

Magic is Might: Understanding the Nature of Magic in Literature

Reeba Sara Koshy

Assistant Professor on Contract

Department of English

C.M.S College, Kottayam

Kerala, India

Abstract

This article attempts to understand the nature of magic in fiction. The differences between the origins and practices in magic in the real world and magic in fantasy literature is defined and the alluring aspect of magic is analyzed by describing the process of reading as an act of shifting consciousness to a different realm. Escapism and incorporation of ardent fandom into culture is delineated to further understand the impact of magic. Magic as explained by Lev Grossman in his work *The Magicians* is organized and analyzed to bring forth a central idea that magic breaks down the barrier between truth or thing and word. The concept Hyperreality helps understand and brings forward the influence of magic from fantasy literature in real life and how the trials and dilemmas in the monotonous life elevates magic to the realm of escapist heaven. The article attempts to perceive magic as a way of acting out by women and taking power for themselves. The article concludes with the idea that magic in literature is a topic of interest that is infinitesimally wide and is ever-widening.

Keywords: Fantasy, Magic, Witchery, Fiction, Arbitrary, Word

Magic is Might: Understanding the Nature of Magic in Literature

Reeba Sara Koshy

Assistant Professor on Contract

Department of English

C.M.S College, Kottayam

Kerala, India

Fantasy is a term associated with both psychology and art. Fantasy includes our needs, desires, wants that we so crave for and at the same time often shapes our world. From fairy tales that appeals to every little girl like *Cinderella* to *Lord of the Rings*, from building blanket forts imagined as a King's castle to role playing games where one immerses oneself in planning and building virtual kingdoms by investing time, money and intellectual prowess, fantasy is everywhere. Fantasy entertains and also proves to be safe escape routes for most minds, young and adult. "Fantasy expresses itself in many ways, from the comfort we feel in the godlike powers of a fairy godmother to the seductive unease we feel confronting Dracula." ("Reviews For Fantasy And Science Fiction: The Human Mind, Our Modern World From Coursera | Class Central"). "If fiction were a mirror, characters would be on the side of reality, they would be projecting light and we would be the reflection (Connor). Tsvetan Todorov, a literary theorist famous for his treatment of the fantastic, said that magic realism disrupts our sense of reality whereas fantasy creates another completely enclosed reality. So says Lucie Armitt, anyway, in her book, *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*. Todorov claimed that fantasy "imposes absolute closure" and "implies complicity on the part of the readers". Reality has a cultural identity("Is Magic Realism Really Fantasy?"). Stories in the Bible are considered to have happened and real

but not as fantasy by staunch Christians whereas an atheist or a non-believer would see them as fantasy.

Magic, the art of wonder, in fantasy literature takes varied forms and it continues to entertain and amuse with its mysteries. As far as the world we live in is concerned, magic than can defy the existing laws of physics doesn't exist. Magicians are people with exceptional skills in using science to cater their need which essentially is trapping us in illusions where our senses fool us to serve the magician's purpose. Magic and its mystery is a source of wonder and viewers must possess negative capability to immerse and enjoy magic. Magic in literature doesn't have the limitations of real world science. Creative imagination offers boundless and infinite array of possibilities for magic. In other words, magic has no limits whatsoever in literature as long as the text allows the reader to suspend his logical and rational skepticism at bay for the sake of pleasure and enjoyment. Otherwise, how can Harry Potter become such a worldwide phenomenon? Some works of literature even creates a whole different universe whose laws even seem to make sense to the point of ardent devotion. Fantasy literature mostly uses magic as an important facet of the world it portrays.

What mystical power does magic hold over us? Is it just an escapist's favourite? This article attempts to understand magic in works of literature that features the same. Magic exists in a different realm and in that sense since literature takes the readers to a different realm from the real world that happens around them, fantasy literature is double spaced away from reality. A strong hold on and a sense of reality pushes the readers back into the world of reality and a good work of fantasy literature lets the readers cross over this chasm between the two realms and comfortably place the reader's imagination in a space created by the author. The space which has been created with soul and heart lets the readers weave a whole new universe and immerse themselves in the make believe world. The huge fan following for fantasy fictions like *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* is an appropriate proof for the same. It's no wonder that some find the real world so boring and the make believe world so refreshing and entertaining that they start living as if they exist in this other world. Culture itself modifies itself to incorporate such believers. Comic cons, Costume parties, fan clubs which promote discussions online and

Vol. 2, Issue 4 (March 2017)

otherwise, and turning up in costumes as favourite character for a movie show are all examples of instances where the fantasy world has created a different reality altogether. Adult readers often take shelter in the belief that magic exists and escape mundane trials and tribulations by soaring freely in the wonderful world with magic. The worldwide phenomenon and daresay massive fandom hysteria, *The Harry Potter* series first came to the book shelves under the category of children's literature but quickly found place in adults' lives with the only difference in a more adult friendly book covers.

"Watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it." ("Roald Dahl - Wikiquote"). Lev Grossman in his work *The Magicians* puts forward some interesting perspectives on magic through his characters. He calls it a craft where the magician depends upon his own skill and knowledge to effect some change in the world and doesn't look toward any other source of power normally looked upon in the real world, be it science or magic. He doesn't pinpoint any particular definition which might give magic objectivity like science neither does he boasts of knowing its origin. He compares the craft of a carpenter to that of magicians since in both cases, the craftsmen doesn't know the origins or how the material or source came into being. (48) The frustration with the real world or the awareness about what the world could be, is seen as pain, and it is suggested to be the root of magic. He even goes on to say that stronger magicians feel more pain and thereby adds to the theory that pain acts a source of power to the magicians (217). But he admonishes a scientific search for the origins by casting away any quests as fruitless tasks (53).

It's a widely accepted notion that language describes reality which is refuted by the structuralists who argues that in fact language creates the reality that we perceive. But a word doesn't conjure something out of thin air just because of the act of utterance itself. The world obeys physical laws and mankind understands and describes the world based on partial theories of science with its own limitations. God creates and writers become Gods in this sense. Writers can create worlds and societies. The act of writing itself is a powerful feeling and can even purge emotions. Readers connect, bond and feel as if they're experiencing what the characters are

going through. Writing is creating and the creations have the power to evoke empathy in the readers. But magic in fantasy literature gives word the power to create reality, and word and truth becomes one. Magic does have its own science set by the author but in essence word is powerful and spells are words capable of creation or to bend laws of physics we know of in the real world. Word is creating. These creations have the power to evoke physical, emotional and mental reactions in the readers. For e.g.: In the book *Magicians* when Quentin and Alice fight, magic is compared to fighting. The argument draws attention to the way words hurt, cause pain and damage, separate people, and can make life better or worse. (331). The *Cruciatu*s Curse (also known as the *Torture Curse*) is one of the three *Unforgivable Curses* of the wizarding world in *Harry Potter*. It is a curse of torture, inflicting excruciating pain on a victim. This is the seducing power of magic where the readers feel like they are Gods. In the real world, prayer is believed to raise words to the level of reality and the probability is depended on the higher power. In magic the power of the person uttering the words determine the chances of words becoming truth or reality. The arbitrariness of language is complex and language itself becomes the tool of creation in magic. The arbitrary relation between word and thing is a source of frustration in the real world and Lev Grossman in his work *The Magicians* explains the existence of magic by delving into linguistics and the arbitrariness of language: “Words and thoughts don’t change anything. Language and reality are kept strictly apart- reality is tough, unyielding stuff, and it doesn’t care what you think or feel or say about it. Or it shouldn’t. You deal with it and you get on with your life. “Little children don’t know that “ magical thinking, that’s what Freud called it. Once we learn otherwise we cease to be children. The separation of the word and thing is essential fact on which our adult lives are founded.” “But somewhere in the heat of magic that boundary between word and thing reptures. It cracks, and the one flows back into the other, and the two melt together and fuse. Language gets tangled up with the world it describes.” (216). *Star Wars* is a science fiction series which has been a worldwide phenomenon since it came out as a movie series which merges magic and science. This force, which we could call magic, can even levitate solid objects. “may the force be with you” is a classic phrase from the movie that is widely popular in the present culture.

“Hyperreality can also be thought of as "reality by proxy"; simply put, an individual takes on someone else's version of reality and claims it as his or her own ("Hyperreality"). Persons who are addicted to certain shows or movies would view the world around them with the lens they fashion out of all the information they gather from these shows. They start developing relations based on some twisted perceptions that could have seriously misconstrued due to the heavy influence of these heavy dramatic relationships and events. Magic in literature transforms the hyperreality experienced by the readers to a level of euphoria where word and reality is so close that the feeling of creator and the new lens of reality makes real world drab. Comic cons, Halloween, costume parties etc... are all instances where one can see the fantastic effect of fantasy literature being incorporated into real life.

“An early description of the way contemporary culture is now full of re-creations and themed environments was provided by Umberto Eco. In a brilliant essay, Eco saw that we create these realistic fabrications in an effort to come up with something that is better than real -- a description that is true of virtually all fiction and culture, which gives us things that are more exciting, more beautiful, more inspiring, more terrifying, and generally more interesting than what we encounter in everyday life.” (“Umberto Eco And His Travels In Hyperreality”). Magic in literature tremendously improve the possibility of improving the real world as we know even if its through imagination. The illusions and fake facades in the real world is also proving to be immensely successful and existing in virtually every society. The magical land of Disney remains the ultimate destination of experiencing hyperreality where everyday life becomes normal and the land becomes an expression of more than normal, brighter and larger than life. Once the experience of hyperreality seeps in, everything else could become boring and Disney land becomes the expression that differentiates reality and fantasy.

Fantasy literature proves to a source of escapism. Children love to escape into the world of make believe, and imaginary friends are even considered to be healthy up to a certain age. Children’s minds are not controlled and repressed by societal pressures and a child’s imagination can soar high and mighty until reality principle or the superego starts creating boundaries and determining black and white areas. “Derivative narrative clichés work with children because they

are comfortingly recognizable and immediately available to the child's own power of fantasizing.”(Byatt) Once upon a time, fantasy books would not have had much space in an adult's life but now magic in fantasy literature is more and more celebrated and discussed without shame.

Magic, in myth and fairy tales, is about contacts with the inhuman -- trees and creatures, unseen forces. Most fairy story writers hate and fear machine because in a world of magic, science has hardly any prominent role in determining the course of history and society. Science and technology would bring forth immense possibilities which might even make magical spells outdated in some cases. This could be why the genre science fiction stands apart from magical fantasy. Science is curiously looked upon by Mr. Weasley in the *Harry Potter* series

Witches and witchcraft potentially transforms and extends the possibilities of magic as something beyond the mere longing for word and reality to be one. One of the things that make witchcraft interesting is that it is an example of women in particular, acting out. Men symbolically lead the community as ministers in Christianity or as head of the household. Women who are witches tend to subvert those hierarchies often by claiming more power for themselves. Witches symbolize the power of female. In the television drama series *Salem*, Salem witch trials is reinterpreted to form a feministic narrative that brings forth the element of resistance against the existing norms, especially patriarchal norms that subjugate women. This resistance through magic against what are norms can be juxtaposed with the element of resistance in magic against the normal or the word creating reality as opposed to reality represented by word. The witch derives or draws power from other forces greater than herself and not because of the relation she has with other prominent people in the society.

The spiritual wouldn't find the magical world very attractive or plausible and might even accuse magic to be satanic and anti-religious. The attraction for magic in literature can be explained by the powerful formula of the fantasy for escape and empowerment, combined with the frustration of knowing what the world could be. Magic shortens the distance between the word and thing, thereby makes words powerful and the realm of imagination becomes doubly powerful. Magic in fantasy literature is an escapist heaven where the power of the individual

moulds and shapes the world around him. It has been a source of mystery and wonder throughout the course of history and will continue to be so. Literature brings magic and the escapist heaven to the readers since *The Beowulf* in English and continues to widen its horizon.

References

- Armitt, Lucie. *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 2005. Print
- Byatt, A. S. "Harry Potter and the Childish Adult." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 06 July 2003. Web. 3 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/07/opinion/harry-potter-and-the-childish-adult.html>>.
- Coursera*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<https://www.class-central.com/mooc/352/coursera-fantasy-and-science-fiction-thefan-human-mind-our-modern-world+>>.
- Davidson12, Lale. "Posts about Literary Criticism on Lâle Davidson." Lâle Davidson. N.p., 12 Mar. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. <<https://laledavidson.com/category/literary-criticism/>>.
- Grossman, Lev. *The Magicians*. 1st ed. N.p.: Penguin, 2009. Kindle.
- "Hyperreality." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 08 Feb. 2017. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperreality>>.
- "Roald Dahl." Roald Dahl - Wikiquote. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Roald_Dahl>.
- Connor, Abigail. *The Magic of Literature | Abigail Conner | TEDxYouth@BIS*. Perf. Abigail Connor. *YouTube*. N.p., 17 May 2016. Web. 3 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPJ9UDnkLMQ>>.
- "Umberto Eco and His Travels in Hyperreality." *Umberto Eco and His Travels in Hyperreality*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.transparencynow.com/eco.htm>>.