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Predictable Plots and Secondary Worlds: Teaching creative writing through modern fantasy

Abstract:

To non-fans ... it's just self-imitating, formula escapism, an irreverent and often heavy-handed plundering of history and legend churned out as derivative, mindless adventure to snatch the disposable income of people who don't know any better. (Terry Dowling 1998)

Since modern fantasy split from 'literary fantasy' in 1977, the genre has often been condemned in academic circles for its predictable plots, 'heavy-handed' approach to literary adaptation, two-dimensional characters, and poor writing. Consequently, it is not surprising that such literature (distinguishable from the pre-1977 literary fantasy of C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and J.R.R. Tolkien, amongst others) is often overlooked in or deliberately left out of university undergraduate courses. This paper suggests that the perceived shortcomings of the modern fantasy genre could actually be exploited to aid creative writing students in learning the basics of their craft. It explores the ways in which the genre can help students grasp the fundamental tools of writing, such as plotting, setting, and characterisation, and also how the genre can encourage students to study such traditional literatures as mythology, legend, and folktale.

Biographical note:

Benjamin Chandler has just submitted his Creative Writing PhD, a comparative study of heroism represented in Japanese and Western modern fantasy.

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Creative Writing pedagogy is a new area of research for me. My area is fantasy, to be precise the writing of modern fantasy, a distinct genre established in 1977 with the publication of Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*.¹ I have long since stopped defending my genre. Anne Swinfen's *In Defense of Fantasy* does a particularly good job of that already. It is from Swinfen that I get my definition of fantasy as literature that 'employs structures, motifs, and marvellous elements derived from its predecessors in myth, legend, fable, folk-tale and romance' (1984: 2). Though I no longer defend modern fantasy, I have started to speculate on how best to use it within the academy. A consideration of my own poesis, praxis, and process, as Nigel McLoughlin labels them in "Creating an Integrated Model for Teaching Creative Writing: One Approach" (2008: 88-100), led me to consider McLoughlin's fourth 'P', Pedagogy. I soon realised that the modern fantasy genre was well suited to teaching writers new to the academy the basics of their craft: plot, setting, characterisation, and an appreciation of literary tradition. John Clute and John Grant note in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1999: 899-901) that *awareness* of Story is central to the modern fantasy genre. J.R.R. Tolkien's theory of secondary world construction highlights the importance of logic and consistency in matters of setting and narrative (2001). My own research has shown that creating characters in modern fantasy requires knowledge of archetypes and their bastard offspring, stereotypes, and also a solid foundation in literary tradition, including myth, legend, and fairy tale. This paper suggests that teachers of creative writing can use the modern fantasy genre to instill in new students an understanding of the basic building blocks of their craft.

Structuralists like Joseph Campbell (1993), Vladimir Propp (1968), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963; 1975; 1978) and even Roland Barthes (1972; 1975) in his early career saw the narratives of the world as being many iterations of a single plot, which Campbell labels the Hero's Journey. The 'There and Back Again' structure that typifies the Hero's Journey is at the core of our storytelling culture, our literary tradition, and yet, as Jakubowski (1990) claims, modern fantasy is often denigrated for its reliance on and adherence to this formula. Rejecting the modern fantasy genre on this account has two major flaws. First, it assumes that all modern fantasy unthinkingly regurgitates the 'There and Back Again' formula, presumably out of laziness on the author's part. Second, it assumes that there is no value in slavish reproductions of that formula. It is this second flaw that I wish to address here—whether or not this perceived shortcoming has any value in the teaching of creative writing.

As Clute and Grant note,

Fantasy texts ... can be characterized as always moving towards the unveiling of an irreducible substratum of Story ... the key elements of a fantasy text are bound to each other, to the narrative world, and ideally to the tale's theme (1999: 900).

In other words Story, 'a narrative discourse that is *told*' (Clute and Grant 1999 [author's italics]: 899), and the structure of that Story, the *nature* of that discourse, which we can label 'plot', is so integral to modern fantasy that it has become one of the defining features of the genre. Clearly, plot is not the sole provenance of modern

fantasy, but what Clute and Grant are claiming of the genre is that plot is *always apparent* within it. Attention is called to it. For Clute and Grant this is deliberate:

many fantasy texts are clearly and explicitly constructed so as to reveal the controlling presence of an underlying Story, and ... protagonists of many fantasy texts are explicitly aware they are acting out a tale (1999: 901).

They call this ‘Story-driven urge’ (Clute and Grant 1999: 399) in fantasy fiction ‘transparency of Story’ (338). In other words, plot drives modern fantasy texts. All other elements within the text relate in a significant manner to plot. Characters know they are on a quest, and readers are familiar with the shape of that quest through Campbell’s Hero’s Journey. The extent to which Story and plot are transparent in modern fantasy makes it well suited to teach students the basics of plot because its building blocks are immediately apparent. Engagement with modern fantasy, by which I mean both reading (critical analysis) and writing modern fantasy, can lead to a deeper understanding of structuralist theory.

Garth Nix’s *Mister Monday* (2003), the first of his *The Keys to the Kingdom* series, makes the model of Campbell’s Hero’s Journey apparent, and a critical study of the structure of the text will give students a firm foundation in this model. Nix’s hero, Arthur Penhaligon, is called to adventure, at first refuses the call, meets mentors, friends, and adversaries, overcomes trials, including a supreme trial, returns home with a boon to save his world, and is called to further adventure. In fact, Nix’s structure is rather rigid in its conformity to the Hero’s Journey, which is precisely why it is such a good example to use to introduce students to it. As the series goes on, the structure of each book evolves away from the rigidity of *Mister Monday*. An analysis of each book taken in order can teach students how to pick up on variations of Campbell’s model.

If this analysis is extended to the series as a whole, students may be able to gain an understanding of what might be called the *macro structure* of the series. This macro structure relies on the assumptions associated with the Hero’s Journey that Arthur will eventually save the day and return home. These assumptions are confirmed for the reader during what Clute and Grant refer to as ‘moments of recognition’, the points at which the characters ‘find out just which Story it is that has ... *dictated* them’ (1999: 901). Whether or not Nix’s series realises those expectations remains to be seen as the seventh and final book, *Lord Sunday*, is not due for release until next year, and so there is yet to be that moment of recognition in the macro structure of the series. However, each book thus far has contained its own moment of recognition, which would suggest another in the final book that rounds off both its own narrative and that of the macro structure as a whole. Either way, Nix’s series offers a good example of both what the Hero’s Journey looks like and how that structure can be manipulated.

Because plot is so transparent in modern fantasy, and because it can help lead to a greater understanding of how plots function and also how to identify aspects of plot such as Clute and Grants’ moments of recognition, a critical analysis of Nix’s modern fantasy series introduces students to questions of reader and generic expectations. The same holds true for other works of modern fantasy. Kate Forsyth’s *The Witches of Eileanan* (1997-2002), for example, fulfils the expectation of a happy ending. At the

end of her series the two warring factions are brought together through marriage and peace is restored. Not all works of modern fantasy meet either generic or reader expectations, however. At the end of Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy* (1996-1997), for example, it is suggested that the cycle of violence will continue and, though the protagonist's side 'won' the battle, he does not return victorious but melts into the shadows, forgotten. An examination of modern fantasy narratives can help students to identify the fundamental building blocks of their plots and can also introduce them to the ways those plots and a reader's expectations of them can be manipulated.

Reading and analysing modern fantasy texts can aid in an understanding of plot and structure, but writing or planning a piece of their own forces students to consider how to assemble the basic building blocks of a narrative into a cohesive whole. Such building blocks include establishing an initial scene, initiating the action, creating plot points and a climax, and devising a satisfying dénouement. This is the 'what' of the story. Using the Hero's Journey as a model, students can learn how to string these building blocks together, how to move the plot from point A to point B, and how to build up to a climax. This is the 'how' of the story. This focus on the basics of plot, the *what* and the *how*, can aid students in learning about logical flow and the importance of narrative consistency, the 'why'. The 'where' and 'who' are dealt with below.

I do not wish to suggest that structuralism is the only way to teach students about plot, nor do I wish to stress that the modern fantasy genre is the only way to teach students about structuralism. However, the transparency of plot in modern fantasy may make it easier for beginning students to digest structuralism, which in turn may provide a sound introduction to the basics of narration.

Assigning exercises that encourage an engagement with the elements of Campbell's Hero's Journey can help students understand the importance of logic, but logical consistency is also stressed in the construction of the fantasy world in which that story is set. As Tolkien noted, logic and consistency are integral to creating a believable and consistent secondary world in which any fantastic elements are only made possible within a tightly controlled and unwavering system (2001: 37). Learning how to create this secondary world is a complicated process that involves a sound knowledge of both physical aspects (climate, topography, and astrology) and metaphysical aspects (magic systems, imaginary beings, and religion) of place, as well as the effect of the latter on the former. This holds true even when the metaphysical aspects of the secondary world are entirely invented. In all matters, consistency is key in the construction and maintenance of the fantasy.

This consistency is the stuff of rigorous mental effort. To use one of Tolkien's examples, anyone can talk about a world with a green sun, and be able to imagine it, but to truly construct a secondary world that has a green sun a writer of fantasy must *know* it as we know that our sun is yellow (2001: 48-9). The writer must know the 'how' and 'why' of the 'where'. Such fantastic elements should not be the result of a flight of fancy, but rather an integral part of the secondary world. Raymond E. Feist and Janny Wurts may have been familiar with Tolkien's example when they constructed their secondary world of Kelewan in the *Empire* trilogy (1996-1997).

Kelewan's sky is green, which has something to do with the gases that make up the atmosphere of this strange land. Kelewan's creatures are distinct, too; the world's mammals have six limbs instead of four, further alienating the humans who inhabit Kelewan from their environment. Alienation may in fact be the 'why' of the green sun. Feist and Wurts do not tell their readers, but instead leave them to draw their own conclusions. This does not mean as writers they are off the hook. A writer has to *know* the 'why', but the communication of it need not be blatant. Judging how much of the secondary world needs explanation and how much can be left to the reader is another skill students can learn from writing modern fantasy.

The writer of modern fantasy must know why they are including fantastic elements into their secondary world, and the effect these will have on their setting. A green sun, for example, may not give off white light, the multifarious refraction of which results in the colour spectrum we are familiar with. The people who inhabit that world may not see the way we see. The green sun may not give off ultraviolet light, either, rendering suntans impossible. It may give off some other, more dangerous type of radiation. These things must be considered. If they are not, the green sun serves no purpose and, like an unnecessary adjective or repetitive phrase, it can be deleted.

Once the secondary world is created, the next step is to teach students how to describe a place that no one has ever seen or ever will see. This poses challenges of its own that can help students develop their exposition skills. Writers of fantasy cannot rely on the shorthand assumptions available to writers of other types of fiction when describing their setting. This is because much of the primary world, that is the 'real world', will be familiar to a reader (Tolkien 2001: 48). A writer who is not writing fantasy can mention a dog without having to go into any further detail regarding the number of legs it possesses, unless that dog is unfortunate enough to have less than the prerequisite number. This is not the case with modern fantasy. In the *Empire* trilogy, for instance, if dogs exist at all on Kelewan they will have six legs, a fact Wurts and Feist remind the reader of every now and then because primary world shorthand has a habit of reasserting itself in the reader's mind.

Constructing and conveying setting in modern fantasy can also help students learn how to combine setting with plot. This is one of the most difficult aspects of writing modern fantasy, and here I speak from personal experience. In the first instance, a writer of modern fantasy needs to be able to judge how much secondary world information the reader needs. Too little and the reader gets lost in the fantasy. They cannot know anything of the fantastic world that the writer has not told them. If too much information is delivered, however, the narrative drive stalls in unnecessary detail. This can be a problem for any text, but more so when that text belongs to a genre like modern fantasy in which the focus is on action and plot. Learning to write through modern fantasy can help students develop the skills they need to balance exposition and narrative drive because the process of doing so needs to be constantly in their minds during their writing practice. Again, it is not that modern fantasy is the only genre in which this balance is necessary, or through which it can be taught, but for new students the transparency of that balance in modern fantasy may help them more easily identify, digest, and engage with the process of writing it.

I wish to turn now to the ‘who’ of modern fantasy, the study of which forms the focus of my doctoral thesis. Characters in modern fantasy are a maligned bunch. They are often denigrated for being stereotypical representations of heroic archetypes, or more crudely as Terry Dowling (1998) puts it as being a bunch of ‘mighty-thighed warriors swinging battleaxes and armoured Amazons fighting dragons’. However, what actually exists within modern fantasy is a dialogue between archetype and stereotype. The more interesting works reinvent or reinterpret those archetypes, while others simply regurgitate tired clichés. It should be remembered, however, that stereotypical characters are themselves the result of archetypal characters already prevalent in the literary tradition. They may rob them of their character, but they maintain the essential elements that can help students identify them.

In the same way that plot and process are made transparent in the modern fantasy genre, stereotypical characters lay bare the most basic attributes of literary archetypes. David Eddings’s knight Mandorallen, for example, is the epitome of the medieval romantic knight embroiled in a tragic love affair. Studying his character allows students to grasp the basics of that type of literary hero, described by W.T.H. Jackson in *The Hero and the King: An Epic Theme* as embodying ‘bravery, superhuman strength, success in battle, and contempt for wounds and death’ (1982: 3).² I do not wish to suggest that we should teach young writers to *use* stereotypes in their writing, rather that we teach them how to identify stereotypes by their slavish reproduction of the most elemental aspects of an archetype, and therefore *avoid* using them. This in turn may lead them to a deeper understanding of what those archetypes are and how to manipulate them in order to construct interesting characters of their own.

Archetypes indicate patterns of meaning throughout a literary tradition that suggest a commonality to human experience (Abrams 2005: 13). Heroic archetypes are simply heroic characters that have patterns of traits that do the same thing. A literary stereotype is formed when a writer uses archetypal heroic characters devoid of what Walter Reed would call a ‘peculiar heroic identity’ (1974: 3). They are archetypes without imagination. To put it another way, they essentially mimic the archetype without adding anything new to the patterns of traits that define it. The interplay between archetype and stereotype that exists within the modern fantasy genre makes a study of character in modern fantasy peculiarly suited for a study of how archetypes function and what defines them.

Modern fantasy does more with its characters than simply regurgitating unimaginative stereotypes. This is highlighted in the trend in modern fantasy noted by Maria Nikolajeva, professor of comparative literature at Stockholm University, to put a greater focus on the construction of character and character development than on action in the modern fantasy genre (2003: 147). In other words, we are increasingly exposed to characters in modern fantasy that play off of and engage with traditional archetypes, and even the stereotypes of earlier fantasy, or that ignore them altogether. For example, though many of Eddings’ characters appear on the surface to be stereotypical, his hero Garion is what I have labeled a pagan holy warrior, a new type of hero that is a reinterpretation of the medieval Christian holy warrior evident in medieval romance. Garion is only one of many modern fantasy heroes who play off of the heroic archetypes present in the literary tradition. A meaningful analysis of his

character necessitates an engagement with the heroic archetypes he is descended from, which in turn may encourage students to look back to earlier literature for inspiration in how they develop their characters.

This engagement with the literary tradition can extend beyond an exploration of heroic archetypes, and this, too, is one of the benefits of teaching creative writing through modern fantasy. Though some see modern fantasy's use of the literary tradition—myth, legend, fairytale, etcetera—as an 'irreverent and often heavy-handed plundering of history and legend' (Dowling 1998), the fact is that to be able to plunder these traditions requires an enormous amount of knowledge in them. Eddings stresses the necessity of knowing the medieval romance in particular in order to write good modern fantasy (1998: 5-7). I would add that a firm grounding in mythology is essential, particularly when the modern fantasy involves gods or any other mythical creatures. The novel that formed the creative portion of my thesis, entitled *Lady of Rain*, is a work of modern fantasy heavily influenced by Japan and Europe. This required of me more than a passing knowledge of the Bible, medieval romance, Western and Japanese fairy tales, Japanese heroic literature, as well as Japanese mythology. It also required at the least a passing knowledge of Chinese, Norse, and Greek mythologies, as well as Judeo-Christian demonology, to name only a few of the influences on my secondary world.

Modern fantasy can therefore act as a gateway genre, enticing students to explore works they may otherwise be disinclined to read. It is a small step backwards from Eddings's Garion to T.H. White's Arthur in *The Once and Future King* (1958). From there it is but another small step back to Malory's fifteenth century *Le Morte Darthur*, and then another to Chrétien's twelfth century medieval romance. This is but one of many pathways modern fantasy opens up back into the literary tradition. The dragons in Forsyth's work are reminiscent of Tolkien's Smaug, who is himself descended from such illustrious and ill-fated forebears as the Germanic Fafnir, from the thirteenth century's *Volsunga Saga*, and Beowulf's dragon, from the eleventh century's *Beowulf* (the draconic trail does not end there). Not only does a sound knowledge of the literary tradition make for better fantasy, but teaching students to write through modern fantasy may also encourage them to explore this tradition. This engagement with the past can have wider repercussions. Through an exploration of the ways the literary tradition has influenced works of modern fantasy, students may be able to gain an understanding of the way literary adaptation functions.

The modern fantasy genre may be ideally suited to teach new creative writing students the basics of their craft because it renders transparent so many of the fundamental elements of the craft. Modern fantasy is driven by narrative and does not seek to hide plot structure; attention is often drawn to it. This makes the structure and its composite parts easier to identify and may help students learn to use them. The creation of secondary worlds introduces students to the importance of logic and consistency, and describing their invented worlds requires students to abandon shorthand assumptions they may fall back on in describing the 'real world'. Marrying plot and setting through the writing process may also help students learn about the balance of narrative drive and exposition. A study of character within modern fantasy can lead to a deeper understanding of the difference between archetype and

stereotype, and may even encourage students to explore the literary tradition. This exploration, in turn, may lead to an understanding of the way literary adaptation functions. For these reasons, it seems that modern fantasy could make for a useful tool in the teaching of creative writing. I am aware of the number of ‘may’s peppered throughout this paper. As mentioned, this is a new area of research for me, and one I hope to take further. At present I am developing a series of exercises intended to test the theories outlined thus far. I am aware of several dangers in this process. I have already intimated that modern fantasy is a popular genre, which affords both advantages and disadvantages in the classroom. On the one hand it may encourage students to commit to their reading. On the other, those who do not like fantasy may not be able to engage with the exercises at all. The length of texts, too, may prove prohibitive. Still, given the advantages of using the genre as a teaching tool outlined above, I believe such exercises will prove worthwhile. They will, I hope, be able to demonstrate empirically the benefits of using modern fantasy to teach creative writing to new students.

Endnotes

1. See Maxim Jakubowski 1990 ‘Modern Fantasy for Adults, 1957-88’ in Neil Baron (ed) *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide*, New York: Garland Publishing; and David Pringle (ed) 2007 *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Sydney: Random House.
2. See also Charles Moorman 1971 *Kings & Captains: Variations on a Heroic Form*, Kentucky: KUP.

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