Out of the Nursery and into Mordor: A Case for the Fantasy Genre as Literature

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The advent of the modern fiction novel in the eighteenth century has since brought to life a certain type of monster in the form of "authoritative" criticism that determines what constitutes serious literature and what does not. Much of what the first fiction novels stood for, in their humblest beginnings, were not accepted within the literature community as actual "literature" simply because they were *fictitious*. Only when fiction writers began to change the way they wrote about their topics—ways that spoke to the betterment of mankind through a higher form of reason and persuasion—did novels become a medium for literature. Of course, it was not the first time humanity had used fiction to teach or to explain life's big questions, but it was the first time the study of fiction had stepped into a new arena where it was qualified in different, intelligent ways. What was taught in serious literature usually varied but there was always an appeal or an engagement that was more than just fleeting fancy. Today, the "authoritative" aspect of criticism manifests boldly in the form of academia—thought to be the highest echelon of what may be termed as "serious." Recently, the limelight of modern fiction has been at least partially occupied by the startup genre of fantasy, both in written and visual formats. Though the academic study of the fantasy genre is a relatively new and sparsely explored field, this paper strives to understand the relationship between its written format and what academia regards as "serious literature."

Arguably, all fiction at one point has been considered fantasy since fiction deals with imaginative circumstances through which characters must progress and reach a satisfying conclusion. However, Figure 1 below shows hierarchical relationships between the category of Fiction, its subcategories, genres, and sub-genres. Fantasy sits underneath Speculative Fiction, which this paper defines as the following: *A sub-category of fiction that contains works in which writers deal with conjectural ideas (asking "what if") as well as narratives about circumstances that may or may not exist in our current reality*.

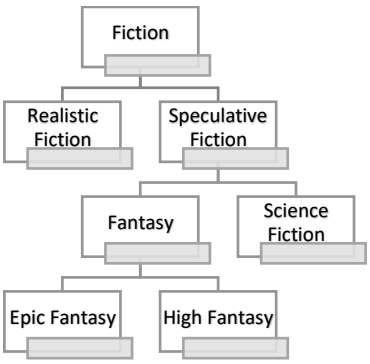

Figure 1

As shown, fantasy sets itself as distinct from the genre of Science Fiction. Epic fantasy, often related to its sister subgenre, high fantasy, sits distinctly as well. Even though an argument can and has been made that Science Fiction is a subgenre of fantasy, for the purposes of this paper fantasy must stand apart from all genres because it has different rules by which one may judge it as "literature." M. Keith Booker indicates in his critical analysis of Speculative Fiction that "adult" fantasy "differs from adult science fiction in that it does not conventionally employ cognitive estrangement as the central project of the text" (14). This estrangement is examined in James and Mendlesohn's *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* as the "historical innovation or novelty in an sf [science fiction] text from which the most important distinctions between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem" (118). Those distinctions are rational and scientific rather than supernatural (as in fantasy). While all sorts of fiction contain to some degree this estrangement, science fiction, Booker claims while quoting Carl Freeman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000), is where the cognitive estrangement is "not only present but dominant" (9). This distinction frees fantasy from the problematic mixing of rules that might only apply to Science Fiction because fantasy, arguably, has evolved to the point where it may stand self-differentiated as its own genre.

At this point, detached from all other potential influential systems and definitions, fantasy may be assigned a definition. Even as this paper provides that definition, it must be acknowledged that the act of defining may create pressures that are problematic in their own rights. The difficulty in defining fantasy as a genre lies in the exclusion or the inclusion of works that may or may not be representative of the genre. Brînzeu states that "since the 1970s, popular interest in fantasy literature has been increasing so rapidly and the pressure of a consumerist public has caused so many subgenres to come into existence every year that the variety of fantasy fiction can no longer be covered by a single definition" (9-10). While at the same time Stephen R. Donaldson, author of the epic fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, which will be studied later in this paper, purports a definition in his essay "Epic Fantasy and the Modern World": "fantasy is a form of fiction in which the internal crises or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external individuals or events" (3-4). Distinguished fantasy scholar John Clute defines fantasy as "a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories there will be possible in its terms" (337). Several more definitions exist that are all equally valid, but the purpose of this paper is not to become mired in the debate of what definition fits best. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of the fantasy genre will be: *A genre of the sub-category speculative fiction where the writer has (i) created an impossible secondary world apart from the reader's/writer's primary world which may or may not be based on the primary world, (ii) created characters whose internal processes are dramatized externally, and (iii) created rules (usually in the form of magic) for which he/she is held accountable by the reader as part of the*

secondary world's infrastructure[i]. The definition draws upon several others, using terms and ideas borrowed from both Tolkien and Donaldson.

In recent times—specifically after the onslaught of World War II—fantasy has been, as Tolkien put it, "relegated to the nursery" (130) by critics who do not know how to read its works. The genre in its entirety has been called "juvenile trash" and therefore having little or no value as serious literature. While most of these accusations are true about a certain number of works that fall under fantasy's shadow, certain key works within the fantasy genre have been grossly under-appreciated in the realm of academia and can and should be studied in high school and college-level classes the same way serious literature is studied. Two game changers in the fantasy genre fit in this category: the first is J.R.R. Tolkien's monumental *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (hereafter *LOTR*) and the second is *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* (hereafter *TCTC*) by Stephen R. Donaldson. These two works, arguably, are the most serious works of modern fantasy literature since the genre was founded.

Several reasons exist for why works in fantasy are not considered literature. First, there is the argument that most fantasy literature is *not* considered "art." Helen Young in her book, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, offers commentary on fantasy scholarship, stating that it "values works deemed to have artistic merit. Art…is deemed to be…'autonomous,' created for its own sake and without consideration of the desires or needs of the potential audience" (3). This is an important distinguishing factor between what may or may not be considered "serious" literature. Because most of the fantasy genre is targeted toward the masses, it is viewed as only having a "market value" and not the artistic value suggested by Young. The author, then, is viewed as writing it for his or her own monetary benefit rather than for the benefit of humankind. The themes in the author's story are then considered simplistic and not

overly complex or intellectually engaging, drawing accusations from critics of not having any literary value. Lots of works of fiction current published are not considered "serious" literature and nor, arguably, are they meant to be. The line has long been drawn between the idea of what is considered "entertainment" and "serious," or "popular" and "cultural" and some authors certainly understand that.

Young continues, "Twenty-first century Western culture is still deeply steeped in the belief that a work which has commercial success and mass appeal is not good art…" (3). "Genre fiction" is the term used for the type of written works that appear in society as having that mass appeal. They are entertaining, not serious. Popular, not cultural. Therefore, the difference between genre fiction and serious fiction may lie at the fulcrum of the author's intent—the nearer it is to the serious sophistication of theme and language, the more difficult it is to dismiss it as simple entertainment. Serious literature has always been a conversation, and the more intelligent that conversation is the more serious the medium that generates the conversation—the text—becomes. This is further supported by New Oxford American Dictionary's definition of the word "serious" with regards to literature and other forms of art: "requiring deep reflection and inviting a considered response." The amount of effort that the author puts into evoking this deep reflection in the reader through the sophistication of themes and language in the work can be an indicator for the amount of seriousness involved.

Another criticism of fantasy is that it is considered "escapist." The idea comes from the criticism that the author's world takes the reader away from the goings-on of the real world and immerses them in a new world of the author's design. The reader then *escapes* from the primary world and into a secondary world where he/she may temporarily forget about present day problems and responsibilities. The act of reading fantasy, then, becomes the very picture of a

drug addict who reads only to find euphoria and release. For Tolkien, the desire to escape is inevitable. Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" wrote, "It is part of the essential malady of such days—producing the desire to escape, not indeed from life, but from our present time and self-made misery" (151). Tolkien also implies that most literature is escapist anyway and that fantasy literature may be considered only one of many escapist kinds of literature (147). Lev Grossman, the author of *The Magicians* series, disagrees. He states:

> It's not a very accurate way to describe it; in fact, I think fantasy is a powerful tool for coming to an understanding of oneself. The magic trick here, the sleight of hand, is that when you pass through the portal, you re-encounter in the fantasy world the problems you thought you left behind in the real world…fantasy takes all those things from deep inside and puts them where you can see them, and then deal with them (qtd in Fassler).

Elsewhere, Grossman defends genre fiction by declaring that it "isn't generic pap. You don't read it to escape your problems, you read it to find a new way to come to terms with them" (Grossman). The bestselling author's declaration is not a general rule for all genre fiction because most readers value works in a specific genre much differently than do literary critics such as Edmund Wilson. Even *LOTR*, which is considered the most respectable exemplar of the fantasy genre, is not immune to Edmund Wilson's scathing attacks as he declared in his review of the series, "I believe, that certain people—especially, perhaps, in Britain—have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash" (331-332).

This leads into a third reason why fantasy may not be considered literature: the lack of familiarity that leads to a misunderstanding of how to read works within the genre. In Jared Lobdell's article, "Criticism of Tolkien, Twentieth Century," he points out that "no 'mainstream critic' appreciated *LOTR* or indeed was in a position to write criticism on it—most being unsure

what it was and why readers liked it (not to say loved it, doted on it, used it as a lens through which to view the world)." He continues, "…first we have to know what the thing is before we criticize it. But the inquiry into what [*LOTR*] is…does not itself fall into the category of criticism as often understood" (110). Ursula K. LeGuin shares a similar, albeit impassioned, conviction against such criticism of misunderstanding in her essay "The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists": "I'm not saying people don't read fantasy; a whole lot of us *people* do; but scholars and critics for the most part don't read it and don't know how to read it." Elsewhere she explains: "But nobody can rightly judge a novel without some knowledge of the standards, expectations, devices, tropes, and history of its genre…" (356). Barkley, in her analysis of Donaldson's work, remarks: "Modern critics prefer writers to reflect only the familiar world of realism and not deviate from this primary world as they create and people their secondary worlds. Anything supernatural or magical in literature is suspect and relegated to dream, hallucination, or delusion/madness" (30). According to these writers, critics do not know or understand fantasy well enough to criticize and do justice to it at the same time.

The reason for this lies in the understanding of how to apply current critical theories to the understanding of the fantasy genre. In his authoritative analysis, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery posits one explanation for the misunderstanding of fantasy by critics who fail to "rigorously" apply correct critical theory in order to give justice to a work of fantasy. He states,

> The dominant literary theories from early Modernism to late Structuralism have rested on a triple base: Saussure, Marx, and Freud. These three giants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to treat human studies from a scientific perspective—Saussure applying to language, Marx to history, and Freud to psychology the methods of the natural sciences (27).

"Trying to be scientific," he continues, "Saussure reduced language to an arbitrary self-referential pattern, Freud viewed the psyche exclusively in terms of its infantile origins, and Marx accounted for all historical events as manifestations of the struggle for means of production" (27). These "formulations" are too limited to provide complete insight into Tolkien's works let alone much of the literature of fantasy. Attebery then analyzes all three of those scientists' theories, altering them so that they apply to Tolkien's owns theories on philology as well as "illuminate areas of [Tolkien's] experience left untouched by orthodoxy scientific theory" (28).

Attebery's work is convincing. His strategies for understanding the fantasy genre remains as influential today as they were in 1992 when his commentary was first published. More recently, however, (exactly 20 years after Attebery's book) more fantasy scholarship has been done by respected Cambridge scholars such as Andrew M. Butler, Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, and Jim Casey in the realms of psychoanalysis, political readings, and modernism/postmodernism readings of fantasy (respectively). Still, fantasy is often unjustly regarded as "juvenile trash" by critics who align themselves with Edmund Wilson. There are other accusations as well, one of which comments on the nature of fantasy itself with regards to Eurocentrism—which means, as Young defines it, "[literature] which is by, for, and about White people" (1)—and depictions of race. Because modern fantasy as we know emerged from a period in which the study of race was still in its infancy, some may easily forgive early authors of fantasy such as Tolkien who created fictional races whose individuals exhibited the same universal features and attitudes. Subsequent generations and replicators of Tolkien's subgenre have found that they receive significantly less forgiveness and understanding as they continue to perpetuate mid-twentieth century notions of Eurocentrism and racism despite scientific and

cultural progress. Young states, “The whiteness which characterized much of the fantasy genre throughout the twentieth century, and which still has significant influence, reflects the social and cultural milieu in which fantasy was produced” (1). Today, fantasy (especially epic fantasy) considered by many readers and critics as being intensely Eurocentric and problematic racially because the characters are shown in a “White and Black” dichotomy; in *The Fellowship of the Ring* protagonists are depicted as “Fair Folk” (45) while antagonists are black and have “foul skin” (298), to use Tolkien’s own words.

While Tolkien’s purposes were not intended by him to be divisive or racist, his works have, unfortunately, become a template for most authors who do not pause to consider the reason why Tolkien chose to use such symbolism in the colors of white and black. Obviously, there are many other colors with different symbolisms attached from cultures of the world both past and present. Such symbolism did not originate from Tolkien, who focused only on what he knew best: the symbolism of Western European Christianity. Attebery points out that Tolkien’s use of the “Black Speech” is a “rhetorical device [used to] alert the reader to the presence of evil, not an attempt to define evil linguistically” (22). However, it is this sort of mode that has been perpetuated and used without thought by his many imitators throughout the years and it is why epic fantasy has developed the stigma of a formulaic genre that perpetuates archaic racism into the twenty-first century.

The modern fantasy genre has also been accused of having poor representation for gender and class minorities. Poorer still is the representation of sexual minorities. Continuing with Tolkien’s *LOTR* as a work that is indicative of the genre, the women in the stories, such as Arwen Undomiel, are shown as prizes to be won by the heroes at the end of the journey (*Return*). At the same time, Clue states that “fantasy as a genre is generally perceived as more hospitable

to women than Science Fiction and Horror, and more flexible in the choices it offers than historical fiction or romance, yet the standard patriarchal bias imposes limitations which are seldom subverted or even questioned. Whereas sf has the potential to question gender roles and try to envision new ways of living, fantasy looks to the past, seeking out patterns and archetypes" (393). As for class minorities, renown is given only to kings, rulers, and prestigious members of society. Much of what the Quest strives for in any given story of epic fantasy is to restore what has been lost without any real consent of the governed, making it appear to be a very conservative and oftentimes reactionary genre.

One motif that has permeated mythology and literature long before Christianity took its first steps into Europe is the motif of the heterosexual patriarchy. Tolkien has reused that motif within his depiction of Aragorn, the rightful king to inherit the throne of Gondor (*Return*) because his ancestry connected him with the kings of old. As a result of his victory, Aragorn then claims Arwen as his wife and queen. McGarry and Ravipinto declare that "every biological resident of Middle-Earth—human, elf, or orc—is cis-gendered and heterosexual" (20). This is indicative of most subsequent fantasy epics because of Tolkien's decision. The reason why Tolkien chose not to include different sexual identities in his main narrative can only remain part of conjecture. There is no convincing reason for this exclusion with Tolkien's narrative in his work except, perhaps, for censorship at the time (McGarry). However, the problem that arises today is that most main characters (particularly heroes) in fantasy are male, heterosexual, and destined to be part of the ruling or wealthy class.

For these very reasons, many critics will look at epic fantasy and denounce it as not "serious" literature. However, the Oxford Dictionary defines literature as "written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit." Christine Barkley, in her treatise

of Donaldson's *TCTC* series, states: "Wisdom is cumulative. Therefore, great literature must be both universal (true and meaningful always) and relevant (true and significant today)" (5). In conjunction, Harold states in his essay *Literature, Genre Fiction, and Standards of Criticism* that "the pleasures of genre fiction are thought to be pleasures of relaxing, of familiarity, of *not* having to engage oneself fully" and "literary fiction is to be judged according to (d) the importance of the themes it examines and (e) how well it makes use of literary and imaginative devices to realize those themes." Using these concepts, "true" and "serious" literature may be assigned the following definition: *Written works that (i) intellectually engage the reader and (ii) deal with universal themes that have lasting power and importance relevant to humanity rather than simply topical. The writer of literature makes good use of literary and imaginative devices—such as (1) Metaphor, (2) Symbolism, (3) Character development and (4) Setting—in order to fully engage the reader and realize those themes.*

Using this definition as a lens to define what may be "serious" literature, we will look first at Tolkien's pioneering high fantasy trilogy, *LOTR*: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (July 29, 1954), *The Two Towers* (November 11, 1954) and *The Return of the King* (October 20, 1955)—all published by George Allen & Unwin. The defining characteristic of high fantasy is having characters within multiple races embark on a quest-like adventure, which this story does. The story begins with Frodo Baggins, a hobbit, who inherits a special golden ring from his uncle Bilbo that eventually proves to be a weapon of the Dark Lord, Sauron. Frodo, along with a fellowship of companions, must then undertake the seemingly impossible journey deep into the enemy territory of Mordor where Sauron himself resides in order to destroy the ring in the unfathomable fires from whence it was created and only where the ring can be destroyed. The three-book epic is generally viewed as the headstream of modern fantasy from which all

subsequent incarnations of the genre have flowed—most especially in both epic and high fantasy subgenres.

Secondly, we will look at Donaldson's series *TCTC*, published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Publishing. *TCTC* is an epic fantasy saga that spans three series (ten novels) by American author Stephen R. Donaldson who has been argued by some to be Tolkien's heir (Barkley). This paper will be focusing on the first series of *TCTC* which spans three books: *Lord Foul's Bane* (1977), *The Illearth War* (1978) and *The Power that Preserves* (1979). The story follows Thomas Covenant, a writer who contracts leprosy and subsequently gets divorced from his wife Joan and becomes a social outcast. He is jarringly thrust from the "real world" one day into what he believes to be a dream world called, simply, the Land. The indigenous people who live there regard him as the reincarnation of the Land's most beloved ancient hero, Berek Halfhand. Covenant must come to terms with this new world and his role as either hero or destroyer—whether to dismiss it as nothing more than a dream or to consider it as a real experience.

While Tolkien's works are being taught in some major universities in the United States and are considered more "serious" than *TCTC*, neither are worthy of British nor American anthologies or given Norton critical editions.[1] However, *LOTR* and *TCTC* do conform to the three major parts to this paper's definition of serious literature: 1. Engagement, 2. Themes of timely and lasting importance, and 3. The good use of literary and imaginative devices that underscore those themes. Because of this, these authors should be given more recognition than they have.

[1] The universities with the most recent courses (as of 2017) on Tolkien include Signum University, University of Missouri, University of Maryland, Villanova University, University of Chicago, and Saint Louis University.

LOTR is a work of high fantasy that engages the reader not only in entertainment but also in philological achievement, which certainly qualifies it as serious literature according to the above definition. Unlike most "pulp" fiction—which refers to the cheap, low-quality wood pulp materials that made up the paper, and generally is used to indicate lower quality of writing—the *LOTR* trilogy exemplifies the author's lifelong passion for philology, the study of words, word meanings, and word genealogy. It should be noted that literature's quality of engagement does not automatically exclude the ability to enjoy it. Many critics automatically dismiss "enjoyable" works as "light" or passive reading simply because it appeals to pathos rather than logos. While *LOTR* is enjoyable, it is certainly not light reading. Tolkien's life-long interest in words, etymology, and history creates a depth of meaning in words as well as in names of characters and places within Middle-earth. No word is used lightly. Attebery states that "the nineteenth-century philologist viewed language not as some abstract structure, a code that refers only to other codes, but as a treasury of words, each of which carries its history along with it" (28).

Tolkien has created an entire world with history, myth, and legend all from the ground up. In *LOTR*, Tolkien included pieces of that mythology throughout the narrative. In Robin Anne Reid's stylistic analysis of *LOTR*, she notes that "mythology and history…are part of a complex continuum in the novel[s] and unobtrusively connect the novel to *The Silmarillion*, a collection of myths and legends 'written' well before the novel[s] but published (in different editions/variants) only after Tolkien's death" (519). This curious aspect of Tolkien's novels then gives the reader the choice of turning into a scholar and investigating these references. An example of this is from *The Return of the King* when Théoden charges to Gondor's aid on the fields of Pelennor: "…the battle-fury of his fathers ran like new fire in his veins, and he was borne up on Snowmane like a god of old, even as Oromë the Great in the battle of the Valar

when the world was young (Chapter 5). It is not an oversight that the Valar (god) Oromë is not mentioned anywhere else in the trilogy. Rather, it is a reference to a deeper and richer history that already existed separate from *LOTR*. Therefore, the reader engages with Tolkien's mythology whether they know it or not. At the same time, it opens up an almost fathomless treasury of history that adds dimensions to the narrative.

In *LOTR*, there are three very powerful themes that are considered universal and timeless. The first of which is the evils of industrialization. In Tolkien's *On Fairy-Stories*, he stated that he believed that fantasy was a way to escape from the "Robot Age, that combines elaboration and ingenuity of means with ugliness, and (often) with inferiority of result" (148). He also condemned "progressive things like factories, or machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say 'inexorable,' products" (150). This personal belief manifests itself through one of the principle antagonists, Saruman, and his industrial war machine cutting down the trees of the peaceful Fangorn forest:

> 'I think that I now understand what [Saruman] is up to,' [said Treebeard.] 'He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment…Down on the borders they are felling trees – good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot – orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc [Saruman's tower]. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days'. (*Two Towers* 76-77)

Tolkien supports this theme through using the literary device of *setting*. He places his magical secondary world, Middle-earth, in grave peril by the very act of industrialization and Treebeard, who is, in fact, an "avatar" for Middle-earth, is given emotions, thoughts, and ideas

with regards to Saruman's behavior. Rather than making Saruman a one-to-one, allegorical device of the evils of industrialization, he is a symbol of how industrialization, used wrongly, can harm living things that get in its way. Curry, in his article on "Industrialization" in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, writes that "the ultimate epitome of industrialism in Middle-earth…is Sauron's Mordor. It is (1) politically totalitarian and completely centralized, (2) the leading military and imperialist power, and (3) highly industrialized, with great mines and forges in the north and slave-worked agricultural fields in the south" (294) Curry continues to point out that by using Sauron's Mordor, Tolkien condemns the "desire for power" whose "drive and consequences are the same" regardless of the political structure (294).

This leads to the second universal theme in *LOTR*, which is the idea of how power corrupts even the most innocent. Mendlesohn and James state that "the [*LOTR*] books are about power and the temptations of power (again, a very Catholic theme). When Bilbo's ring is revealed as the Great Ring of Power, an adventure starts which is not about claiming a thing of power, but about destroying and *rejecting* it" (Chapter 4). The ring becomes a *symbol* of this power: it looks simplistic and small, yet it holds terrible potential that puts everyone's life in jeopardy. Frodo takes it up reluctantly. Some, like Boromir, are tempted by its allure but eventually pay dearly for the temptation (*Fellowship)*. Donaldson, in his essay of Epic Fantasy, also points out that "the importance of Sauron, personified evil, resides in the fact that he is an expression of Frodo. Seduced by power, Frodo spends the novel in the process of **becoming** Sauron – and that is only possible because part of him **was** Sauron to begin with" (8). Donaldson's assertion is intriguing as it connects with the second part of the definition of fantasy where the internal processes of characters are expressed externally. It is the sort of reading presents us with new avenues of thought that do justice to Tolkien's work.

The final theme within *LOTR* that is discussed here is the giving into or the triumph over despair. This theme especially is meaningful in a darkening world where hope is hard to find. According to Burdge and Burke (*J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*), despair is "the complete loss or lack of hope and being overcome by a sense of futility or defeat." It is also, in Christian theology, a consequence of sin (124). They state: "Tolkien's characters all deal with despair in its various manifestations; some, such as Samwise, never truly give into it, and others, such as Denethor, completely lose hope" (124). Tolkien, then, uses *character development* as a literary device to show through characters like the king, Théoden, how one may suffer strife and malice yet still win the day. On the other hand, the king-like Denethor plays as steward to Gondor's throne who has given up hope that any victory against Sauron is possible:

> 'Pride and despair!' [Denethor] cried. 'Didst thou think that the eyes of the White Tower were blind? Nay, I have seen more than thou knowest, [Gandalf]. For thy hope is but ignorance. Go then and labour in healing! Go forth and fight! Vanity. For a little space you may triumph on the field, for a day. But against the Power that now arises there is no victory…' (*Return*, chapter 7)

Tolkien's use of biblical language in Denethor's voice is not gratuitous, nor is it used without thought. It alerts the reader to Denethor's separation from the rest of the characters. Tolkien gives him shorter sentences that show how far removed from the other characters, as well as from sanity, Denethor really is. Thus, despair is shown as being related to insanity. It makes Denethor forget his rightful place as Steward of the throne of Gondor as well as refuse to take charge of its defenses. Denethor breaks the staff of his own stewardship and dies having cast himself upon the pyre he built himself (Chapter 7).

Donaldson's *TCTC* does a different type of engaging with the reader than *LOTR*. The first book in the *TCTC* series, *Lord Foul's Bane*, demands a lot of the reader. We, as readers, are asked to follow the story of Thomas Covenant, a cynical (and often spiteful and angry) leper who has become an outcast from modern society. We continue on in his misadventures through a magical secondary world ("the Land") which he neither cares for nor believes to be real—hence the title he gives himself as "the Unbeliever." Covenant is a man with whom the normal reader has almost nothing in common. We may even label him an "anti-hero." Barkley, however, agrees with W.A. Senior and writes that "Covenant is a uniquely American hero, one who does and does not fit the traditional role of hero as defined by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*" (8). Whatever stance we are to take, it is true that through Covenant's actions and attitude Donaldson is asking a lot of the reader to sympathize with him especially after he rapes the innocent Lena in the seventh of twenty-five chapters (*Lord Foul's Bane* 50-51).

Although Donaldson depicts the act of rape as morally reprehensible and inexcusable (an act which has unforeseen consequences for Covenant throughout the series), the reader is asked to remember two things: 1. Covenant believes he is in a dream—a dream that threatens his sanity, and 2. The magical Land he finds himself in has just (temporarily) healed his impotency and given him back feeling in his extremities. These two disruptions to Covenant's reality as a leper threaten to push him further into mental illness and sets the stage for a story of such maturity that it is not suitable for children. Barkley states, "Far from being 'escapist' fantasy literature, Donaldson engages the reader in a serious, modern discussion of our need for imagination, responsibility, and acceptance of our limitations and culpabilities to become actualized humans" (1).

TCTC is a high fantasy that was heavily influenced by Tolkien. However, Donaldson discusses different themes throughout the series through the use of literary devices as well. Three major and universal themes will be discussed herein. The first of these themes is the need for imagination. In this, Donaldson gives his own personal rebuttal against modernists' demand that all literature must be realist. Covenant rejects the need for imagination (fantasy) because he believes it will drive him insane:

> Perhaps he was crazy. Perhaps he was at this moment wandering in dementia, tormenting himself with false griefs and demands, the impositions of an illusion. Such things happened to lepers.
>
> I'm not! he shouted, almost cried out loud. I know the difference—I know I'm dreaming. (*Lord Foul's Bane* 42).

Covenant's struggle to believe the Land is real is a *metaphor* for the modernist struggle with accepting fantasy as a valid literary mode. Before Covenant contracted leprosy, he had been a famous author of an unnamed book that stood at number one on the New York Times Bestsellers list. His life had been centered around his own imagination. After leprosy took over his life, he realized that imagination was life-threatening to a leper because he feared he would lose the sense of what is real and what is not: "If he tormented himself with unattainable desires, he would cripple his grasp on the law which enabled him to survive. His imagination could kill him, lead or seduce or trick him into suicide: seeing all the things he could not have would make him despair" (*Lord Foul's Bane* 12). It was at that time that Covenant found himself transported to the Land where he finds real, palpable, life-giving power and magic. Fantasy, then, is presented as the thing that can save Covenant who, in the heat of psychosis, rejects it all. Instead, he calls himself "Unbeliever" in the name of "his need for constant awareness of and constant

vigilance to monitor his disease of leprosy and [what] the danger of his willing suspension of disbelief could create in his 'real' world" (Barkley 30). This is in Donaldson's as well as LeGuin's opinion of the modernist mindset: a world of disease and decay cannot be cured, only watched and monitored with growing bitterness.

This mindset creates more problems for Covenant than it solves and can be the source of much frustration for the reader. However, Donaldson does an excellent job at providing reasons for why Covenant makes the choices that he does. Covenant (and by extension, we, as readers), must then be compelled to confront despair through the conflicts encountered in the magical realm of the Land. "The result for us is a sense that we can regain our imaginative qualities, our hope, and our sense of purpose and community" (Barkley 23).

The second theme in Donaldson's works is probably the most overt theme in all the series: harnessing the power of nature. Donaldson uses the literary device of *setting* to upholster this theme. Much like Middle-earth, the Land is a romantic, medieval secondary world where magic exists as a function of the Earth. Various characters may perform acts that damage, cultivate, or even control that magic to their advantage. In the first chapters that Covenant is transported to the Land, we are introduced to Lord Foul, the principal antagonist of the series, who declares that his purpose is to destroy the Land and the people who live there. Most other characters besides Covenant revere the Land and use that power in respectful and creative ways that benefit others. An example of this Earthpower is through what the inhabitants of the Land call "hurtloam" which is a type of gold-speckled sediment used to heal wounds:

> "You must use it," [Lena] insisted. "I know what it is. Do you not understand? This is hurtloam… [My father's] work is with the fire-stones, and he leaves healing to the Healers. But he is *rhadhamaerl*. He comprehends the rocks and soils. And he taught me

> to care for myself when there is need. He taught me the signs and places of hurtloam. This is healing earth. You must use it" (*Lord Foul's Bane* 30).

Covenant and we as readers can barely understand what is happening when it is suggested that he use the mud-like substance in order to heal open wounds. Yet, when Covenant does rub his hands in the hurtloam, feeling returns to his leprous hands. This theme echoes Tolkien's love for the Earth in *LOTR*, but Donaldson takes it a step further as he shows the whole purpose of the Lords of Revelstone is to seek out and *control* that power. Barkley adds that "the Lords' entire study of Earthpower is precisely to acknowledge, not deny, the power of nature and to learn how to control it" (14).

The last theme within *TCTC* is the theme of pacifism. In the third book of the *Chronicles* entitled *The Power that Preserves*, Covenant declares: "There's only one good answer to someone like [Lord Foul] …I'm going to bring Foul's Creche down around his ears" (83). When it comes to the final confrontation with Lord Foul, however, Covenant realizes that violence is and has never been the answer. When the apparitions of long-dead Lords appear and begin pressing Covenant to slay Lord Foul, Covenant refuses: "I can't kill him. He always survives when you try to kill him. He comes back stronger than ever the next time. Despite is like that. I can't kill him" (279). Covenant realizes that trying to kill Lord Foul had never worked in the past, and it would not work now. Instead, Covenant urges specters to laugh and bring joy into Lord Foul's thronehall with hopes that it would diminish the Dark Lord's influence. The Lords do so:

> Lord Foul cringed at the sound. He strove to sustain his defiance, but could not. With a cry of mingled pain and fury, he covered his face and began to change. The years melted off his frame. His hair darkened, beard grew stiffer; with astonishing speed, he was

> becoming younger. And at the same time he lost solidity, stature. His body shrank and faded with every undone age. Soon he was a youth again, barely visible. Still the change did not stop. From a youth he became a child, growing steadily younger as he vanished. For an instant, he was a loud infant, squalling in his ancient frustration. Then he disappeared altogether (280-281).

Covenant's decision to bring joy and laughter into the darkest part of the Land in order to destroy that darkness is a strong *metaphor* for the proper way of dealing with violence. It also shows how Covenant's character has developed over the course of the trilogy from an angry, bitter leper to someone who chooses to value life and joy over death and despair.

Today, fantasy sits as an outlier in the literary and academic communities where some works of fiction are held up as a pinnacle of literary success whilst others are either relegated to the lowest echelons of literature or ignored completely. However, many good and viable literary works do get ignored by academics who dismiss them simply because they fall underneath a genre like fantasy. Because fantasy is a relatively unexplored genre with regards to literary criticism, it is easy to understand why even the most carefully crafted and literary works may be ignored. This is an area of study that deserves improvement and understanding. Without a basic understanding of the genre, it's hard to analyze its texts and do the genre justice without judging it by the standards of other genres.

Some works of fiction were written by the authors not to garner literary fame or to prove their writing can stand the test of criticism. Their themes are not meant to be universal or pertinent to humankind. Most works of fiction are not considered pinnacles of literary success—nor should they be. However, there are authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Stephen R. Donaldson who deserve more recognition in the literary realm than they have currently received. Based on

this paper's research and definition, Tolkien, who has received as much literary recognition as is currently possible for any writer of fantasy, qualifies for a place within British literature anthology as well as a Norton critical edition he does not have. Stephen R. Donaldson, who follows in Tolkien's footsteps, deserves more recognition and scholarship than he currently has in his favor. Both authors write works that engage with the reader on an intellectual level, introduce themes that are timeless and universal rather than topical, and make good use of literary devices engages with the reader and supports their themes.

The void that is present within the study of fantasy literature is wide and cavernous, yet it is filling up slowly year by year. It is past time for the fantasy genre to step out of the nursery and bravely enter the perilous land of serious, literary criticism.

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[i] I have created this definition drawing upon terms from J.R.R Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" ("secondary world" and "primary world") and Stephen R. Donaldson's definition of fantasy in his essay "Epic Fantasy and the Modern World": "Fantasy is a form of fiction in which the internal crises or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external individuals or events" (6-7). I have also included my observation of magic as "rules" for which a fantasy writer must abide by in order to convince the reader the story is believable.