

Fantasy in Children's Literature

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Welcome to this lecture on children's fantasy literature. I will begin by addressing some issues that have to do with the specificities of children's literature and exemplify with *Where the Wild Things Are*. Then I will talk about the development of fantasy, E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* and finish with a few words on modern fantasy literature for children.

Some Specifics of Children's Literature

Power relation: The adult author and the child reader are in an unequal relationship, since the adult has more power than the child and in the text speaks to, for and about the child.

Dual and double address (Barbara Wall): The difference between speaking simultaneously to the child (Dual address) and the adult co-reader and speaking to the adult above the child's head (Double address).

Ambivalence: The text works in two literary systems, children's literature and adult literature. For some scholars a question of quality, for others, an inherent feature of all children's literature.

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When discussing children's fantasy, one must know the basic features of children's literature at large, which, of course, differs a lot from adult literature. Children's literature is always written in a relation of power: the empowered adult writer writes to, for and about the powerless child readers. That is a unique power relation between author and reader, not seen anywhere else in modern literature. As a consequence, there are questions one has to ask when studying and analyzing children's literature, that one does not have to ask when analyzing adult literature. One example is the address. Researcher in children's literature, Barbara Wall, distinguishes between double address, by which she means when the adult co-reader is addressed above the head of the child, and dual address, when the child and the adult co-reader are addressed at the same time, although perhaps in different manners.

Another feature that is exclusively associated with children's literature is the concept of *ambivalence*, here referring to a text that works in two literary categories simultaneously, the adult literature category and the children's literature category. For some scholars, for example Zohar Shavit, ambivalent texts are rare in children's literature; one example she mentions is *Alice in Wonderland*. For her, ambivalence is a question of quality and according to her only a small part of children's literature is good enough to function in both categories. To other scholars, ambivalence is the basic condition of all children's literature; it has two recipients, the child and the adult. In that understanding, one could say that the issue of ambivalence is connected to that of address: the text addresses the child and the adult at the same time but in different manners. The child often interprets a text on a literal level: the events are actually taking place; they are not metaphors or fantasies. Adult readers tend to read on a more symbolic or perhaps psychological level: that the events have another meaning apart from the literal one; they are metaphors. This does not make the literal level less important or "correct", and a child can definitely sense that there is something more to a text, and this sense gets stronger as the child grows older. How we interpret a text has to do with our experience, and the more experience you have, the more apt you are to interpret a text on more than one level.

Maurice Sendak: *Where The Wild Things Are* (1963)



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One of the most famous picture books of all times belongs to the fantasy genre, Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are* (1963).

Different Readers, Different Levels

Literal level: The plot is what happens and what the book is about. In this case: Max gets grounded, in his room a forest starts to grow, he finds a boat, sails to the land where the Wild Things are, becomes their king, wants to go home and finally returns. But how come his supper is still warm after such a long time?

Psychological/Symbolical level: Max tries to reach out to his mother, gets grounded and fantasizes about a secondary world that enables him to leave his room and his own life. In his fantasy he sails away to a place where there are beings as wild as he is, that he can control and master. These beings can be seen as projections of his own emotions. When he is ready, on his own terms, he returns to reality. The hot supper on his table is there as a sign of love and forgiveness.

Dream text: the passage between worlds is made possible because of the protagonist's dreams and fantasies.

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When the protagonist is a small child it is not unusual that the gate between the first and the secondary world is located in the child's fantasy or dreams. Swedish literary scholar Boel Westin calls this kind of story *drömtext* (dream text). The child reader primarily understands the events as parts of an amazing journey which is made possible by means of magic – a world that suddenly appears in Max's room which allows him to leave his

room – but an adult reader would probably understand the events as an expression of the child's way of coping with difficulties in her or his life.

Max is grounded without supper after having made mischief and shouted that he was going to eat his mother. After a while a forest starts to grow in his bare and not very cozy room. This is the moment where the first world and the secondary world melt together, like a double exposure of dimensions. In the collision between worlds, Max finds a boat by a sea and leaves on a journey, one of the main themes in children's literature at large. He sails for a year and eventually arrives in the place where the Wild Things live. The Wild Things can be understood as projections of his own feelings that he cannot control in real life. The same way that his behavior is conditioned by his mother (accepted up to a certain point and then condemned), the behavior of the Wild Things is controlled by Max: first they play and make a lot of noise, then Max tells them to stop, or they will have to go to bed without supper. He copies his mother's way of treating him, which gives him back some of the power he lost when he was grounded. Eventually, he returns to his own world (after the Wild Things have protested and cried that they like him so much that they want to eat him) and to his room, where he finds his supper still warm, perhaps as a symbol of reconciliation between himself and his mother.

An adult reader can furthermore dwell on the threats of eating, first from Max towards his mother and then from the Wild Things towards Max. The Wild Things want to eat him because they like him so much and perhaps this is a reflection of Max's own motif: in his own way he tries to reach out to his mother, it becomes an act of love, but she does not understand it (Spike Jonze's film adaptation seems to suggest a similar interpretation).

Often children's fantasy fiction can be interpreted as pipe dreams: the wish for power and control of one's own life and possibilities to achieve great things; to matter. In the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's novels *Brothers Lionheart* (1973) and *Mio, My Son* (1954) the adventures can simultaneously be understood as real adventures (for the child reader) and expressions of coping with difficulties (for the adult reader). The gaining of power is one important reason why fantasy is a fundamental part of children's literature.

The History of Children's Fantasy Literature



From reason and rationality to fantasy and emotions.

Child and childhood became a topic in poetry

Fairytales and folktales were considered to convey the true spirit of the people and the nation

E.T.A. Hoffman published the first fantasy story for children in 1816

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Because of the power relation between the child reader and the adult author/co-reader, children's literature has always been inherently didactic: used as a means to tell children how to behave in different parts of life: in school, at home, towards parents, other adults, friends, animals et cetera. This does not mean that the books that adults put in their children's hands were only that: already John Locke claimed it was easier for children to learn if the books they read gave them pleasure as well. Therefore he advocated that children should read Aesop's fables, which contain anthropomorphic animals that act in one-episode tales with a moral at the end. The Romantic period, towards the end of the eighteenth century and roughly the first half of the nineteenth century, changed the views of childhood and children. From being considered small adults, children (and childhood) were now celebrated and romanticized. The child was considered an innocent, good being, closer to nature than to culture, and childhood was regarded a unique period of a human life: an idyllic paradise which a human would spend the rest of her life longing back to. This became an important trope in poetry, where the British poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) created a cult of childhood.

The new pedagogics, introduced by the philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), advocated that the child (the boy) should be raised in freedom, close to nature, with a mentor that would guide him but give him a lot of freedom to find things out for himself. Whereas the thinkers of the Enlightenment era had been critical towards fairytales and other types of fiction, which they considered to be superstitious and immoral, the Romantics had a great interest in the oral culture among the people. They

argued that fairytales, passed down orally from one generation to the next, captured the soul of the people, the very essence of the nation. Like the child, the people were considered closer to nature, to the origin, and that was what interested the Romantics. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Grimm brothers began to collect folktales and fairytales and write them down. Many of the most famous fairytales, such as Cinderella and Snow White, were written down at this time. However, in the process of writing down these tales, the brothers Grimm also changed them and adapted them to suit the middle-class patriarchal ideas and values of their time, for example regarding behavior and gender roles.

The increasing interest in folktales and their supernatural elements among the Romantics also led to the birth of a new genre, fantasy, which has a lot in common with the traditional folktales: its about a young hero who gets a mission and has to go on a journey to fulfill it. He or she meet characters who can help them or who are their enemies. The hero can get possession of magical objects such as cloaks and swords. During the mission, the protagonist matures and returns home a changed person. There are also differences: In fantasy fiction, both the plot and the characters are more complex than in the folktales and fairytales. Existential issues are important, such as the dichotomy of good and evil. Another important difference between traditional tales and fantasy is the secondary, or alternative, world. Either there are two worlds, the real world and the secondary one, with a passage between them, as in Lewis' Narnia books, or there is only the secondary world, as in Tolkien's fiction. The third alternative is that magical elements are introduced into our world, as in Meyer's Twilight series. Tolkien stresses that the secondary world must be construed in such a way that it is made believable. That is why it is misleading to see realism and fantasy as a dichotomy, since they both strive to make us believe what we read. For the same reason it is problematic, as is often done, for example by Nikolajeva, to regard *Alice in Wonderland* as a work of fantasy, since the Wonderland is a chaotic place with no inner reason and logic.

E. T. A. Hoffman: *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816)



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The first fantasy work of fiction for children is E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816). The story has two worlds, with a connection between them, just as in the Narnia series; one must walk through a wardrobe to reach the alternative world. However, the real passage between the worlds is the main character Maria's fantasy and special sensitive perceptive abilities, which also makes it a dream text. She immediately understands that there is something special about the little nutcracker, and it is her love and care that eventually leads him to victory. The story has a lot in common with a genre that is unique for children's literature, the living toys genre, but the presence of a secondary world puts it in the fantasy genre. However, there are no watertight compartments between the genres.

A Complex Narrative

A mix between fairy tale and fantasy. A classical fairytale theme where a simple boy completes a mission to get the princess and the kingdom.

Two worlds that mingle: the real world and the doll world, where the Nutcracker and all other dolls become alive. There is a passage through a wardrobe between the worlds. Some characters that belong to the first world are also present in the second.

It is a dreamtext. Maria's rich inner life and ability to fantasize is what gives her access to the other world.



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The narrative of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* has quite a complicated structure, in which the worlds blend and characters from the first world play important roles in the other. Furthermore, the story is told both by an omniscient narrator and by Father Drosselmeier, who himself takes part in the story he tells the children, as well as in Maria's dream. When she confronts him about his presence in her dream, he seems to know what she is talking about. He thus exists on various levels of the narrative, almost like a Russian doll. This role is illustrated by the mechanical castle which he gives the children for Christmas. Among the little figurines in the castle there is one who looks exactly like him. At the end, the two worlds mingle even more as the nutcracker is transformed into a real boy, Father Drosselmeier's cousin's son, who asks Maria to marry him. It is Maria's warm heart and her ability to disregard a non-attractive outer appearance that makes her, and not the shallow princess Pirlipat, become the young man's future wife. And, as fairytales often go, it is for the very same reason the poor nutcracker regains his true form:

Oh my very best Miss Stahlbaum, you see here at your feet the happy Drosselmeier, whose life you saved on this very spot. You said most amiably, that you would not slight me, like the hateful Princess Pirlipat, if I had become ugly for your sake. From that moment, I ceased to be a miserable Nutcracker, and resumed again my old – and, I hope, not disagreeable – figure” (p. 137).

There is a definite didactic tone in the story: the lesson is that it is important to help and care for others, and not let appearance and class stand in the way. Even though these are values that concern everyone, not particularly children, in this story it is the children that are the recipients. However, it is told from a child's perspective, and loyal to her, even though there are aspects that only adult readers understand, and that Maria remains puzzled by:

“Who knows, dear godfather, if you were dressed like my sweet Nutcracker, and had on such bright little boots – who knows but you would then be as handsome as he is?” Maria could not tell why her parents laughed so loudly at this, and why the Counsellor's face turned so red, and he, for his part, did not laugh half so heartily this time as he had more than once before. It is likely there was some particular reason for it (pp. 24–25).

As in *Where The Wild Things Are* two levels can be found in this narrative: the one where everything Maria experiences is true, and one where everything takes place in her mind. As adults we tend to interpret the events as Maria's dream's and her imagination, but there are things that contradict such an interpretation, for instance, Father Drosselmeier's reactions to some of the things Maria tells him, the seven crowns that do not seem to be made by human hands, Drosselmeier's cousin's son that claims he is the Nutcracker; they suggest that not everything is made up by Maria. Just like Max's supper in Sendak's book, these things complicate the interpretation, mix the worlds and leave the reader contemplative.

Modern Children's Fantasy Fiction

From homogeneity (white middle class) to heterogeneity (all classes and races)

Time shifts and time displacements as means for self exploration

New themes such as environmental dystopias

Global Mythologies (for example Greek and Norse mythology)

Important names: Edith Nesbit, Frank Baum, Pamela Travers, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, James M. Barrie, Alan Garner, Ursula LeGuin, Philip Pullman, J. K. Rowling



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Edith Nesbit (1858–1924) is one of the first authors of modern children's fantasy, with works such as *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) and *The House Of Arden* (1908). Even though she is said to be one of the first to adopt a child's perspective, the message, according to Nikolajeva, is still educational and power-related: in the end, the children give up their magical abilities, which have empowered them during their adventures. Nesbit does not use a secondary world; instead the magic is infused in the first, a strong tendency in twentieth-century writers of children's fantasy (for example Pamela Travers' *Mary Poppins* from 1934), even though it is not followed by all writers: James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911) and Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard Of Oz* (1900) both have secondary worlds, as do C. S. Lewis' Narnia chronicles (1950–1956), and the plot of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) takes place solely in a secondary world.

An important feature of children's fantasy is the time displacement and time shifts. In works that contain two worlds, time is often static in the first world while passing in the second. The literary possibilities of time travels are of course numerous. In modern fantasy literature for children it is often used as a device for self-exploration rather than as a means for exotic adventures.

The Nutcracker and the Mouse King introduced a theme that is unique for children's fantasy: animated toys and dolls. Nikolajeva points to the empowering effect of these kinds of texts: the child gets to be the stronger and the smarter one compared for example to a toy. It can be discussed whether this type of literature should be called fantasy; as Nikolajeva points out, the living toys or anthropomorphic animals do not possess any supernatural powers apart from being alive or human-like.

In the sixties, children's fantasy was often constituted by an adventure, preceded by a normal, middle-class family life, which the protagonists returned to afterwards. This began to change as society changed, and race, class and family structure became less homogeneous. The possibilities for children to be outdoors by themselves, unguarded, are fewer today, which can be seen in the literature as well: Modern children's fantasy often takes place solely in a secondary world, or in another place and time, where other rules apply. Another difference from earlier works is that parents and other adults are not excluded from the fantastic events, but can take part of the adventure alongside their children. The adventures do not end in the way that the protagonist returns home and continues an ordinary life: he or she has gained moral and psychological insights and supernatural powers that do not allow a return to an ordinary life but point to the future, to new adventures (which often take place in sequels). Themes and motifs have changed as well. One new subgenre is the dystopian fantasy, often ecocritically framed. Mythology

from all over the world has for a long time served as inspiration and raw material for fantasy writers, not without problematic results: uses of non-European mythology have been criticized and seen as cultural appropriations.

Four of the most influential modern children's fantasy authors are Alan Garner, Ursula Le Guin, Philip Pullman and J. K. Rowling. Aspects of dual address and ambivalence can be seen in all of these, for example in the criticism of the Catholic church in Pullman's work and in the political satire in the Harry Potter series. In Harry Potter we find many features that we associate with children's fantasy: the portal between the first and the secondary world, the empowering of the protagonist (from being a powerless and neglected child to becoming the most powerful wizard in the magic world, from poor to rich, from lonely to popular etc.), as well as the elderly mentor and the faithful comrades, both seen for example in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. We find the classical good-versus-evil plot, but also the more modern inner conflicts that torment the protagonist and his fight against the darkness in him. The plots get darker and more complex in the later books, just as the characters grow older and more mature. The Harry Potter series is a typical crossover kind of literature, loved and read by children as well as teenagers and adults.

Thank you for listening!

