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Reading Fantasy for a Better Understanding  
of Spiritual Life in a Material World

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## Abstract

Can reading the fantasy works of certain authors help us better understand difficult spiritual concepts, gain insights bridging the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds, and help us live spiritually-fulfilled lives in a material world? In George MacDonald's novel *Phantasies: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*, Anodos experiences twenty-one years of life in fairyland in twenty-one days, gains spiritual insights from those adventures, and is thereafter a changed person. In J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novel, *The Children of Húrin*, the son Túrin repeatedly illustrates the spiritual interplay between God's Grace, evil's curse, and consequences in the material world of man's free will. In C. S. Lewis's fantasy, *The Screwtape Letters* one sentence, "Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal", is an important key concept on the dynamic challenge of living spiritually in a material world and gives insights into Lewis' writing.

## Reading Fantasy for a Better Understanding of Spiritual Life in a Material World

Can reading the fantasy works of certain authors help us better understand difficult spiritual concepts, gain insights bridging the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds, and help us live spiritually-fulfilled lives in a material world? We'll focus on examples of Christian fantasy by three authors, George MacDonald, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis, helps us discuss living a spiritual life in a physical world.

If anyone looked in a library for books on spirituality they would find a wealth of titles. Aside from the apparent interest in that topic, the abundance of competing titles suggests it is not an easy topic to define. When we speak about spirituality, are the concepts too difficult or impossible to describe within the limits of language? Perhaps this is the special power of the Arts — music, poetry, visual arts and fiction — taking complex ideas and expressing those ideas in a way that is more accessible.

In George MacDonald's novel *Phantasies: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*,<sup>1</sup> the main character Anodos experiences twenty-one years of life in fairyland in twenty-one days. Much as someone might mature from life's experiences over twenty-one years, the time Adonos spends in fairyland informs and matures him with an accelerated-learning experience in just twenty-one days, and on his return to the common-day world he is thereafter a changed person.

George MacDonald's fairy romance plot and sub-themes could make for an entire conference. Early reviews of this work considered it bewildering.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship suggests

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<sup>1</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005.)

<sup>2</sup> Gunther Adrian, *The Structure of George MacDonald's Phantastes*, (De Pres: North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies: Vol. 12 , Article 3, 1993.) p. 43-49, endnote 2.  
<https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol12/iss1/3>

there is a complex narrative design that layers stories within stories until the line between the common-world, the world of fairy, and the stories told within fairyland blur and merge.

At the start of Adonos's journey there is this magical transition between the common world and the world of fairy:

*... I suddenly, as one awakes to the consciousness that the sea has been moaning by him for hours, ..., as if [Adonos's room and all its furnishings] were about to dissolve with it, and, forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters.*<sup>3</sup>

On returning from fairyland to the common world at the end of the story Adonos learns:

*On the morning of my disappearance, they had found the floor of my room flooded; and all that day, a wondrous and nearly impervious mist had hung about the castle and its grounds.*

Where the common world ends and fairyland begins is blurred throughout this tale. At one point Adonos tries retelling stories he had read in the Fairy Palace library:

*One story I will try to reproduce. But, alas! it is like trying to reconstruct a forest out of broken branches and withered leaves. In the fairy book, everything was just as it should be, though whether in words or something else, I cannot tell. It glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness, and it was occupied only with the things themselves. My representation of it must resemble a translation from a rich and powerful language, capable of embodying the thoughts of a splendidly developed people, into the meagre and half-articulate speech of a savage tribe.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> MacDonald, 93.

MacDonald uses his fairy romance to inform us that our language is not quite sufficient to directly describe significant themes and truths. His stories within a story, moving between the common world and fairyland, work to help bridge this gap.

J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novel, *The Children of Hùrin*,<sup>5</sup> is a tale that can be enjoyed as a straight-forward epic taking place in the First Age of Tolkien's literary collection of legends, roughly 6,500 years before Bilbo Baggins' adventures in *The Hobbit*. In Bilbo's time Tùrin is the stuff of legendary tales told late in the evening while sitting fireside. It is an epic myth layered within epic myths.

By asking if Tolkien envisioned his tale of Tùrin as a model for illustrating Christian concepts a pattern appears. *The Children of Hùrin* is a good example because the son Túrin repeatedly illustrates the spiritual interplay between God's Grace, evil's curse, and consequences in the material world of man's free will. The time is the Battle of Unnumbered Tears when the flower of humanity and of elves is destroyed, marking the darkest hour and the decline of the First Age.<sup>6</sup> A defiant Hùrin is taken captive by Melkor the Morgoth, who lays a curse on Hùrin and his family<sup>7</sup>. Soon Hùrin's lands are under attack and occupied by evil men aligned with Melkor. Hùrin's wife Morwen nominally remains a figure of leadership, could have led her family and the last of her people to flee and seek help and refuge but she doesn't. Is it defiance or stubborn pride that makes them stay in an oppressive occupation? Tùrin is still a youth when Morwen finally sends him from his homeland to seek refuge with his father's friends, the elves in

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<sup>5</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Narn i Chîn Hùrin: The Tale of the Children of Hùrin*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.)

<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, *The Children of Hùrin*, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, 64.

the kingdom of Doriath<sup>8</sup>. Tùrin's party becomes hopelessly lost and near death but is rescued by the elf Bereg, who later becomes Tùrin's true-hearted ally and companion-in-arms. King Thingol of Doriath welcomes Tùrin and grants him refuge<sup>9</sup>. Tùrin is also befriended by the elf-maiden Nellas who secretly falls in love with him. Tùrin has entered into a state of grace where the curse of Melkor has no place. The queen sends an invitation to Tùrin's mother, but she rejects coming to Doriath because of her pride.<sup>10</sup> Tùrin grows increasingly restless. Finally, rejecting all good and wise counsel and after much willful misadventure, Tùrin abandons his refuge. Tùrin's later adventures go from bad to worse, but even then, there is some redemptive hope. Tùrin adopts the name Neithan, falls in with a band of outlaws and eventually becomes their leader. Through his leadership their focus shifts towards being guerrilla fighters harassing the dark forces of Melkor. Bereg finds Tùrin and gives him the news that the grace Tùrin found in Doriath is still offered him as his choice again, but his pride will not allow him to return and reenter a state of grace.<sup>11</sup>

After more sorrow and a cleansing by the sacred waters of Eithel Ivrin, Tùrin enters the kingdom of Nargothrond. Tùrin is welcomed and honored by the king Orodreth, whose daughter Finduilas falls secretly in love with Hùrin. He has found another safe haven for a time. In time the king increasingly takes Hùrin's counsel which proves to be overly proud and incautious, which leads to the fall of Nargothrond<sup>12</sup> and worse to come. Tùrin is still too restless and willful to accept beneficence when it is offered, and his continued stubbornness allows opportunities for Melkor's agents to work evil on Tùrin and his companions<sup>13</sup>. These events mirror the basic

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<sup>8</sup> Tolkien, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Tolkien, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Tolkien, 139.

<sup>12</sup> Tolkien, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, 256.

model of God's Grace freely given, evil's efforts to work against that Grace, and the awful impact that anyone's choices can have in finding Grace or falling afoul of evil's curse.

In C. S. Lewis's fantasy, *The Screwtape Letters*<sup>14</sup>, one sentence — “Humans are amphibians — half spirit and half animal”<sup>15</sup> is an important key concept on the dynamic challenge of living spiritually in a material world and gives insights into Lewis' writing. When I first read this passage, I instantly remembered the following event from twenty-some years before. A good friend Billy from work was puzzled by a recent spiritual retreat he'd been on. He had attended this retreat to meditate on "The Great Question", what does life, the universe and everything all mean? Billy said that the only answer he'd gotten during that week was an unusual dream where he was working on a crossword puzzle with this clue: "nine letters, lives in two worlds." I replied, "That would be an amphibian. Maybe that's the answer to your question. It makes sense; we are like amphibians because we also live in two worlds. We live in the physical world and also in the spiritual world." I contemplated this idea for years wondering was there a great truth about humanity being like amphibians. I kept asking myself questions because it seemed to make so much sense and explained so many of humanity's basic conflicts. Doesn't the physical world have our attention front and center? Doesn't materialism drive our commerce which drives our seemingly endless exposure to marketing? Doesn't popular culture largely focus on the material world? The physical world is all there is and the spiritual world is a giant void. Any spiritual world becomes a dramatic theme full of darkness and danger that only brings grief. Yet if we are also spiritual beings then doesn't our spiritual nature also call to us? This spiritual

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<sup>14</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. (New York: Macmillan, 1953.)

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 17.



nature may have difficulty getting our full attention when our primary focus is solidly rooted in the material world, but surely in our most transcendent moments, whether watching a sunrise at the ocean, listening to an inspired work of music, or in our personal interactions with close friends and family, are not those moments and sensations our response to our spiritual nature as it interacts with the physical world, what C. S. Lewis might describe as true Joy?

These thoughts all flashed through my mind in an instant when I saw C. S. Lewis use the word "amphibian". That moment started me on my journey reading the adult works of C. S. Lewis, Tolkien and eventually the works of George MacDonald.

Brief research shows C. S. Lewis was not the first to use an amphibian simile to describe humanity's dual nature; recent examples, medieval and ones from antiquity can all be found.<sup>16</sup>

When we experience these brief moments of Joy, they illustrate our full nature as beings who live in two worlds: one of the material world and one of the spirit. Maybe this is why fairytales and fiction can help us understand our spiritual natures; they allow us a safe distance from the everyday world. They help stop our normal comparisons and the negative critiques commonly made while discussing philosophy and theology. When we are within the realm of suspended disbelief, we give ourselves permission to consider new possibilities and, perhaps, gain greater insights into the truth of our full nature. In this way, the reading of Christian fantasy could help readers live a more spiritual life in this material world.

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<sup>16</sup> Benita Huffman Muth, *Sir Thomas Browne, Screwtape, and the 'Amphibians' of Narnia*. (Wheaton: Christianity & Literature, vol. 59, no. 4, 2010, pp. 645–663.) doi:10.1177/014833311005900404. (This is one example of scholarly research tracing the historic use of an amphibian simile to describe humanity's dual nature.)