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Modern Fantasy: A Genre of Racism?

There is a growing need for representation of race within the Fantasy literary genre—and not the kind of representation race has been receiving in the years since the genre was popularized. The forerunners of this now well-beloved genre are Anglo-American whites who hold monopolies on the fantasy bestseller lists. However, the racist theme within Modern fantasy is not as racist as one might think. Ever since J.R.R. Tolkien wrote and published *The Hobbit* in 1937 there have been accusations of racist elements within the narrative. His famous masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, is a work that is considered to be a hallmark of the epic fantasy subgenre. To the average reader, it is only an exciting epic that incorporates historical, mythological, and literary elements within its fantasy narrative. It is the story of a group of small “Hobbits” who must face seemingly insurmountable odds in order to destroy an evil weapon of power. The reader is drawn in by Tolkien’s masterful use of language, both ancient and modern, to create a mythology all his own. Not only does his expertise play out in exciting ways within the trilogy, but within other works that function as part of his mythos as well. By all accounts the standard that Tolkien set seems insurmountable, and his genius and contribution was nothing less than groundbreaking within the fantasy genre. However, the average reader does not immediately recognize the subtle appearances of racist elements within the narrative—that, within groups, all good characters are white-skinned and all evil characters are black-skinned. These elements exist not only within Tolkien’s works, but within most high fantasy epics readers

come across today. An inquisitive reader might ask why this continues to occur within the genre almost without fail. A closer look at the “seriousness” of the genre, Tolkien’s works and the way media represents them may help to clarify why this aspect of racism continues on today and why the upcoming generation must learn how to write race into fantasy.

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of “modern fantasy” as we know it today will be any work of prose fiction beginning with the year 1800 in which the elements comprising the narrative are purely fantastic in nature—yet is told as if it were real. “Fantastic” is meant to include anything that is supernatural or, as Michelle Eilers calls it, “extranatural” (336) and that is grounded within mythology. The first modern fantasy novel is considered to be quintessentially English and written by Sara Coleridge in 1837. Called *Phantasmion*, it is the story of a young prince named Phantasmion who is visited by the fairy, Potentilla, and is shown various fantastic wonders. We are not explicitly told what race Phantasmion is, but it is not discussed. It is set in a fictitious land yet written from a British perspective. The kingdom, a king and queen, fairies, magic—all historically British elements that make up traditional modern fantasy.

Few fantasy authors have moved past this heavy Anglo-Saxon presence within their stories perhaps because it is such a popular and enduring element. It is an element that Tolkien intentionally focused on within his own mythology. It was, after all, his stated purpose to create his own “creation myth” for England (Clute 951). As modern fantasists seem to be struggling to move past Tolkien and his epoch of popularity, it’s no wonder that the genre has progressed at an incredibly slow rate within an increasingly demanding world that demands modernization and diversity. Fantasy is a romantic genre that tends to hold onto the past with an iron vice grip. It

has never truly been a “serious” genre of literature nor have any of the novels that belong to it been considered “canonical” in the literary world except, perhaps, *The Hobbit*.

This lack of “seriousness” is something that is touched on by few authors. Both fantasy and science fiction are deemed to be less serious than, say, Ernest Hemingway or T. S. Eliot. “Fantastic” literature is considered childish and should be reserved only for children. James Prothero tackles this question very convincingly, making a case that, even though we associate fantasy and science fiction with “sword-and-sorcery aficionados and wide-eyed Trekkies,” fantasy should be considered as “modern day mythology...Myth teaches meaning, not by realistic logical exposition but rather by imagination and metaphor, entering the back door of the mind through the imagination”. However, he says, as teachers and school programs insist upon teaching “just the facts, not the meaningful context” we lose out on truth. There is a “fragmentation of culture and a loss of community” (33). The lack of treating with seriousness, this paper explores, might also come from a lack of proper representation of race within narratives.

I begin my analysis of Fantasy with the works of *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien because of his seemingly supreme and overpowering influence upon the modern fantasy genre. Like most modern fiction, fantasy can draw upon powerful symbolism to create themes within its narratives. However, unlike most modern fiction, the symbolism present in fantasy can date it by millennia. In most works that fall under fantasy, there is almost always the archetype of good struggling against evil—the majority of “good” being represented by the symbol of light and “evil” being represented by the symbol of darkness. In Chevalier’s *Dictionary of Symbolism*, he draws upon the Christian symbolism to define the symbols of light and darkness. He states, “Throughout [the Bible], light symbolizes life, salvation and happiness granted by

God...Darkness is correspondingly a symbol of evil, misfortune, punishment, damnation and death (604). Tolkien drew heavily from this type of symbolism in his stories, basing his own mythology more upon the archetypes of ancient Christianity. Anderson Rearick states that "...an examination of [Tolkien's] life, works and letters suggest that his treatment of dark forces in general and Orcs in particular is based more on an archetypal and Judeo-Christian parameter than a racial one. In fact, the central message of his famous work is contrary to the central racist presumption, which is that individuals can be categorized and judged by their physical, racial appearances" (864).

Because of this dichotomy of light versus dark, many make the easy assumption that Tolkien is focusing mostly upon race rather than upon archetypes. Upon closer inspection, however, *The Lord of the Rings* story does not seem like a racist one. Near the end of the story, one of the main and principle authority figures throughout the story, Aragorn, is crowned king over the land of Gondor. His goal? To unite that which had once been divided—including those men who had once fought for Sauron, the enemy of all. How, then, do so many cry "racist" against a man whose hallmark work's theme was not to portray racism as justifiable—but rather champions inclusion. At the same time, Tolkien's focus on the West and its apparent virtues seem to be obviously Orientalist—a term that is defined as "a way of looking at other people with preconceived assumptions and assigned notions of essential characteristics" (Winegar 1). Orientalism is a belief that more commonly deals with how the West views the East within history. It seems that, within Tolkien's narrative, the reader can easily mistake the East/West conflict as being inherently good versus inherently evil. However, if we look closer at the first book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Sauron's evil power "had begun to grow again" (Fellowship 59)—implying that, at one point, it had not been so powerful. The evil has come to the East

simply because of Sauron's presence, not because of any inherent qualities of the land itself. Followers who are "born and bred to the service of the Dark Lord in Mordor" (Fellowship 249) are only that way because of his presence and influence. Had Sauron not have existed—or perhaps had chosen a different land to conquer, the East might have been a very different land.

If this is true, and Tolkien was not an Orientalist who viewed the East as well as everyone who was dark-skinned as inherently evil, where does the strong accusation of racism come from? Certainly within the books there is evidence that suggests Tolkien did indeed harbor racist ideals—or at least let them subconsciously drip onto the page as he wrote. In his second book, *The Two Towers*, there is a description of a group of Gondorian men that can be taken as such evidence: "...Frodo saw that they were goodly men, *pale-skinned*, dark of hair, with grey eyes and faces sad and proud" (Towers 299 emphasis mine). Also, in third book, *The Return of the King*, another visual description is made of a member of the antagonist race of "orcs" that are always evil without fail: "[the orc] was of a small breed, *black-skinned*, with wide and snuffling nostrils..." (King 214 emphasis mine). The orc, of course, is a mythical creature that has never existed. The fact that it is black-skinned is significant and is an example of the overbearing racial dichotomy between black and white that exists within the story.

C. S. Lewis, another forerunner in the modern epic fantasy genre, spoke on the subject but briefly in his *Dethronement of Power*, "I think some readers, seeing (and disliking) this rigid demarcation of black and white, imagine they have seen a rigid demarcation between black and white people. Looking at the squares, they assume (in defiance of the facts) that all the pieces must be making bishops' moves which confine them to one color. But even such readers will hardly brazen it out through the last two volumes [of *The Lord of the Rings*]. Motives, even on the right side, are mixed" (12). The "facts" that Lewis mentions are clearly not as obvious as he

leads us to believe. This confusion of the facts comes from representation of the books in art as well as the film industry. With the arrival of the movies in the early 2000's, it is worthy to note the difference between the creative license taken by director, Peter Jackson to represent the different races of Middle Earth, and the novel's exposition and treatment of race in the context of Tolkien's history. Sue Kim explores this subject extensively. She states "...partly due to the novel's ability to explore symbolism, diplomacy and war, culture and history in greater depth and subtlety, the novels' black-and-white coding, while still strongly apparent, is more ambivalent than in the films" (898). For example, in the books, the orcs are not inherently evil but are more like workers who are taken advantage of by the "bureaucratic" designs of Sauron (Kim 884).

The Lord of the Rings has, unfortunately, become a template for most modern day fantasy writers. Robert Jordan, author of the immensely popular *Wheel of Time* series, upon seeing Tolkien's success at popularizing the high fantasy subgenre, set out to write a sword-and-sorcery epic based on the themes presented in Tolkien's work. The story follows the adventures of Rand al'Thor, a white-skinned protagonist who struggles to lead a rebellion against the "Dark One" who threatens the fictional land with destruction. There is, on the surface, a dichotomy of light versus darkness, white versus black—though the focus is clearly on whiteness and its eventual victory over blackness. This is not to say that Robert Jordan was racist. Like Tolkien, however, Jordan's works can be misconstrued and misinterpreted because of its prevailing use of white and dark skin as metaphors for the Christian archetypes of good and evil.

Another example comes from the works of David Eddings—the Belgariad and Mallorean series. A strong dichotomy exists here as well, but it is not consistent with Tolkien's East/West conflict. The symbolism of light and dark here again is strong, and all characters who are

protagonists are depicted as being white, even in the book cover art. As there are several groups of ethnicities that are part of the world, most of them are static and unchanging. There are no intermingling among them since each of them has their own social structure, religion and history. They are consigned to their own land and, although there are tensions between them, they rarely leave their boundaries. The light/dark archetypes are strong as Eddings describes the antagonist, a scarred god by the name of Torak, as being one who is the “Child of Dark.” Belgarion, the principle character and protagonist, is known as the “Child of Light” who is to eventually confront Torak and defeat him.

A third, more modern contender in the world of fantasy that seems to be breaking the black/white dichotomy mold and replacing it for something significantly more complex is an author by the name of Brandon Sanderson. What Sanderson is most famous for is his series *The Stormlight Archive*, a planned 10-book high fantasy epic that tackles issues of culture and ethnicity in ways that both challenge and break stereotypes. In the only two books published—*The Way of Kings* and *Words of Radiance*, the Alethi are the so-called protagonist race of tan-skinned, dark-haired people who have a social and economic structure based on the color and brightness of an individual’s eyes rather than skin. Thus, instead of using the tired and old dichotomy of white versus black, Sanderson replaces traditional archetypes with color. The antagonists, the Parshendi, are viewed by the Alethi to be savages with a strange, backward society that they do not understand. Parshendi individuals are depicted as having both light and dark skin that is marbled with red. Both are pitted against each other not because one represents good or that the other is evil—quite the contrary since the Alethi ruling class is portrayed as mostly conniving and corrupt—but because of cultural and religious differences and gaps that Dalinar, a major character, is trying to bridge. If anything, Sanderson’s themes within *The*

Stormlight Archive narrative are a postmodern reaction against Tolkien's and Jordan's romantic themes of light and dark, and instead venture into the gray world of ambiguity.

Because of the strong, anti-racist sentiment that has been fostered within our country for several decades, the subjects of race and ethnicity have become such tender subjects that most writers are afraid to include such diversity within their fiction. There is what David Wright calls a "vibe" at modern creative writing workshops in which you are only supposed to "write what you know" (1). However, if fantasy is going to gain the same amount of respect that authors such as Harper Lee already have, then there must be a breaking of the template that J. R. R. Tolkien unwittingly set for almost all who have come after him. Wright says in his article, "Aspiring writers need to learn how to create characters, which requires understanding people in all their complexity. Whether the character is, as James Baldwin put it, making love or breaking bread, she's doing it with the impulse to satisfy a hunger and longing that all of us share and that make us all equally human."

Just as all black characters in novels should not be viewed as inherently evil and wicked, all novels written in the High Fantasy style should not be viewed as inherently racist. The use of ancient symbolism and archetypes of light and dark are useful tools to writers, but when they are oversimplified through the narrow lens of the media, it can lead to misconceptions about the original text as well as the author who wrote it. Today, the fantasy community could benefit more from a better and less static view of ethnicity. The need is obviously for a better, more complex representation of ethnicity specifically within the subgenre of high fantasy. The need is for something more than just the use of racially binary—which seems to be the easy stencil cut-out of most fantasy literature today.

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