

## **Fantasy versus Reality in Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Through fantasy we are able to group, explain, alter and comment on reality. Fantasy can subtly lure readers into its comforting embrace and speak to the human desire for more than the empirical world of the familiar. With that in mind, this paper aims to critically analyse and discuss how the lines between fantasy and reality are blurred in literature. It is hoped that this systematic review will project our desires which appear in the form of fantasy onto reality. Three research questions were formulated: (1) Can magical realism be the bridge between fantasy and reality in literature? (2) What role does fantasy play in literature? (3) How does fantasy affect its audience? Search items identified 72 articles and books related to this topic. The analysis shows that there are differing views and opinions about the fantasy versus reality debate in literature. The importance of this study is to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality in literature, and in addition to provide insights to the readers on how literature is perceived differently by different people.

*Keywords:* Blurred boundary, fantasy, literature, reality, systematic review

## Introduction

Fantasy fiction typically presents the readers with fictional worlds that to some degree relate to our actual world. Fantastical worlds range from being wholly different in all aspects from the real world to being a fictional real world with a single occurrence of the supernatural, or any degree of fantastic elements in between the two extremes. Whichever the case may be, all of these fantastical worlds invariably relate to our own world and therefore they cannot escape relation to it, even if only by virtue of being written in this world and read by a reader from this world.

Starting with the most fantastic worlds, that is to say, the most different from the fictional real world and ending with the least fantastic, we will show that each of these worlds to some degree relate to our actual world. We argue that authors actively construct a reality or a deviation from a reality in fantasy with the intent of providing a realistic work of fiction despite its fantastical elements. This action positions the fictional reality in between the book and the reader, by virtue of being only half a reality which requires a reader to close the gaps in the text.

Traditionally, fantasy can be defined along three avenues, being either defined by its relationship to rationality, its relationship to reality, or by virtue of being a genre that evokes wonder. While the first of these categories, the criteria of rationality, is not frequently used to describe fantasy, it is nevertheless interesting in its focus on perception. This definition suggests that “works in which events occur or exist according to rational standards” are typical of fantasy (Tymn, Zahorski & Boyer, 1979, p.18). Crucial to this definition, then, is the concept of rational standards. While a work can be defined as fantasy by the presence of the non-rational, it is the reader that defines the rational. In practice, the definition by rationality is a variation on the most common definition of fantasy through its relationship to reality. Fantasy is defined by not being reality and thus the definition by rationality only adds the element of reality being constructed. This definition of fantasy (while the details may differ between theorists) is the generally accepted starting ground for most contemporary definitions (Collins, 1982).

While the first two avenues defining fantasy focus on aspects of fantasy literature, the third route focuses on the reader of fantasy. The first such formulation and one which is still frequently quoted is that of Todorov (1975). His definition of the fantastic positions the concept firmly with the reader, as it is “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of the natural, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov, 1975, p.26). While Todorov’s (1975) fantastic may be prompted by a work of literature, it is a reader’s experience that is the essence of the fantastic. These different interpretations of fantasy create difficulties in establishing a firm, stable definition, of the term “fantasy,” as “one man’s ‘world,’ then may be another man’s fantasy” (Collins, 1982, p.30). Definitions of fantasy that define it as a reaction by the reader often suggest that the purpose of fantasy is “to amaze and shock” (Moorcock, 1987, p.31), “to evoke wonder” (Mathews, 2002, p.67) or otherwise simply refer to “a quality of astonishment that we feel” (Rabkin, 1977, p.81).

Via a systematic review of the literature on fantasy versus reality in literature, this paper aims to explore the elements present in both. To date, however, the relationship between fantasy and reality has not been agreed upon. As such, this paper will attempt to bridge that gap. The overarching research question to be addressed is: Can magical realism be the bridge between fantasy and reality in literature? The specific questions include: What role does fantasy play in literature? How does fantasy affect its audience?

### **Fantasy versus Reality**

Fantasy and fairy stories according to Tolkien (1984), are not limited to audience predominantly made up of children. In his essay "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien (1984) explains that it is a result of our culture that children are associated with fairy tales because they are confined to the nursery. Tolkien (1984) then writes, "Children, as a class... neither like fairy stories more, nor understand them better than adults do: and no more than they like many other things...But in fact only some children, and some adults, have any special taste for them." (p. 130). Tolkien (1984) subtly suggests that children may not comprehend fairy stories as anything more than stories, and more importantly, adults, who supposedly possess more logical and learned minds, have an understanding of the stories no better than the children for whom the stories are created. In stating this, Tolkien (1984) explains that Fantasy as a genre should not only be geared towards children.

Fantasy is a difficult genre. Scholars have been discussing its definitions for years. The term has been the matter of constant critical speculation, there is no agreement on a precise definition (Clute & Grant, 1997). That is quite understandable: fantasy has expanded through modern times, and is still evolving, where sub-genres are created and cross each other. Boyer et al. (1979) believe that "fantasy, as a literary genre, is composed of works in which non-rational phenomena play a significant part" (p. 3). This means that the events, in some cases, places and beings, could not have taken place or could not exist according to our reality and does not apply to our natural laws. Fantasy is a genre that one places under one big umbrella called non-realistic literature, the other being realistic literature.

In realistic literature, the world is just like the one we live in, according to our natural laws. The worlds past and present are an exact copy of our reality. What we read in realistic literature could have been real; it would not break with our view of reality. Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality", realism in literature is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements. The non-realistic literature on the other hand, has that break with our view of reality; something we know cannot or will not happen. In this type of literature, magic and mystical creatures are just as natural as Internet and horses are to us. The non-rational phenomena are a natural part of the laws in non-realistic literature. There exists a bridge between non-realistic and realistic worlds when we begin to make sense of it. The works of Charles

Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde maintain a realist core overlaid by fantastic elements.

### ***Source and History of Fantasy***

Modern fantasy is young (Priyatni, 2016), only two centuries old, however, its sources can be traced back to the ancient world. Some scholars like Zipes (2012) traces the source to fairy tales, while Tolkien (1984) traces it even further, back through the Norse mythology, Anglo Saxon tales and Arthurian myth (Armitt, 2005). All of these elements have contributed to the forming of fantasy. Literature traced back from the ancient world, from *Gilgamesh* to the *Odyssey*, is rooted in fantasy (Mathews, 2002). The difference is that when read at that time, these works were looked upon as real. For the ancient people, magic and other supernatural phenomenon and creatures were seen upon as realistic. These early works had the function to stimulate, educate, entertain; in some cases, even influence, control and impress (Mathews, 2005).

### ***The Beginning-Ancient Fantasy***

What have the Ancient Greek and Roman novels, medieval romance, and early modern verse and prose in common? They all have elements which are typical traits of fantasy: magical transformations, strange monsters, sorcerers, dragons and the existence of a supernatural world (Mendlesohn & James, 2009). The oldest known example that could in our time be classified as fantasy is *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, dated about 4000 years ago, written in hieroglyphics and found on papyrus from ancient Egypt. It tells of a story of a shipwrecked sailor on an enchanted island who meets a genie, confronts a monstrous serpent, and finally escapes (Mathews, 2005). The earliest forms of written fiction that we have from the ancient world are “works that we might understand as fantasy, and which have influenced many modern fantasy writers: stories about gods and heroes” (Mendlesohn & James, 2009, p. 7). Here we see the typical narrative elements of fantasy being shaped. The hero on a journey, faces danger in the form of monsters, survives and becomes a wiser man. It is based on such works including *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer’s *Odyssey*. In these works, there are many elements that are a precursor for future fantasy (Mendlesohn & James, 2009).

One might also mention the works of the Far East that has contributed to fantasy. The classical Sanskrit epics of ancient India contain works that deal with politics, history, philosophy and metaphysics (Priyatni, 2016). There are stories about love, cosmos, meetings between gods and man, and beast fables. In the fables, animals are given human qualities and abilities. Through these tales are about talking animals, we learn about our strengths and weaknesses and about morals and choices (Mathews, 2005).

### ***Contemporary fantasy***

Contemporary fantasy, also known as modern fantasy or *indigenous fantasy* is a subgenre of fantasy, set in the present day. It is perhaps most popular for its subgenre, urban fantasy. Urban fantasy is set in an entirely fictitious world. Many urban fantasies are set in contemporary times and contain supernatural elements. However, the stories can take place in historical, modern, or futuristic periods, and the settings may include fictional elements. The prerequisite is that they must be primarily set in a city (Datlow, 2011). These terms are used to describe stories

set in the putative real world (often referred to as *consensus reality*) in contemporary times, in which magic and magical creatures exist but are not commonly seen or understood as such, either living in the interstices of our world or leaking over from alternate worlds. Meanwhile consensus reality is that which is generally agreed to be reality, based on a consensus view.

Fantasy is often characterized by a departure from the accepted rules by which individuals perceive the world around them; it represents that which is impossible (unexplained) and outside the parameters of our known reality. Fantasy usually describes those stories that could not happen in real life, known as make-believe. Modern fantasy allows for a break with reality, anything is possible from flying cars from travelling to other worlds. For this to succeed, the author needs to suspend the readers' disbelief of the plot and characters. These stories involve magic, or a quest, or good vs evil. One of the most obvious benefits of fantasy is that it allows readers to experiment with different ways of seeing the world. It takes a hypothetical situation and invites readers to make connections between his fictive scenario and their own social reality.

Meanwhile, Zipes (2008) states that "it has generally been assumed that fairy tales were first created for children and are largely the domain of children, but nothing could be further from the truth" (p.17). From the very beginning, thousands of years ago, when tales were told to create communal bonds in face of the inexplicable forces of nature, to the present, when fairy tales are written and told to provide hope in a world seemingly on the brink of catastrophe, mature men and women have been the creators and cultivators of the fairy tale tradition. When introduced to fairy tales, children welcome them mainly because they nurture their great desire for change and independence (Zipes, 2008). On the whole, the literary fairy tale has become an established genre within a process of Western civilization that cuts across all ages.

Even though numerous critics and shamans have mystified and misinterpreted the fairy tale because of their spiritual quest for universal archetypes or their need to save the world through therapy, both the oral and the literary forms of the fairy tale are grounded in history. According to Zipes (2008):

they emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors (p.29).

#### ***Source and History of Reality***

This section addresses the attitudes and conventions of literary realism and an effort will be made to approximate a generalized definition of this genre. It has to be stressed that information provided here is provisional. It is not an absolute formula of the genre, rather an attempt in identifying and appreciating literary realism.

The understanding of reality is relative and not identical for all, as both literary realist works and the criticism of them reflects. One of the fundamental conceptual changes that the modernists introduced was the understanding that reality is relative, that is, that it cannot be fully knowable or communicable, but can only be approached from a relative perspective and is not identical to all. This constituted a significant departure from the dominant perception of reality as conceivable, knowable, verifiable and communicable. Realism is the faithful or true representation of reality. It can be representative of any everyday life situation typically involving middle and lower classes (most people are not considered as the “upper class”).

The principal referent of literary realism is ostensibly, reality. Fantasy fiction, for example is a form of deformation of reality which creates its own reality, whereas literary realism appears to be a representation of something concrete, something “real”, that is, reality. On the surface, literary realism would appear to presume upon a set of rules supposedly related to real-life, to reality, outside of fiction. We tend to judge, as readers, a literary realist text as if it were “real life”. A common perception of realism is that it is characterized by ‘maximum verisimilitude’ (Jakobson, 1971, p. 38). This perception is often also thought of as a key characteristic of the genre of literary realism.

In a literary context, we may say of a text that it is realistic if the sequence and manifestation of events are plausible. A text is real if we can relate to the characters or if the atmospheric effects transport us into the text’s reality. We may remark on the realism of environmental description and social detail. All of these elements lend to an appearance of the real, that is, verisimilitude.

Literary realism is fiction, however, regardless of what referent it may suggest. Iser (1971) observes that “the basic and misleading assumption is that fiction is an antonym of reality. It is a source of confusion... when one seeks to define the “reality” of literature” (p.85). Reality is both its raw material and its outcome. The interaction with a text amounts to a “real experience and has the potential of making the reader react to his own ‘reality’, so that this same reality may then be reshaped” (Iser, 1971, p.85). In other words, fiction draws on, emulates and addresses reality, regardless of genre, and by virtue of its subject and in providing an experience in itself, has the potential of changing our perception of reality.

Literature has arguably helped shape our idea of reality, culturally as well as individually, which has led some to claim that everything is fiction. That the scope of accepted reality, is, at least in part, dictated by fiction. This lays a heavy burden on fiction in general, literary realism in particular. Critics of literary realism have argued that it effects a continuation and naturalization of detrimental fictions about reality, by presuming a closer relationship with other genres.

We would be mistaken, however, to expect a direct correlation or make a direct comparison between the reality represented in a literary realist text and our external reality. Like fantasy fiction, literary realism creates a reality; it is not a mirror to reality. As Morris (2003)

points out, “realist novels never give us life or a slice of life nor do they reflect reality” (p.4). Literary realism does not refer directly to reality, as that would be an act of imitation, and imitation is neither representation nor art. A representation is, in fact, a referent in itself, a portrayal or a sign of something else, once removed from its subject; and a copy is not art.

So, how do we define reality? Is it even possible? How do we express reality, let alone comprehend it? It would appear impossible. It is generally accepted today, that human comprehension and language cannot encompass reality in its entirety. We may have a partial understanding from our own perspective, our sensations, and reflections on and experience of reality, but to grasp reality in its entirety, escapes us. Thus, our understanding of reality as a whole is largely based on concepts. Iser (1971) argues that “no literary text relates to contingent reality as such, but to models or concepts of reality, in which contingencies and complexities are reduced to meaningful structures” (p.70).

Thus, literary realism does not actually refer to or represent reality, but rather a perception of it, which it seeks to structure and communicate, and, like all fiction, draws on elements of reality, and can potentially alter our perception of reality.

### **Magical Realism**

Magical Realism, while encompassing a range of subtly different concepts, share in common an acceptance of magic in the rational world. It portrays magical or unreal elements as a natural part in an otherwise realistic or mundane environment (Bowers, 2004). Strecher (1999) defines magic realism as “what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe” (p.20).

Many writers are categorized as “magical realists,” which confuses the term and its wide definition. Magical realism is often associated with Latin American Literature, particularly authors including Miguel Angel Asturias, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges and Isabel Allende. In English literature, its chief exponents include Salman Rushdie and Alice Hoffman.

A literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism aims to seize the paradox of the union of the opposites. For instance, it challenges polar opposites like life and death, and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality.

### **Methodology**

A systematic review was conducted with the multidisciplinary literature on fantasy versus reality using the keywords of “fantasy” “reality” and “literature.” The selection criteria were specified as: (1) what constituted fantasy-studies and conceptual papers that examined or described the elements of fantasy were analysed. Also two stories were chosen as the subjects of study and evaluation, (2) the elements of reality were also analysed. Then, (3) the parallels drawn between the two and an analysis was made as to how the two actually fused together in the world of literature. Also (4) how fantasy affects both adult and children was looked into. Besides that, a

number of publications were used for the purpose of this study – ranging and spanning over a number of years from 1953 to 2016.

The literature search was comprehensive within the data pool consisting of computerized bibliographic databases (i.e. JSTOR, Dissertation Abstracts, Academic Papers and Lectures), major literature and psychology journals and the reference lists of several reviews and books.

The initial online searches of the aforementioned data pool identified 64 books, articles and journals on fantasy and reality. After going through all these readings, it was found that 60 books, articles and journals met the preliminary selection criteria. It was noted that although some articles and books were worthy of analysis and were meaningful – they did not meet the criteria and needs of the selected topic. In the end, 60 were analysed in the final literature synthesis

## Analysis and Discussion

### *Theme 1: Why fantasy matters?*

Zipes (2012) argues that researchers should turn their attention to recent sophisticated and innovative theories of storytelling, cultural evolution, and human communication and mimetic to see how fantasy enables us to understand why we are disposed towards them and how they ‘breathe’ live into our daily undertakings. Yet, Zipes (2012) states the opposite is true. We all know we believe or want to believe in fairies and fairy tales. We all know that fairy tales are tied to real life experiences more than we pretend they are not. According to Zipes (2012) we ward of fairy tales and pretend that they are intended mainly for children because they tell more truth than we want to know. They are filled with desire and optimism. They drip with brutality, bluntness, violence and perversity. They expose untruth, and the best are there, brusque and concise. They stamp our minds and perhaps our souls. They form another world, a counter world, in which social justice is more readily attainable than in our actual world, where hypocrisy, corruption, hyping, exploitation and competition determine the outcome of social and political interaction and the degraded state of social relations.

### *Theme 2: Fantasy for all*

The fairy tale or the fantasy genre is often associated with children and children’s literature, yet children are not the consumers of fairy tales. Sale (1979) points out that “children’s literature includes many books that older people, well past childhood, read and enjoy even when they are not reading with or for children” (p.79). Many authors purposefully write tales for adult audiences. Whether intended for children or adult readers, the sheer number of tales that exist across nations and cultures demonstrate the widespread popularity and influence of the tradition. Many scholars from a variety of disciplines tend to ignore the fairy tale tradition in their studies of culture and literature. Yet, a number of key contemporary writers have appropriated fairy tales for their own purposes resulting in the need to try to explain the value of fairy tales.

Zipes (2008) suggests that authors continue to rewrite fairy tales because “the transformative and utopian qualities of the fairy tale appeal to young and older audiences and make it both stable and flexible as a literary form” (p.100). In retelling fairy tales, these authors

shape the fictional landscape for both children and adults in order to help their audiences work through real life situations and anxieties.

We first encounter fairy tales as children, but we continue to keep them in our lives, even as adults. Many people have the tendency to write off fairy tales as trivial because of the pop culture appeal, but just because something is popular in culture does not mean that it is not worthy of studying. It is perhaps because of their popularity, that it is so important to study fairy tales, as popular culture reflects that which the people are receiving. Thus, the genre's very persistence suggests its appeal.

### ***Theme 3: Bridging Fantasy and Reality – Magical Realism***

According to Rogers (2002) magical realism is the fusion between fantasy and reality. It tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective reality. If there is a ghost in a story of magical realism, the ghost is not a fantasy element but a manifestation of the reality of people who believe in and have “real” experiences of ghosts. Magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from others. It is not a speculation, magical realism endeavours to show us the world through other eyes.

We recognize the world, although now – not only because we have emerged from a dream – we look on it with new eyes. We are offered with a new style that is thoroughly of this world that celebrates the mundane. This new world of object is still alien to the current idea of realism. It employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that have always threatened the secure tranquillity of simple ingenious things. This art offers a calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces. This means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered – albeit in new ways. For the new art it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world (Roh, 1925).

In magical realism, we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. It is predominantly an art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision (Flores, 1955).

### **Conclusion**

Three salient themes have emerged from this literature review regarding fantasy versus reality in literature. The three themes inform us why fantasy matters to us, to show that fantasy in reality is considered safe, the elements of allegory in fantasy, the existence of a thin line between the realm of fantasy and the realm of reality which leads to magical realism in literature and finally, fantasy is for both children and adults alike.

Some scholars frown upon fantasy literature and feel that not much importance should be paid to it. After all, shouldn't we just stay in the world that we see before us? Why do we need to

delve into the contrived worlds of someone's mind? Why elevate and even celebrate magical, mythical creatures- and magic itself? Why should we present evil in any form in literature? It is because we are storytellers. We simply love to listen to other people's stories. We grew up on a steady diet of fantastical tales-they fuelled our imagination and satisfied our desire for adventure. Fantasy in particular, speaks to our dreams and deepest desires. Fantasy literature contains many universal elements and it is this universality that points to a deeper message in each story that we read.

Fantasy too can open up many different possibilities and writers are able to convey complex ideas on a symbolic level that would be difficult to convey otherwise. Besides that, fantasy works provide a fresh perspective on the real world. The fantasy genre involves a different way of apprehending existence but it is no less true than realism. Fairy stories and other tales of fantasy often get a bad rap. Nowadays, the power of the fantasy tale is still celebrated, thanks to writers and thinkers as diverse as Carl Jung, Bruno Bettelheim, Joseph Campbell, Oscar Wilde, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Fantasy has struck such a chord with modern readers, that it has taken fantasy to dizzying heights. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling are testament of these phenomena.

It was commonly thought that fantasy was a form of escapism. This is far from the truth. The reality is fantasy is a way of engaging with genuine problems in the real world. The reality lies in the fact that we can identify ourselves with the struggles of good versus evil. We can identify with that drama – that fights to overcome the evil power. So, we all like to see the vanquished and good to come out on top, because we want that to happen to our own lives. The working-out of this epic struggle reminds us the worthiness of good and the perversion of evil.

### **Future Research**

Fantasy tends to polarise people. The oft-repeated logic is that “serious” readers prefer realism while fantasy caters primarily to children or those who view reading as a form of escapism. The assumption is that fantasy is of lesser value than realist writing – which is why it is commonly associated with children and imagination. That is why this myth needs to be squashed and the advocates of the literary world need to rethink about how fantasy can also cater to adults. A new approach and understanding needs to emerge as to give fantasy the status it so rightly deserves – at par with other forms of literary work. The notion that fantasy is merely a form of escapism has to be looked into and scholars need to come up with a new understanding of the richness of fantasy and its contribution, not only to the literary world but to everyday life as well.

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