Fairy Stories
A psychological examination of the dual audiences for fantasy literature

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Although fantasy literature as a genre is usually thought of as having children as its core audience, there is a good case to be made to the contrary. The natural source for the opposing argument would be a fantasy writer such as J.R.R. Tolkien, especially given that he has written on the question of child versus adult audiences for fantasy literature as well as having written his own famous fairy story, The Hobbit. However, another source can be found by looking to psychology. Since the time of Tolkien’s writing, a number of psychological theories have been conceived that serve to substantiate his hypotheses.

Tolkien’s ideas on the topic are put forward in his essay called “On Fairy-Stories,” in which he examines these proposed dual audiences for fantasy literature. He acknowledges the common association of fantasy literature with children directly by saying that “it is usually assumed that children are the natural or the specially appropriate audience for fairy stories.”

One such psychological theory, according to Saul Kassin’s book Psychology, states that cognitive development “is not a process by which children merely ‘copy and paste’ what they are told.” Rather, the creation of intellectual notions occurs “through a complex interplay between preexisting knowledge and new information gathered through interaction with the external world.” It seems clear, then, that children can process thought with a degree of complexity, and so the many adults Tolkien alludes to in “On Fairy-Stories” are not completely correct in arguing that “it is easier to work the spell with children” because children immediately accept everything in the tales they are told. The naiveté of children, according to Tolkien, is “an adult illusion produced by children’s humility, their lack of critical experience and vocabulary, and their voracity (proper to their rapid growth).” Children are intuitive enough to take the experiences from their real lives and juxtapose them against the make-believe events that occur in fantasy literature; they are similar to adults in their ability to distinguish between the two and accept fairy stories for their entertainment value rather than completely believe in them. As a result, authors can afford to put highly unrealistic events and characters into their stories knowing that both children and adult audiences will be able to accept the fantasy not for its authenticity, but for its enjoyable, outrageous nature.

While children may be capable of separating fact from fiction, that does not necessarily mean that they are capable of adult-level thought processes. Kassin explains that “even though concrete operational children (children between the ages of seven and twelve) appear to reason like adults do in response to specific problems, they do not think on an abstract level.” So, while many children will realize that The Hobbit is fictitious and are likely to take away from it the entertaining plot, they probably will not glean any more than that. Adults, on the other hand, may realize that there is much more behind The Hobbit because of their capacity for abstract thought. They may read it as a story stereotyping British aloofness, a tale re-defining the medieval hero, an object lesson about life, or even a unique representation of the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf. Tolkien’s characters and the situations they encounter are entertaining enough to sate the appetites of children, but his story is also sufficiently deep and creative to capture the interest of adults. Because children are able to reason like adults in their ability to sort fact from fiction yet are unable to think abstractly, Tolkien’s tale attracts for both children and adults because it places adult concepts within an entertaining children’s plot.

The concept of a dual audience for fantasy literature is further supported by psychological tests that equate fantasy to imagination. One such test, The Thematic Apperception Test, “requires the individual to create imaginative stories in response to a series of pictures; the content of his fantasy is then analyzed to reveal the underlying aims of his behavior.” The test operates under the principle that the imagination produces fantasy, so it stands to reason that imagination is the essential quality that readers of fantasy both possess and utilize. In The Hobbit one must imagine the fan-
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tastic worlds and characters that Tolkien creates, yet he does not overly develop his characters and settings so that they must be imagined in only one way. Instead, Tolkien allows each individual reader to personalize his or her own picture of Middle-Earth and its inhabitants. For example, the only physical description Tolkien gives of the dwarves is the color of their beards, belts, and hoods: “It was two more dwarves, both with blue hoods, silver belts, and yellow beards; each carried a bag of tools and a spade.” The author says nothing about the size of the creatures, who they are, or where they came from; he leaves much of the description of the dwarves and other characters up to the reader’s imagination.

Tolkien intentionally omits details to stimulate the imagination but is not specifically targeting children when he does. While it is a common assumption that children are more imaginative than adults, many psychologists think that this is not necessarily the case. In his book The Child’s World of Make-Believe, Jerome L. Singer sees “the young child’s cognitive structure as limited with a corresponding paucity of fantasy life.” Singer says that children are too cognitively undeveloped to have a complex imagination, but he pinpoints a change in adolescents, going on to state that “the richness and elaborateness of the fantasies of adolescents point to the manifestation of their cognitive maturity.” In other words, while imagination is an inborn attribute, children do not fully develop it until adolescence or adulthood. It would seem, then, that there is a “cognitive skill of imagination” that becomes more refined with age.

As a result of this development, fantasy appears to take on different meanings as people reach adulthood. The more abstractly they can think, the better they use their imagination and experience fantasy literature. Singer points out that the imagination grows stronger after childhood because the adolescent has had more experiences to draw information from and has more overall knowledge of the world: “The implication here is that imagination requires stimulation from the environment, peer contact, parental approval and contact, and adequate time and space, in order to flourish.” This leads Singer to draw the conclusion that “one way children might learn fantasy behavior is through observation of models.” Children eventually develop into adults who are able to combine abstract thought with imagination, in part because of adult example and guidance. For this reason, fairy-stories are passed down from generation to generation: the child first observes the adult who encourages a growth of imagination, then the child gains a more advanced “cognitive skill of imagination,” enjoys fairy-stories on a deeper level, and becomes the adult model for future children. Because of this dependency on adults for the encouragement of an interest in fantasy literature, both children and adults play vital roles in assuring the future existence of fairy-stories. Fairy-stories must appeal to both audiences or the cycle of imagination will stop and fantasy literature may cease to exist.

Another venue in which psychology corroborates Tolkien’s theories lies in the debate on nature vs. nurture in cognitive and emotional development, it seems that he would probably fall on the nature side, given his statement about a basic predisposition to fairy stories. However, Tolkien also points out that this inclination tends to increase with age, denoting a more nurture-based perspective. It follows from Tolkien’s statement (and Singer’s earlier one as well) that adults must have learned through environmental influences to cherish fantasy literature even more so than they did as children. That it is adults who insist on reading and adapting the stories for their children just as it is adults who foster the development of a child’s imagination is cause to assume that the “taste” for fantasy literature increases with age as a result of encouragement by adults. While some parents might read the stories to their children with only the intent to entertain, personal adult interest is another reason for the survival of fairy-stories. Tolkien states: “Fairy-stories...cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined.” Just as a fragile object left to a child is likely to be broken, a fairy-tale, likewise, will cease to exist if not fostered by adult guidance; what begins with age, if it is innate.

Should Tolkien have been familiar with the debate over nature vs. nurture in cognitive and emotional development, it seems that he would probably fall on the nature side, given his statement about a basic predisposition to fairy stories. However, Tolkien also points out that this inclination tends to increase with age, denoting a more nurture-based perspective. It follows from Tolkien’s statement (and Singer’s earlier one as well) that adults must have learned through environmental influences to cherish fantasy literature even more so than they did as children. That it is adults who insist on reading and adapting the stories for their children just as it is adults who foster the development of a child’s imagination is cause to assume that the “taste” for fantasy literature increases with age as a result of encouragement by adults. While some parents might read the stories to their children with only the intent to entertain, personal adult interest is another reason for the survival of fairy-stories. Tolkien states: “Fairy-stories...cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined.” Just as a fragile object left to a child is likely to be broken, a fairy-tale, likewise, will cease to exist if not fostered by adult guidance; what begins as a natural disposition develops through external encouragement.

Psychological theories can also provide some explanation for how unrealistic characters and actions in The Hobbit may be so easily accepted by both children and adults;
the theory of animism is one in particular that provides such an explanation. Animism is defined as a tendency to endow non-living (or made-up) physical objects and events with biopsychological attributes, such as life, consciousness, and will. From the age of two to twelve, concepts having to do primarily with the external world – physical objects, space, time, physical causality – are less important to children than those having to do with humans. As a result, children at this age tend to imagine that all things, especially those that are inanimate and unrealistic, have living human characteristics. In The Hobbit, it is not hard for children to accept talking birds and other anthropomorphized creatures, exemplified by the characterization of the Eagles:

And though the Lord of the Eagles became in after days the King of All Birds and wore a golden crown, and his fifteen chieftains golden collars (made of the gold that the dwarves gave them), Bilbo never saw them again—except high and far off in the Battle of Five Armies.

Tolkien gives birds the human ability to speak and reason in English, even imparting the Eagles with a social class, a respected royal leader, and a system of government. This extreme anthropomorphism is very attractive to children, as is the way Gollum treats his ring as though it were a person. When he realizes he has misplaced it, he hisses: “Where is it? Where is it? . . . Lost it, is my precious, lost, lost! Curse us and crush us, my precious is lost!”

The manner in which Gollum names his inanimate Birthday present “my precious” has psychological appeal to children as they often name toys or presents as well. Since two to twelve-year-olds are at the prime of both animistic thought processing and fairy-story familiarity, fantasy literature like The Hobbit keenly attracts the child. But animism does not lose its appeal after age twelve by any means; in fact, Miller argues that:

Animism persists in an attenuated form into adulthood. Thus we refer to boats and cars as “she” and describe them as having human qualities. The golfer talks to his putter as though it has a will of its own. Many adult religions are animistic, most obviously pantheism, which believes that God is everywhere and in everything, including inanimate objects.

While adults do not actually believe that their boats are beautiful women, or that their putters will obey their commands, they continue to treat lifeless objects as though they possess certain human qualities. In this respect, they can relate to the humanized characters and objects in fairy-stories, as well. It is not a matter of believing the out-of-reach to be real; children, after all, do understand that birds cannot truly speak. Rather, it is the enjoyment and imagination of animism and fairy-stories that continues to attract both adults and children.

Tolkien believed that the value of the fairy-story is not for children alone, but for adults, as well. As his own popular fairy-story, The Hobbit, shows, both children and adults can be entertained by fairy-stories. In the intervening 65 years, modern theories of psychology have tended to support Tolkien and give a scientific explanation for the purpose of his work. Even though most writers, Tolkien included, are probably not aware of psychological ideas such as the debate between nature and nurture, the mind’s ability to process thought abstractly and concretely, and the tendency to endow non-living objects with human attributes, these elements are nevertheless present in their stories, supporting their validity as works for both children and adults. Psychology truly is a useful science that can be applied to even the most remote, seemingly unrelated issues in other areas of study. In this case, psychological ideas applied to literature confirm a possible purpose for Tolkien’s creation of The Hobbit.