



Written version of the lecture

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What is fantasy literature? This is a question that has been debated and answered in numerous studies on fantasy literature, but a quick overview of the studies shows that there is not one simple answer to this question. Different scholars mention different criteria for the genre, and they include different literary works in their descriptions of the genre. However, there are a few basic aspects that they all define as central for fantasy literature. In the following, I will discuss a few different definitions of fantasy literature that clarify the most central characteristics of the genre.

To begin with, I want to point out that there is a difference between fantastic literature and fantasy literature. Fantastic literature includes all kinds of literature that do not rely on a mimetic description of a world that is similar to reality, such as fantasy literature, science fiction, and horror (Irwin 1976:55). Fantasy literature, on the other hand, is one of the genres included within the wider concept of fantastic literature, but it displays genre characteristics which makes it very different from science fiction, for example. Whereas science

fiction literature describes a possible future with advanced technology that does not yet exist, but could potentially exist in 10, 100 or 1000 years, fantasy literature portrays worlds where the supernatural exists (see James & Mendlesohn 2012:3). Magic, magical creatures, spells, and dragons introduce a world that does not follow the natural laws that govern our own reality. According to William Robert Irwin (1976:155) fantasy literature can be understood as the result of presenting the supernatural as real and always present. Thus, fantasy literature is a much narrower notion than fantastic literature.

In *A Short History of Fantasy* (2009:3–5) Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James list four different ways of defining the genre.

1. As a type of literature that goes against what is believed to be possible in reality.
2. As a historical genre that was born as a reaction against the dominance of realistic literary fiction during the Enlightenment.
3. As a marketing category for books.
4. As a genre that has been defined by different scholars' definitions.

Mendlesohn and James highlight a few problems with the different types of definitions. For example, what people view as realistic and supernatural varies over time and between different cultures, which means that different

people might have different opinions on what should be regarded as supernatural. Since supernatural elements have existed in literary fiction since antiquity, it is also hard to define one exact historical moment when the genre was born (Mendlesohn & James 2009:3–5). Different scholars suggest different starting points. For example, Stefan Ekman argues that the genre came into existence with the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* between 1954 and 1955, whereas Brian Attebery views the birth of the first art fairy tales at the end of the eighteenth century as the starting point for fantasy literature (Ekman 2010:22; Attebery 1992:10). In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) James and Mendlesohn point out that many academics seem to include their own personal favourites in the genre, but at the same time exclude works of literary fiction that the average reader of fantasy would include in the genre (James & Mendlesohn 2012:1; cf. Attebery 1992:21). In short, the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of fantasy literature explains why scholars have put so much effort into defining the genre.

In *A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (1992) Brian Attebery presents an alternative to definitions that aim to define the boundaries of the genre, and as a consequence exclude many literary works from the genre. He describes fantasy literature as a *fuzzy set* (Attebery 1992:2, 12). He borrows this term from George Lakoff's and Mark L. Johnson's influential study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980:122–124). By applying the notion of a fuzzy set to fantasy literature, he defines the genre from

its centre point, instead of by defining its boundaries. According to Attebery, the most typical example of fantasy literature is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This is a work of literary fiction that almost everyone considers to be fantasy literature. It inspired many other writers of fantasy literature, and it has become a symbol of the genre. Hence, Attebery defines *The Lord of the Rings* as the centre point of the genre. Other literary works can be compared to this most influential example of fantasy literature, and they can be described as classical fantasy, fantasy to some degree, or similar to fantasy in certain ways. As a consequence, a work of literary fiction that only displays a few fantasy characteristics still belongs to the genre's fuzzy set (Attebery 1992:12–14).

Attebery himself points out that this definition is very wide, but he mentions three criteria which make his definition more specific and easier to apply to works of literary fiction. He argues that fantasy literature is similar to Tolkien's trilogy on three different levels. The first similarity is the existence of strong disruptions of what is regarded as possible in reality. This usually happens through the introduction of the supernatural and/or magic into the narrative. In fantasy literature, other rules apply than what we are used to from our own everyday lives (Attebery 1992:14–15). This is true for *The Lord of the Rings*, where magical rings and magical creatures play a central part in the story. Several other scholars agree with this criterion. For example, Irwin describes fantasy as “that kind of extended narrative which establishes and develops an antifact, that is, plays the game of the impossible” (Irwin 1976:ix).

The second criterion describes the structural outline of works of fantasy literature. Attebery argues that works of fantasy fiction, or book series of fantasy fiction, follow a comical structure. The story begins with the introduction of a problem, and ends with a resolution through which the quest—the hero's magical task—is fulfilled. The trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* follows this structure, and once again Tolkien's work is used as a point of comparison. It includes “a round-trip journey to the marvellous, complete with testing of the hero, crossing of a threshold, supernatural assistance, confrontation, flight, and establishment of a new order at home”, which is a structure that also defines the fairy tale according to Vladimir Propp (Attebery 1992: 15). According to Attebery and Tolkien, the eucatastrophe, the avoidance of an approaching catastrophe and thus a happy ending, is a necessity for all fantasy literature (Attebery 1992:15; Tolkien 1975:62).

The third and final criterion that Attebery defines as central for fantasy literature is the effect fantasy aims to create in its readers. Through the introduction of worlds which follow different rules from reality, readers can potentially gain new perspectives on the world they live in. In “On Fairy-Stories” (1976) Tolkien describes how fantasy can create a *recovery*, through which we can see our surroundings with new, fresh eyes (Attebery 1992:15–16; Tolkien 1975:53). Thus, according to Tolkien and Attebery, fantasy literature is not an escape from reality. Instead, it can help us see the world we live in

through the lens of fantasy literature, which creates a distance from things that we are used to, so that we can see them anew.

In a discussion of Attebery's definition, Ekman adds one more criterion that he considers to be so central for the genre that it should be included in the definition. He argues that fantasy literature relies on *the cauldron of stories*. The notion comes from Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" (1976), and clarifies that fantasy literature, to a much greater extent than other literary genres, reuses and transforms myths from different parts of the world. According to Tolkien, the myths are the ingredients that the writer of fantasy fiction puts in the cauldron. The writer lets the myths cook together with other ingredients in the cauldron, and thus works of fantasy literature are a result of the mixing, stirring, and transformation of different ingredients, both old and new. The metaphor of a cauldron full of stories clarifies how fantasy literature constantly displays a dialogue with previous stories and myths.

In conclusion, the answer to the question "What is fantasy literature?" depends on whom you ask. However, Brian Attebery's description of the genre as a fuzzy set where *The Lord of the Rings* is the most typical example of fantasy literature, his three criteria for what defines the genre, and Ekman's addition of the cauldron of stories, creates a common ground from which scholars, students, and fans of fantasy literature can begin to discuss the diverse genre of fantasy. I want to conclude this lecture with a quotation from Tolkien,

where he vividly describes the almost magical influence works of fantasy literature can potentially have on readers:

We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness. [...] This triteness is really the penalty of “appropriation”: the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquiring them, and acquiring ceased to look at them. [...] Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open up your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers and flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you. (Tolkien 1975:53–54)

Works cited

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