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Evolution of Fantasy Fiction

Fantasy is a genre of literature that features magical and supernatural elements that do not exist in the real world. Although some writers juxtapose a real-world setting with fantastical elements, many create entirely imaginary universes with their own physical laws and logic and populations of imaginary races and creatures. Speculative in nature, fantasy is not tied to reality or scientific fact.

What sets fantasy apart from other genres is its untethering from reality. Stories may speak to the actual human condition, but they do so with fantastical elements such as magic (the existence or absence of which can play a large role in stories), prophecies of a "chosen one" or an impending doom, ancient mythologies from around the globe, reimagined Medievalism, and the creation of entirely new worlds, races, and creatures. While all writing requires imagination, fantasy is a playground for those who want to push the limit of theirs. As **George R.R. Martin** says,

"**Fantasy is silver and scarlet, indigo and azure, obsidian veined with gold and lapis lazuli. Reality is plywood and plastic, done up in mud brown and olive drab.**"

Development:

The history of fantasy is as old as humanity itself. Some of the oldest works of classical fiction are fantastical stories passed on through the centuries and across international borders such as **"One Thousand and One Arabian Nights"**, and **"Journey to the West"**. Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Norse mythology are among the most popular and most recognizable collections of stories read on an international level. The oldest stories of humanity – myths – ought to be considered fantasy. Tales of the creation of the world, powerful gods and goddesses, heroes battling monsters – the tradition of myth laid the groundwork for our ancestors' love of imagination and wild fancy. Oral histories have always been important for ancient cultures, and during the Great Migration of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages sharing oral histories was one of the more effective ways to solidify cultural identities. Germanic legends of the hero Siegfried and Celtic legends of the hero Cú Chulainn are **precursors** to the later medieval tradition of writing fantastic stories in vernacular books for wider audiences. Stories such as all these mentioned above are from humankind's need to tell and hear stories, but the real tradition of the fantasy genre as we know it had yet to develop because when medieval people told stories of the fantastic they generally believed it was real, unlike the modern human who knows it's just fantasy. As far as written literature, **The Epic of Gilgamesh** and Homer's **The Odyssey** are often credited as the first fantasy works.

By one standard, no work created before the fantasy genre was defined can be considered to belong to it, no matter how many fantastic elements it includes. By another, the genre

includes the whole range of fantastic literature, both the modern genre and its traditional antecedents, as many elements which were treated as true (or at least not obviously untrue) by earlier authors are wholly fictitious and fantastic for modern readers. But even by the more limited definition a full examination of the history of the fantastic in literature is necessary to show the origins of the modern genre. Traditional works contain significant elements which modern fantasy authors have drawn upon extensively for inspiration in their own works.

Romances

With increases in learning in the medieval European era, literary fiction joined earlier myths and legends. Among the first genres to appear was romance. This genre embraced fantasy, and not only simply followed traditional myths and fables, but, in its final form, added new fantastical elements.

The romances themselves were fictional, but such tales as **Valentine and Orson, Guillaume de Palerme, and Queste del Saint Graal** were only the beginning of the fantasy genre, combining realism and fantasy.

During the **Renaissance**, romance continued to be popular. The trend was to more fantastic fiction, for example the English **"Le Morte d'Arthur"** by Sir Thomas Malory.

One English romance is **"The Faerie Queene"** of Edmund Spenser. The action is that of a typical knightly romance, involving knightly duels, and combats against giants and sorcerers. That is probably the first work in which most of the characters are not men, but elves.

The Enlightenment

Literary fairy tales, such as were written by Charles Perrault (1628 – 1703), and Madame d'Aulnoy (c.1650 - 1705), became very popular, early in the Age of Enlightenment. Many of Perrault's tales became fairy tale staples, and influenced latter fantasy as such. Indeed, when Madame d'Aulnoy termed her works **contes de fée** (fairy tales), she invented the term that is now generally used for the genre, thus distinguishing such tales from those involving no marvels.

This era, however, was notably hostile to fantasy. Writers of the new types of fiction such as Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding were realistic in style, and many early realistic works were critical of fantastical elements in fiction.

Romanticism

In reaction to Enlightenment's cult of Reason, Romanticism highly prized the supernatural, tradition and imagination, together with the age in which they were supposed to rule - Middle Ages. These traits readily borrowed traditional elements of the fantastic.

One of the first literary results of this fascinations was **Gothic novel**, a literary genre that began in Britain with **The Castle of Otranto** (1764) by Horace Walpole. It is the predecessor to both modern fantasy and modern horror fiction and, above all, has led to the common definition of "gothic" as being connected to the dark and horrific. **Prominent features of gothic novels included terror, mystery, the supernatural, ghosts, haunted buildings, castles, trapdoors, doom, death, decay, madness, hereditary curses, and so on**. The fantastic, dream-like atmosphere pervaded the genre at this point. Gothic tales permitted, but did not require, an element of the supernatural. Some stories appeared to contain such elements and then explained them away. The genre straddled the border between fantasy and non-fantasy, but many elements from it, particularly the houses of particular import, being ancient, owned by nobles, and often endowed with legends, were incorporated in modern fantasy.

Modern Fantasy

The modern fantasy genre first took root during the 18th century with the increased popularity of fictional travellers' tales, influencing and being influenced by other early forms of speculative fiction along the way, finally unfurling in the 19th century from a literary tapestry of fantastic stories and gaining recognition as a distinct genre (mainly due to the nigh-ubiquitous recession of fantastic elements from "mainstream" fiction) in the late 19th century.

In the early Victorian era, stories continued to be told using fantastic elements, less believed in. Charles Dickens wrote **A Christmas Carol**, using novelistic characterization to make his ghost story plausible.

The fairy-tale tradition continued in the hands of such authors as William Makepeace Thackeray, but his **The Rose and the Ring** showed many elements of parody. Hans Christian Andersen, however, initiated a new style of fairy tales, original tales told in **seriousness**. From this origin, John Ruskin wrote **The King of the Golden River**, a fairy tale that uses new levels of characterization, creating in the South-West Wind an irascible but kindly character similar to the later Gandalf.

It wasn't until the early 19th century that the Brothers Grimm transcribed the early modern folk tales by interviewing domestics around rural Germany, and in 1812 they published a collection known as the Grimm's Fairy Tales. Around the same time other Romantic writers experiencing the Gothic Revival began to critique modern civilization by stating that too much sophistication had allowed us to forget about the fantastic and that it was important to save our own humanity by re-inserting the fantastic into civilization via the Gothic fairy tale.

It was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that modern fantasy genre first truly began to take shape. The history of modern fantasy literature begins with **George MacDonald**, the Scottish author of such novels as **"The Princess and the Goblin"** and **"Phantastes"** the latter of which is widely considered to be the first fantasy novel ever written for adults. MacDonald also wrote one of the first critical essays about the fantasy genre, "The Fantastic Imagination",

in his book "A Dish of Orts". MacDonald was a major influence on both J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

The other major fantasy author of this era was William Morris, an admirer of Middle Ages, who wrote several fantastic romances and novels in the latter part of the century, of which the most famous was **"The Well at the World's End"**. He was deeply inspired by the medieval romances and sagas; his style was deliberately archaic, based on medieval romances. In many respects, Morris was an important milestone in the history of fantasy, because, while other writers wrote of foreign lands, or of dream worlds, Morris's works were the first to be set in an entirely invented world: a fantasy world.

These fantasy worlds were part of a general trend. This era began a general trend toward more self-consistent and substantive fantasy worlds. Earlier works often feature a solitary individual whose adventures in the fantasy world are of personal significance, and where the world clearly exists to give scope to these adventures, and later works more often feature characters in a social web, where their actions are to save the world and those in it from peril. In Phantastes, for instance, George MacDonald has a mentor-figure explain to the hero that the moral laws are the same in the world he is about to enter as in the world he came from; this lends weight and importance to his actions in this world, however fantastical it is.

Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde (in The Picture of Dorian Gray) also developed fantasy, in the telling of **horror tales,** a separate branch of fantasy that was to have great influence on H. P. Lovecraft and other writers of dark fantasy. Wilde also wrote a large number of children's fantasies, collected in The Happy Prince and Other Stories (1888) and A House of Pomegranates (1891).

Despite MacDonald's future influence, and Morris' popularity at the time, it was not until around the start of the 20th century that fantasy fiction began to reach a large audience, with authors such as Lord Dunsany who, following Morris's example, wrote fantasy novels, but also in the short story form. He was particularly noted for his vivid and evocative style. From the foundations he established came the later work of E. R. Eddison, Mervyn Peake, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

According to historian Michael Saler, speculative fiction entered a new stage in the 1880s and 1890s as a consequence of the rise of the secular society, where the imagination in literature was freed from the influence of the church. This allowed writers to combine aesthetic literature with the freedom of the New Romance literature and the techniques used in literary realism.

H. Rider Haggard developed the conventions of the Lost World subgenre, which sometime included fantasy works as in Haggard's own **"She"**. With Africa still largely unknown to European writers, it offered scope to this type. Other writers, including Edgar Rice Burroughs and Abraham Merritt, built on the convention.

Several classic children's fantasies such as Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland", J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan", L. Frank Baum's "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz", as well as the work of E. Nesbit and Frank R. Stockton were also published around this time. Indeed, C. S. Lewis noted that in the earlier part of the 20th century, fantasy was more accepted in juvenile literature, and therefore a writer interested in fantasy often wrote in it to find an audience, despite concepts that could form an adult work.

At this time, the terminology for the genre was not settled. Many fantasies in this era were termed fairy tales, including Max Beerbohm's The Happy Hypocrite and MacDonald's Phantastes. The name "fantasy" was not developed until later; as late as J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit, the term "fairy tale" was still being used. The word fantasy does not appear in the English language used as a word for "a genre of literary compositions," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, until 1949. And its first usage as such appeared in a title: The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Added up, fantasy's sudden growth in popularity was born of talent and terror in the 1940s, and specifically from singular event.

An important factor in the development of the fantasy genre was the arrival of magazines devoted to fantasy fiction. The first such publication was the German magazine. In 1923, the first English-language fantasy fiction magazine, Weird Tales, was created. Many other similar magazines eventually followed, most noticeably Unknown and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. Such magazines also played a large role in the rise of science fiction and it was at this time the two genres began to be associated with each other.

In 1938, with the publication of The Sword in the Stone, T. H. White introduced one of the most notable works of **comic fantasy**. This strain continued with such writers as L. Sprague de Camp.

Literary critics of the era began to take an interest in "fantasy" as a genre of writing, and also to argue that it was a genre worthy of serious consideration. Herbert Read devoted a chapter of his book English Prose Style (1928) to discussing "Fantasy" as an aspect of literature, arguing it was unjustly considered suitable only for children.

However, it was the advent of high fantasy and, most importantly, **the popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings"** which finally allowed fantasy to truly enter into the mainstream. Building upon the legacies of MacDonald and Morris, J. R. R. Tolkien penned the first high fantasy, The Lord of the Rings (1954-1955). Both creatively and commercially successful, the epic ushered the genre into the mainstream and influenced countless writers, making Tolkien the undisputed father of modern fantasy. Tolkien's **The Hobbit** and **The Lord of the Rings** were the spark that lit the fire for modern fantasy. Tolkien was obsessive in creating his world, filling it with imagined languages, species, and history. It was surely this intensity of world-building that set the books apart from their fairy tale, mythology, and children's story predecessors.

Tolkien, like MacDonald before him, challenged the very concept that fairy tales and fantastic stories were only for children. **In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien compares them to the old Victorian furniture that filled children's nurseries at the time: "Fairy-stories banished in this way, cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined; indeed in so far as they have been so banished, they have been ruined."**

If not for Tolkien and successful contemporaries such as C. S. Lewis, author of **The Chronicles of Narnia** series (1950-1956), and Ursula K. Le Guin, author of Earthsea series (1968-2001), the genre might still exist on the literary periphery.

In subsequent decades, fantasy has continued to evolve, diversify, and grow in popularity, with Terry Brooks' **The Sword of Shannara** (1977) becoming the first fantasy novel to appear on The New York Times trade paperback bestseller list; J. K. Rowling's **"Harry Potter"** novels (1997-2007) becoming the best-selling book series of all time; and Hollywood adapting many fantasy stories into hit films and television shows. Notable books of the 1990s include **Robert Jordan**'s popular series Wheel of Time, **Tad Williams**' Memory, Sorrow and Thorn series and **George R. R. Martin**'s A Song of Ice and Fire.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Fantasy is a blend of heroic epics of the Great Migration, a blend of chivalric epics from the High Middle Ages and a blend of 19th-century Romantic idealization of the Middle Ages all in one genre, hence its constant allusions to the idyllic castle, chivalric knights saving princesses from dragons and heroic kings invading kingdoms. In other words, fantasy is a hybrid of many old storytelling traditions. It originally strived to re-insert the fantastic into a modern world where science had cursed us with the ability to no longer believe in myths. In the 21st century, fantasy still plays this role, allowing children and many adults to escape and explore worlds of elves, dragons and the very self-same mythical monsters of the Middle Ages that people once believed in. And today fantasy continues as an expansive, multi-layered milieu encompassing many subgenres, including traditional high fantasy, sword and sorcery, magical realism, fairy-tale fantasy, and horror-tinged dark fantasy.