exist by their original audience and even their author, but were often acknowledged to be real only in a special fashion: they only enter the lives of the spiritually or heroically elect; they are miracula or things to be marvelled at, precisely because they are not everyday occurrences and cannot be controlled by just anybody who has a mind to try. We know we are dealing with a form of fantasy if the rhetoric of the text places the dragonflight somewhere else or once upon a time. Such distance and time markers commonly denote an awareness of fantasy.

Todorov and Brooke-Rose ban allegorical and poetic interpretation of the fantastic event or action. Although Jackson does not actually exclude the non-subversive, she relegates it to a position of insignificance in her
treatment of fantasy. Suvin excludes from consideration as science fiction any story that does not include a “cognitive novum” or intellectual novelty (rigorously defined); hence both he and Jackson would pass over most popular “fantastic” escape literature. Many of these critics would deny utopias to be fantasy, preferring instead to call them speculative fiction, since they do not violate any laws of physics. I would embrace utopias along with allegories and science fiction as having fantastic elements, and therefore of concern in a study of fantasy. Utopias seem felicitously included by Jackson’s “literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (p. 3). The perfection of utopias may well be impossible in our world, and yet be desirable.

It may seem that I am trying to claim all literature as fantasy, or at least all but the realistic novel and occasional earlier picaresque and satiric tales. Not so. I am saying that most literature includes fantastic elements, even as it includes mimesis. I also grant that some forms are not best served by using the idea of fantasy as a means for analyzing them critically. One such form is any mythic narrative so undispensed that teller and audience believe absolutely in the accessibility of the fantastic phenomenon to anybody. It is doubtful if we have any such tales in literary form, but some religious narratives may qualify. Another exception is escapist literature which is unrealistic but not a departure from what could physically happen in this world. Stories in women’s magazines about ordinary girls marrying men who are brilliant, wealthy, fascinating, and besotted with them are sometimes called fantasy because of their raw daydream content, but they do not contravene the laws of physics or physiology. The third exception is simply what we normally call fiction. Plausible stories set in times past or present, which use invented characters in real or imagined situations, are not trying to depart from consensus reality, for all that they describe something which did not actually happen. If there had been a man like Horatio Hornblower during the Napoleonic wars, he might have enjoyed a career like that of C.S. Forester’s hero; most of the upper ranked characters in that enjoyable series are historical and do what the history books say they did, but Hornblower himself is fictional. However, if historical characters are made to depart substantially from historical fact, as is Nixon in Coover’s *The Public Burning*, then we are dealing with fantasy.

If we turn to the diagram of texts and contexts with an inclusive definition in mind, we can compare some of its concerns with those of the exclusive theories, and also chart the subsequent concerns of this book:

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Since departure from consensus reality can only be registered from its appearance in the text, one might, at first, class this inclusive definition as work-oriented, but “consensus” immediately refers us both to the world of the author and that of the audience. Fantasy depends on what world-1 has conditioned the author to think of as real. Fantasy originates in the phenomena of world-1, as acted upon by authorial desire, fear, and logic. The author can incorporate the departures from reality out of the motives traced by Bloom, or out of those suggested by Freud and Jung; or may wish to “express” desire in both of Jackson’s senses. All of these possibilities must be taken into account by the theory. Moreover, the nature of the fantasy may partly be dictated by the form of the work: if one is writing romance or satire or science fiction, one usually aims to meet formal expectations. The fantasy may also be influenced by the occasion for which a piece is produced, or by the preferences of market or publisher, or by the internal development of the plot. The departure from consensus reality appears within the fictive universe of the story, but is not always recognized as such a departure by the characters. In many a work of science fiction, the worlds portrayed are the only ones known to the characters, and so not alien or wondrous. Their adventures may or may not include brushes with what they deem magic. Rabkin’s and Todorov’s emphasis on a barrier between characters and the fictive universe seems too exclusive to me. So long as the departure is recognizable to the reader, we are talking about fantasy.

Some fantastic departures are peripheral: n-space travel is usually not magic to the characters within the work, and in any event is of less concern to readers than the plot it makes possible. Other departures, such as an escape from human mortality, can be central to the effect of the story. The narrative nature of the mix of fantasy and mimesis has much to do with the complex effects of the narrative. The audience may respond intellectually, emotionally, and subconsciously, each response differing in content and
strength. The audience will also react according to generic expectation, according to cultural background, and according to personal concept of reality. Some of these responses will be influenced by the audience's experience in and perception of its own world. Moreover, the fiction, if effective, may at least temporarily modify each audience member's relationship with his or her own world. If the work is extremely effective - as Jackson's subversive agency, as Tolkien's bringer of joy, or as C.S. Lewis' awakener of a sense of enchantment - it may permanently alter the reader's relationship with world.

An inclusive definition cannot confine itself to treating fantasy as a genre (Todorov) or even as a mode (Jackson). Tolkien moves beyond literature when he calls fantasizing a natural human activity, and that seems to me an important point when we try to locate fantasy within the system. The author fantasizes, creates inner fantasies using and altering materials he perceives in world, and turns them into a text which embodies fantastic departures from reality. The reader in turn absorbs the literary fantasy and turns it into virtual memory, and even into personal fantasies. We can see only the literary text, but without some consideration of the human desires motivating both supply and demand of that text, we cannot understand fantasy. A work-orientation to fantasy criticism is insufficient. We can deal with the textual manifestation because that is what we can see, but fantasy and the activities producing it go beyond that text. I have tried to gather and subsume these various facets of fantasy under the term "impulse", and I suggest that this impulse is not inferior in priority, scope, or significance to the mimetic impulse.

As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, fantasy has not generally been granted parity with mimesis in critical thinking. Even in this post-romantic era, Ransom could speak of mimesis as the best foundation for any aesthetic. One can indeed build elaborate intellectual edifices on an essentially mimetic foundation, as Western critics have done, but the complexity and beauty of such structures should not blind us to the flaws inherent in this foundation. Moreover, the potential presence of fantasy and its effects in each of the relationships among the contexts and text suggests that fantasy is much more central to literature than a generic label. But I am not arguing that fantasy should replace mimesis. Robert Scholes is correct in theory when he states:

what we can no longer accept is precisely this Joycean faith in the transcribability of things. It is because reality cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. No recording. Only constructing.

In practice, however, we know it to be quite possible to recognize an imitative and realistic intention in narratives. Zola's L'assommoir and Updike's Rabbit is Rich may be fiction, and as stories they are certainly poiesis, but the plots use no fantastic elements and new to consensus reality. No one would call them fantasy. Hence, I continue to use the traditional terms, mimesis and fantasy, and as impulses behind the creation of literature, the terms are accurate and usable as they may not be when used to describe the transformation of thing or action into words.

If we look beyond mimetic-oriented critical assumptions, we will see that fantasy is present in many literary forms throughout ages. In some picaresque tales, pastoralts, and novels, we find a systematic effort to avoid it. In the case of the novel, the exclusion of the non-real parallels and imitates the attempts of scientists to free their observations from the assumptions based on Christian myths, in order that they might establish facts. Fantasy, far from being a fringe phenomenon, is strongly separable from literature as a whole. Fantasy and mimesis together are equally important impulses, and their interaction must be studied if we are to progress in our understanding of literature.

Assumptions about literature

As a coda to these definitions of fantasy, I would like to lay out the assumptions about literature made in this study. These can be important because assumptions about the function of literature strongly affect their proponents' attitudes towards fantasy.

Some of the standard assumptions about what literature is or does (aside from entertain) include the following. Literature has been seen primarily as imitation (the classical and neoclassical tradition). In a broad sense, this assumption extends to all the following approaches to literature. They all assume that literature refers to reality, whatever else it does. The role of literature has also been identified as expression (anthropological and psychological approaches, romantic lyricism); as manipulation of the audience through its affective power and rhetoric (Tolstoy, Sir Philip Sidney); as communication (Max Eastman, many didactic writers); as creation (Robert Scholes, Austin Warren); as expression of the author's mind which only becomes meaningful by an act of mind by the audience (Poulet); as a dialogue between author and his predecessors (Bloom); and as an exercise of the teleological faculty by both author and audience (Albert Levi). Obviously, some of these overlap and some contradict each other. The reader's teleological faculty may be exercised whether the opus is considered expression or imitation. Expression may mean lyric outcry, or may represent something like the author's attempt to manipulate unconscious anxieties. Communication may be the flatfooted exposition of a message, or may be something more subtle, such as Sartre's notion that literature has a thesis (though no extractable idea) whose point is to remind man of his freedom. For readers like R.G. Collingwood, who hold Kantian notions of the purely aesthetic, any attempt at explicit communication
degrades a work from the status of art to that of propaganda. A work of literature deemed by one critic to derive its significance from the personal response of the reader may be seen by another critic as an embodiment of the spirit of its age.

All these approaches to literature seem possessed of some validity and usefulness, but each gives its proponent a characteristic ability to see or not to see fantasy in literature, to value it or not to value it. If one starts with the belief that literature consists of mimesis, one has an automatic bias against manifestations of fantasy. The presence of fantasy is taken to signal a kind of failure. Many classical and neoclassical writers used ghosts and gods in their high mimetic works, apparently feeling that these heightened the effects of pity and terror that they strove for, but Dryden, for instance, betrays defensive uneasiness over his use of such gimmicks; his protests on behalf of his practice imply uncomfortable belief that the tibits of fantasy were not the highest form of art, that they were, in fact, a bit regrettable, and entertaining though negligible. In no sense did they threaten the fundamental imitation from which his art drew its respectability.

Literature as expression is an approach taken by very different critical schools. Christopher Caudwell takes an anthropological and Marxist work-orientation, and discusses literature as emerging from expressions of community feeling such as work songs and celebrations of community events. For Freud, the expression involves the author’s conscious and unconscious anxieties, which are made palatable and even enjoyable to him and to his audience because they are artfully expressed. For many romantics, literature was the author’s lyric expression of feeling. Part of Wordsworth’s celebrated definition of poetry calls it “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. Theoretically, this approach to literature neither encourages nor discourages fantasy; in practice, it is sufficiently open to the fantastic and to images from the author’s unconscious that it seems to foster fantasy, especially in the Romantic era, if only by contrast to the mimetic assumptions that had influenced previous ages. Gothic literature, with its sinister fantasies and subversive probes into bourgeois conscience, is often called dark romanticism. Jackson’s Marxist and Freudian theory of fantasy rests on such assumptions about literature’s expressive function.

If one considers literature as rhetoric, significant insofar as it has power to affect an audience, one should be able to admit and recognize fantasy. If swaying the audience is what matters, then any technique which succeeds validates itself, unless religious taboos limit the techniques allowed. The literature of sentimentality that flourished in the eighteenth century uses little fantasy because its rhetorical end is to persuade the audience to respond to the finer things of the extant world, but literature designed to frighten readers or entrance them often finds fantasy effective. Tolkien’s emphasis on fairy tales bringing joy is an affective theory; C.S. Lewis’ preference for enchantment is another. Theories that art should produce estrangement (Verfremdung, ostraneniyje) make affective assumptions about the purpose of literature, and fantasy is a logical tool for inducing estrangement. Poetic metaphor and symbol are warranted by the aim of affecting the audience, no matter how surreal the metaphor or how fantastic the symbol.

Literature as communication is sometimes difficult to separate from literature defined by its affective power. The former, however, works more directly with ideas, the latter with emotions. Fantasy is possible within a communicative framework, but not necessary. Theorists who view literature as a medium for communication tend to be utilitarian, and hence consider the non-real insignificant. The more the communication of ideas is stressed, the less important the artistry and individuality of the text; as I suggested with figure 5, the text can be represented by empty parentheses in the line of flow between author and audience. However, fantasy can provide the dulce which makes the utile palatable, so it often surfaces in didactic literature.

Literature as creation is an approach that is open to the possibility of recognizing fantasy and making use of it. Robert Scholes, who stresses poiesis in his assumptions about literature, makes the following point:

No man has succeeded in imagining a world free of connection to our experiential world, with characters and situations that cannot be seen as mere inversions or distortions of that all too recognizable cosmos. Thus, if we must acknowledge that reality inevitably eludes our human languages, we must admit as well that these languages can never conduct the human imagination to a point beyond this reality. If we cannot reach it, neither can we escape it. And for the same reason: because we are in it. (Structural Fabulation, p. 7)

This is a vital statement about the nature of literature; with commendable brevity, it suggests the basic grounds for my belief that fantasy is an impulse behind literary creation of no less importance than mimesis. Ultimately, we can escape neither one entirely. Both together are literature.

Poulet’s characterization of literature is both expressive (for the author) and affective (in his concern for audience response). Leibniz’s description of literature seems to me to give a sharper focus and at the same time most resembles my own. Levi sees literature as the exercise of the teleological faculty by both author and audience.

I accept all these assumptions about literature as useful and relevant, and by no means wish to exclude them when I state that my own primary assumption is that literature is significant as a meaning-giving experience. Both author and audience, in different fashions, receive corroboration for their standards of meaning, or find new frames of values. The myriad ways in which a sense of meaning is conferred will be discussed in chapters two, seven and eight. I grant that any sense of meaning is a myth of our
consciousness, but most of us seem to crave that myth. Literature, viewed in this fashion, helps us find relationships between the I and the not-I, between man and the cosmos, between consciousness and reality. Although some limited and everyday affirmations of meaning can be made using only reason and only mimetic techniques, and although fantasy has other roles as well, I shall argue that it is the fantastic elements which allow literature to convey most of its varied senses of meaning.

Historical perspectives on fantasy and realism

Throughout the span of western civilization, literature has served different functions in keeping with the shifting cultural patterns. Conceding the oversimplification, I would like to suggest that there have been three fundamentally different kinds of literature, each with its own typical function. Chronologically, they follow the sequence A-B-A-B-C. The first is the kind of literature fostered by traditional societies—societies with a unifying religion and morality—and we see this form in the Homeric epics (and much of the Old Testament) and in the literature of the Middle Ages (A, A). The second develops after the religious myths have been challenged (B, B). In late classical times, this development was cut short by the advent of Christianity and a new traditional society; in the later era, the long transitional stage found in the Renaissance eventually yielded a definitively new form of literature with a new implicit function: realism. The third stage (C), encompassing modernism and post-modernism, is arguably only another transition to we-know-not-what, but I believe that this literature has achieved a fairly clear new function, and feel that it can tentatively be recognized as a third distinct kind of literature.

Within these three stages, we find very different scope for the impulses of mimesis and fantasy. The characteristics of traditional societies have logical corollaries in their literature which help explain how that literature gives a sense of meaning, and help define the many varied functions of fantasy fostered during that stage. Skeptical philosophical and scientific stances likewise have corollaries in literature, and affect the ways of conveying meaning. I will discuss traditional literature in the first section, and then go on in the second to sketch the changes in cultural outlook that made realism possible. In the third section, I want to consider why realism has been so limited a phenomenon, historically speaking. What caused its synthesis of values to break down? How did it suggest a sense of meaning