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## The Three Faces of Fairy

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ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

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**The Three Faces of Fairy:  
Finding Tolkien in Harry Potter**

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## The Three Faces of Fairy: Finding Tolkien in Harry Potter

Scott P. Johnson and Alesha D. Seroczynski

Famously known for *Hobbits* and *Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien produced a variety of scholarly works including the important essay “On Fairy-Stories.”<sup>1</sup> In “Tree and Leaf” (now included in *The Tolkien Reader*), this essay denotes the “Tree” (the theoretical structure) in which Tolkien discusses the origin of fairy-stories as standing independent from history and culture.<sup>2</sup> For Tolkien, the world of Fairy as a literary genre addresses, while transcending, the *zeitgeist* of any given time. At one point, he divides fairy-stories into three “faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man” (52). Given the transcendent nature of Tolkien’s ideas, they can (and ought) be applied to any body of fairy literature, not simply works written for Tolkien’s own generation. With that in mind, we believe that the novels of J.K. Rowling provide an excellent venue for just such a comparison, as they exemplify Tolkien’s criteria for fairy stories. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine Tolkien’s three faces of fairy against the *Harry Potter* novels and critically evaluate messages Rowling propounds concerning nature, humankind, and the supernatural.

For Tolkien, the “essential face” of fairy is the Magical towards Nature. This literary device of amplifying aspects of the natural world through unnatural means makes fairy stories essentially magical. Tolkien asserts that when most people think of fairy, this is often the only dimension considered. In *Harry Potter*, we find Rowling masterfully crafting a world that defies the natural logic and reason of the real world: wands open locked doors, cook meals, and illuminate the darkness like a torch (or flashlight); portraits speak, fireplaces transport and staircases move; cars fly, willows whip and rusty armor sings. Any and all things material have the potential to be magical which redefines the boundaries of nature: the

plain-old world becomes fantastic again. Tolkien insists that fairy-stories have “a mythical effect”:

[T]hey open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe.

If we pause, not merely to note that such old [i.e., ancient mythical] elements have been preserved, but to think *how* they have been preserved, we must conclude, I think, that it has happened, often if not always, precisely because of this literary effect. (56)

In like manner, Rowling enables her readers to transcend Time, and to imagine, if only for a moment, that other Times might exist simultaneously with our own. It is her creative use of ancient themes (centaurs and unicorns) and literary magic (the turning of the natural world on its ear), that fosters this process for the reader. If you are familiar with her work, you can see where we are headed: while Tolkien’s *Hobbit*-world lies in some distant, pre-historical era, Rowling creates *Potter*-world in which a pre-Modern, magical world coexists alongside the Modern “normal” world. This inventiveness scores in quidditch: the most exciting athletic invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Quidditch is Rowling’s creative combination of basketball, hockey, soccer and—of course—flight. Each ball (of four) has a specific function; only one of the balls (the Quaffle) is engaged in a manner consistent with Modern sports.<sup>3</sup> The two Bludgers independently attack the players, who must be vigilant to prevent personal injury. Each player, as in Modern sports, has a specific task; yet, unlike our sports, males and females play equally. Once the match begins, it happens (in a matter of speaking) outside of time. It can only end by snatching the Golden Snitch;

there are no periods of play or other temporal means of artificially controlling or limiting game play (other than a referee's brief interruptions).<sup>4</sup>

Quidditch also affords Rowling the opportunity to address issues more serious than sport. She uses these magical sporting venues to address social issues that fall under the rubric of the second face of fairy: the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. Tolkien remarks that the "fairy-story may be used as a *Mirour de l'Omme*" in which "the whole field of man's religious and moral nature [is] to set forth the purposes of Providence in dealing with him, to describe the various degrees of society and the faults specially chargeable to each class of men, and finally, to explain the method which should be followed by man in order to reconcile himself to the God whom he has offended by his sin."<sup>5</sup>

According to Tolkien, the degree to which scorn and pity appear in fairy depends on the story-teller; and Rowling has opted for a widely encompassing mirror. Unlike C.S. Lewis, who saved much of his critique of humanity for the later Narnia pieces (e.g., *The Silver Chair* and *The Last Battle*), Rowling's mirror is unveiled early and both broadens in scope and intensifies in degree with each novel. The first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*,<sup>6</sup> contrasts muggles (humans without magical powers) to the wizarding community. It presents a virtue-centered, pre-Modern worldview which denounces the dangers of materialistic, narrow-minded reductionism. For example, Modern commercialism takes a hit in chapter two of the first book when Dudley (Harry's cousin) receives thirty-seven birthday gifts, including a second television, a new computer, sixteen new computer games, a video-camera and player, and a gold wristwatch. A tantrum follows Dudley's count of the unopened gifts due to the fact that he received fewer presents than the previous year. Aunt Petunia promises another two presents to mollify him. "Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father. 'Atta boy, Dudley!" says Uncle Vernon (20-21). Here Rowling is suggesting that for the materialist, the quality of the gift is subordinate to the quantity.

Contrarily, Christmas at Hogwarts reveals a true understanding of the meaning of gift-giving: Harry, who historically received insulting gifts (if any at all) from the Dursleys, receives his first meaningful gifts: a hand-made, wooden flute from Hagrid, Hogwart's gamekeeper; a box of home-made fudge and a hand-knit, emerald green sweater ("to match [his] eyes") from his Ron Weasley's mother; a large box of a favorite candy from fellow-student, Hermione; and his father's invisibility cloak from an anonymous giver with a card enclosed that reads, "Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Merry Christmas to you." The selfless love expressed in personal, home-made gifts

and heirloom treasures reveals a virtuous commitment to the expression of wholesome Christmas sentiment over a torrent of self-serving, for-accumulation-only toys. To make the contrast most apparent, Harry also received one other gift: a fifty-pence piece from the Dursleys: "We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia" (147-48).

This deliberate disregard for the mass accumulation of modern luxuries—wooden flutes and woolen sweaters—is very interesting. Like Lewis and Tolkien, Rowling has created a culture that has no use for, and places no value upon, electronic devices. This is perhaps her most subtle critique of Modernity, and possibly her most significant. In an era inundated with electronic-mediated entertainment, Rowling's books draw readers in by the millions. On the first day of its release, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, her fifth installment, sold five million copies (double the annual sales of last year's best-selling novel); within the summer quarter, sales had reached a staggering eleven million books (*Business Digest* and *Publisher's Weekly*, respectively). Ironically, Rowling's world also places more emphasis on the written word than any other form of communication. There is no e-mail, no cell phone, and no palm pilot at Hogwarts; communication occurs largely by (now don't faint) handwritten letter with quill and ink; occasionally face-to-face conversations via the fireplace and a dash of floo powder are used in emergency situations. We don't find students using laptops—they actually have to write all their homework out by hand on scrolls of parchment. Surreptitiously, Rowling is espousing values that have been all but lost in today's world of instant communication gratification. Neil Postman would be proud.

Rowling's primary example of luxury-oriented, Modern-world muggles—the Dursleys—are egotistical, obnoxious, belligerent, and unidimensional (to merely scratch the surface of their inglorious characters). In fact, there are only four muggles mentioned in the first five books who value the magical world thus far: the parents of Hermione, of whom we know little besides their dentistry occupations and penchant for summer vacations; and the parents of Lily Potter (Harry's mother), of whom we know nothing.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the characters within the wizarding world come in spectacular shades of multidimensionality. But this should come as no surprise; as "benefactors" of our mass-commercialized society, Moderns are expected to act in bedazzled uniformity, reduced to the least-common denominator, much as we find in the Dursley family. Rowling may be suggesting, in Huxlean fashion, that the only way to recoup our individuality is to shed the burdens of modernity and recover a pre-modern worldview.

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At the very least, she recognizes and mocks the dangers of reductionism and materialism brought on by the modern era. C.S. Lewis, too, recognized these dangers. In his critique of the educational system, Lewis claimed that by educating the intellect only and not the heart (i.e., emotion) we were removing the necessary and essential, virtue-processing organs that make humanity human. “We make men without chests,” he wrote in *The Abolition of Man*, “and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst” (35). Later, he claimed that “perhaps . . . analytical understanding must always be a basilisk which kills what it sees and only sees by killing” (90). Rowling, like Lewis, explores the implications of Modernism by creating the Dursleys—the quintessential empty-chested family, bereft of virtue and creativity.<sup>8</sup>

One other reflection of humanity that Rowling critiques but has received little attention from published authors is the use and abuse of power. Related to this theme is her more obvious criticism of racism. We see this as early as *Philosopher’s Stone* in the form of Harry’s peer and nemesis, Draco Malfoy, who comes from a pure-blood wizard family and criticizes Harry for not wanting to join the House of Slytherin (i.e., the house of power). In *Chamber of Secrets*, Draco denounces Hermione for being a mudblood (a pejorative term for a wizard descended from muggle parents). In fact, one of the central plots revolves around the presence of mudbloods at Hogwarts, and the intent of the villain, Lord Voldemort, to rid the school of the “half-breeds.”<sup>9</sup> Another dysfunctional family unit is the Crouch father and son. Barty Crouch, Sr., holds a prestigious office at the highest governing institution in the wizarding world, the Ministry of Magic. Clearly power-hungry, he refuses to recognize the existence of the evil Lord Voldemort for fear of losing his Ministry position. We learn at the end of *Goblet of Fire* that Crouch, Sr., had turned his own son (Barty, Jr.) over to the Prison of Azkaban in order to save his professional future. This is the ultimate sacrifice of family at the altar of career, and Rowling makes clear that this decision cost Crouch, Sr., dearly. The revenge of Crouch, Jr., on his father is catastrophic and leads inexorably to the demise of both parties. Incidentally, we find it fascinating that the only Jr./Sr. father/son combination in all five novels has this kind of relationship; not surprisingly, they are a pure-blood family. Rowling certainly seems to be warning her readers about the dangers of placing career above family, and bloodline above social equality.

Finally, Tolkien’s third face of fairy (the Mystical toward the Supernatural) addresses the use of myth and magic as a story-teller’s medium for the conveyance of supernatural themes. It is ironic that Rowling has been most criticized for this component of her writing by

members of the Christian community.<sup>10</sup> Some evangelical critics of Rowling claim that she is supplanting “the Christian true story” with a “Christless cosmology which substitutes occultism as the new frame of reference for its hero and an entire generation of readers” (Lentini 20). Rather, it is our belief that Rowling’s fairy-tale is replete with (understated) Christological significance, and vigorously engaged in a critique of Modern humanity. We find her work to be more reflective of a Christian perspective than that of a secular or wiccan perspective, and even apparently non-Christian writers, such as Jack Zipes, recognize this: “The strange controversy surrounding the Harry Potter books caused by conservatives, even though the works are clearly didactic and moralistic and preach against the evil use of magic. . . . Perhaps if Harry were seen as a Christian knight (which he actually is), he might be pardoned for his magical sins” (174).<sup>11</sup>

Rowling’s worldview manifests itself in recurrent themes like selfless living, sacrificial death (symbolic or literal) and miraculous salvation. These literary devices (made mystical through the true myth of Christianity) reveal Tolkien’s idea of the “eucatastrophe”:

I coined the word ‘eucatastrophe’: the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). . . . It perceives—if the story has literary ‘truth’ on the second [worldly] plane . . . that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made. . . . [T]he Resurrection was the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible in the greatest Fairy Story. . . . Man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story. *But* since the author of it is the supreme Artist and the Author of Reality, this one was also made to Be, to be true on the Primary Plane. So that in the Primary Miracle (the Resurrection) . . . you have not only that sudden glimpse of the truth behind the apparent . . . world, but a glimpse that is actually a ray of light through the very chinks of the universe about us. (*Letters* 100-01)

The “eucatastrophe” (further defined as “joy of the happy ending,” “a sudden and miraculous grace,” “joy of deliverance” (*Fairy-Stories* 86)) is particularly evident at the conclusion of each of the first four Potter books, each time leaving the reader with a sense of virtuous action, moral truth and heroic redemption in the face of certain self-destruction.<sup>12</sup> John Granger, in *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter*, demonstrates that the second book—*Chamber of Secrets*—is the most

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Christologically rich of the five books published thus far.

In his essay “Fairy Stories,” Lewis also shares his glimpse of the eternal truths revealed in fantasy literature:

I thought I saw how [fairy] stories . . . could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. . . . But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could. . . . (*Of Other Worlds* 37-8)

Connie Neal, in her book *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*, describes her experience of leading her neighbors to salvation in Christ through the redemptive story of the first book, *Philosopher’s Stone*.<sup>13</sup> In another paper, we explore the “redemptive analogy”<sup>14</sup> of Potter-world in the allegorical nature of Harry as a “type” of Christ. To briefly illustrate this redemptive analogy with one of hundreds of allusions to the Gospel, toward the end of *Philosopher’s Stone*, Harry, Hermione and Ron descend through the trapdoor into the “Devil’s Snare”—a plant that prefers the dark—which ensnares them. What frees them from their bondage? Light! What a magnificent literary allusion to John’s Gospel: “The Word was the real light . . . and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it” (Jn 1: 9, 5).

Lewis cautions that fairy tales do not satisfy or speak to all readers:

The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of ‘commenting on life,’ can add to it. (38)

How much of this is at the root of the great divide between Christian writers who admire and recommend

the Potter books, and those who vilify them? is an interesting question. Can Harry Potter, much like Aslan, provide a model of salvation for both children and adults? We think so.

Rowling is said to have remarked that she did not write these books specifically for children; and that she did not read them to her daughter until she reached an age mature enough to handle the themes. One of the persistent mature motifs among all five *Harry Potter* novels is the fragility of life and the higher calling to be virtuous in the face of death. In the first chapter of the first book, we learn of the attempted murder of Harry and the actual death of his parents. Later in that book, Harry learns of the tragic circumstances surrounding his parents’ death and grieves the loss of his mother and father, most poignantly felt at the Mirror of Erised (i.e., desire). This process of grief and reconciliation to his history is thematic for all five novels.<sup>15</sup> Rowling succeeds at writing a true fairy tale: we find an incarnation of a marvelous world, which is parallel to (and critical) of our own, where characters participate in a selfless, passionate spiritual journey.

While many have complained about these mature themes, Tolkien seems to honor and encourage them, helping us see their role in understanding our *zeitgeist* in the post-Christ era of humanity:

God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused. But in God’s kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The *Evangelium* has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the ‘happy ending’. The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. (*Tree*, 72)

Harry Potter is teaching us “to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die.” And why? Because Rowling has crafted the antithetic Modern, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century redemptive analogy. She speaks to us at the level of virtue-building, commitment to a noble principle, and staring death in the face while attempting to do the right thing. Potter-world is full of myth and magic: at the level of nature, the level of social critique, and the supernatural level of announcing that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Potter-world is worth appreciating.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written in 1938 (as the *Lord of the*

*Rings* began to be written) and first presented as an Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews. It was later published in the collection *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford University Press) in 1947.

<sup>2</sup> The “leaf” is the story *Leaf by Niggle* in the same collection.

<sup>3</sup> It has only a minor spell on it to slow its fall to earth if dropped by a player.

<sup>4</sup> Quidditch matches, by the way, have been known to continue for months.

<sup>5</sup> This translates to the *Mirror of Mankind*, a reference to an early Renaissance work by John Gower, found at Bartleby.com’s Great Books Online website: <http://www.bartleby.com/212/0603.html>. We believe that citing Gower here is Tolkien’s way of linking the spiritual (the third face) with the moral responsibility toward society (of the second).

<sup>6</sup> We are choosing to use the British title, since it speaks to the accurate, historical roots of the “stone.”

<sup>7</sup> In an interesting side note, Hermione’s buckteeth are not corrected by braces (i.e. modern devices), but by a bit of clever thinking and some anti-growth potion from the Hogwarts hospital wing (i.e., premodern ingenuity).

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, it is a basilisk summoned by Rowling’s villain, Voldemort, in *Chamber of Secrets*, that robs the heroes of reason and life.

<sup>9</sup> Voldemort, incidentally, is a half-breed himself, and is consumed by anger toward the father who abandoned him.

<sup>10</sup> Focus on the Family’s *Citizen Magazine* and Richard Abanes are two sources of strong anti-Potter writings.

<sup>11</sup> Zipes, who clearly doesn’t like Potter, later says: “Goodness is doing unto others what you would like done to you, and Harry and his friends are gentle Christian souls” (182)!

<sup>12</sup> It is our belief that the lack of “eucatastrophe” in *Order of the Phoenix* is intentional.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth quoting her at length regarding Harry as an appropriate role model:

So Harry Potter is a model of a young person on a quest to find out who he truly is and where he truly belongs. He is chosen to be in Gryffindor, and he chooses to be there. He longs to be good while struggling with certain traits that seem to have more in common with the evil one than with heroes on the side of good. He must constantly be on guard against an evil adversary, who is deceptive and deadly. Above all, he must resist evil regardless of how weak he feels. He is discovering that he does have courage. He is a Seeker in more ways than one; he seeks truth,

and he seeks to right wrongs and overturn injustice. He is not alone, not even when he seems to stand alone in his battle against the evil one. He is humble enough to call out for help and brave enough to make good use of the help he receives. He is in the process of discovering he has some unique talents, but also learning that he cannot get by without the help and unique talents of his friends. He does not know what destiny holds for him, but he knows his heritage, he knows the house where he belongs, and he is determined to resist evil. I don’t know how you see it, but that sounds like a pretty good illustration of the Christian life to me. (189-90)

<sup>14</sup> This term was coined by Don Richardson in *Peace Child* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> A later example of a mature theme is the state in which we find Harry at the beginning of *Order of the Phoenix*. Having survived the encounter with Voldemort in *Goblet of Fire* by an act of “salvation” provided by his parents and a supernatural interaction of his and Voldemort’s wands (both of which contain, by the way, a feather from Fawkes, the Phoenix), Harry—feeling responsible for the death of Cedric Diggory—is depressed and angry.

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