Magic Swords, Mythic Creatures, and Mighty Warriors: Archetypal Patterns in Fantasy Literature

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Chapter 1: The Fantasy Tradition

“Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales ever end?”
“No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later - or sooner”.
- Sam and Frodo contemplating the nature of tales on the stairs of Cirith Ungol.

On a path leading to almost certain doom, two weary travelers pause as they reflect on the structure of heroic legends. They relate it to their own situation and are astounded to learn that they themselves have somehow fallen into one of these great tales. Being surprisingly insightful wayfarers, the two realize that while the characters in such epic stories may come and go, the core of the tale itself remains relatively unchanged over the ages: words of tremendous import coming from two small hobbits.

The characters are of course Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, hobbits from the Shire who have journeyed to Mordor, a land of evil, in order to destroy an object of immense power crafted by the enemy in malice and deception. The world in which the two hobbits live is called Middle Earth, but the universe in which Middle Earth resides as merely one bright star sitting amongst countless celestial bodies is known as fantasy. Fantasy is a word we use to describe the kingdom of the strange and unthinkable, where magic reigns and all things are possible. It is a land of mystery and intrigue, populated by wizards and dragons. Magic rings and unbreakable swords abound. Dark lords plot to overthrow the world with evil machinations while mortal heroes rise to oppose them and deliver the innocent from harm. Fantasy is the realm of the imagination, and it is into such a region that this discussion will venture.

Fantasy has many manifestations in modern society. Although fantastic elements can be traced to the dawn of civilization, the form of fantasy we recognize today began as literature in
the late 1800’s. The popularity of this type of imaginative fiction has greatly increased in the past hundred or so years, rising to become one of the most dominant genres in the literary world. Largely due to its growing success, fantasy blossomed into other mediums over time. No longer contained solely in literature, fantasy began to spill over into film, role-playing board or card games, and eventually into electronic gaming. Specifically in movies and video games, fantasy was able to assimilate to the electronic age, morphing its ancient motifs and values with the technology of modern society in order to reach an audience more diverse than it had ever achieved. However, literature, where fantasy began, remains its most important and farthest-reaching instrument. Accordingly, the majority of discussion in this paper will focus on literature, but not to the total exclusion of other methods of fantastic transmissions, which remain crucial in their own right.

The crux of our investigation will ultimately relate fantasy today not only with its predecessors fifty years ago, but with its ancient ancestors from antiquity. Of course, such a topic is almost ridiculously vast; one could spend years investigating fantasy and its long history and still be looking at only the tip of the iceberg. JRR Tolkien himself alludes to this in his essay “On Fairy Stories”:

“The study [of fantasy] may indeed become depressing. It is easy for the student to feel that with all his labour he is collecting only a few leaves, many of them now torn or decayed, from the countless foliage of the Tree of Tales, with which the Forest of Days is now carpeted” (Tolkien Reader, 76).

Ergo, the scope of the topic must be narrowed if anything worth reading is to be accomplished. Out of the mix of possible subjects I selected the concept of the archetype as one of paramount importance to fantasy fiction. It has always amazed me how characters, themes, and symbols in
one fantasy work often so closely resemble those presented in another, even when the works were published decades apart and the authors likely did not know each other. Many characters seem almost mirror images of others in completely different stories. It has to be more than mere coincidence that such works are so similar. Perhaps there is one mother source of fantasy, one extraordinary story composed somewhere in the past, from which all modern manifestations spring. Perchance characters and themes presented in this tale were so visionary that all subsequent works of fantasy sought to emulate what this imaginary author had accomplished through adoption of his ideas. This theory seems too good and simplistic to be true (as it in fact is). The actual process leading to modern fantasy is much more complex and incorporates thousands of years of legends and myths. Yet behind the theory of one source serving as an archetype lies an inkling of truth which may lead us to a greater understanding of the structure of fantasy.

The nature of our discussion, therefore, will revolve around this notion: that fantasy works often resemble each other so closely because they share a common background which dictates many of the characteristics of their genre. Of course, there is nothing revolutionary about this idea. Many forms of literature have mutual antecedents that compose much of their framework, and in effect liken works in that genre to each other. Yet the extent to which this is true in fantasy is unprecedented. The amount of material shared from story to story is astounding. Yet, the best fantasy tales have managed to adopt many of the same ideas which make those stories so similar without succumbing to mere imitation. Continuing the Tree of Tales image above, Tolkien adds:
“Who can design a new leaf? The patterns from bud to unfolding, and the colours from spring to autumn were all discovered by men long ago. But that is not true. The seed of the tree can be replanted in almost any soil” (*Tolkien Reader*, 76).

From this we can see that while many elements which make up the core of fantasy may remain the same, locked in the past, this does not mean that new stories in different forms cannot be sprouted from those old seeds. In this manner does fantasy avoid simply copying its own works over and over, while still retaining those common elements that comprise the very heart of the fantastic.

Picture it thus: in Greek and Roman mythology, the same characters appear in countless tales. Zeus is always the king of the gods, whether he be ravishing a mortal girl, weighing the scales of fate for two battling heroes, or delivering divine judgment on a wicked malefactor with thunderbolts from above. But not only the gods remain constant in these tales. Mortal champions such as Herakles, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Jason often turn up, either in different stories or rather variations of one tale. Other men such as Creon and especially Tiresias the blind prophet, who are not the protagonists of their tales but are still vital to the plot line, become stock characters often used to fill a role. Hence, while the telling of the tale may change slightly as time passes, the main characters and the major actions they partake in remain relatively unaltered. Indeed, when the Romans conquered Greece, so impressed were they with the Hellenic culture that they adopted their myths and tales as their own, merely changing some of the names to sound more Roman. Herakles became Hercules, but there was no doubt that it was the same figure, whether he was the son of Zeus or Jove.

This notion was continued into the Middle Ages, both in Celtic and Norse mythology, which function much like classical myth in this respect. Arthurian legend also followed such a
tradition, as Arthur and his knights of the Round Table were used in tales by countless authors over hundreds of years. Fantasy, as it shares much with myths and legends of the past, adapted this method of using the same characters in different tales into a new procedure. Rather than having characters appear over and over, fantasy elected character types as the string that ties its stories together. Instead of the same old Herakles in tale after tale, fantasy utilizes a rugged barbarian figure, often crude and violent in his opposition of evil but still admirable in many respects, as one of its most important character types. But fantasy did not stop with character archetypes. The same themes, images and symbols appear in many fantasy tales, often under different names and in completely different plots, but still mirroring each other from afar. One might say then that while mythology shares common characters and locations, fantasy partakes in similar character types and themes. As Sam and Frodo puzzle out on the way to Shelob’s lair, the great tales do not end, but rather change their characters from time to time.

Now this does not mean to imply that mythology or medieval romances do not make use of character archetypes or familiar themes. Such a statement would be wildly inaccurate.

Rather, what I present here is that often in such legends of the past, the teller (or creator) of a tale might sometimes elect to include a familiar character from another well-known story instead of making up a new character with similar attributes. The audience would not object to this, especially if the character used has become that audience’s national icon (i.e. Herakles for the Greeks, Aeneas for the Romans, Arthur for the English). This cannot be true in every case obviously, or no new characters would ever be invented, but still it can be seen how listeners would not object to multiple stories of the same character if they shared some sort of cultural connection with him.
Fantasy, however, cannot afford the luxury of repeated character usage in tale after tale, and so falls back on archetypes and themes, which are more universal and allow for greater variation. One of the major reasons for this phenomenon lies in the incredibly larger audience fantasy enjoys today than a thousand years ago, due not only to advances in printing technology, but to the great population growth, and especially the rise in literacy. Since many more people are reading and writing fantasy, greater variation is demanded. Whereas most of the peasantry in the Middle Ages could not read and thus had little exposure to some of the great works (unless they happened to hear them performed, as public recitals were a common form of story-telling), the common man in America can pick up a fantasy book for five dollars and enjoy a good read. Thus, a wider audience exposed to many more works of imaginative fiction will not allow for different authors to use the same characters, especially with the taboo in modern times on plagiarism. They want new figures in each book, perhaps similar to another character they know of, but still distinctly his own person. A modern hero should be in one tale and one tale only. When he achieves his quest, we let him live happily ever after and move on to the next hero in a different book. Were the old character to pop up in this new work written by a different author, the reader would become outraged. Added to this is the fact that, since fantasy now takes place in imaginary worlds (instead of somewhere in Europe, as in past myths), audiences do not feel the cultural connection with a specific character. Paul Bunyan and Davie Crockett were tolerated in the U.S. in recurring tales because they were distinctly American; national icons, as it were. But most fantasy characters owe allegiance to no real world country, and audiences do not feel the same pride in them, thus tiring of one character more quickly. We can see then, that while both fantasy and ancient myths employ archetypical patterns, the practice is much more prevalent in fantasy, as myths prove far more successful in repeated character usage.
By the same token, fantasy’s inability to use the same characters over and over has succeeded in further broadening its audience. Because of the changing of characters and locations in different fantasy works, a reader is able to criticize one book while not damning the whole genre. If a hero in one tale (such as the barbarian figure Conan) does not appeal to the reader, perhaps another champion would be more palatable, even if the two fall under the same character type. Comparatively, if a reader despises Zeus and his lascivious ways, then much of classical mythology will prove objectionable to that reader. Fantasy authors are given much more flexibility, for even though one character may closely resemble another, significant details surrounding the character can serve to greatly differentiate the two, albeit they may both be wizards (as in the case of Merlin and Gandalf, two distinctly different wizard characters). Through this method, fantasy is able to carry many ancient beliefs into the present under the guise of new heroes living in unheard of lands. Thus fantasy has adapted to a modern audience through its usage of archetype rather than remaining completely loyal to mythology and its repetitive ways.

This brings us back to our main question: where does fantasy get archetypes of character and theme upon which it bases its modern creations? Fortunately, not (as speculated above) from one single source, but rather from a myriad of tales stretched over thousands of years. Since the reservoir from which fantasy draws is so incredibly vast, it is almost impossible to exhaust the material. Thus new tales spring from common backgrounds continually in the form of modern fantasy. But what is this common background? Is there any one man to whom modern fantasy authors owe their allegiance? I have already hinted at the connection between fantasy and myths, legends, and epics of classical and medieval times. This association will be explored to some extent in subsequent chapters. The problem with such an exploration,
however, lies not only in the sheer amount of material to sort through, but in the lack of any one form to which fantasy is nearly identical. Fantasy fiction is quite reminiscent of Arthurian literature in many ways, probably more so than any other form, yet vastly different in others, as shall be demonstrated throughout the discussion. There is really no one author in those periods (hundreds or thousands of years ago) to whom fantasy is overwhelmingly indebted. Looking in more recent times, however, we do find such a man, one who revolutionized fantasy literature and succeeded more than anyone in bestowing upon it the popularity it receives today: JRR Tolkien.

Tolkien is widely recognized as the father of modern fantasy. With his epic *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950’s, Tolkien not only electrified the previously sluggish fantasy movement in America, but raised the bar for fantasy authors everywhere. Admittedly, Tolkien did not give birth to fantasy, but rather forced it to mature out of its infancy into a young adult reaching for the height of its manhood. So successful was Tolkien’s writing that the characters and themes he included have become the basis for the work of many fantasy authors today. If there is a story from which most modern fantasy is based, it is *The Lord of the Rings*, the reason I devote an entire chapter to Tolkien and his works. Tolkien’s importance not only to literature, but to film and electronic gaming is nearly as impressive, as shall be demonstrated periodically throughout the following chapters.

The writings done on Tolkien’s work could fill an entire library. Critics have been analyzing *The Lord of the Rings* since its publication and continue to do so today. The vast majority of this work, however, has centered around influences on Tolkien, trying to find sources in ancient myths or texts from which Tolkien may have drawn material. Since so many admirable researchers have already explored much of this aspect of Tolkien, I have chosen to
concentrate on more recent times (working in the opposite direction) and to see how Tolkien has affected fantasy authors following in his footsteps. One of the attractive features of this approach, besides the fact that it goes in the same direction as our discussion up to this point, is that since new fantasy material is published all the time, there is always something fresh to say about the connection between recent works and Tolkien. Consequently, such an investigation is a journey into largely unexplored regions.

With this new destination in mind we can further narrow our search. Instead of just a general inquiry of fantasy archetypes springing from some source in the past, two important elements have been identified to refine the process. One is that source in the past: JRR Tolkien. The second is the time frame to be considered: the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* to the present. What, then, of all my claims to relate classical and medieval mythology to fantasy literature? How will I accomplish that if Tolkien is the main source of modern fantasy and I am only considering authors following him? While much of my discussion will show the archetypes solidified by Tolkien and how they have been adopted or modified by subsequent fantasy authors, this will not be the whole of the paper. Tolkien did not invent many of the themes or character types in his work. But because of the unique and skillful manner with which he used such existing motifs, coupled with the popularity of his work, *The Lord of the Rings* became almost an archetype in itself: the archetypical fantasy, on which many authors now base their work. Since Tolkien did not create many of these themes on his own, it would seem unfair to completely exclude from the discussion anything before Tolkien. Indeed, chapter three is concerned not with recent fantasy authors and their connection to Tolkien, but rather an investigation of Tolkien’s works themselves and a brief overview of some of his more important influences. Beyond this, scattered throughout other chapters I will refer to myths, legends,
motifs, symbols, and characters from ancient times as they relate to modern fantasy. Let the reader be set at ease; when I say that this paper is concerned with revealing Tolkien’s influence on subsequent fantasy authors, I do not mean this to the exclusion of sources more ancient than Tolkien. The essential point is that Tolkien is the man most responsible for existing archetypal patterns in fantasy literature, and consequently deserves more attention than any one single source.

If this topic still seems much too broad to the reader, I can sympathize with the concern. The number of modern fantasy writers just in the last thirty years is mind-boggling, especially considering that many writers produce multiple works. How then can one even attempt to relate patterns of the past to modern times? The most logical solution is to pick a few of the most dominant fantasy authors for discussion. In this way, specific textual references can be used to get a more exacting view of our topic rather than just using a general overview of the entire genre. Therefore, I have selected several of the most popular modern fantasy authors to be referenced throughout the discussion. They will serve as representatives for the genre as a whole. The following subsection will briefly introduce the work of each author, in order to somewhat familiarize the reader with some of the characters or topics I will reference.

1.1 Introduction of relevant authors

Tolkien has already been mentioned as the most influential fantasy writer to date. His main work, *The Lord of the Rings* (hereafter abbreviated as LOTR), is a story involving men, wizards, elves, dwarves, and most importantly, hobbits. The setting is a land Tolkien dubs Middle Earth, where the forces of good struggle against the dark lord Sauron and his evil army of
The quest of the main characters (most significantly Frodo and Sam) is to destroy the Ring of Sauron, which commands incredible power but ultimately corrupts all who would attempt to wield it. Unfortunately, the only place the Ring can be unmade is in the heart of Mordor, the land of Sauron. Thus, the heroes must journey to Mordor, bearing the Ring and evading Sauron’s minions, who desire nothing more than to return the Ring to their master. Tolkien’s other fictitious work which I will mention from time to time is *The Silmarillion*, a sort of Old Testament for Middle Earth which contains the creation of the world, the divine hierarchy of its deities (the Valar), and an entire history of happenings from the moment of creation to the time of LOTR.

With his *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, Stephen Donaldson secured his place among the elite of fantasy authors. The Covenant series was originally a trilogy but due to the popularity of the first three books, Donaldson elected to create a second set which, although impressive in their own right, fail to equal his initial three. Thomas Covenant, the main character of the series, is a writer from the ‘real’ world afflicted with leprosy who somehow gets sucked into a realm of magic referred to as the Land. In the Land, Covenant must battle against the wiles of the evil Lord Foul while at the same time trying to reconcile his own disbelief of the reality of the world to which he has been transported: a characteristic which earns him the title “Unbeliever”. Inhabitants of the Land believe Covenant to be the reincarnation of their greatest hero, Berek Halfhand, and thus destined to battle Lord Foul in the defense of the Land. Part of the charm of Donaldson’s work lies in the antiheroic qualities of Covenant, who is at times selfish, cowardly, and violent, even going so far as to rape his friend in the throes of the power he receives from the Land. Donaldson claims to make a conscious effort
to avoid Tolkien influence, but many undeniable elements of LOTR (in which the antihero is not included) still exist in his work.

The other major writer with whom to explore Tolkien archetypes is Robert Jordan, the most dominant fantasy author writing today. His *Wheel of Time* (or WOT for short) is an epic series begun in 1990 with *The Eye of the World*. Since then, Jordan has produced nine sequels in the WOT series, the most recent in January of 2003. The series remains unfinished with no exact estimate regarding the number of prospective books necessary to finish the series. It is important to note that as the series is unfinished, no one except the author can positively predict the ultimate fate of the characters contained therein. However, I have taken the liberty of speculating likely happenings as they relate to the discussion, based on contextual clues and a bit of guesswork. Only time will prove the accuracy of my predictions. The series’ main character, Rand al’Thor, is a simple country boy from a backwoods town called Emond’s Field. When evil forces invade his quiet farming community, Rand and his friends are set on a course of adventures which leads them into conflict with the Dark One, a Satanic figure locked away from the world of men. Rand eventually discovers he is the Dragon Reborn, a sort of reincarnation of the world’s most powerful male Aes Sedai (wizard), Lewis Therin. Thousands of years before Rand’s time, Lewis Therin and his Aes Sedai followers locked the Dark One in a prison, but his counterstroke tainted the male half of the Source, from which Aes Sedai derive their magical powers. Consequently, Lewis Therin and his comrades went insane and nearly destroyed the world. As Lewis Therin reborn, Rand is fated to battle the Dark One when he escapes his prison at Tarmon Gaidon, the Last Battle. But as a male who can touch the Source, Rand is also destined to go mad, making the Dragon Reborn one of the most feared figures the world has ever known. The WOT series is a chronicle of Rand’s adventures as he attempts to unite humanity in
preparation for Tarmon Gaidon, all the while battling the minions of the Dark One, who likewise work to undermine Rand’s efforts as they make ready the return of their dark lord. The amount of Tolkien influence in WOT is staggering, whether it be a direct connection between the two works or an adaptation by Jordan of a Tolkien theme.

Together, Donaldson and Jordan comprise two of the most dominant fantasy writers in the last thirty years, or perhaps of all time, and thus make excellent authors through whom to explore archetypal patterns originating not only from Tolkien, but from the myths and legends of the past. The chronological spacing between the three is also advantageous, averaging around sixteen years. The spacing is valuable because it allows time for sufficient development within the fantasy genre to occur in each author and among the group. Similarities over a prolonged period of time prove that the works are not similar simply because they come from the same generation of authors. A progression of sorts can be detected, as the most recent authors like Jordan have not only Tolkien as a guide, but subsequent writers such as Donaldson as well.

Judging all of fantasy literature by only these three authors may be a bit narrow-minded. Hence, various other popular authors will be referenced within the text, in order to give a more inclusive view of fantasy. The number of such authors must be limited, however, to avoid falling into vague generalities. The most significant of these authors is Terry Goodkind, producing his first Sword of Truth novel in 1994 and with the most recent entry in the series released in 2002. Goodkind’s books follow in the wake of WOT, mirroring Jordan’s work so intimately it leaves one wondering if Goodkind would even have written the series had Jordan not provided him with the material Sword of Truth novels rely so heavily upon. Also worth mentioning is L.E. Modesitt Jr., whose extensive Saga of Recluse outdoes even Jordan in sheer page numbers. The system of magic in Modesitt’s work is definitely its most compelling feature,
and is mainly why it is here included. Earlier publications by Jordan, particularly his work with the Conan novels, is also relevant to the discussion of archetypal characters, as Conan, created by Robert Howard in 1932, is by far the most famous barbarian character to grace the realm of the fantastic.

These authors, then, will represent the world of fantasy literature wherein we shall explore the manner archetypal patterns of the past are perpetuated and modified. What is the point, the reader may now wonder, of bothering with such works if they are all so similar to one another, as are the Sword of Truth novels to WOT? If what I am proposing is true, isn’t fantasy simply repeated plagiarism over the last fifty years? Why read of the same types of characters doing the same types of things over and over again? The case I attempt to make is that although many fantasy works are indeed very closely related, there is so much room for variation in the fantasy realm that these similarities do not overpower the work. Even great authors like Virgil, who relies very heavily on Homer for the structure of the Aeneid, often utilize past sources for their material. The fact that a story is not completely original does not signify its worthlessness; indeed, some believe it is nearly impossible in modern times to create an absolutely novel work. Because a fantasy author is completely free to create his own incredibly vast world with its own unique set of rules, he also has limitless power to invent totally new concepts in one scenario while employing a more standard idea in another. I criticize Goodkind because of his reliance on Robert Jordan, yet still I find myself unable to put his novels down. Why? Because however similar his work may be to Jordan’s, there is much more contained in them that is vastly different. This room for variation, regardless of the extent to which established archetypal patterns are utilized, is one of the most intriguing aspects of the fantasy novel.
Chapter 2: What is Fantasy?

“I feel as if I was inside a song, if you take my meaning.”
-Samwise Gamgee, commenting on his experience with the elves in Lorien.

Before we can begin analyzing some of the common themes and character types in fantasy literature we must first answer a very important question: what exactly is fantasy? Many people recognize that fantasy is a literary form often involving wizards, monsters, and magic, but in truth know little else which might serve to distinguish fantasy from other forms of fiction. Others may not even be aware of fantasy as a genre at all, believing the word simply signifies something imaginary, a flight of fancy, as it were. Yet fantasy is in fact a very distinct form of story telling, with its own set of rules and characteristics that place it apart from standard fiction, or from any other sort of visionary tale. Just what are these characteristics, and from where did fantasy spring to evolve into the form we know today? This section is designed to familiarize the reader with some of the standard features and styles one comes to expect from a fantasy novel, in the hopes that he will emerge fairly knowledgeable about some of the basics of fantasy. Also contained here is a brief history of fantastic literature, including an explanation of how it has been altered over the years, culminating into what we today recognize as modern fantasy. Such a discussion could fill almost countless pages were the writer so inclined, so I shall limit the explanation to facts relevant to our investigation, which is more focused on modern fantasy rather than the origins of fantasy as a whole. It is still essential, however, to have a basic understanding of fantasy’s forerunners and to recognize the metamorphoses it has undergone throughout human history.
Modern fantasy (more simply referred to as ‘fantasy’) is a unique genre of literature born from many different types of storytelling reaching back as far as classical antiquity. Fantasy incorporates elements from the mythologies of various cultures including the ancient Greeks and Romans, Scandinavians, Celts, and Germanic peoples. Myth therefore has a very powerful influence over fantasy, and we can see many ancient legends and stories retold in a different form in some fantastic works. Fantasy is also heavily indebted to epic adventures, from The Odyssey to The Nibelungenlied and everything in between and beyond. The epic form of a central hero struggling against overwhelming odds is mirrored in many works of fantasy. Further adding to its rich background is Biblical and Arthurian legend and European fairy tales.

The astounding accomplishment of fantasy is the combination and synthesis of all these sources into its own brand of story telling, a type of fiction that shares much with past forms yet includes many elements unique in themselves. The form is collectively called ‘fantasy’, yet this term is relatively new, even considering the short existence of the genre (little over one hundred years). Tolkien, for example, wished to distinguish his work from novels and insisted on referring to LOTR as a “heroic romance” in a letter to a fan (Humphrey Carpenter has made a collection of Tolkien’s letters and published them with the assistance of Tolkien’s son, Christopher). Others in the past have dubbed like works as imaginative fiction or fairy stories. The title ‘fantasy’ is currently most popular, and seems to fit well, as many of the tales are indeed quite fantastic and bizarre.

The most defining element of fantasy literature lies in its intimate connection with the force known as magic. Magic is that which allows the impossible to occur in fantastic worlds. Wizards possess it, elves owe their origin to it, the very land is permeated with the flow of magic. Without magic, that inexplicable force which permits the unthinkable, fantasy cannot
exist, becoming rather science fiction or even realistic fiction. Fantastic stories are filled with magicians, monsters, sprites, and spooks. Like magic, these are things alien to reality. An Ent has no place in a realistic novel because it is contrary to what we recognize as valid. But in the land of Middle Earth, Ents are very much extant, walking, talking, and ripping down the walls of Isengard. In fact, they and creatures like them are entirely necessary, possessing a magic of their own that is right at home in a fantastic setting.

Merriam Webster defines fantasy fiction as: “imaginative fiction featuring especially strange settings and grotesque characters” (421), all of which is true enough, yet which neglects the absolutely most essential element: the magic which runs the fantastic world. Tolkien’s own definition in “On Fairy Stories” amends this oversight:

“a ‘fairy story’ is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated as magic... There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself” (Tolkien Reader 39).

Throughout the essay, Tolkien chooses the world “fairy” to describe the works we have been referring to as fantasy; essentially there is no difference. The use of “fairy” has most likely been foregone in recent times in an attempt to distinguish fantasy works like WOT and LOTR from what we now think of as fairy tales: Cinderella, Snow White, etc.

Magic, along with mythical creatures and mystical elements in fantasy novels, collectively constitute an extremely important aspect of the genre: the occurrence of the impossible. Brian Attebery, a fantasy critic, describes fantasy as “an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility” (1), referring to its whimsical nature and dependence on inconceivable (from a realistic standpoint) events. He then goes on to state a requirement of
every fantasy novel: the necessity for the reader’s consistent belief of the impossible throughout the tale, often referred to as the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (2). Herein lies one of the most difficult tasks of the fantasy author, and thus, among the most admirable achievements when performed correctly. A fantasy work must contain some element, most commonly magic, which does not exist in the real world. The magnitude of that mystical element is crucial to the success of the story. The author must not stray too far into the unbelievable, or risk alienating his reader. Even though magical elements must be present in order for the work to be classified as fantasy, some link with reality must be maintained, or the story may lose credibility in the eyes of the reader. This is where the importance of the reader’s belief in the impossible comes into play. Attebery tells us: “We cannot picture the unknown unless we hear it described in terms of the known”, then goes on to cite a passage by C.S. Lewis who invites us to try and imagine a new color or a third sex (35). It simply cannot be done. Likewise, a fantasy which lacks a connection to reality is unable to adequately describe the impossible elements it contains, and a reader may very justly reject it. A fantasy which does not successfully convince the reader that what is impossible in the real world is in fact possible in the fantasy world has failed.

This is a formidable obstacle for authors to surmount, and varied approaches have been attempted. Some, like Robert Jordan, create incredibly intricate worlds with well-ordered rules of magic that we can understand within their context. This approach is also seen to a lesser extent in the works of L.E. Modesitt and Terry Goodkind. Others, like Stephen Donaldson, forge the link with reality by actually incorporating an element from the real world, in this case, Thomas Covenant. Authors like Tolkien forego the complicated explanations of the workings of magic and focus instead on creating characters that function perfectly within their own worlds, so that we have no choice but to accept the world of Middle Earth as ‘real’. The fact that
Tolkien claims Middle Earth is actually the real Earth at some unspecified point in history strengthens its link with reality. Whatever approach an author decides to take, the production of a successful fantasy world requires an extremely deft hand that understands the limits of its creation; perhaps signifying that a good fantasy is more difficult to forge than a good realistic fiction, as fantasy authors are not granted the luxury of an pre-existing world with concrete rules in which to place their story.

I have claimed that magic is the most defining element of a fantasy story and that in order for that story to work, the author must succeed in making the reader believe in that magic/otherworldly force, most commonly through a link to reality in the story. Another extremely important element concerning the magic must be also considered. The magic must be presented as real. A fantasy author must display his magic as a real element of his imaginary world, a force that perhaps may not be believed in or used by all his characters, but still one that is very much operational. Tolkien states in “On Fairy-Stories” that the magic in faerie must be real, not presented as a dream or illusion of the characters involved (Tolkien Reader, 39). Magic must be relevant to the human situation in order to sustain the link with reality, but it should not be used solely for that purpose with the result that the magic itself really becomes nothing more than an allegory for some real world event. Rather, it must exist naturally within its fantastic context, whatever or wherever that setting may be. This aids the reader in accomplishing the belief in the impossible that I have claimed is so necessary for a successful fantasy. If that belief is not sustained, often because of inadequate magic, the reader is put in the position of standing outside a strange world and peering in through a window while shaking his head at the impossible events he sees inside. Contrarily, if the belief of the reader is achieved, he feels more as if he were in the story itself. He can picture himself walking around and interacting with the
other characters, all operating under the rules of magic which have succeeded in preventing the reader from simply thinking the story too ridiculous to even consider. Just as Sam feels he is inside a song while walking the paths of Lothlorien, so must the reader accept the impossible and place himself inside the story. One of the great ironies that Donaldson achieves with his story lies in this very situation, as he places Thomas Covenant within a ‘fantasy world’ possessing a definite system of magic, yet Covenant refuses to believe the reality of the situation despite his adventures therein.

Much more than magic, however essential it may be, bonds fantasy works together, as they commonly draw from the same sources and incorporate the same sort of themes and ideas in their stories. Many of these ancient sources have been mentioned above, but perhaps it will not be amiss to dwell for a short while on some of the elements on which fantasy stories commonly rely. The influence of the epic form on fantasy literature cannot be understated. When one hears the word ‘epic’ in relation to literature, it is difficult not to immediately think of the works of Homer or Virgil. The *Iliad, Odyssey,* and *Aeneid* are perhaps the earliest (and best) examples of epics the world has ever seen. Yet the epic did not end with Virgil, but rather continued through the Middle Ages into Celtic, Norse, and German tales, as well as finding its way into much Arthurian legend. These tales incorporate many of the same ideas and themes as seen in the epics of Homer or Virgil. Epics most often contain a central hero who undertakes a journey or quest and is beset by difficulties along the way. Also present in most epics is a sense of magic or mystery, something unknown to the real world with which the hero must deal.

As we approach more modern times, a noticeable drop in the popularity of epics is seen as the rise of the novelist begins. A possible explanation lies in the success of technology and exploration. As science advances and we discover more and more of the natural world, there is
less and less mystery and sheer awe of the realm in which we live. All the lands on Earth have been discovered, and many natural processes can now be explained through science. In short, since there are fewer unknowns in the world, there is nowhere on Earth for an epic hero to have a mystical journey into a strange land with unfamiliar creatures. Fantasy, following in the tradition of the epic, has solved this problem by creating a totally new world for its characters to explore.

Freed from the constraints of reality, Gandalf can now battle the Balrog and explore the depths of Moria just as Odysseus defeated the Cyclops and descended into the underworld. The difference relevant to our discussion is that while the islands in _The Odyssey_ were strange and perhaps did not exist, the setting of the story was still in the real world. Middle Earth or the world in WOT, however, are totally foreign lands with little or no resemblance to reality. Fantasy must go beyond the real world to find the unknown which is so crucial to an epic story, and in so doing create alternate realities. This phenomenon of a completely imaginary setting is dominated by, if not contained exclusively within, the fantasy genre, and marks the next step in the evolution of the epic form.

Fantasy is also extremely indebted to medieval literature, not only for themes and motifs, but also for its very style of writing. In much medieval writing, Arthurian romance in particular, the time and location of a story are rather unspecific. We as readers know the action takes place in the real world, but are often unsure exactly where in Europe the plot is set. True, Arthur is the king of the Britons sometime around the 4th or 5th century, but aside from that fact it is very difficult to locate specifics as to time and location. Some Arthurian stories even seem to suggest that Arthur is situated somewhere in France. Confusion is sometimes seen on the part of the poet as to the exact location of Brittany. A similar vagueness is seen in much of fantasy. Middle
Earth, for example, is supposedly the real world, but at some unknown point in history. Jordan opens each of his WOT books with the same litany:

“The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning.”

Note the lack of any specific time, but rather a focus on the cyclical nature of existence, varying from viewer to viewer depending on their position. The Star Wars movies open in a similar manner, telling us the events occurred “A long time ago in a galaxy far away”. All three examples emulate the medieval convention of an unspecific time and/or location in an attempt to add to the mystique of their own respective stories.

Technology and warfare in the majority of fantasy stories is medieval in nature. Battles are fought with medieval style weapons: the sword, ax, bow, spear, etc. Rarely in a fantasy do we see any nonmagical weapon more advanced than very early cannons, such as were introduced in the late Middle Ages, and even those are rare indeed. Nor is other technology far beyond that seen in the 1400 or 1500’s. For the most part, electricity, automobiles, or steamboats are unheard of in the fantasy world. Horses are the best mode of transportation, and when venturing into a dark cave, a torch is the truest companion. The only common violation of this rule is the use of magic to accomplish that which medieval technology cannot.

What is the reason for this? Why not have a world with magic and machine guns? For one reason, medieval style warfare is more romantic than modern fighting. It requires more skill
to win a sword fight than to simply pull a trigger and dispatch your opponent (though, as Indiana Jones will tell us, having the gun is much more convenient). What is dashing or awe inspiring about putting a bullet through another man’s chest with modern technology? Nothing really. It requires no great skill. A child can pull a trigger and defeat the most robust villain imaginable. Yet when we read about Conan single-handedly dispatching ten men with naught but his sword, it is a whole other matter. The other reason to exclude modern technology from fantasy stories is that such modern devices lessen the power of magic. Many of the things we do in today’s society are more amazing that much of the magic seen in fantasy novels. A person one hundred years ago, were we to show him a computer, might even be tempted to describe it as magical. What is the attack of a dragon next to a stealth bomber? How damaging is Rand’s saidin-wrought lightning compared to a nuclear bomb? What is amazing about Galadriel’s phial when shown next to a simple flashlight? Even King Kong fell to the might of 20th century technology, and the planes used in his defeat are primitive compared to the fighters we possess now. Of course, magic can accomplish much that even real world technology cannot, as fantasy authors are very imaginative in their creations. But the deeds magic can perform are even more astounding when put in a world where nonmagical technology has not advanced past the Middle Ages. For these two reasons, the majority of fantasy authors have selected to allow the armor clad knight, rather than the rifle-toting marine, to be the foot solider of the fantasy world.
One further medieval element that has been adopted by some and adapted by others in the fantasy world involves the notion of originality. Generally, people in the Middle Ages did not place the same emphasis on the value of originality for its own sake as we do today. Modern readers tend to frown upon an author who borrows material from another writer, especially when he forgets to give that writer due credit. God forbid he might intentionally plagiarize something. In the Middle Ages, plagiarism was not even an issue. Indeed, authors or storytellers were insistent on claiming their tale came from some outside source, in order to give it validity and prove they were not simply making it up. German poets like Gottfried von Strassburg or Hartmann von Aue continually remind us that they did not invent these stories, but are rather retelling or translating from another source (frequently Chretien de Troyes). Wolfram von Eschenbach even goes so far as to invent the imaginary poet Kyot, from whom Wolfram supposedly got the tale of Parzival. Michael Resler, a professor of medieval literature, maintains that little or no evidence exists to back Wolfram’s claim. Such stories are presented as historical truth rather than imaginary tales. This idea has been picked up (to a certain extent) by fantasy authors. Modern fantasy writers are aware that much of their material is indebted to Tolkien’s works, whether directly or indirectly, and generally do not try to deny it. Others even hint at the connection, as we see in the playful allusions to LOTR scattered throughout Jordan’s work. Whether this is done as a tip of the cap to Tolkien and his legacy or instead designed to lend credibility to the author’s work, exhibiting how much it has in common with the great Tolkien, is anyone’s guess. Perhaps both are true. Some relationships are even closer chronologically than Tolkien and Jordan. Goodkind, for example, borrows extremely heavily from his contemporary Robert Jordan, lifting characters, themes, and concepts right out of WOT and placing them in his Sword of Truth novels with essentially only a change in name. A more blatant theft of ideas in
fantasy I have yet to come across, made even more apparent by the fact that WOT precedes Goodkind’s work by little more than four years.

As to the concept of historical truth, several fantasy writers have also adapted this to their stories. Some authors, Jordan and Tolkien, for example, have incorporated a character within their tales whose job it is to chronicle the events taking place so that they might be remembered in the future. In LOTR, Bilbo and Frodo record the history of the events surrounding the Ring in *The Red Book of Westmarch*, from which Tolkien supposedly received his information. A similar event seems to be taking place in WOT, where Jordan has the Ogier Loial attempting to document everything Rand does as Tarmon Gaiden approaches. Of course, Tolkien and Jordan are not seriously attempting to make us believe their stories are true, as poets did in the Middle Ages, but the connection between the two concepts can still be seen.

One very prevalent medieval convention that has not been adopted by fantasy literature is a tendency to focus on plot rather than character development. In many Arthurian tales (although not all), *Culhwch and Olwen* for example, the characters begin and end the story with remarkably little changed about themselves. They may have learned an important lesson throughout the course of their adventures or simply grown older, but the core of the person is relatively unaltered. The primary function of such characters is to perform some noble act, to slay a dragon or rescue a maiden, rather than to grow into something different themselves. Contrarily, characters in fantasy stories often undergo astounding metamorphoses, regarding either relevant facts surrounding their lives or the very nature of their character. Consider Frodo’s growing obsession with the Ring, Rand’s ever increasing insanity as the taint on *saidin* seeps into his soul, or Covenant’s ultimate coming to terms with his unbelief of the Land. These are absolutely essential components of their respective stories. Obviously fantasy authors put
large amounts of effort into creating an engaging and successful story line, but unlike many medieval tales, the development of the characters in a fantasy is at least as important as the action of the story itself.

While many factors of fantasy, including magic or language, can be technically explained by the author if he so chooses, often a certain mystic charm is accomplished when such factors are left rather vague. In a letter to a fan, Tolkien writes:

“As a story, I think it is good that there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation actually exists); and I have perhaps from this point of view erred in trying to explain too much, and giving too much past history”

(Carpenter 174).

Here Tolkien is referring to the chapter on the council of Elrond, in which he believes he may have gone too far into explanations. He remains extremely satisfied with Tom Bombadil, however, as perhaps the most mysterious character in all of Middle Earth: neither an elf, wizard, man, hobbit, dwarf, or Valar. Existing as some sort of immortal manifestation of nature, Bombadil’s true identity is never revealed by Tolkien. And that was precisely his intention. In comparison to other, more recent fantasy works, the workings of Middle Earth are virtually shrouded in obscurity. We are never told exactly how Gandalf’s magic works or if the Ents ever succeed in their search for the Entwives. Compared to the clockwork mechanics of saidar and saidin, the magic of the elves in LOTR is immensely arcane. However, we cannot always expect the degree of technicality given to us by authors like Jordan or Modesitt. It is probable that the majority of fantasy authors, like Tolkien, deliberately leave at least a portion of their material obscure. In so doing, the author invites the reader to speculate on his subject matter. While forming our own conjectures or hypotheses, we are even more drawn into the story, almost as if
we were inside the fantasy world, trying to decipher the rules that govern it. Obscurity, like everything else, must be used with discretion, or the author risks losing his audience in a cloud of confusion. Yet in the proper amounts, a certain level of mystery within the fantastic context can further heighten the intrigue that readers experience.

In “On Fairy Stories”, Tolkien lays out his theory of the three reasons fantasy stories prove worthwhile reading: recovery, escape, and consolation. Recovery is described as a “regaining of a clear view” (Tolkien Reader 77), a way, in effect, to wipe our slates clean of the familiar world. Via the reading of fantasy we are taken away from everyday elements through relaxation and a drifting of the mind to realms outside the real world. Upon return to reality, we find we now have a clearer outlook, no longer bogged down by notions we have formed of certain aspects of everyday life through constant proximity. It is like stepping back every once and a while to see the forest, rather than focusing in on the same tree day in and day out.

Recovery is very much related to Tolkien’s next function of fairy stories: escape. Escape operates much like recovery, taking the reader away from reality for a short while, except in this case, it is escape for its own sake, not for an ultimately clearer world view. Escape is a way to get away from the ho hum of everyday life and enter a world with fair maidens, gallant knights, and magic creatures, a place where honor is respected and good triumphs over evil. In short, escape is simply the pleasure experienced by the reader. This ties into the last element of fairy stories: consolation. Perhaps the most important part of a fantasy, according to Tolkien, is the consolation of a happy ending.

“Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story” (Tolkien Reader 85).
This prediction has rung true for the majority of fantasy authors following and preceding Tolkien. From a personal standpoint, I cannot recall a fantasy story I have read in which evil has ultimately triumphed. Perhaps they do indeed exist, but I have yet to stumble across one. As it is, a reader can expect that virtue will prevail in a fantasy story. The manner of that victory, or the cost at which it comes, varies greatly from story to story, but it is important for our sense of justice that good eventually does overcome evil, much more definitively than sometimes happens in the real world. For some, like Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, good triumphs not only to console the reader about real-life hardships, but for a specifically Christian reason: to show that God will ultimately conquer evil, no matter the bleakness of a person’s current situation.

Attempts have been made by many to divide modern fantasy into classifications that separate one type of story from another. These divisions fluctuate depending on which source is being consulted. Some try to divide fantasy into three main classifications, some venture up to six instead, and some do not try to divide it at all, believing rather than the stories are too varied to fit into anything more specific than ‘fantasy’ as a whole. The following are five classifications taken from Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia. They are perhaps one of the most common forms of divisions within fantasy, and are fairly successful in splitting up the differences into smaller groups. Supplied with each subgenre is a short definition from Wikipedia, followed by some examples that are relevant to this discussion.

**high fantasy**: “These stories are serious in tone, often epic in scope, dealing with themes of grand struggle against supernatural forces”. High fantasy is undoubtedly the most popular of any subdivision. Both LOTR and WOT fall into this category, as well as the works of Donaldson and Goodkind. High fantasy is the most reminiscent of the classical epic form,
and is therefore the most highly respected type of fantasy story. Due to the broad scope of high fantasy, such stories are often a series of books rather than just one single novel. Most of the fantasy discussed in this paper is high fantasy.

*sword and sorcery*: These are tales “featuring muscular heroes in violent conflict with a variety of villains, evil spirits, and other creatures whose powers are - unlike the hero’s - supernatural in origin”. The most common, and by far the most popular, type of sword and sorcery stories are those of Conan. Stories of this type, unlike high fantasy, are often short and to the point. The average Conan book is between two and three hundred pages, whereas an average WOT is around eight hundred. Countless Conan novels and short stories have been written in the last seventy years by many different authors, but unlike high fantasy, these stories are generally independent of each other, sharing in common only general characteristic of the world in which Conan is placed by his original creator. Sword and sorcery stories are thought more crude and violent (as they often are) than the more ‘respectable’ form of high fantasy, yet the two styles are far more similar than they are different.

*contemporary fantasy*: This kind of fantasy involves stories placed “in contemporary times, in which, it is revealed, magic and magical creatures exist, either living in the interstices of our world or leaking over from alternate worlds”. Contemporary fantasy is less common than high fantasy or sword and sorcery. Often it is difficult in such stories to reconcile the impossibilities of magic with the technology of modern society; the reason, as noted, that most fantasy is placed in a more medieval context. When too much of the real world is present, or when magic loses its mystic quality due to modern intervention, the story falls from true fantasy, straying rather into science fiction, or something wholly different. Donaldson’s Covenant novels are contemporary to a certain extent, as the main character is actually from the
real world, but Donaldson avoids the danger of deviating from true fantasy by allowing Covenant to escape to the Land for most of each novel. The *Harry Potter* stories and movies are a more true form of contemporary fantasy, but they too retreat into a world of magic found in Potter’s school. In such a way does Rowling avoid too much intermingling of the real world with the magical one.

*comic fantasy:* “Usually set in imaginary worlds, comic fantasy often includes puns on and parodies of other works of fantasy.” Most often “humorous in intent and tone”, comic fantasy is sometimes called “low fantasy”, in direct opposition to high fantasy. Authors such as Tolkien somewhat disapprove of comic fantasy, holding that fantasy should not be a parody but rather presented as a real world with working rules. L. Sprague de Camp has been known to write some comic fantasy.

*romantic fantasy*  *Wikipedia* fails to define this subgenre, but it can be inferred that romantic fantasies are love stories containing magical elements. One might be tempted to classify Goodkind’s *Sword of Truth* novels as romantic fantasy, considering the time devoted to Richard and Kahlan’s relationship, yet the novels as a whole are more focused on the fight against evil rather than on the love of two people, and thus are more deserving of the high fantasy classification. Personally, I would not include romantic fantasy as a subgenre, limiting the divisions only to the previous four. Such a type seems more interested in telling a love story, throwing in magic only as a side thought for added effect. Magic must be central to a fantasy, not just a convenient element to the story, and thus any such tale is not a true fantasy. This view indicates the discrepancies that arise when different people try to separate fantasy into categories. And indeed, many fantasy novels have characteristics of more than one
subgenre, perhaps signifying that no truly accurate division of fantasy can be achieved, but rather only one which is generally true.

Fantasy and science fiction are two forms of literature which share much in common and are thus very often confused or overlapped. Many fantastic books or movies are often given the duel classification of fantasy/scifi, as they contain elements of both genres. As with the subgenres of fantasy, such classification depends greatly on point of view, varying from person to person, or bookstore to bookstore, as it were. I have even seen LOTR under the scifi section in certain stores, though among fantasy works, Tolkien’s books have perhaps the least in common with science fiction.

How then are we to distinguish between the two genres if they share much in common, and if some works contain elements from both? As L. Sprague de Camp (a noted fantasy author and critic) tells us, “no sharp line divides science fiction from fantasy” (6). Yet while they do indeed resemble each other in certain areas, there are also characteristics in each which can serve to differentiate the two. Most definitively, science fiction is on the whole less mysterious than fantasy. This does not mean that scifi does not present strange settings or odd happenstance; in fact, quite the contrary. It does mean however that these oddities can sometimes be explained. Attebery, for instance, believes that “science fiction spends much of its time convincing the reader that its seeming impossibilities are in fact explainable if we extrapolate from the world of science that we know” (2). De Camp adds a general definition of scifi, stating that it contains “stories based upon scientific or pseudo-scientific ideas, such as revolutionary new inventions, life in the future, or life in other worlds” (6). When considering science fiction, most people will think of Star Trek, The Twilight Zone, or of books like Arthur C. Clarke’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. These are all very much in accordance with de Camp’s
definition: stories of the future or of future technology. Like fantasy, they contain many unknown elements, but the nature of these elements is often scientific or futuristic rather than magical. A good example to show the difference lies in the comparison of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, both stories of space exploration and alien civilizations. *Star Trek* is almost always classified solely under science fiction, as a result of its heavy reliance on technology and futuristic developments. There is very little of fantasy in *Star Trek*; almost every unusual occurrence can be explained through technology or the intervention of an alien race. *Star Wars* on the other hand is often given the dual classification of fantasy/scifi. This is because while it contains the superior technology and alien civilizations seen in *Star Trek* the presence of a magical element is introduced through the ‘force’. There is no scientific explanation for why Yoda can lift Luke’s X-wing from the swamp; the force is simply strong with him. This factor of inexplicable and intangible power is what lends the work its fantasy classification.

It seems then that the level of the inexplicable in a work gives it a corresponding amount of the fantastic, and can serve to determine whether most people consider it fantasy or science fiction. Many magical doings are left purposely vague by the fantasy author to allow the reader’s imagination a freer reign, while scifi more commonly spells events out in detail. For the purposes of comparison, let us briefly analyze the main works discussed in this paper under such a lens. LOTR, I have claimed, is dissimilar to scifi. The forces at work are very mysterious in Middle Earth. Magic is unexplained, deities do not really play a direct role unless we read the *Silmarillion*, leaving their influences unclear, and many elements are left unresolved (Bombadil or the Entwives). Contrarily, Jordan’s WOT possesses many scifi elements while still remaining in the fantasy genre. On a whole, there are many fewer mystical creatures in
WOT than in Middle Earth. Aside from Ogier and Trollocs, there really are no non-human races that play any significant role. Compare this to LOTR, where most of the most important characters are indeed non-human, especially hobbits and elves. The magical use in WOT is extremely technical, calling for certain amounts of the five elements to be woven is precise ways in order to yield the desired effect. As the magic in Goodkind’s *Sword of Truth* books is modeled on the workings of *saidin* and *saidar*, this hold true for his works as well. Rand and his comrades occasionally stumble across relics from past civilizations: technology fused with magic that is far superior to anything in Rand’s day and age. There are very militaristically sound battle tactics in the story, particularly in the later books, and Rand’s creation of a school for philosophers and scientists hints at technological advances ranging from highly powered binoculars to the internal combustion engine. We can probably be safe in stating, then, that the world in WOT is generally more realistic and less fantastic than Middle Earth, thus edging it much closer to the realm of science fiction.

Perhaps somewhere in between the two lie the Covenant novels of Donaldson. The real world is present and humans tend to dominate the tale, so it seems realistic enough, but much of the Land is extremely mysterious, especially Covenant’s magic, as it requires three books before he can decipher a way in which to invoke the power, let alone control it. Also present in Donaldson is a sense of darkness and morbidity often coupled with confusion and doubt not seen in LOTR; at least, not nearly to such an extent. In Covenant, there are no lighthearted comments about the foolishness of hobbits or even the roguish grin of Mat Cauthon as he sets his sights on a likely serving wench. The Land is almost constantly filled with despair and desperation over the machinations of Lord Foul. This creates a feel not unlike the ending of many *Twilight Zone* episodes, when the characters reach the horrifying realization of the
nightmare they have brought upon themselves. Of course, not all of scifi and fantasy is so gloomy, as we can see in some utopian fiction or even in Tolkien’s early work The Hobbit, where the evil of Sauron is not as yet truly extant. But some stories from both genres do incorporate such a dismal environment. Donaldson’s work does indeed partake in many scifi characteristics, yet still remains safely within the bounds of fantasy.

2.1 A Brief History of Fantasy

Fantasy as its own form of literature did not appear on the literary scene until the 1880’s, and even then it was quite different from the post-Tolkien works we are familiar with today. However, styles of literature or story telling similar to fantasy have been around for thousands of years. This subsection gives a brief overview of the development and evolution of such works as they relate to modern fantasy, beginning in antiquity and progressing up to the works of Tolkien, which will occupy the next chapter. I stress a “brief” overview because to accomplish this task as it fully deserves would be an enormous undertaking, worthy of a full paper in itself. For our purposes, we are only looking for a basic background as a foothold upon which to further our investigation in subsequent chapters. The information provided here is mostly based on the works of L. Sprague de Camp.

Imaginative fiction, the forerunner of fantasy, has been around for as long as people have been able to tell stories. “Imaginative fiction took place in the myths and legends of ancient times and of primitive people” (de Camp 7). Indeed, in comparison to realistic fiction, or “stories of ordinary people doing ordinary things”, which barely existed before the 1700’s, imaginative fiction is quite ancient (de Camp 7). These campfire tales possessed many of the
elements seen in today’s fantasy literature: the terrible monsters, unfathomable power of supreme beings, and bravery of human heroes we have all come to expect. Some simple myths and stories eventually evolved into the higher form of the epic, which I have already shown shares a strong connection with modern fantasy. Even without the epic, imaginative fiction, whether in the form of an actual text or just a tale passed among people, thrived throughout history into the Middle Ages, where it found a new home in Arthurian tales of chivalry and knighthood.

However, the explosion of imaginative fiction in the Middle Ages was not to survive the rise of a single Spaniard. Around 1600, Miguel de Cervantes did a great deal to bring the medieval romance to “an ignominious end” (de Camp 9) with his Don Quixote de la Mancha, a parody of knightly tales starring a scatterbrained would-be knight and his laughable sidekick/squire Sancho Panza. After the enormous success of Cervantes’ work, few would hazard an attempt at a true chivalric tale for fear of comparison to Cervantes, in which case they would inevitably come out an old-fashioned fool yearning for the days of yore. This did not signal the end of imaginative fiction by any means, only the demise of its medieval form. However, “after 1650 came a general decline in belief in the supernatural” (de Camp 10) for a variety of reasons, including the Enlightenment and an overall more rational outlook on life, both of which tended to discourage some of the wild beliefs perpetuated in earlier times. The 17th and 18th centuries also saw the rise of the novel and realistic fiction, which filled the gap created by the withdrawal of imaginative fiction. Many readers became more interested in stories relevant to their own lives than about knights living hundreds of years ago accomplishing impossible tasks. According to critic Mark Hillegas, while the 18th century novel weakened the previously dominant epic/romance, the onset of 19th century realism nearly
killed it (xì). In this time period, the world of the fantastic dwindled to a level perhaps never before seen.

A revival of fantasy in Europe came in the late 18th and early 19th century from three sources: the oriental tale, the Gothic novel, and the emergence of fairy tales (de Camp 10). Stories from the east such as Arabian Nights and the collection of traditional peasant tales for the purpose of publication by the Grimm brothers refired Europe’s thirst for the whimsical. Finally, in the 1880s William Morris came along and resurrected heroic fantasy (now commonly called high fantasy) from the ashes of the Middle Ages. This is considered by many as the birth of modern fantasy. Morris is noted not for extraordinary talent, but rather for his pioneering work in the world of imaginative fiction (de Camp 40). A string of authors followed in Morris’ footsteps, excited by this new revival of an ancient form that the European (and to a small extent, American) public seemed to devour. Noteworthy for our purposes among these is Robert E. Howard, the creator of that lovable barbarian Conan. Conan first appeared as a series of short stories in 1932 in the wildly popular scifi/fantasy magazine Weird Tales and has had great success since then, both in literature and film. Howard was probably the greatest American fantasy writer of the first half of the 20th century, and is considered by de Camp to be the “most widely-read and influential author of heroic fantasy” (135) next to Tolkien himself.

Fantasy began once again to dwindle in the mid 1940’s, fairing poorly during the next decade or so. Weird Tales came to an end in 1954 and it seemed that “fantasy had become a casualty of the Machine Age” (de Camp 30). Then in the mid 1950’s Tolkien published his greatest work, The Lord of the Rings. Fantasy exploded back onto the literary scene with a vengeance. Even Conan reappeared in the fantasy world as de Camp began collecting
Howard’s tales and publishing them in book form, eventually adding to the Conan legacy with his own stories.

But it was LOTR that opened the floodgates not only for fantasy in Europe, but particularly for its emergence in the United States. Previous to Tolkien, the US had been very slow to adopt fantasy. Aside from Howard, who wrote only short stories, there were no great American authors writing in the realm of fantasy. Why the US was reluctant to accept fantasy with the same enthusiasm as those in Europe is a complicated issue, but one possible explanation may lie in the relative youth of the country. Unlike the older countries of Europe, America still possessed much unfamiliar territory that was relatively unknown to the everyday citizen, particularly to the north around Alaska. Thus, American authors felt no need to turn to the alternate world of fantasy when there were still strange lands in their own country. We can see this is the arctic survival stories of authors like Jack London. For such reasons, fantasy gained ground slowly in America until Tolkien released his work into the country. Because of the enormous success of LOTR in the states, American fantasy authors began to make up for the lethargy of their predecessors. Before anyone knew it, American authors were producing stories that easily rivaled works in Europe. Today, American authors dominate the fantasy scene, with writers like Jordan and Goodkind heading the list. How ironic it is that the publication of LOTR, written by an Englishman at the forefront of all fantasy authors, led to the rise of American writers who have overwhelmed their English contemporaries! How exactly did this occur? In the next section we will take a closer look at Tolkien, his works, a few of his inspirations, and the consequent rise of American fantasy.
Chapter 3: The Coming of Tolkien

“In this genre, few have equaled and none has surpasses LOTR in vividness, grandeur, and sheer readability. And that is accomplishment enough for any one man.”
- L. Sprague de Camp

Tolkien’s work was revolutionary not only in the sense that it was the most captivating fantasy story the world had ever seen, thus raising the standard for fairy stories the world over, but because it was by far the most complex and intricate fictional realm ever conceived. *The Lord of the Rings* became the Bible of fantasy for subsequent authors. Writers would find it impossible to escape being compared to Tolkien by critics and readers alike. Even to be considered in Tolkien’s league was a compliment indeed, possibly part of the reason many fantasy works so closely resemble LOTR in character type, theme, or symbol. The great success of LOTR helped writers to realize that they were involved in a legitimate, respectable genre (especially in America) and that they would have to redouble their efforts if they hoped to match the splendor of Tolkien’s world. In this chapter we will view some critical material regarding Tolkien, briefly consider a few of his most important influences, and finally take a look at what JRR himself had to say about his work. This chapter is mainly concerned with LOTR and its predecessors, so many elements of Tolkien’s writing as they relate to more recent works of fantasy will here be overlooked in order to develop such ideas more fully in the next few sections.

Although most credit Tolkien with recasting the fantasy genre into a greater, more visionary form than previously achieved, he did not see himself as some sort of literary genius with an extraordinary talent for the fantastic. Tolkien claimed that he caught the wave of fantasy, not served as its origin (Carpenter 227). He visualized the rise of fantasy as some
inexorable force that would have succeeded without the publication of LOTR, and considered himself extremely lucky to be part of that movement.

Tolkien’s view is impossible to prove. Perhaps fantasy would have risen to its current popularity without the advent of LOTR, but such a speculation is merely an empty hypothesis. More likely though, Middle Earth and all its inhabitants deserve more credit regarding their import for the fantasy genre than Tolkien believes. Tolkien’s disclaimer is very possibly just a reflection of his usual modest demeanor, and I find it doubtful that another author of comparable ability would have stepped forward if Tolkien had not. Of course, it is always dangerous to claim that an author was ‘the first’ to employ a certain style, or that he was ‘the creator’ of a certain idea, as there is always some reader in the background waiting to pop up and say, “But what about so-and-so? Wasn’t he actually the first?” only to be disproved by another observer who knows of a still more arcane source. However, if a writer takes this concept too far and errs excessively on the side of caution, his statements become overly general, obscure, or lacking in force. As is such, I hold with the view that modern fantasy writers are indebted to Tolkien more than any other figure in history, and that he created a unique style never before seen in the literary world.

Most critics would agree. Brian Attebery for instance believes so strongly in the power of LOTR that he claims “no important work of fantasy written after Tolkien is free of his influence, and many are merely halting imitations of his style and substance” (10). It may seem excessive to claim every important subsequent authors (and many of the minor ones) are so overwhelmingly indebted to Tolkien, but considering the Tolkian forms perpetuated in so many fantasy works, as well as in film and games (into which we shall later delve), Attebery’s allegation is probably true. Speaking of the fantasy genre as a whole, Mark Hillegas points out
how collectively, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams raised fantasy from “the underground of the cultists” to more mainstream literature (xii). These authors constitute three of the best known fantasy writers to date, and as they all wrote around the same period of time, the combined strength of their works allowed fantasy to progress beyond whimsical tales suitable only to diehard fantasy lovers. I would place Tolkien definitively at the head of the trio, not to deny the accomplishments of his colleagues, but to recognize Tolkien’s superiority even in the company of other distinguished writers. Tom Shippey has compared Tolkien to Chretien de Troyes, the 12th century French poet who worked with Arthurian romances (xviii). Neither author can claim to have invented their respective genre, but rather to have expanded upon it. Just as Chretien took the largely English, Celtic, and Welsh tales of Arthur and introduced them to the world in new ways, so did Tolkien improve upon fantasy before him, and in so doing, opened the genre to the general public. Each author was gifted with a talent for story-telling which allowed the obscure to become widely read.

Tolkien’s importance to American fantasy was alluded to in the previous chapter, but how was it exactly that LOTR took such a hold in the United States? Indeed, Attebery points out that “The Lord of the Rings fell like a great meteorite into the stream of American fantasy and almost blocked it off all together” (154). This seems logical, as Tolkien was after all British, and the stream of American fantasy was not all that big even before the meteorite splashed into it. Hypothetically, the great success of an Englishman might thoroughly overwhelm his American contemporaries, who were struggling to begin with. However, while it may be true that LOTR initially dominated American fantasy, the net effect was to captivate the American audience with the possibilities of the genre. Specifically, LOTR was appropriated by college hippies in the 1960’s and early 70’s. The clearly defined system of good versus evil in Middle Earth appealed
to a group searching for justice and righteousness in a country of turmoil. The quiet land of the Shire fit perfectly with young America’s desire for peace and brotherly love. Many college students were easily drawn into the magic and mystery of the fantastic realm. On a more fundamental level, Tolkien’s work served as an escape to a more exciting, noble world away from the stress and tedium of reality, especially for peace-loving hippies disheartened by America’s involvement in Vietnam. Had LOTR not come along when it did, most likely another heroic fantasy would have become the book of choice, albeit of a lesser quality. Who can say if such a book would have been as influential as Tolkien’s work? Certainly nothing produced by any writer within twenty years of Tolkien was nearly as important, but if LOTR had never been published, would another writer have filled the gap? Would he have inflamed the heart of America as did Tolkien? Might fantasy have even fizzled out and died? Such an occurrence seems quite possible, and speculation in this direction clearly shows the importance of Tolkien’s work.

Of course, the popularity of LOTR was not limited to the college environment, but was much more widespread throughout America. The world of Middle Earth quickly reached beyond cult classic status and into the rest of American society. When a country decides that it likes something, it is likely that it will attempt to produce its own form of that product. This is exactly what happened, as U.S. fantasy authors began picking up the slack of their pre-Tolkien countrymen. Eventually, American authors came to dominate the fantasy genre, largely due to the inspiration received from their colleague across the Atlantic. L. Sprague de Camp began his Conan collection and publication, soon to be followed by the work of Donaldson and eventually succeeded by exceptional writers like Jordan and Goodkind, who now stand at the head of the fantasy genre.
The military background of Tolkien, who served in the first World War, no doubt played a large role in his depiction of the titanic battle scenes which take place throughout LOTR, especially the contention for Minas Tirith and the fight before the Black Gate of Mordor.

Through his experiences in the war Tolkien was granted an exceptional insight into the nature of battle that would perhaps be lacking in the writings of an author who was wholly unfamiliar with warfare. The desperation of men beset by overwhelming odds, the courage of a soldier defending a fallen comrade, the horrors of war upon not only the fighters but their families and townsmen: these were concepts understood by Tolkien through firsthand encounters. In this respect Tolkien is similar to authors like Homer, who some have speculated had experience as a battlefield surgeon due to his graphic and accurate depiction of the wounds illustrated in his tales, especially in The Iliad. Comparatively, works like the Nibelungenlied are ridiculously exaggerated in their portrayal of battles and wars, often even wholly erroneous regarding the warfare of their time. Such poets clearly had little knowledge or experience in fighting, unlike Tolkien and Homer who understood war quite well.

Robert Jordan, as a graduate of the Citadel, shares this intuition to a certain extent with Tolkien. The battles in WOT, even more than in LOTR, are very technical and militaristically sound. Jordan seems to possess more than a general knowledge of medieval battle tactics, and is quite inventive when magic becomes a deciding factor in the outcome of a battle. Unlike some works of fantasy, which portray battles as nothing more than two groups of fighters blundering into each other and recklessly hacking away, the warfare in LOTR and especially WOT is largely based on real world tactics and maneuvering (with adjustments for the addition of magic). Of course, as in real warfare, tactics often fail. Jordan’s main character, Rand al’Thor, is constantly...
reminded by his general Davrim Bashere that plans of battle often do not survive the first engagement. But at least in WOT and LOTR, tactics are present in the first place.

A popular topic of discussion regarding LOTR involves the relation of Middle Earth to reality. In chapter two I explained the importance of a fantasy work’s connection to the real world and showed how LOTR makes this connection partly through the fact that Middle Earth is actually Europe at some undisclosed point in history. This, however, is a weak connection of which the majority of readers are unaware. On the surface, Middle Earth shares little with reality. Readers are thrust into the land of hobbits and elves without being directly led from the real world. This factor distinguishes Tolkien from many previous fantasy authors, as well as some writing in his own time. Compare Middle Earth to Narnia, the land created by C.S. Lewis in his most well known-work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis leads his characters (and the reader) into Narnia initially through a wardrobe in an English mansion. The characters begin and end the novels in the real world. Tolkien chose not to take such a route, but rather to leave his characters within their own realm and not to complicate matters with real world interactions. Largely because this concept worked so well for LOTR, most modern heroic fantasy follows the same pattern. Authors like Jordan, Modesitt, and Goodkind choose to forego directly leading the reader from reality, showing once again how Tolkien remains a model for fantasy works.

At this point it seems proper to introduce some of Tolkien’s most important influences. His sources range from classical mythology to Norse, Celtic, and Welsh tales. Also included is Arthurian literature of the Middle Ages, Germanic epics, biblical legends, and even later European fairy tales. Of course, it is inherently impossible for anyone to accurately list every source that has influenced an author. Even Tolkien himself could not catalogue all his sources, as some may have become so ingrained in his conscience that he used them unknowingly. Thus,
it may seem futile to undertake an exhaustive search into any author’s past, as the endeavor can never be entirely achieved. Often it is more important to focus on the work itself than on some story a thousand years ago which may have played a role in its creation. Yet, if one delves into a writer’s sources consciously accepting that all of them can never be found and understanding the intrinsic limits of the task, much useful information can be garnished which grants a greater insight into the work of the author in question. Such a search is, then, ultimately not futile, but rather a useful tool for further understanding the depth of the work. Let us now look at Tolkien’s sources. Most of the information provided here is based on the work of David Day, whose book *Tolkien’s Ring* serves as an excellent reference to the legends and tales mirrored in the work of Tolkien. While Day’s book clearly shows how several of Tolkien’s ideas were not original, he fervently asserts that many elements of LOTR are “invented [by Tolkien] mythology” and holds to the claim that “it is certainly the most complex and detailed invented world in all literature” (13).

While the majority of Tolkien’s sources are from Northern European mythology, certain similarities to classical works do exist, especially in *The Silmarillion*. Most significantly, perhaps, is the resemblance between Tolkien’s divine hierarchy (the Valar) and that of the Olympians. Just as the ruler of the Valar (Manwe) is identified as the lord of the air, so does Zeus govern the other immortals as king of the heavens from his high seat on Mt. Olympus. The Tolkien king of the sea (Ulmo) is certainly based on the Greek god Poseidon. “Ulmo shares most of his characteristics with Poseidon”, both possessing long beards and great horses which drive their chariots through the sea (Day 121). Many other direct counterparts exist between the two sets of immortals, such as the...
resemblance between Aule and Hephaestos (both smiths), Mandos and Hades (lords of the dead), and Tulkas and Herakles (strong, savage characters). A large section of *The Silmarillion* deals with the rise and fall of the island nation Numenor, a land of vastly advanced civilization which ultimately sinks to the bottom of the sea as a result of the Numenorians corruption and greed. The tale of Numenor is Tolkien’s retelling of the Atlantis legend, the fabled island of antiquity. In order to make the connection abundantly clear to the reader, “Tolkien tells us the High Elven (Quenya) form of Numenor is ‘Atalante’” (Day 119).

Other tales in Tolkien’s works also probably owe their creation to classical legends. Luthien’s quest to liberate her lover from the depths of Morgoth’s dungeon with the power of her song reminds us of Orpheus’ venture into Hades, where he charms the lord of the dead through his music and receives permission to bring his love Eurydice back to the land of the living. Denethor’s despair over the appearance of black-sailed ships which, unbeknownst to Denethor, actually contain friendly reinforcements resembles king Aegeus’ madness as he watches his ships returning from Crete (Day 120). Aegeus had told his son Theseus that if he survived the ordeal with the Minotaur, he should fly a white sail upon his return. Unfortunately, Theseus forgets his instructions, flying instead the black sail and ultimately causing his father to leap into the sea in his grief.

Even more than classical mythology, Norse tales play an important role in Tolkien’s work. Odin, the king of gods in Norse mythology, is the driving force behind two of the most important figures in LOTR: Gandalf and Sauron. This relationship will be discussed in greater detail when we begin looking at character archetypes in the subsequent chapter. Tolkien adapted many of the old Norse stories and placed them in his work with his own special flair. In Norse myth, for example, the land of the dead is guarded by Garm the Hound, analogous to the giant
wolf Carcharoth who defends the gates of Angband in *The Silmarillion* (Day 33). Later in Tolkien’s tale, Carcharoth bites off the hand of Beren as he attempts to use the Silmaril as defense against the great wolf. “Carcharoth is comparable to the Norse myth of Fenrir the Giant Wolf who bites off the hand of Tyr, the heroic son of Odin” (Day 33). Fenrir later consumes the sun and is burned from within, as is Carcharoth seared by the Silmaril within his body. Tolkien’s creation of the Ring is largely indebted to the Volsung Saga, in which the life of Sigurd, the greatest of all Norse heroes, is intertwined with the magical ring Andvarinaut. So influential was this tale that Day claims “the tale of Andvarinaut has become the archetypal ring legend” (45). Gandalf’s epic struggle with the evil Balrog on the bridge of Khazad-dum is mirrored in Norse myth by the battle of Surt and the god Freyr on the Rainbow Bridge of Bifrost (Day 34). Both confrontations result in the collapsing of the bridge and a plunge into darkness for the two combatants. Perhaps a more obvious connection can be seen in the Norse name for the world of mortals: “Midgard”, which literally translates to “Middle-earth” (Day 31). Many other similarities exist between the two sets of stories, more than I could hope to here list, but even with these few we can begin to see the extreme importance of Scandinavian myth to Tolkien’s work (and thus, to the entire world of fantasy). The Norse legends and myths play a greater role in Tolkien’s work than the stories of any other single culture.

As in Norse myth, Tolkien found a wealth of material imbedded in Celtic and Saxon tales. Tolkien often cited the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf as one of his most valuable sources, especially for *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo’s theft of a cup from the horde of the dragon Smaug is certainly drawn from a similar incident in the Beowulf legend (Day 85). Tolkien’s elves share many similarities with the Celtic Tuatha de Danaan: fairy folk of a reclusive and secretive nature. Both races are a powerful, magical, noble people who often avoid humans and are endowed with
immortality. The character Sauron, infamously known throughout Middle Earth largely because of his great Eye, is a reflection of the Celtic Balor the Evil Eye, king of a giantish race which wars frequently with the Tuatha De Danaan (Day 81). One of Tolkien’s impressive achievements in the utilization of these tales is the way he combines important elements from many different stories cohesively into one telling. “Tolkien took the sketchy myths and legends of the Sidhe and the Tuatha De Danaan and created a vast civilization, history and genealogy for his Elves” (Day 81).

Even the languages and names in Tolkien’s work have northern European influences. The language of the elves, although Tolkien’s own creation, is based on Finnish. Many of the runes that comprise that language (and that of the dwarves) are Anglo-Saxon, whereas the dwarvish names seen throughout The Hobbit, LOTR, and The Silmarillion are mostly Scandinavian. These cultures had an enormous impact on Tolkien’s work, not only in legend and myth, but also in language and writing.

Fittingly, I will close this chapter with some insights from Tolkien himself. We can study Tolkien’s work through the writings of countless critics, or attempt to delve into his sources to gather deeper understanding, yet no man can understand LOTR as well as he who created it. Tolkien’s comments on his own work serve as an invaluable tool for furthering our knowledge of fantasy.

Tolkien’s inspiration for the creation of LOTR and The Hobbit is multifaceted. At several instances Tolkien claims LOTR is linguistic in inspiration; that “the ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse” (Carpenter 219). Through this explanation, we are presented with Tolkien the philologist: the lover of languages who went through all the trouble of creating Middle Earth primarily to have a place in which his invented
language could reside and be spoken. Beyond even Middle Earth, Tolkien tells us that his “taste for fairy-stories was wakened by philology” (Tolkien Reader 64-5). Presented with just this information, we might be tempted to claim that linguistics were the primary motivation for LOTR. At least one other driving force exists, however: Tolkien’s desire to create a purely English mythology. In a letter to a publisher, Tolkien elucidates:

“I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my country: it had no stories of its own (bound up in tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands” (Carpenter 144).

Through this lens, LOTR becomes a national epic, perhaps not set explicitly in that country, but at least written by an Englishman. We can see, then, that although Tolkien’s love of words and languages played an extremely important role in the creation of his mythology, his passion for and loyalty to his country was also a powerful source of inspiration. The two motivations blend together in what could very well be the perfect combination: a love for country and subject matter.

When searching LOTR for overall meaning or some sort of ‘message’ we must be extremely careful not to read into something that is not there, a fact Tolkien vigorously points out on several occasions. Writing to Houghton Mifflin Co., Tolkien certifies that “it [LOTR] is not ‘about’ anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political” (Carpenter 220). This does not mean we cannot learn anything from Tolkien’s work or that it is devoid of any philosophy whatsoever. It does mean, however, that Tolkien’s goal is not specifically aimed at teaching a lesson or addressing a real world issue. In his foreword to LOTR, Tolkien specifically spells out that the war in Middle Earth does not resemble W.W.II “in its process or conclusion” (11) as a response to the many
readers who wrongly attempted to draw parallels between the two. Tolkien does admit that “there is a ‘moral’, I suppose, in any tale worth telling” (Carpenter 121), but is eager to dispel any false connections to reality in his work. Teaching a lesson, while perhaps unavoidable in any good story, was not a motivating factor in the creation of LOTR. Likewise, while allegory remains a staple for much of the fantasy genre (as in the works of C.S. Lewis and Terry Goodkind), an overly-diligent search for allegory in a fiction can sometimes lead to conclusions never intended by the author.

In describing his own work, Tolkien took to the view that his fantasy, while based in past mythologies, was unlike traditional fairy stories. Indeed, in a letter regarding the possibility of a LOTR animated film, Tolkien expresses his displeasure over the presented script, which he viewed as:

“a pull-back towards more conventional ‘fairy-stories’. People gallop about on Eagles at the least provocation; Lorien becomes a fairy-castle with ‘delicate minarets’, and all that sort of thing” (Carpenter 261).

Compared to many fantastic stories of the past, Tolkien’s work is very realistic in the sense that every action has a reason and result. The characters act logically and rationally. Magic is present, of course, but it too has its limits, the very reason why everyone cannot ride an Eagle whenever they want. In this sense, LOTR was a step away from the oftentimes confusing or random happenings of older, more conventional fairy-stories.

Commenting on the overall tone of his work, Tolkien describes LOTR as a sort of blend between comedy and horror. The comic element is largely present in sections dealing primarily (or exclusively) with hobbits. Their foolish “hobbit talk”, as Tolkien refers to such conversations, is difficult to read without a smile, particularly when one of the participants is
Samwise. Tolkien even admitted that “‘hobbit talk’ amuses me privately... more than adventures; but I must curb this severely” (Carpenter 36). This amusing foolishness among hobbits is balanced with the horror of Sauron the dark lord and his evil minions. To Tolkien, the two themes were related and intertwined; both are desirable elements in a fantasy story which, through their duel presence, prevent either tone from overpowering the work while at the same time often giving rise to each other. In a letter to one of his publishers Stanley Unwin Tolkien explains how “in real life, as here, it is precisely against the darkness of the world that comedy arises” (Carpenter 120). Sam’s lighthearted comments are often made all the more humorous when juxtaposed with the dire straits he is placed in at the time. In LOTR, comedy and horror share an interesting dichotomy that lends the work a greater depth and realism.

Obviously, volumes more could be written on Tolkien’s work, whether critical material, information regarding possible sources, or Tolkien’s own thoughts. What is presented here is barely even the tip of the iceberg. Tolkien’s work is so incredibly deep that it is easy to understand the fantasy world’s preoccupation with it. Existing as a synthesis of so many legends from differing cultures, LOTR and The Silmarillion collectively serve as a wellspring for modern fantasy authors. Often there is no need for such recent writers to look further back than LOTR for their material; Tolkien has already done the research for them. The following three sections explore the extent of Tolkien’s influence on modern fantasy and also look at ways in which Tolkien motifs have been altered. The true direction of our investigation is, after all, more focused on authors influenced by Tolkien, rather than the reverse.
Chapter 4: Archetypal Characters

“If his unlined face proclaimed that he had seen fewer than twenty winters, his eyes at that moment said they had been winters of iron and blood. He tossed aside his fur covering with one massive hand and rose to dress, as always first seeing that his weapons were close to hand, the ancient broadsword in its worn shagreen sheath, the black bladed Karpasian dagger that he strapped to his left forearm”

- Conan of Cimmeria, rising from a night of revelry with a local strumpet (Conan the Invincible)

Finally we can turn now to the manifestation of archetypal patterns in modern works of fantasy. This chapter, along with the two subsequent sections, comprise the very heart of our discussion. So far I have, to the best of my abilities, explained the tremendous import of the archetype for fantasy, showing how reliant fantasy authors in the last forty years have been on characters and themes created in past works, particularly those of JRR Tolkien. In chapter two, the reader was familiarized with some of the general aspects of the fantasy novel: its common characteristics, differences from other genres, and internal mechanisms that allow fantasy to function. The previous chapter showed some of the more significant influences on the works of Tolkien, which subsequently became the basis for so many forms of modern fantasy. This chapter is designed to closely scrutinize the particular aspect of the character archetype in fantasy. We will be carefully analyzing character molds from the past (often created or made popular by Tolkien) and their perpetuation into recent times.

Tolkien’s work is so important to modern fantasy not because he was incredibly original (he wasn’t) but rather because the way in which he presents the characters, themes, and symbols in his work is so imaginative and gripping that they became standard ideas for ensuing fantasy. The works of authors such as Jordan, Donaldson, and Goodkind (with whom the reader is already somewhat familiar) will be referenced throughout the following three chapters. Because
these next few sections are largely devoted to recent fantasy, discussion will venture outside of literature and trek into the comparatively unexplored regions of filming and gaming: two areas in which fantasy holds an enormous stock. The type of video games I am referring to are mostly role playing / adventure games, not the simple fighting games or first person shooters, but those that involve numerous characters and a vast world to explore. Aside from mythological sources (classical, Norse, Celtic, etc.), I would estimate that the largest contributor of names and character types to such games spring from fantastical sources, and thus often from Tolkien himself. To be fair, we must accept that Tolkien’s influence on video or card games is nowhere near as deep as on fantasy fiction. If we could magically remove Tolkien’s works from the world, video games would not disappear. True, many might be less rich in detail, or simply rely more heavily on mythological sources for its material, but the entire industry would not collapse. Tolkien is not the father of video gaming, as he is of fantasy literature. Through these investigations we shall see that despite its dependence on archetypal patterns which causes fantasy to seem so similar from work to work, the potential for variation within common themes is so large that those dealing in fantasy (whether they be authors, directors, or programmers) are consistently able to please their audiences.

4.1 The Four Hero Configuration

A large percentage of archetypal characters in fantasy fall within a classification I have dubbed ‘the four hero configuration’. As one might have deduced without too much effort, there are four different types of characters within this band of heroes, each with its own distinct attributes and mannerisms. Comprising the group is the elf, the dwarf, the wizard, and the
strongman. These four character molds are probably the most common types of heroes within the world of fantasy. Upon a close inspection of a character from any work of modern fantasy, often we find that the individual can be placed somewhere within this configuration. Perhaps such a character does not match identically with one of the four classifications I have designated, but very frequently sufficient similarities exist to clearly show the relation between the two. This is true particularly in electronic gaming, where game creators place different names on character types in an attempt to present the player with fresh concepts, but in reality are often only disguising an old concept with a new name. The elf character, for example, is often replaced with the archer, the dwarf with the cleric, and the strongman with the barbarian or knight. While these variations may initially appear quite different, in actuality they are virtually the same character with almost identical attributes, especially in video games where those attributes play such a vital role in the development of the game.

The first of the four characters we shall consider is the elf. In general, the elf character in modern fantasy is a tall, slim, swift and incredibly nimble warrior often making use of the bow in place of short-range weapons, or failing that, a knife. Elves are beautiful and magical characters with pointy ears and an intimate connection to the natural world. So strong is this connection that elves are sometimes considered embodiments of the earth itself, and can almost always be found living in a forest or wooded area. The replacement of the elf with the archer in some games is made possible by their similar attributes: quick, agile characters unburdened by heavy armor because of their tendency to avoid melees. The only major difference is the lack of any mystical force in the simple archer character.

The elf character mold in modern fantasy is overwhelmingly indebted to Tolkien.
The basic description of the elf I have given above pertains not only to LOTR and The Silmarillion, but to the vast majority of subsequent elvish characters who have appeared in fantasy works. Tolkien’s elves were so popular that the characteristics they possess became nearly inseparable with the elf figure. Yet the situation was quite different prior to Tolkien’s writings. Elves before Tolkien’s time did not share a common set of attributes, but rather varied greatly from story to story. Some elvish characters were similar to Tolkien’s, but more often than not elves were affiliated with a pixie or fairy-type figure than with the tall, noble elf presented in LOTR. Tolkien was quite aware of his break in tradition, encouraging fans to recognize that his elves were “very little akin to the Elves and Fairies of Europe” and that they were more similar to “Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility” (Carpenter 176). David Day describes the pre-Tolkien elf as “a vaguely defined concept associated with pixies, flower-fairies, gnomes, dwarfs, and goblins of a diminutive and inconsequential nature” (80).

Clearly then, while Tolkien did not create the elf character, his representation of the figure differed greatly from previous images. Just where do these older elves appear most frequently? Both Tolkien and L. Sprague de Camp place the majority of the blame for the association of elves with sprites and nixies on Shakespeare. De Camp maintains that “in pre-Christian European mythology, the elves… were generally thought of as man-sized”, and that it was only in Elizabethan times that the idea of tiny elvish fairies became popular (227). Likewise, Tolkien (who frowned upon Shakespeare for a number of reasons) denounced the playwright for “the disastrous debasement” of the elf figure (Carpenter 185). Perhaps the best example of elves in Shakespeare’s work comes in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, where Oberon the fairy king rules his magical forest with his faithful but tricksome servant Puck. In Puck’s
first appearance, he has a conversation with a fairy who claims that her job is to “serve the fairy queen” (II. i. 8), yet later in the same stanza she bids Puck goodbye, for “our queen and all our elves come here anon” (II. i. 17). The odd way in which she interchanges ‘fairy’ and ‘elf’ show us how vague is Shakespeare’s conception of the elf character. He does not consider elves strong and heroic, but rather as impish little sprites who wander the woods playing mischievous pranks on foolish humans. Due to the enormous popularity of Shakespeare, this image of the elf flourished during and after his time, and the elf character often became mixed up with fairy creatures such as Tinkerbell from the Peter Pan story. Thus, between Elizabethan and Tolkien times the elf was most often portrayed as a cute little fairy zipping around forests on wings of magic.

The elves before Elizabethan times were more similar to Tolkien’s conception, though clearly not as detailed or well developed as in LOTR. In the poems of the medieval German minnesinger Heinrich von Morungen, for example, “many a man gets bewitched by the elves” (Goldin 24). Like Shakespeare, Heinrich seems to imagine elves as magical beings who can easily dazzle the minds of simple humans. Contrarily, though, there is no indication that elves are diminutive in stature - only that they possess magic. In some medieval Arthurian tales, such as Brut by Layamon, Arthur is taken away to the land of elves on the isle Avalon after his ambiguously fatal battle with the forces of Mordred. These elves come off as supremely beautiful creatures, more like elegant human women than tiny fairies.

Tolkien’s great accomplishment with the elf figure was not only to destroy the Shakespearean elf/fairy, but to reintroduce and revolutionize the pre-Christian elf. The elf figure in modern fantasy is now almost exclusively loyal to Tolkien’s vision. Donaldson’s tree-dwelling folk, whom he dubs the Woodhelvennin (notice the ‘elven’), are described as “all tall,
slim, and lithe, with fair hair and light eyes … dressed in cloaks of woodland colors” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 134). Although not specifically stated by Donaldson, these people are clearly elvish figures, nearly identical to Tolkien’s elves in manner and appearance. While many of the popular and more recent fantasy novels (in the 1990’s and into today) have dropped the elf figure from their cast of characters, Tolkien’s form thrives in electronic gaming. Games such as the Zelda series, Knights of the Round, many of the Final Fantasies, and Warcraft II all portray the elf as a magical being adept in the use of the bow. In a subtle tribute to Tolkien and his work, the leader of the elvish people in the PC game Civilization 2 is named ‘Galadrien’, obviously based on Tolkien’s ‘Galadriel’, queen of Lothlorien. Needless to say, the elves in Civilization 2 are clearly Tolkien elves, living in forests and wielding bows.

The classic foil for the elf character is of course the dwarf. The two represent completely different worlds, and it is not uncommon to find in a video game or fantasy novel that dwarves and elves are often violently opposed to each other, or even in a state of war. Nowhere is this better seen than in LOTR. Indeed, it was probably here that the whole dwarf versus elf theme was first brought to fruition and given the complexity that has influenced so many writers following in Tolkien’s tradition. Dwarves often represent all that elves are not. They are short, stout, heavy-footed but strong characters noted for their endurance and tendency to prefer an ax as they charge fearlessly into battle. In opposition to the elvish connection to nature and love of trees, dwarves are miners who prefer to live in the earth rather than upon its surface. Also unlike

Link: elvish figure from the Zelda games

Fig 4.1
elves, who are noted for their wisdom and understanding, dwarves are characterized by their rash and impetuous manner. They are fiercely loyal to their own and have little patience for that which they consider threatening or foolish. While both races are generally opposed to evil, dwarves are often thought of as more self-centered and less concerned with the suffering of strangers.

Like elves, dwarves before Tolkien’s work were varied characters sharing little from story to story. Pre-Tolkien dwarves appeared most frequently in medieval Arthurian, Scandinavian, and Germanic tales. Most often dwarves are little more than midgets serving as squires or some sort of servant for a knight, especially in the Arthurian legends. They are not a different race from man, created as an entirely separate species as in Tolkien’s work, but rather just little humans sharing the same attributes of men. As is such, medieval dwarves lack the unity seen in LOTR. Some are quarrelsome or roguish characters who earn the disfavor of the noble hero, while other are loyal servants of their masters. Still others serve as a form of comic relief. In Hartmann von Aue’s tale of Erec for example, the dwarf of the knight Iders cruelly beats one of Queen Guinevere’s maidens as well as inflicting injuries on the unarmed Erec who approaches the dwarf with the intention of avenging the maiden. Erec’s beating at the hands of the dwarf is the motivation for the whole first quarter of the tale, for he had “never suffered such shame as from the fact that the Queen had viewed this dishonor along with her ladies” (Resler 107-8). Later in the tale a different dwarf serves as a source of comedy rather than disdain. A medieval audience would most likely have laughed at the scene where the king of Ireland steals a horse from a protesting dwarf who vainly attempts to regain his lost steed. Yet Hartmann describes the king of Ireland himself as a dwarvish character. He is also a different kind of dwarf, one that is honorable and valorous in combat, whom Erec is hard-pressed to defeat.
When Erec finally vanquishes the valorous little man, he “was gracious enough to spare the dwarf’s life” (Resler 4462-3). This dwarf is honored, in direct contrast to the earlier dwarf who received nothing but Erec’s contempt.

Thus we see that the dwarves in works like Erec are really just smaller versions of humans. Some are honorable, some despicable, some laughable. They do not possess the defining dwarvish characteristics seen in Tolkien’s work. Beroul includes a dwarf in his tale Tristan, portraying the midget as a meddling and evil character constantly attempting to expose Tristan and Isolde to King Mark. Equally treacherous is the dwarf smith Regin from the Volsung Saga, who plots to murder and rob Sigurd following the hero’s defeat of Fafnir. Such examples show that in medieval tales dwarves, while divergent figures in different works, were most often quarrelsome and cowardly, far from the fearless and basically honorable dwarves of Middle Earth. Tolkien’s reformation of the dwarf figure probably stemmed from his desire to create a race capable of serving a key role in his ring quest. With their craven and shameful ways medieval dwarves would have been unworthy characters not only as companions to the Ring-bearer, but as formidable foils for the elves, who play an absolutely vital function in Tolkien’s mythology. Thus were the Tolkian dwarves born, a race of sturdy and dependable characters capable of rivaling the elves.

Dwarvish figures from other sources, such as the famous seven dwarves from the tale of Snow White, fit a little more closely with Tolkien’s image. Snow White’s dwarves mine underground, sport long white beards, and work all day long, all in accordance with Tolkien’s dwarves. Yet even though the Snow White dwarves are a bit more nonhuman than the Arthurian dwarves, they are still rather varied in their personalities, evidenced by the very names they carry (Happy, Sleepy, Grumpy, etc.). In opposition to the Snow White dwarves, the dwarvish
companions of Bilbo in *The Hobbit* share very similar names, such as Oin, Gloin, Nori, and Ori. Perhaps it is partly due to this cohesion that has made Tolkien’s dwarf so wildly popular, combining various existing elements of dwarves into one attractive character mold.

Following the pattern seen with elves, Tolkien succeeded in the dismissal of the medieval dwarf with the introduction of his own vision. Dwarvish characters in modern fantasy are no longer just little men, but a different species with their own unique attributes. Just as Donaldson used the Tolkian elf as a basis for the Woodhelvvenin, so did he use the dwarf figure to create the Stonedowners, a community of strong, enduring, simple folk who excel in the carving of stone but to whom the use of wood is almost unheard of. In the Square Soft game *Final Fantasy 2* is a race of dwarves living beneath the earth among pools of magma. They also reflect Tolkien dwarves, especially in their skill at producing powerful weapons. The *Warcraft* games use dwarves as demolition experts, drawing upon Tolkien’s concept of dwarves as expert miners and workers in hard stone. Following upon this is the game *Myth III*, describing dwarves as “a robust and strong race of warriors” who “have lived since the weaving of the world in their underground empires” (46). Of the three types of dwarves contained in the game, one is a warrior, one a demolitionist, and one a blacksmith - all in conjunction with Tolkien’s characterization.

The conflict between elf and dwarf seen so vividly in *LOTR* has become almost cliché in the world of fantasy. The two races are almost always seen at a variance, largely due to their radically different lifestyles and characteristics. Dwarves and elves are virtually opposites: the former a strong, ponderous, impetuous foot soldier and the latter a slim, swift, mystical archer. What is interesting about the two is that while elves are associated with forests and dwarves with mining into the ground, both races are intimately connected to nature. They represent the two
sides of the earth: the surface world and the underground. Both races are children of the earth. Thus, although the two are opposites, in actuality they are really just different manifestations of the natural world. When we take this into account we can see why, although a rare occurrence, dwarves and elves working as a team fashion a formidable duo. Operating in unison, they account for each other’s weakness and constitute an extremely well balanced group. In combat, for example, the dwarf can rush into the melee, taking advantage of his strength and endurance, while the elf remains at a distance offering support to his comrade with pinpoint accuracy using his bow to pick off enemies before they can even get close. The dichotomy of elf and dwarf is brilliantly depicted by Tolkien with the relationship he crafts between Legolas the elf and Gimli the dwarf. The two characters are often at odds with each other, embodying the distrust and ill feelings that exist between the two races. When the two are ultimately reconciled, they become life-long friends and serve as the first step in bridging the gap between their respective people. Through this appeasement, Tolkien has effectively combined the two sides of the earth, forming a perfect balance within the natural world.

Magic being absolutely essential to a work of fantasy, it is not surprising that those who wield the magic are accounted among the most important and recurring characters in all of fantasy. The most common form of the magic user is the wizard. Of course, countless creatures and monsters exist who consist or make use of magic, but it is the wizard to whom the casting of spells truly belongs.

The typical wizard figure appears as nothing more than an elderly human. Often the wizard is swathed in robes, wears a long white beard, a pointy over-sized hat, and a staff to support his weight as well as his spells. Such an image is consistent with the description of Gandalf in LOTR as well as many other wizard figures in more recent fantasy. In this case,
however, Tolkien cannot really claim to have invented or made popular the wizard archetype with the appearance of Gandalf, although Tolkien’s wizards remain important for the entire mold. The grandfather of all wizard figures is Merlin, the prophet / sorcerer from Arthurian legend. Merlin is probably the most famous of all wizards in the western world. While his role in different Arthurian tales varies from potent sorcerer to prophetic advisor to a Celtic druid figure, Merlin is almost always associated with magic of some sort. His appearance is also inconstant, sometimes a crazy old man resembling a beggar (as in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*), other times appearing more as the wise and venerable wizard we are familiar with today. Merlin serves as the most influential single figure in the entire wizard archetype.

However similar he may appear to Merlin, Gandalf is not based on the Arthurian wizard, but rather on a still more ancient figure: the Norse god Odin. Odin, the king of gods in Norse mythology, is believed by David Day to serve as “the model for the wandering Wizard and Magicians from Merlin to Gandalf” (31). Because Norse mythology is not nearly as widespread as Arthurian legend, Odin is less familiar of a character than Merlin, and thus was unable to influence as many sources as was Merlin, albeit the Norse god may have inspired the creation of the Arthurian wizard.

Appearing as we might expect a wizard, Odin is attired in “a grey or blue cloak and a traveler’s broad-brimmed slouch hat” and “carried only a staff” (Day 31). It was not the outward appearance of Odin which made him the single most important figure to the creation of *LOTR*, but rather his peculiar character and role in mythology. In chapter four of his book, Day presents his theory of Odin as the direct inspiration for not only Gandalf, but also the dark lord Sauron. Odin, says Day, is “one of the most complex and ambivalent figures in mythology... totally
uninhibited by moral notions of good and evil... concerned with... the acquisition and use of power” (37). Odin, then, was neither good nor evil, but simply existed as a force of nature. Tolkien’s use of the Odin figure was to split him down the middle and create the good wizard Gandalf and the evil wizard Sauron from the dissection. Many character similarities exist between the wizards (particularly Gandalf and Sauron) in LOTR and Odin, more than we have time to fully explore, but it is important to at least recognize the significance of the Norse god to the wizard archetype.

Working in the other direction chronologically, we can see wizardry relations to Tolkien’s work in more modern works of fantasy. The physical appearance and personality of Gandalf has become, like so many other character molds created by Tolkien, the accepted norm for his respective character. Wizards in many fantasy stories / video games, besides looking like Gandalf, are inherently wise and well schooled in many arts, yet are often somewhat arrogant and have small suffering for fools. As Gildor the elf cautions Frodo: “do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger” (LOTR, 97). The arrogance of wizards, especially in Tolkien’s work, is often due to their high social standing and superior powers. Comparing the wizards and elves of Middle Earth, we see that while both races are immortal, the wizards are actually “messengers sent by the Lords of the West” (Silmarillion 299), and are thus lesser versions of the deities that reign in the lands west of Middle Earth. As is such, since the wizards are semidivine creatures, their power supersedes that of even the high elves, and their authority reigns supreme in the land.

Like Gandalf, who dies and returns to life in a more powerful form as Gandalf the White, many wizards in post-Tolkien works of fantasy are reborn from beyond the grave with additional powers and wisdom. Donaldson’s wizard character Mhoram, for example, returns from death at
the end of the first Covenant trilogy to offer the floundering Covenant advice and words of encouragement. In the third book of the series, the giant Saltheart Foamfollower, while not a wizard, undergoes a purging similar to Gandalf’s death in the fight with the Balrog. When Saltheart emerges from the molten rock surrounding Lord Foul’s domain after Covenant was convinced of the death of his giant friend, he is cleansed of the horror of seeing his people slaughtered that has so tormented his soul. Enduring the pain of the lava allows Saltheart to reconcile his dedication to peace with the fight against evil so that massacres suffered by the giants will not be inflicted on other peoples. Saltheart’s near-death experience is critical to the ultimate victory over Lord Foul, as the giant appears to aid Covenant in his darkest hour. Strong evidence exists in the seventh book of the WOT series for the eventual return of Moiraine, the wizard type (Aes Sedai) character who serves as Rand’s guide and mentor for the first five books. Such evidence is manifested in the comments of Min, Rand’s lover who possesses the ability to predict with unerring accuracy the fate of many she comes in contact with. Observe Min’s reaction upon mistaking Caraline Damodred (Moiraine’s close kin) for Moiraine herself:

“Min sighed regretfully, but it was not as if she had really expected Moiraine to turn up alive. Moiraine was the only viewing of hers that had ever failed” (A Crown of Swords, 700).

The fact that Min may have had a viewing regarding Moiraine’s return is significant precisely because of her flawless record when it come to divination. The return of Moiraine, presumed dead at the hands of Lanfear, could have an astoundingly beneficial impact on Rand, who has been growing increasingly unstable in his actions and mental well-being. Moiraine’s resurrection could effectively redirect and refocus Rand onto the proper path, especially if she is
brought back with some sort of arcane knowledge or power, as we have seen with previous resurrected wizards.

Additional wizard characters with direct connections to Tolkian or other wizard figures also exist. The Amyrlin Seat (ruler of the Aes Sedai) in the first few books of WOT shares a certain similarity to Saruman, the traitorous wizard in LOTR. Both characters eventually become fallen wizards: the Amyrlin (Siuan Sanche) is stripped of her title and cast out of the White Tower, while Saruman is defeated by Gandalf, expelled from the White Council (of which he was formerly the head), and exiled from Isengard. Both Siuan and Saruman also are identified by their multicolored cloaks. Saruman abandons his white cloak in order to become “Saruman of Many Colours” (LOTR 276), while Siuan, as Amyrlin, is of “all Ajahs and of none”, thereby wearing the color of all seven Ajahs (divisions of Aes Sedai). The many-hued cloaks serve to place the wizards as separate and above others of their kind. The main difference is that for Saruman, the change from white represents a dissolution of his identity and a signal of his treachery, while for Siuan the cloak is simply customary for any Amyrlin. The term ‘Aes Sedai’ itself is based on the Aes Sidhe of Celtic mythology, remnants of the magical Tuatha De Danann. In Goodkind’s Sword of Truth series, he presents us with the Sisters of Light, virtual replicas of Aes Sedai in almost every way. The Sisters are women sorceresses who control men, much like Aes Sedai bond male warriors to protect them (the Warders). They resist aging as a result of their magic, enabling them to live many hundreds of years, exactly as the Aes Sedai do. Just as the Aes Sedai eventually uncover a secret division within their ranks devoted to serving the Dark One (the Black Ajah), so do the Sisters of Light discover a group of their own carrying out the bidding of the Keeper (Sisters of Dark). The similarities between the two groups are
incredible. Even their system of magic, which we will examine in the following chapter, is comparable.

The wizard characters in video games almost always possess the same attributes. They are obviously skilled in magic, but are greatly lacking in physical strength. As a result, wizards commonly have very little physical defense and pitiful offensive capabilities if robbed of their magic. Such is also the case with the female Aes Sedai in Jordan’s stories, who must employ their Warders to counterbalance their weakness in physical encounters. The Lords in the Covenant novels utilize their Bloodguard for the same reason: to deal with situations where their magic might not suffice. Richard Rahl, as the Lord of D’hara in the Sword of Truth series, is often called by his people “the magic against magic” while they are “the steel against steel” (Blood of the Fold, 85). Richard and the people thus form a pact, where he is expected to deal with the supernatural threats that regular steel cannot handle, while the D’haran people promise to guard Richard’s back against more earthly dangers. The physical weakness of wizards is a theme often played out not only in games but also in fantasy stories.

If the elf is the balance for the dwarf, then the logical balance for the wizard character is the strongman: the fourth and final component of the four hero configuration, and my personal favorite. The strongman, also sometimes called the barbarian, is almost always a human figure of great strength and vitality. They excel in melee combat beyond even the dwarves, although many strongmen, such as the berserkers of Myth II, sacrifice defense for greater dexterity and ultimate killing ability. Strongmen are commonly weak in the magic department, possessing no mystical qualities of their own, even fearing to do battle with sorcerers except in great need. Acting as the foil for wizards, strongmen are sometimes very simpleminded, understanding little beyond battle and killing and caring nothing for the work of scholars. For a true strongman,
battle is life, and life is often quite short. I find the strongman character intriguing mainly because of their raw savagery that offers a breath of fresh air from the often stifling chivalric tendencies of so many fantasy heroes. Honor and justice is all well and good, but sometimes it is refreshing to see a hero viciously decapitate his foe and spit on his corpse. When such animal ferocity is combined with a cunning mind, as in many Conan tales, a truly captivating character is created.

Unlike the previous three characters, strongmen do not appear in any significance in LOTR, and thus Tolkien adds very little to the archetype. The closest Tolkien strongman would probably be Boromir, the valiant yet easily corrupted warrior from Gondor who is slain in battle after attempting to take the Ring from Frodo. More important strongman figures come from older (some quite ancient) sources. Probably the first successful strongman character in the western world is Herakles, the mythical son of Zeus whose feats of strength were unrivaled. Herakles is the perfect strongman: fearless in combat, daring the impossible, possessing of godlike strength, but slow-witted and easily angered. Herakles’ murder of his tutor Linus in frustration over his inability to learn the lyre, as well as the slaying of his first wife Megara in a fit of madness, stand as testament to Herakles’ lack of control over his more primal emotions. Because of his heroic deeds and legendary exploits, however, Herakles’ place as the most popular strongman character of all time is well secured.

For modern fantasy, the most important strongman character was created much closer to the present. In 1932 Robert Howard gave birth to Conan, the rugged barbarian from Cimmeria. Not since Herakles had a strongman character been so well received and utilized in so many stories, even after the death of Howard in the mid 1930’s. Conan, like Herakles, is a superb barbarian character. He is a large, virile, uncivilized warrior who is virtually unbeatable in
combat. No man is Conan’s better in a sword fight, and he is not shy regarding less-than-honorable tactics to accomplish his goal. Like a standard strongman, however, Conan is somewhat apprehensive about dueling with magicians. When told of his mission to steal an artifact from a powerful sorcerer in the movie *Conan the Destroyer*, the hearty hero comments: “What good is a sword against sorcery?” Aside from his uneasiness around magic though, Conan is pretty much the toughest character imaginable. De Camp describes Conan as “the barbarian hero to end all barbarian heroes; his later imitations seem pallid by comparison” (159). He then uses a tidy example to illustrate his point:

“In ‘A Witch Shall be Born’, Conan is captured and crucified. As he hangs on the cross, a vulture flies down to peck his eyes out. Conan bites the vulture’s head off. You just can’t have a hero tougher than that” (de Camp 159).

Discussing Conan’s savage element, Harold Bloom points out how Conan’s “barbaric comportment distinguished him from the noble savages that hitherto had dominated adventure fiction” (57). Clearly then Conan was a new type of hero that took the fantasy world by storm: one who resembled past heroes like Herakles, but whose barbaric countenance created a character less honorable in the traditional sense and more concerned with his own survival. Conan is far from an evil character, nor is he ‘bad’ enough to achieve antihero status, as does Covenant in Donaldson’s books. But Conan will not shirk from stabbing a man in the back or sharing a bed with a different woman each night, many of whom are cheap prostitutes. In Conan, chivalry is truly dead, perhaps in a definitive and intentional distancing of the strongman from the medieval knight for an audience that was eager for a new type of hero. Through Conan’s creation the strongman archetype was recasted and thrust anew into the world of fantasy.
In accordance with the pattern we have observed thus far, the popularity of Conan ensured that subsequent barbarian / strongmen characters would strongly resemble him. In *Kull the Conqueror*, Kevin Sorbo plays Kull, a barbarian character also created by Howard. The movie has often been called a cheap rip-off of the 1980’s Conan movies with Arnold Schwarzenegger, yet most people making such an observation are oblivious to the fact that both movies are based on Howard characters, and thus similarities are to be expected. Coincidentally, Sorbo also played the original strongman, Hercules, in a television series. Also following the Conan movies very closely is the recently produced *The Scorpion King*, starring The Rock as a barbarian assassin who rises to be king. Like Conan, the Scorpion King is rugged, violent, crude with women, and troublesome to authority figures. The cartoon character He-man, while not nearly as unrefined as Conan, is still a barbarian type figure no doubt based on the huge Cimmerian. Roguish characters like Mad Mardigan in *Willow* or Matrim Cauthon in WOT serve as less intense reflections of Conan, resembling him in his unorthodox fighting style and lewd manner with women.

Even more refined strongmen characters can be found in other representations of fantasy. Aragorn, the rightful king of Gondor in LOTR, is more of a chivalric knight than a barbarian character, but if forced into a particular mold would probably fit best as a strongman. Lan, Moiraine’s Warder in WOT, is based directly on Aragorn, so in this respect Tolkien does contribute to the strongman tradition. Both characters are forgotten kings of a great nation. They are rugged and highly dangerous men, both excelling in swordplay, and, like all strongmen, are lacking in magic. Lan and Aragorn are reserved, even stoic, characters with a special connection to a particular wizard (Aragorn to Gandalf, Lan to Moiraine). Finally, both are
ultimately noble and honorable; men of great character lacking any of the savagery seen in Conan. This last characteristic serves to distinguish the two from other strongmen figures.

Older characters such as Sigurd or Siegfried from Scandinavian and Germanic epics, while not true strongman characters in the sense of Conan or He-man, prove interesting subjects for comparison to Aragorn, who is himself a stretch as a barbarian character. In his chapter on German romance, David Day draws an interesting parallel between the love quadrilateral of Siegfried, Kriemhild, Brunhild, and Gunther in the *Nibelungenlied* to that of Aragorn, Arwen, Eowyn, and Faramir in LOTR:

“The shield maiden Princess Eowyn of Rohan falls in love with Aragorn in the same hopeless way as it is implied the Amazon warrior Queen Brunhild of Iceland falls for Siegfried. Siegfried is betrothed to the beautiful Kriemhild, in the same way that Aragorn is betrothed to beautiful Arwen of Rivendell” (97).

Such occurrences are too similar to be mere coincidence, and once again we see the medieval influence on Tolkien’s work. Largely because Aragorn is a more chivalric character than Siegfried (though Siegfried does posses some courtly elements himself), the ultimate solution of pairing Eowyn with Faramir is much more honorable than the deception Siegfried and Gunther engage in to fool Brunhild.

The elf, the dwarf, the wizard, and the strongman: these characters constitute the most common types of heroes in fantasy literature. The four balance and complete each other, effectively covering every aspect of a good hero. What one lacks in raw strength he makes up for with agility or magical ability. Because the heroes are often inherently opposed to each other (like the elf to the dwarf), different characters present the reader with alternate methods with
which they undertake similar quests. This keeps the action fresh, even though it may be a replay of a familiar theme or adventure.

4.2 Giants, Monsters, Gods, and Other Heroes

In this section is discussed other archetypal characters that have proved popular in modern fantasy. As with the four heroes discussed above, Tolkien’s work plays an important role in the development of several of these character types. Figures in some works who don’t fit well in the four hero configuration, like Rand from WOT or Richard from the *Sword of Truth*
novels, share many direct connections to Tolkian characters, some of which will here be analyzed. These miscellaneous characters will be the first group of our inquiry.

The main character of WOT, Rand al’Thor, is an intriguing figure for discussion. Inspirations for the creation of Rand are multifaceted, adding to the complexity and depth of the character. He is not simply based on one past archetypal figure, like Gandalf on Odin, but is rather a synthesis of many sources. The Tolkian influence cannot be overlooked in Rand’s character, particularly in relation to Frodo. A comparison between the hobbit Frodo Baggins and Rand may seem odd due to the vast difference between the two races. However, both characters actually share many of the same characteristics and develop in a similar manner. In the beginning of both tales, each character is relatively young and innocent, living a carefree life in a somewhat backwater village removed from events in the world at large. Both characters are orphans, Frodo taken in by his uncle Bilbo, and Rand adopted by Tam al’Thor, whom Rand believes to be his true father for his entire childhood. As the plot develops, each character begins to understand his importance despite his humble background and apparent insignificance to the larger world.

The major difference between Rand and Frodo is manifested in their actual parentage and personal identity. Rand eventually discovers himself to be the son of an Andoran Queen and an Aiel clan chief, thus possessing some sort of nobility from both parents. Beyond even that, he is the Dragon Reborn, the reincarnation of the most powerful Aes Sedai in history. Rand progresses far beyond his simple beginnings as a farmer in the Two Rivers, soon becoming a ruler of nations, and perhaps eventually the world. Frodo, however, proves loyal to his modest origins. Frodo’s parents were simply hobbits: not rulers of countries or great warriors, just hobbits. Perhaps they were a bit more intelligent or adventurous than most hobbits (especially
on the Took side), but on the whole they were regular hobbits. Likewise, Frodo, while certainly the wisest and most perceptive of the four hobbit companions, is no valiant warrior or powerful magician. Like all his people, Frodo’s strength lies in his inherent goodness and compassion, not in wisdom or physical prowess. Unlike Rand, Frodo is really not significant except for his possession of the Ring, which thrusts him into the enemy’s line of sight and sets him on a path to Mt. Doom.

Rand, like Frodo, is fortunate to set out from his hometown with close companions he has known from childhood. Just as Frodo has Sam, Merry, and Pippin to help him on his path, so does Rand have Mat and Perrin as reminders of his home and as comrades who share his innocence. The difference here is that while Frodo shares a special connection to Sam beyond that of Merry and Pippin, Rand has no true ‘best friend’, confiding rather equally in Mat and Perrin. As a result, Frodo can always rely on Sam for support no matter the situation. But Rand, with no true companion to turn to, grows distant and cold after Moiraine’s ‘death’, when he becomes separated from both Mat and Perrin.

A second important influence that can be seen in Rand’s character comes from the Arthurian tradition. Rand is, to some extent, an Arthurian figure that shares at least four vital connections to the mythical king of England. Rand, like Arthur, is a king who through his great military might and inherent greatness is able to triumph in countless battles and in so doing subdue a large amount of land under his rule. This is an important connection, for both Rand and Arthur’s conquest succeeds in uniting many smaller countries previously under their own separate rule. That both characters’ rule is a just and honorable one distinguishes them from evil characters like Mordred or Shai’tan, whose lust for conquest is driven by hate and greed. The
second important connection lies in the prologue to book seven of WOT, where Jordan makes a specific reference to an Arthurian motif. It reads:

“There can be no health in us, nor any good things grow, for the land is one with the Dragon Reborn, and he one with the land. Soul of fire, heart of stone, in pride he conquers, forcing the proud to yield. He calls upon the mountains to kneel, and the seas to give way, and the very skies to bow. Pray that the heart of stone remembers tears, and the soul of fire, love.” (Crown of Swords, IX).

The important idea conveyed here is that Rand is somehow connected to the land, and that his well-being is reflected in the health of the earth. This concept of the king being associated with the land is quite prevalent in Arthurian legend, the actual character in question depending on the tale. In some tellings, such as in the movie Excalibur, Arthur is the figure upon whom the state of the land is dependent. When Arthur is healed by the power of the Grail near the movie’s completion, the land is reborn with him. In other tales, like Chretien’s Perceval, it is the mysterious Fisher King who must be healed in order for the land to be made well. What the particular device will be which could heal Rand and restore the land (Moiraine’s return?) is yet unclear.

Rand’s royal bloodlines serve as the third important connection to the mythic king of England. Rand’s true mother, Tigraine, is a direct reflection of Arthur’s mother Igraine. Both figures are queens of powerful countries who give birth to a child that is somehow taken from them (Arthur by Merlin, Rand because Tigraine dies in childbirth) and raised by foster parents. The final connection between Rand and Arthur is Rand’s sword Callandor: clearly based on Arthur’s sword Excalibur. The specific relationship between the two will be discussed in greater detail in chapter six, concerning images and symbols in fantasy literature.
The final possible influence for Rand to be here discussed concerns Biblical characters, specifically Jesus and Satan. How could one figure possible represent two intrinsically opposed characters? In this case, it depends greatly on point of view. The reincarnation of Lews Therin (the original Dragon) as Rand creates a somewhat ambiguous character. As the vanquisher of the Dark One, Lews Therin could be viewed as a savior of the world, and thus equitable with Jesus, sent to save man from the lures of Satan. Yet, Lews ultimately goes mad, killing his entire household and nearly destroying the world, in which respect he becomes a devilish figure. Rand inherits this double interpretation as the Dragon Reborn: fated to save mankind from the Dark One, yet hated by many for his conquest as he attempts to unite humanity. Rand’s specific connection to Jesus is evidenced in the peculiar wounds he accumulates throughout his adventures, reflections of the injuries Christ received on the cross. Rand’s semihealed, never healing wound in the side as a result of his battle in the sky with Ishamael is similar to the spear thrust inflicted on Christ by the Roman soldier. The odd Dragon emblems and heron marks burned into Rand’s hands represent the spikes driven into Jesus’ wrists to hold him on the cross. And the crown of Ilian, renamed in book 7 as “The Crown of Swords”, is a reflection of the crown of thorns placed on Christ’ head.

Satanic connections, aside from the ambiguity regarding the nature of Lews Therin referenced above, prove a bit harder to swallow. In the short article “Robert Jordan, The Wheel of Time, and Antichrist”, Robert Neaville points to facts such as the Biblical habit of referring to Satan as the Dragon in his attempt to equate Rand with the antichrist. Neaville seems to be suggesting that for some reason the Dark Lord in WOT is actually a Christ figure, possessing twelve followers (the Forsaken) as did Jesus have twelve disciples. A particularly stirring point is made by Neaville in his opening:
“Baalzamon is a thinly veiled Jesus, reversed to evil immortal sorcerer, the Dark one. He is held at bay from returning to this world by seven seals. In the Bible we see Jesus as being the worthy one who opens the seven seals before his second coming to earth.”

The entire theory, while interesting and possessing certain undeniable facts, becomes weak at points when considering the merciless disposition of Baalzamon and the overall motivation of the author to create such an odd arrangement. Of course, only Jordan himself (and perhaps a few privileged informants) know his ultimate intent, but it is engaging to explore connections with past works like the Bible and speculate on possible outcomes.

Just as Rand is somewhat based on Frodo, amongst other figures, Goodkind in turn bases his main character Richard Rahl largely on Rand, his literary predecessor by no more than five years. Like both Frodo and Rand, Richard is raised by a man not his father, but whom Richard believes is his true parent until later in the series. All three characters share humble beginnings in a farming community, yet eventually rise to great importance. This is particularly true with Rand and Richard, who both become great kings. As with Rand’s struggle to tame saidin, Richard’s inability to control his magic frequently creates sticky situations throughout his adventures. The growing madness in Rand as a result of saidin’s taint is reflected in Richard’s indefinite recovery from his torture at the hands of Denna, who hints that Richard “is sick with a madness, madness I put there” (Stone of Tears, 243). A final connection is the existence of prophesies speaking of both Rand and Richard’s coming in their respective tales, predicting their incredible significance on the existence of mankind.

I have hinted at the importance of the Arthurian tradition for WOT with the parallel between Rand and king Arthur, but many other connections exist between Jordan’s work and
the Arthurian world. In many of these cases, Jordan has adapted an Arthurian figure, slightly altering his or her name but keeping some of the important characteristics intact. In other examples, Jordan’s characters bear names similar to Arthurian figures but share little likeness beyond that. Most of these characters are in some way connected to the capital city of Andor in Jordan’s world, called Caemlyn. Caemlyn is generally thought of as the seat of powerful and righteous nation, thereby equating it with Arthur’s realm of Camelot. The royal court of Caemlyn is almost entirely made up of Arthurian figures. As the son of Caemlyn’s queen, Gawyn is clearly based on the Arthurian character Gawain, often exemplified as the epitome of knighthood, just as Gawyn is a ferocious fighter with a strong sense of justice. Gawyn’s half-brother, Galad, is also based on an Arthurian knight: Galahad, the son of Lancelot. In Malory’s *Le Morte DArthur* Galahad is a Christ figure, succeeding as one of the three knights searching for the Grail and presented as the ultimate knight, surpassing even his father Lancelot. Similarly, Galad is described as one who “does not know the meaning of envy” and who “always does the right thing ....even when he should not” (*Eye of the World*, 601-2). Galad and Gawyn’s sister, Elayne, shares a thin connection to various Arthurian characters with a similar name; probably the most significant of these figures is Elaine the mother of Lancelot, or possibly Elaine de Corbin who, with the help of Lancelot, conceives Galahad. Elayne and Gawyn’s mother, Queen Morgase, resembles Arthur’s sister Morgause, who is consequently the mother of Gawain. The old man Thom Merrilin, because he is old and as a result of his last name, reminds us of Merlin, but otherwise has little in common with the Arthurian wizard. The same holds true in the case of Nynaeve, the Wisdom from Rand’s village. Her magical ability and first name resemble the Arthurian sorceress Nineve, who in many stories, such as *The Suite Du Merlin*, imprisons Merlin in a cave or tomb.
A final Arthurian connection to the world of WOT lies in the long dead figure of Artur Hawkwing, also known as Artur Paendrag: a powerful conqueror well before Rand’s time who defeated and united the lands from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World. Hawkwing’s true name, Artur Paendrag, is a synthesis of ‘Arthur’ and Arthur’s father, Uther ‘Pendragon’. Both Arthur and Artur were great kings who ruled with justice (the very name of Hawkwing’s sword) and are someday fated to return (seen in book two, when Hawkwing rides from beyond the grave to fight for Rand).

Thomas Covenant, Donaldson’s ‘hero’, is a relatively unique character who does not fit at all in any fantastic archetypal pattern. Some aspects of Covenant are similar to characters in past works (Tolkien’s in particular), such as his magic ring, which will be discussed in relation to power in the following chapter, or his missing fingers (compare to Frodo’s finger lost in his final struggle with Gollum). But Covenant’s personality is an intriguing paradox offering the avid fantasy reader a taste of something quite different from the common fantasy hero. Covenant is a true antihero. Beyond his wild magic and ultimate stoicism he possesses no heroic qualities. Indeed, often he displays rather unheroic traits, including cowardice, deception, and malice. Covenant rapes a young girl, constantly abuses his friends, and is ridiculously self-centered throughout his entire quest. Considering all this, it seems highly unlikely that Covenant could succeed as a hero battling the minions of the evil Lord Foul. Yet battle he does, continuously alienating and ingratiating the reader in rapid succession throughout the plot with villainous and semiheroic exploits. Covenant proves quite a conundrum about whom readers are left uncertain until perhaps the conclusion of the first trilogy.

The final category of miscellaneous characters we must consider is hobbits, those charmingly simple munchkins from LOTR. Hobbits are pretty much Tolkien originals, most
diminutive characters in pre-Tolkien times being denoted instead as dwarves. Tolkien’s hobbits are very simplistic creatures possessing no great strength or magical attributes. Tolkien best describes them in his prologue to LOTR:

“They are quick of hearing and sharp-eyed, and though they are inclined to be fat and do not hurry unnecessarily, they are nonetheless nimble and deft in their movements. They possessed from the first the art of disappearing swiftly and silently ... But hobbits have never, in fact, studied magic of any kind, and their elusiveness is due solely to a professional skill that heredity and practice, and a close friendship with the earth, have rendered inimitable by bigger and clumsier races” (13).

Due to their simple nature, hobbits in general make very unusual heroes, especially for such a grand quest as that of the Ring. The heroes of old, like Arthur, Sigurd, and Herakles, are valiant and powerful men capable of overcoming almost any obstacle through their strength in arms. David Day points out how Tolkien’s infusion of hobbits into the classic ring quest effectively turned the quest on its head (180). Instead of a hero seizing a ring and using its power to bring him glory, Tolkien’s heroes (hobbits) embark on the quest with the sole intent of destroying the Ring.

The hobbit character has proven more influential for fantasy in games and movies than in literature. Literary figures may be based on Tolkien’s hobbits, as in the case of Rand and Frodo, but the actual inclusion of a hobbit character in a fantasy novel is more rare than in a game or film. For video games, hobbits have become so important that a fifth addition to the four hero configuration has become possible: the thief character. The thief is a hobbit-based figure, lacking in great strength or magic, but excelling in stealth, dexterity, and luck. Some games, such as *Wizardry V*, have even called the thief figure a hobbit instead. Playing as a thief
always proves an interesting adventure, for the player will be hard-pressed in certain situations to make the best possible use of his limited skills, just as are the hobbits in LOTR as they strive against the minions of Sauron. The Pecks in the movie Willow are clearly hobbit figures, having to rely on their cleverness and furtiveness where a more standard hero might instead use his brute strength or magical prowess. In an ironic occurrence, I recently saw a commercial for Willow being shown on television, coming shortly after the release of the first installment of the LOTR movie. The commercial invited the viewer to come and relive the Willow adventure, claiming that “before there were hobbits, there was Willow”. Apparently (and surprisingly), the editor of this particular advertisement was unaware of the existence of hobbits outside the LOTR movie, and that the Willow figure is actually based on hobbits, rather than the reverse.

The next important figure to be taken into consideration is the giant character. Giants are, obviously, large characters, often towering several feet above normal men. Giantish figures in modern fantasy are based almost exclusively on the Ents of LOTR, and thus in this type of character, Tolkien’s work plays a tremendous role, perhaps more so than in any other archetype. Many giants before Tolkien prove similar to pre-Tolkien dwarves in that they are really just men of abnormal size. Ents, however, prove quite different from men. The Ents are truly a Tolkien original. “Ent” comes from the Anglo-Saxon “eald enta geweorc”, meaning simply “Giant”, but aside from their size the two share little or no similarities (Day 16). Tolkien’s true inspiration for the Ents sprang from his disappointment in Shakespeare’s MacBeth, when an army disguises itself behind trees cut from Great Birnam wood and marches to war under their guise. With the creation of the Ents, Tolkien actually made the trees themselves march to war, particularly with their assault on Isengard. The word “Ogier” (Jordan’s name for his giants) probably comes from a Carolingian legend concerning the greatest of Charlemagne’s paladins, Ogier the Dane.
Why Jordan chose such a name for his giant race is uncertain, as there appears to be little connection between them and the knight of legend.

Both Donaldson and Jordan make great use of the Ent character in their own giantish figures. All three, the Ent, the Giant, and the Ogier, are slow, patient, deliberate, long-lived characters with a special connection to nature that goes beyond that of even the elves. Compare Ents (actual walking and talking trees) to Covenant’s first view of the Giant Saltheart Foamfollower, who he describes as “an oak come to life” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 175). Loial, the Ogier Rand first meets in Caemlyn, lives in a stedding: a community of Ogiers within great forests protected by a certain earth power which prevents the use of magic. Ogiers are, like Ents, shepherds of the trees. Additionally, Loial is a rare Ogier with the ability to sing to trees, effectively strengthening their limbs and aiding in growth. Beyond their connection to trees, both Saltheart and Loial share specifically Entish qualities that are difficult to miss. Perhaps most importantly is their partiality to slow, careful thought and tendency to thus consider humans as extremely hasty and rash creatures. Loial claims, “You humans are very excitable’ (Eye of the World, 548) upon his initial encounter with Rand, and the Ent Treebeard likewise comments: “Hm, but you are a hasty folk, I see” (LOTR, 486) when first meeting Merry and Pippin. Soon after meeting Saltheart, Covenant ironically accuses the Giant of quick judgment, to which he responds: “Here is a new thing in the Land - a man accusing a Giant of haste” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 181). Their great patience in all matters is no doubt due to the long life span of each race, many times that of a normal man, yet their great reluctance to rush into decisions often causes tension in their dealings with humans, and thus in all three stories a ‘hasty’ representative is chosen from the giantish people to deal with mankind. Both Loial and Saltheart are viewed as oddities in their communities because of their ability to make
comparatively quick judgments, similar to Quickbeam, the Ent chosen to entertain Merry and Pippen while Entmoot commences (a process lasting several days).

Further connections between the three giantish characters include the power of song, skill in construction, and the dwindling of each race. Singing proves an extremely important aspect for both Saltheart and Loial, the former using song to power his ship and to embolden his companions in the direst of straits, and the latter to sing to trees, creating the highly-prized sung wood. Like Giants, Ogiers are extremely skilled in construction, working not only with wood but with stone to build many of the ancient cities in which humans reside. With these last two similarities, song and construction, Jordan seems to be borrowing material from Donaldson rather than Tolkien, as the Ents are not mentioned to have any great power with song or skill in building. All three, however, are related in the unfortunate fact that their numbers are so few. For the Ents, the fault lies in the disappearance of the Entwives, who wandered away countless years ago, thus taking the possibilities of any Entings with them. The Giants also suffer from a deficiency in offspring, to the extent that Saltheart tells Covenant: “there are only five hundred of us, and our vitality narrows with each generation” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 188). Ogier are the best off of the three, but they too have suffered a greatly reduced population than enjoyed in the past, largely due to the Breaking of the World and their subsequent dependence on the steddling for survival.

As might be expected, Ents also play a large role in the world of video gaming. In Myth III, for example, a giantish race called the Ents is described as Forest Giants to whom “cutting down a living tree was akin to murder” (15). In the game’s plot, the Ents defend their homeland and forests against the evil Trow. The Trow, like the Ents, are giant figures, but are associated
with stone rather than wood. One might describe a Trow, therefore, as a malignant Ogier lacking his usual love of trees.

Delving into the darker side of fantasy, we shall now examine archetypal monsters and evil forces that thrive in corners and shadows. Many of the monsters in modern fantasy closely resemble Tolkien creatures, while others spring from more distant sources. Others still, particularly in the case of Goodkind, come from very recent works.

By far one of the most intriguing characters in LOTR is Gollum, the ruined hobbit so twisted by the corrupting influence of the Ring he possessed for hundreds of years that his entire miserable life is dominated by his quest to retrieve “the Precious”. Gollum both hates and loves the Ring, wishing to be free of its call yet unable to resist the temptation it represents. Because he is bound to the Ring, Gollum shares an intimate connection with Frodo, not only because Frodo guards the Ring and thus Gollum must somehow take it from him to be reunited with his Precious, but also because only Frodo and Gollum truly understand the powerful lure of the Ring. In this respect, the two are kindred spirits, Gollum existing as a sort of shadowy reflection of Frodo, or perhaps serving as a living omen of the ultimate fate of Frodo should he possess the Ring as long as Gollum.

Gollum’s representative in WOT is the character Padan Fain, the one-time darkfriend peddler of Rand’s hometown who is summoned by the Dark One and altered to become a sort of bloodhound of evil, set forever on the track of Rand. Physically, the two characters are very similar: small, slimy, dirty creatures with astounding agility and strength for their diminutive size. Just as Gollum is tortured in Sauron’s dungeon to procure the name of the Ring-bearer and then released to track Frodo, so is Fain abused with fire and set out to hunt Rand with an internal homing beacon that allows Fain to always sense the location of his quarry. Gollum is often torn
by conflicting forces. In Mordor, he is torn between his fear of Sauron and his desire to keep the Ring for himself. Regarding Frodo, he is torn between the urge to seize the Ring and the compassion he feels for the gentle hobbit. Likewise is Fain divided in his loyalty. Originally wholly devoted to the Dark One, Fain is left somewhat bitter after his mutation. After a different evil invades his body in Shadar Logoth, Fain goes quite insane as a result of the conflicting forces inside his body. The Shadar Logoth evil somewhat frees Fain from the Dark One’s control, yet “his compulsion to hunt did not lessen ... it grew stronger and sharper with every day that passed” (*Eye of the World*, 716). Because of this irresistible command to hunt, Fain is bound to Rand every bit as tightly as Gollum is bound to Frodo. Whether Fain will ultimately play as instrumental a role in the final outcome as did Gollum is yet to be seen, but it is conceivable considering the striking similarity between the two.

Tolkien’s common foot soldier, the Orcs, have become a staple monster for many video games (*Gemfire, Final Fantasy*, etc.) and a basis for similar creatures of the dark in several examples of fantasy fiction. Jordan’s grunt solider, the Trolloc, is basically a blown up Orc, possessing all the same animal-like characteristics and savagery but with an increased size quite a bit larger than a normal man. The word ‘Trolloc’ is a synthesis of two Tolkien monsters: the Troll (possessing great size and strength) and the Orc. Combining the two we arrive at the Trolloc: ‘Troll’ + ‘Orc’ = ‘Trolloc’. Less similar but still possessing the low-rank status of foot soldiers in an evil army is Donaldson’s Cavewights, creatures of brute strength but little intelligence, like their Orc brethren in LOTR.

Tolkien’s Nazgul, or Ringwraiths, remain perhaps the most haunting creatures in all of Middle Earth. Like the Ents, Nazgul are Tolkien originals, and their perpetuation in modern fantasy is formidable. Both Jordan’s Fades (also called Myrddraal) and Donaldson’s Ravers are
clearly Nazgul characters, with the Fades bearing the greater similarity to their father figure. Fades and Nazgul are upper servants of their dark lords, garbed in black robes and riding on steeds of black. Compare the Myrddraal’s ability to “cause paralyzing fear with a look” (Eye of the World, 794) to the approach of the Nazgul, which made “fear fall on our boldest, so that horse and man gave way and fled” (LOTR 263). Both Fades and Nazgul also share a reluctance to cross running water. The Ravers resemble the Nazgul in their wraithlike qualities and ability to cause uncontrollable fear in the weak-hearted. Beyond even the skill of Nazgul, Ravers are able to possess persons of weak will and to dominate their souls. Darth Vader in the Star Wars movies also bears a certain resemblance to the Nazgul that goes beyond the black garb of both figures. Vader, like the Nazgul, is a powerful wizard-type figure who strikes fear into the hearts of even the boldest men. Also like the Nazgul, Vader was once a great and powerful man who fell under the corrupting influence of a dark lord, ultimately transforming him into a wraith-like figure of evil powers.

In addition to Orcs, Trolls, and Nazgul, Tolkien makes use of more traditional evil creatures in his tales. De Camp notes how, in nature “traditionally, wolves, reptiles, and spiders are all feared” (249), thus making excellent monsters in many fantasy stories. Tolkien makes use of all three creatures, with the wargs (wolf-type monsters), Smaug the dragon, and Shelob
the gigantic spider. Here is one tradition that seems to have changed in more recent fantasy.

Many of the conventional ‘evil’ creatures in WOT actually turn out to be valuable allies in the fight against the shadow, or at the very least simply creatures of nature going about their business. When captured by the Children of Light and being questioned about his relation to wolves, Perrin asserts: “Wolves aren’t creatures of the Dark One. They hate the Dark One. At least, they hate Trollocs and Fades” (Wheel of Time, 451). Several times throughout the series Perrin calls upon the wolves to aid him in battles against evil forces. Such a reversal in role could be due to relatively recent understanding of wolves’ true nature, not as savage killers, but as reclusive creatures of the wild who generally shy away from human contact. Dragons, almost always evil creatures in older fantasy stories (such as the Lernaean Hydra or Fafnir, the basis for Smaug), have also grown more amiable in recent fantasy novels. Rand is, after all, the Dragon Reborn, and while an actual dragon has yet to be included by Jordan in WOT, it is plausible that one may appear before the series is concluded (Rand’s title has to be based on something!). In the Sword of Truth series, Richard befriends a dragon who consequently flies him around the world and aids in several of his adventures. In this pattern we see a departure from the assumption in Tolkien’s work of wolves and reptiles as evil creatures.

The final group of creatures under our monster category are actually not monsters at all (at least, not in the physical sense), but a particular group of humans created in WOT and lifted from the work by Goodkind for his own usage. This is the group Jordan calls the Whitecloaks, or the Children of Light, and whom Goodkind renames the Blood of the Fold in his Sword of Truth books. The Whitecloaks are an autonomous military organization fanatically devoted to the destruction of the Dark One’s minions, specifically Dark Friends: humans who have sworn their service to Baalzamon. In theory, the Whitecloaks have commendable goals and would be
of great service to the people of the land. In practice, however, the Whitecloaks are often more concerned with forcing a confession out a person they have decided is in league with the Dark one, regardless of his actual guilt or innocence. Historically, the Whitecloaks resemble the Inquisition of Europe: an organization that preached noble causes yet inflicted untold suffering on many innocent people. As a result, the Whitecloaks have become greatly feared among the populace, even in their home country, where they rule behind a puppet king. Observe the reaction of three Whitecloaks as they walk down the streets of Baerlon:

“No one even seemed to notice them. Just the same, the three did not have to push through the crowd; the bustle parted to either side of the white-cloaked men as if by happenstance, leaving them to walk in the clear space that moved with them” (Eye of the World, 222).

The Whitecloaks have no need to force their way through a crowd; their nefarious reputation does it for them.

The Blood of the Fold are nearly exact duplicates of the Whitecloaks. Both share the same goal: the destruction of evil humans in league with the dark lord. Both are zealous beyond belief in their methods, forcing confessions out of whomever they choose. Like the Whitecloaks, the Blood is the true power in their homeland. Crucial to their goal is the power in numbers both the Blood and the Whitecloaks wield, enabling them to enforce their beliefs and laws on almost anyone they wish. Both groups hold magic in abhorrence, believing it to be a sign of evil, and are thus dedicated to the annihilation of those who wield magic (Aes Sedai and wizards). As the Whitecloaks are a symbol of fear to the people of the land who avidly attempt to stay clear of the Children, lest they draw attention to themselves, so is the Blood given a wide berth in whatever country they might be presently occupying. And in a final striking similarity,
just as the Children of Light are identified wherever they go by their bright white cloaks, so is the Blood of the Fold known infamously for their deep scarlet cloaks billowing behind them as they go about their self-proclaimed righteous work.

It is with the Blood that Jordan’s influence is most strongly felt on Goodkind’s work, made doubly evident since the two are writing within the same time frame. Both the Whitecloaks and the Blood, however, are manifestations of a narrowly self-righteous view which decries any form of thought or philosophy not in accordance with its own belief system. Both groups possess essentially honorable goals that aim to eradicate evil and improve mankind’s quality of life. Yet the danger inherent in each organization is in the methods chosen to achieve those goals, which brook no room for argument, compromise, or consideration of individual circumstance. Thus, the Whitecloaks and Blood exist as fantasy’s attempt to exhibit the dangers of a seemingly moral philosophy that refuses to accept or even tolerate that which is different.

The last two figures to be considered in our discussion of archetypal characters are the immortals. Gods and Devils, Creators and Dark Lords: the names change from work to work, but many of the basic characteristics remain the same. Immortals play an incredibly important and oftentimes complex role in the workings of a fantasy. Sometimes that role is minimal, as in Modesitt’s work. Elsewhere it is profound, as in the Conan novels, where gods, demons, and immortals deities are a staple that appear in just about every adventure. Most often, however, the role of gods is very one-sided, as we shall see in detail in the next chapter when we investigate the function and extent of divine intervention in differing fantasy stories. Here, our purpose is to draw similarities between gods in previous fantasies to immortals in more recent ones.
Tolkien’s immortals have had an intense impact on the ‘Creator’ and ‘Dark Lord’ images that have come to pervade fantasy literature. Tolkien’s divine hierarchy is set up in *The Silmarillion*, where we learn of the Earth’s beginning at the hands of a Creator figure, Iluvatar. Following the creation, Iluvatar sends down a host of lesser immortals to govern his world and his children (the elves), after which he largely disappears from the scene. Such a creator is mirrored in the works of Jordan, Donaldson, and Goodkind. Both Jordan and Goodkind refer to their Iluvatar figure as The Creator, a distant god to whom the creation of life is credited, but who now partakes little in its happenings. Donaldson’s creator is a bit more active, actually meeting and conversing with Covenant upon the first trilogy’s conclusion. All four creators, however, share a tendency that greatly limits their influence on their own creations, leaving mankind largely to its own devices and thus bestowing on them free will.

The opposite archetype of the Creator is the Dark Lord character. Sometimes the lord of the underworld, sometimes a powerful demon locked away from the world of men, other times just a maliciously powerful sorcerer bent on domination and subjugation of all who oppose him, the actual identification of the Dark Lord varies according to the author’s preference. The basis for many of the Dark Lord figures is Tolkien’s Sauron, the evil ruler of Mordor. In *The Silmarillion* Tolkien explains how in the beginning, Sauron was actually but a servant of the true enemy, Morgoth. Eventually, Morgoth was defeated and imprisoned by the other immortals, leaving Sauron to take his master’s place as best he could, thus setting him up as the main antagonist for LOTR. Sauron, of course, exists as a synthesis of many different sources of inspiration, ranging from Odin to the Christian vision of Satan (Morgoth was originally held in Iluvatar’s favor, after all, but Sauron fell to evil at the same time as his master).
For the world of fantasy, however, Sauron remains the most important figure in the Dark Lord characterization. In Donaldson’s work, he is Lord Foul, a malevolent deity bent on world mastery and residing in a desolate wasteland reminiscent of Mordor. Like Sauron, Foul was defeated in the past and required thousands of years to recover his strength for his latest attempt at domination, which is precipitated by the appearance of Covenant to the Land. Jordan’s character is known by many names: Baalzamon, Father of Lies, Heartsbane, Lord of the Grave, the Dark One, and his true name Shai’tan, which is believed taboo to utter aloud, “inevitably bringing ill fortune at best, disaster at worst” (Eye of the World, 788). Unlike Sauron or Foul, the Dark One is fortunately imprisoned by the Creator, although in the time of Rand and his legacy Baalzamon begins stirring from his prison and once again touches the world of men. Following the pattern of Jordan yet again, Goodkind places his Dark Lord, dubbed the Keeper, firmly in the Underworld, unable to cross into the world of men except under some extreme circumstances, largely brought about by his evil agents in the Overworld. The near release of the Keeper in book two of the series is narrowly averted by Richard. In the case of the Dark One and the Keeper, both associated with control of the dead, we may be tempted to directly associate the two with Hades, the Greek god of the underworld, rather than with Tolkien’s Sauron. Yet it must be remembered that the Greek conception of Hades was not of an evil monster. Feared yes, but not evil. The father of the Dark Lord figure is undoubtedly Sauron.

In a discussion of Tolkien and his works, L. Sprague de Camp states: “Tolkien, with a few variations, sticks close to traditional materials, roles, and themes” (249). De Camp’s view represents the general consensus on Tolkien’s style. How is it then that LOTR and its relations have had such a profound impact on the fantasy world, if it is really only a repetition of familiar characterizations and themes? In this we see the paradox of Tolkien, revolutionizing the genre
while remaining loyal to past forms. How did he do it? The first part of the answer is that those “few variations” have proved incredibly important to the entire work. As we have seen in this chapter, Tolkien took many old character types (the elf, dwarf, wizard, etc.) and gave life to them in exciting new ways. With the elf, he reverted to the pre-Elizabethan image of the man-sized mystical elf, yet added a depth and beauty unmatched anywhere in history. In his dwarves, Tolkien weaves a cohesion within the entire race that incorporates past dwarvish elements while maintaining the similarity desired from dwarf to dwarf that so enchants the reader. Added to these “few variations” are the Tolkien original characters, the Balrog, the Nazgul, the Ent, and the hobbit: figures that have become sources of inspiration for creators of fantasy fiction. The little alterations on carefully selected motifs, which Tolkien synthesized in an incredibly complex and detailed manner, proved all that was needed to revolution the world of fantasy. The second component of the answer lies in the very nature of fantasy, which allows for such familiarity between works. Past characters and themes are the fountain from which fantasy flows; every author draws from that fountain to some extent. In what direction that author will guide the new flow is totally up to him. When a writer selects elements from the spring that combine in a pleasing flow and leads them into a new stream, as Tolkien did, his originally tiny trickle can become a mighty river from which other authors begin their own streams. Yet even Tolkien’s river (and thus, all who base their works on him) originates from the spring of fantasy: the comprehensive collection of fantastic elements spanning thousands of years of human story-telling evolution. With such a deep and diverse background, we can clearly observe the incredible room for variation fantasy offers its writers, regardless of their similarities in other respects: the very reason fantasy remains so popular today. The next chapter will continue our investigation of these past sources in modern fantasy with a look at archetypal themes.
Chapter 5: Themes, Styles, and Parallel Story Lines

“I admit the desire. But do not tempt me. Power has a way of revenging itself upon its usurpers. I would not accept this ring if you offered it to me.”
- Saltheart Foamfollower refusing the wild magic of Thomas Covenant’s white gold ring.

Several of the most important character types in fantasy fiction having been discussed at some length, it is now time to take a look at other ways archetypal patterns in past works are reflected in modern examples. The majority of this chapter deals with archetypal themes in fantasy literature - ideas and motifs that have become fundamental to the genre. As in the previous section, the works of Donaldson, Jordan, and Goodkind will be frequently referenced in comparison to each other and to their literary forefathers, most commonly Tolkien. While many of the themes contained in the writings of these recent authors are similar or identical to Tolkian ideas, such as the danger of Covenant’s ring, alterations inherent to the evolution of fantasy as a genre exist in sufficient quantity to provoke an interesting discussion.

The other two sections of the chapter revolve around a comparison of style and story lines in an effort to give a more inclusive picture of fantasy fiction and its reliance on past forms. Some of the topics in this chapter might seem to overlap with a discussion of archetypal characters (such as the ‘dark lord’ motif covered in the last chapter), but generally an investigation of themes is much broader and will build upon previous ideas mentioned only in passing.

5.1 Themes

By far one of the most intrinsic and vital themes for fantasy literature involves the relationship between power and danger. For many a fantasy hero power does indeed corrupt,
and much of that hero’s tale is often consumed with his quest to reconcile the use of power with its inherently destructive influence. Of course, this motif is not particular to fantasy literature, but rather exists as an extremely broad idea that pervades many aspects of literary history, from the teachings of Jesus to the warnings of America’s forefathers against the oppression of monarchy. The equation of the danger that comes with power is particularly important for the fantastic realm, however, because of the otherworldly or godlike powers that characters can sometimes easily attain in a world where the impossible is made feasible. In such cases of temptation, extreme restraint must be observed on the part of the hero if he is to avoid the corrupting lure of improperly or untimely gained power over others which can often lead to great harm and destruction. Most often the type of power that presents the most danger is that which is achieved (or worse, granted by some outside force) immediately or in a short amount of time with some sort of magical association. Conan’s power with his sword is not evil or dangerous because it required a lifetime of practice and needed no external assistance; he learned the way of the blade through battle and blood. The power granted by the Ring, stemming from the evil sorceries of Sauron, is another matter altogether.

The danger of instantaneous, mystical power is vividly depicted in Tolkien’s writings, centering around the call of the Ring to any who would listen. Elrond tells Boromir at the Council: “We cannot use the Ruling Ring... The very desire of it corrupts the heart” (LOTR 285). This theme is played out throughout the entire tale. Many times it would be very convenient for Frodo to slip on the Ring and become invisible, yet he knows every time he uses Sauron’s tool, he falls further and further under its corruptive influence. The irony of possessing such a weapon yet being unable to wield even the least of its powers is a certitude the heroes must deal with throughout the course of their adventures. Some, like Boromir, fail in that reconciliation.
Others, like Faramir, are eventually made to see the truth and necessity behind the restriction on the Ring’s use. And the wisest of characters recognize the danger of the Ring from the very outset. Gandalf fears even to touch it, as he knows the desire to use the Ring were it in his possession would be more than he could resist. Frodo, feeling overwhelmed and insignificant to the task placed before him, offers Gandalf the Ring early in the tale, evoking the wizard’s heated protest:

“No! ... With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly... Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself” (LOTR 75).

Gandalf fully comprehends his limitations regarding the Ring, as do Frodo and Sam eventually come to realize the peril of the Ring if donned for but a second. Representing the ultimate in the instantaneous gratification of dangerous power, the Ring is a tool whose use can result in naught but evil.

Despite his claim of excluding Tolkien’s material, the central theme dominating Donaldson’s series is the danger associated with Covenant’s white gold ring: a similarity to Sauron’s Ring that cannot be denied. To be fair, Covenant’s ring is not innately evil, as is the LOTR Ring, nor does it originate from the forge of some dark lord. In fact, the wild magic contained in Covenant’s white gold ring proves the necessary element for the defeat of Lord Foul, in opposition to the LOTR Ring which must be destroyed if Sauron is to be defeated. However, the power contained in Covenant’s ring is, as the name suggests, wild and unable to be controlled until very late in the story, and even then Covenant has but a tenuous hold over it. Additionally, the ring is a physical manifestation of the magical powers of the Land which are partly to blame for Covenant’s raping of his friend Lena early in the first book. Because of this,
and because Covenant does not understand how to control his magic, the ring remains a symbol of both hope and despair, existing as the force capable of defeating Foul yet feared because it grants ungovernable power to its wielder. Were Foul to capture the ring, he could easily dominate the world and break free of his imprisonment, as could Sauron annihilate any opposition should he regain his Ring. Thus, Covenant’s ring serves as a more intriguing symbol than Frodo’s: not intrinsically evil, but rather capable of both good and evil depending on the wielder. Yet both rings share in the fact that while the forces of good must show restraint and great caution in the use of the ring’s power, lest they become corrupted, evil has no such restriction placed on it, and can use the ring to its fullest destructive potential.

Frodo’s offering of the Ring to Gandalf is closely mirrored by Covenant’s attempt to pass off his ring to Saltheart, who stoutly refuses (in the quote opening this chapter) for many of the same reasons Gandalf declines the gift. A further example of the danger in power not well understood is strikingly seen in the Lords’ insistence on first mastering the most elementary magic of the past Lords, who were almost infinitely more powerful than the present ones. In her explanation of the Lords’ history directly following Kevin’s Desecration of the Land, Atiaran tells Covenant:

“One thing more they swore - Peace, a calmness of self to protect the Land from destructive emotions like those that maddened Kevin. For it was clear to all gathered that power is a dreadful thing, and that the knowledge of power dims the seeing of the wise” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 104)”.

With her assertion “power is a dreadful thing”, Atiaran effectively summarizes perhaps the most important motif of the entire trilogy.
The danger of unjustly gained power can also be seen to a certain extent in WOT, though in a less obviously Tolkien manner than is observed in Donaldson’s work. One of the largest perils in the work is magical in origin, just as in both LOTR and the Covenant series. Rand possesses the ability to draw upon *saidin* and wield its power, but with each occurrence he comes closer and closer to the inevitable madness awaiting all men who attempt such magic. Later, when Rand finds the magical sword *Callandor* and the still more powerful artifact in Rhuidean, he is reluctant to use them except in the most extreme emergencies, as they grant him almost god-like powers which he is uncertain he can control. Rand’s fear of using the immensely powerful *sa’angreal* from Rhuidean is evident in his reaction to Cadsuane’s revelation that *Callandor* is dangerously flawed and thus cannot be used safely:

> “Rand barely heard her. He had hoped to use *Callandor* again, hoped it would be strong enough. Now only one chance remained, and it terrified him. He seemed to hear another woman’s voice, a dead woman’s voice. *You could challenge the Creator*” (*The Path of Daggers*, 540).

*Callandor* and the *sa’angreal* represent grave threats to the world not only because of their vast destructive capabilities, but also because of Rand’s relative inexperience wielding *saidin* compared to those who created and first made use of the arcane magical objects. Beyond even the danger of the *sa’angreal* though is the growing arrogance and violence in Rand as his power swells. He himself may prove the most dangerous of forces if something is not done to check his pride and utter confidence in his power, both magically and militarily.

Often intertwined or juxtaposed with the inherent danger of power in fantasy fiction is the role of the reluctant hero. Such a character is portrayed as a hero who is swept up by the action of the plot and grudgingly dragged along rather than one who actively seeks adventure and
excitement. Conan serves as a perfect example of an active hero, while reluctant heroes include Frodo, Mat and Perrin (Rand’s childhood friends) and Richard Rahl, just to name a few. Because these characters are almost forced into adventure rather than going out and seeking glory, the danger associated with the acquisition and use of power is somewhat lessened than it would be for a character who yearns for the distinction of a great adventurer. As the ultimate reluctant hero in WOT, Perrin longs for the simple life of a blacksmith, constantly reminding everyone in sight that he is not a lord. Thus, there is little danger of Perrin succumbing to the lure of power and becoming a dangerous and evil force. Rand, on the other hand, has grown overly confident in his strong magical ability, differing sharply from his once similar companion. Through reluctant heroes, fantasy authors are able to shield some of their characters from the corruptive influence of power and, if they so wish, compare them to the development of other characters who do not share in their hesitant tendencies.

The period of time in which Tolkien, Jordan, Goodkind, and Donaldson place their stories all share a similar characteristic: a world in decline, past the peak of its civilization. The idea of a past ‘golden age’ has become quite common in the fantasy world, as we see in LOTR, which takes place during the rise of men and the dissolution of magic. Elves are passing over the sea, wizards are disappearing from the world, the Entwives are lost, the Rings of Power will soon be destroyed. In short, at the end of the tale, much that is mystical in Middle Earth has been lost. The high civilization of Numenor is long past, nor will it ever come again. Both heroes and villains of the past are remembered as vastly more powerful than current ones. Even Sauron himself was a simple servant of the true enemy, Morgoth, in ages long past. A similar situation exists in WOT. The world in which Rand and his companions embark on their quest is placed thousands of years after a near apocalyptic event Jordan refers to as “the Breaking of the world”.

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The high level of technology and magic that existed in that ancient civilization far exceeds the quality of life observed in the culture in which Rand has been raised. Humans were blasted back into a primitive civilization by the Breaking, and are only slowly beginning to recover during the time of Rand. Magic has also sharply declined in the post-apocalyptic world, as men who can wield *saidin* are hated and feared, due to the inevitable madness awaiting them, and the amount of female Aes Sedai is greatly reduced in number compared to before the Breaking. The quality and strength of their magic is also lessened. Donaldson’s world follows upon this theme as well. Describing the present Lords, Foul proclaims “they have not mastered the seventh part of dead Kevin’s Lore” (*Lord Foul’s Bane*, 34). In turn, Goodkind remains loyal to the idea of magic as extremely less potent in the time of his characters as compared to the past, especially with the continual references to the vast wisdom of the old wizards and Emperor Jagang’s (the main antagonist) quest to annihilate magic from the world in preparation for the rise of mankind.

Closely tied in with this notion of a past golden age is the idea that the high civilizations were brought to an end as a direct result of some titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil, where very commonly a stalemate of sorts results in which evil is defeated but still manages to extract some catastrophic toll on the world. In *The Silmarillion* Sauron’s influence is finally purged from Numenor, but at the price of the total destruction of the Atlantis-like island nation, just as his defeat at the end of LOTR signals the end of much that is magical in Middle Earth. In WOT Lews Therin and his companions are successful in sealing away the Dark One thousands of years before Rand’s birth, but Baalzamon’s counterstroke taints *saidin*, consequently causing the Breaking of the world. When Lord Foul and Kevin the mythical hero spoke the Ritual of Desecration, the Land was destroyed and all but a remnant of humanity swept away. As Lord Foul tells Covenant at the beginning of his quest: “That folly brought the Age of the old Lords to
its ruin!” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 34). From these examples we can clearly trace a pattern of a semivictory over the Dark Lord figure that results in the decline of civilization.

The difference inherent in the fantasy world’s notion of the previous golden age compared to more standard tales is seen in the odd fact that although evil is defeated in the past, the world is still somehow lessened. Evil’s defeat does not necessarily signal a blossoming of civilization, but rather some sort of decline. In this we can see fantasy’s belief that evil is not so easily banished from the world; even when the physical manifestation of evil is destroyed, other forms persist is less obvious appearances. Perhaps such a trend in the fantasy world also serves as a warning against the use of drastic force to combat evil, for although good may eventually win with such weapons, the end result may be equally as horrific as the triumph of evil. Gandalf could easily seize the Ring and throw down Sauron, but such an act would lead to even greater evil.

Also directly related to the demise of the old civilizations is the passing of the more mystical elements from the world. The world of LOTR following the defeat of Sauron is, as mentioned above, much less magical. Men, hobbits, and dwarves (the least magical of the races in Middle Earth) will thrive in this new world. Such a pattern can be seen in other examples of fantasy. In the film Excalibur, Merlin shares an intimate scene with Arthur prior to the wizard’s imprisonment at the hands of Morgana where he tells the mournful king “it is a time for men and their things”. Merlin’s speech is designed to encourage Arthur and assure him that he can continue without the aid of his wizard companion, yet on a deeper level it signals the passing of the magical old ways and the rise of Christianity. Both Jordan and Goodkind follow the pattern as well, slowly eliminating (or playing down the importance of) many of the magical creatures
(Trollocs, Fades, night wisps) who were originally central to their stories but have became less and less vital in the later installments in the place of human protagonists and antagonists.

The power of language, or the spoken word, is a theme of vital importance for the fantasy genre. Perhaps originally thought of as requisite to the casting of magical spells, as in the form of an incantation or some such, the spoken word has progressed beyond such an equation into much broader applications. This is particularly true for Tolkien, enamored as he was of words and their origins, evident not only in the vast amount of poetry and song embellishing his work but in various examples where characters are cautious or cautioned regarding their choice of words. While still in Hobbiton, where matters are only beginning to turn dark and mysterious, Gandalf declines to read the lines written on the One Ring in their original tongue of Mordor, as if the very utterance of such words could bring ill fortune upon them all. Gildor’s reluctance to speak of the Nazgul, even in the company of such high and powerful elves, is based on a similar fear of dark speech. Later when Frodo jokes that he is becoming a wraith due to his lack of food, Strider vehemently rebukes the hobbit: “Do not speak of such things!” (LOTR 201). The “surprising earnestness” (201) with which Strider speaks is testament to the seriousness of the matter. Even in the seemingly invincible house of Bombadil, Merry and Pippen beg the master to delay the answer to Frodo’s question regarding the Willowman, to which Bombadil, despite his awesome powers, responds: “Now is the time for resting. Some things are ill to hear when the world’s in shadow” (LOTR 141). Bombadil’s own power, however, seems based in (or at least strongly associated with) his songs, as when he rescues the floundering hobbits from the den of the barrow wight with his cheerful melody. Thus, while the wrong words are feared as harbingers of bad luck, the proper ones can defeat some of the most powerful monsters in Middle Earth.
The most direct connection of the power of language to WOT was already covered in the previous chapter with our discussion regarding ‘naming the Dark One’, but the importance of the spoken word for Donaldson’s work, manifested mainly in Saltheart’s laughter, was but touched upon. While Saltheart is originally presented as a stalwart character whose laughter, serving as a defining characteristic of his entire race, is virtually omnipresent no matter the darkness of the hour, Covenant finds his giant friend much changed upon his third visit to the Land in the last book of the first trilogy, *The Power That Preserves*. Unable to partake in his emblematic laughter as a result of the slaughter of his race, Saltheart remains sadly lacking in character until his rebirth in the magma before Foul’s Creche, where he is purged of his horror. Made whole once again, Saltheart’s laughter (at Covenant’s request) initiates the subsequent humor of the ghostly Lords, who had just previously been urging Covenant to slay the defeated Foul:

“It was a gruesome sound at first; writhing in his fetters, Foamfollower spat out the laugh as if it were a curse ... But as Foamfollower fought to laugh, his muscles loosened ... Soon something like joy, something like real mirth, appeared in his voice ... The Lords responded ... They began to unclench their hate ... They were no longer laughing to express their outrage at Lord Foul ... they were laughing for the pure joy of laughing” (*The Power That Preserves*, 466-7).

It is this act of glee that ultimately defeats Foul, rather than the act of hate and vengeance the ghosts of the Lords were insisting Covenant partake in after he had Foul at his mercy.

Recognizing the power in the Giant’s laughter enables Covenant to deal Foul a blow far more potent than possible had he attempted to kill him through standard physical means. Foul’s defeat, subsequently concluding the first trilogy, is a superb showcase of the power of the spoken word, in this case exceeding even the power of physical action.
An extraordinarily complex topic to tackle in any genre of literature or walk of life is the role of fate. Fantasy proves no exception. Like many classical myths, the force known as fate shares a convoluted relationship with divine intervention, and it sometimes becomes extremely difficult to differentiate between the two. In Homer’s *Iliad*, for example, we are presented with a rather unclear cosmic hierarchy and are left uncertain upon the epic’s conclusion as to whether it is the immortals who dictate fate, or rather fate itself which mandates the path of the gods.

Likewise, the role of fate is sometimes indeterminate in fantasy novels, and the extent to which it is used is dependent on the overall style of the work. Some fantasy stories place a much greater emphasis on fate as a force independent of the gods and working under its own constraints. Others elect immortals as the ultimate force running the universe, while still other examples of fantasy intertwine the two in an elaborate union. We shall first consider the effectiveness of fate as a relatively autonomous force in various examples of fantasy and then proceed to explore the concept of divine intervention, showing how the two forces differ and yet overlap in various circumstances.

Both fate and the immortals play key roles in Tolkien’s work, yet in LOTR, which is primarily concerned with the happenings of Middle Earth (thereby excluding any activity of the Valar who live far to the west), fate seems to operate largely of its own volition, with but hints and phrases that a higher power (Iluvatar) may be truly dictating the action. For the most part, the influence of any benevolent deity has been removed from the world of LOTR, aside from Gandalf who is more properly an immortal servant of the gods than a deity himself. Yet, we cannot completely discount Iluvatar’s possible influence on the world he has created, however absent he may appear to be. Consider Gandalf’s explanation to Frodo of Bilbo’s unlikely discovery of the Ring:
“Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker.
I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you were also meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (LOTR 69).

An encouraging thought indeed, if it suggests the design of Iluvatar behind the affairs of the Ring. The fact that Gandalf delivers this theory is especially significant when we recall that, as a servant of the Valar, he may know something of their mind, or perhaps even comprehend some of the music of Iluvatar. However, speaking strictly from the information contained in Gandalf’s explanation to Frodo, it does seem that fate is operating on its own without any divine intervention.

Later, in his conversation with Frodo, the elven lord Gildor tells the young hobbit: “In this meeting there may be more than chance; but the purpose is not clear to me, and I fear to say too much” (LOTR 98). The significance of this statement lies in the timely rescue of Frodo and his companions by Gildor’s people, just as the helpless hobbits were about to be discovered by the Nazgul. Gildor recognizes that fate may have played a role in this, but as he is an elf and not a near-deity like Gandalf, his comprehension of such matters is limited. Shortly after, a bit of prophecy comes from Frodo’s closest companion Sam, speaking of his role in the quest:

“I don’t rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it through, sir, if you understand me” (LOTR 100).

Prophesy might be the last thing we would expect of Sam, as he is a very simple character, loyal without question to his master Frodo and fearless in the face of danger but not noted for wisdom or lore beyond knowledge of gardening or cooking. Yet Sam possesses a slow, deliberate mind
which proves incorruptible. As a result, Sam’s vision is unclouded and he often sees the clearest path when even the Wise are confounded. Sam’s strength lies in his simplicity and utter devotion to Frodo. Yet Sam is even less sure of the nature of his instincts than was Gildor. As a hobbit, Sam is of course not expected to comprehend prophecy or the workings of fate to anywhere near the extent that important folk like Gandalf or Gildor do. All Sam knows is that he must continue on the quest and stay by his master’s side. Why he understands this does not matter to him. He knows his duty, and that is sufficient for Sam.

Fate and divine intervention also form an intricate pattern in Donaldson’s work, yet upon the conclusion of the first trilogy we are informed that while Covenant was chosen by the Creator to save the Land, he was not in any way forced to do so. Nothing is set in stone for Covenant; he is “free to damn Earth and Land and Time and all” if he so chooses (The Power That Preserves, 472). Thus fate plays a less significant role in the Covenant series than in LOTR, yet still its influence makes a powerful impact on the work. By far the most vital manifestation of fate is Covenant’s personification as the reincarnation of Berek Halfhand, the mythical hero from the past who originated the Earthpower upon which the present Lords now depend. The fact that Covenant’s leprosy has eliminated two of the fingers on his right hand, thus equating him with the Land’s hero of legend, is too coincidental for fate not to have intervened.

Contrarily, fate in WOT and the Sword of Truth series plays a vastly more important role than divine intervention. The basic philosophy of Jordan’s world lies behind the concept of the Wheel of Time. The Wheel supposedly weaves the fate of every creature on the earth into an incredibly complex design, called the Pattern, which dictates the lives of all living things, similar to the ancient Greek conception of the three Fates who determine destiny with their weaving and
cutting of thread. As of the tenth book of the WOT series, we have yet to clearly see a direct intervention of any benevolent deity in the world of men. It seems that the Wheel of Time spins entirely on its own will. Moiraine often comments: “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills”. People must accept the path laid out for them if they wish to make something of their lives. The Wheel has spun out Rand as the Dragon Reborn, and as such he is destined to combat the Dark One at the Last Battle.

A major manifestation of fate lies in the Prophesies of the Dragon: the ancient texts which supposedly foretell the life of the Dragon Reborn and his battle against Shai’tan. Rand frequently refers to these texts in the later books of the series in order to determine the proper action he should take. The difficulty lies in the fact that the texts are often cryptic and vague, resulting in multiple interpretations for single sentences. In opposition to Rand’s reliance on the Prophecies as a guide for his actions, Richard Rahl in Goodkind’s work is strongly opposed to any form of prophecy, especially that which pertains to him, regardless of the importance most in the world place on those who can decipher prophecy’s twisted tellings. Richard rejects prophecy as worthless or even harmful, proclaiming that a man should be free to live his own life without being constrained by some outside force. Near the beginning of book six, before Richard surprisingly complies with a vision he has experienced, he reflects on his feelings regarding prophecy:

“Prophecy was always ambiguous and usually cryptic ... Unthinking adherence to a literal interpretation of prophecy had in the past caused great turmoil ... Prophecy, at least on the face of it, was predestination; Richard believed that man
created his own destiny ... Richard simply ignored what prophecy said and did as he believed he must” (*Faith of the Fallen*, 13).

Despite Richard’s protest, fate in the form of prophecy has proven every bit as vital to Goodkind’s work as it has to Jordan’s.

One of the most telling similarities between WOT and the *Sword of Truth* lies in a very specific manifestation of destiny which Jordan dubs “*ta’veren*” but Goodkind refers to as “the pebble in the pond”. In WOT, very rare individuals are designated as *ta’veren*. The Ogier Loial best describes the effects of a *ta’veren*:

“sometimes the Wheel bends a life-thread, or several life threads, in such a way that all the surrounding threads are forced to swirl around it, and those force other threads ... That first bending of the web, that is *ta’veren*, and there is nothing you can do to change it, not until the Pattern itself changes” (*Eye of the World*, 554).

Rand and his two closest companions, Perrin and Mat, are *ta’veren*, and are thus destined to drastically affect the lives of many in the world. Goodkind plays down the importance of this idea, largely dropping its usage or mention after the first couple books of his series, yet still cannot resist its inclusion in his work. In the Palace of Prophets, Richard is often referred to as “the pebble in the pond”: an idea similar to *ta’veren* in that while Richard may exist as only a small rock in a vast body of water, he generates waves that profoundly affect the rest of the world. In such an important manner does fate and destiny influence the worlds of Jordan and Goodkind.

The other side of the coin is dominated by divine intervention: the extent to which immortals directly interfere in the world of men to shape it as they will. As with the concept of fate, the presence and influence of gods is variable in fantasy literature, yet extremely rare is a
work with absolutely no mention of divine intervention on some level. In the previous chapter I mention how in many fantasies, some sort of Creator figure originally gives birth to the world and then largely disappears from the scene, leaving mankind to its own devices. Contrarily, the Creator’s counterbalance, the Dark Lord figure, is very much present in the world, often serving as the main antagonist. Such a pattern is followed by Tolkien with Iluvatar and Sauron, by Donaldson with his Creator figure and Lord Foul, by Jordan with the Creator and Baalzamon, and by Goodkind with the Creator and the Keeper. The most important consequence of leaving the evil deity in the world of men while removing his antithesis is that it pits mortal heroes against a being of vastly superior power. Even Tolkien’s immortal elves or Gandalf himself is no match for Sauron in a one-on-one brawl. But this is exactly the author’s intention. Because the Dark Lord figure is in fact a god of incredible power, the hero of the tale is automatically transformed into an underdog, thus endearing himself to the reader. As an underdog striving against seemingly insurmountable odds, the hero is fully able to showcase his heroic qualities. Had the hero begun the tale with power matching the Dark Lord figure, his exploits in the fight against evil would seem less heroic and the reader would no longer sympathize with a poor mortal trying to survive against an evil monster, but would rather view the situation as two titans struggling for control. This is the very reason why many authors depict their heroes as naive country bumpkins at the start of their tale. As such humble characters, the heroes quickly gain our sympathy in their struggle against the evil gods.

Assuredly the most profound example of divine intervention is the creation of the world, almost always taking place long before the time of the story. In Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, he describes the creation of the world as a sort of song composed by Iluvatar and his heavenly court, the Ainur:
“Iluvatar said to them: ‘Behold your music!’ And he showed them a vision, giving to them sight where before was only hearing; and they saw a new World made visible before them ... Iluvatar said again: ‘Behold your music! This is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find herein, amid the design that I set for you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added” (17).

The melody of the Ainur is flawed by the evil heart of Melkor, most powerful of deities next to Iluvatar himself, and it is for this reason that strife arises in the world created by that music. Very similar to this is the creation of the world in Donaldson’s work, described by Saltheart Foamfollower to Covenant as a great Rainbow forged by the Creator. However, like the music of Iluvatar, the Rainbow becomes flawed as a result of the Enemy (Lord Foul), who “had cast spite into the mortar of his creating” (Lord Foul’s Bane, 186). In his wrath at discovering the flaw, the Creator tore the Rainbow to shreds, unknowingly trapping his children (represented by stars in the sky) in the realm he had created. The Enemy, however, was also confined to the Land, as was Melkor forever bound to the earth he had helped to create and corrupt.

The world now completed by the Creator figure, rarely if at all does he directly influence the happenings of his land for a variety of reasons beyond the author’s intent of forcing mortal heroes to display their caliber against the Dark Lord. Iluvatar assigns the rule of the Earth to his once heavenly court (called on Earth the Valar), only interfering in extremely rare circumstances, such as his destruction of Numenor, which Sauron had corrupted and encouraged to make war on the Valar. By the time of LOTR, even the Valar have dropped out of the picture, leaving the inhabitants of Middle Earth to fight their own battles against Sauron. For different reasons entirely, Donaldson’s Creator makes an appearance at the end of the first trilogy after the defeat of Foul and explains his lack of interference:
“No, Thomas Covenant. I risked my trust in you. My own hands were bound. I could not touch the Earth to defend it without thereby undoing what I meant to preserve. Only a free man could stand against my Enemy, hope to preserve the Earth” (*The Power that Preserves*, 471).

Unlike Iluvatar, who chooses not to intervene for his own reasons, Donaldson’s Creator cannot interfere without destroying his creation. In Jordan’s WOT, the Creator has yet to make a definite appearance, and thus divine intervention plays a much less significant role than in Tolkien or Donaldson’s work.

Because the Creator is largely passive in these stories, often a mortal champion is elected as his representative on Earth to battle the evil Dark Lord. Thomas Covenant was, as we have seen, chosen by the Creator to combat Foul, who would have surely dominated the Land had Covenant not thwarted his plans. Yet the risk involved in the selection of Covenant is enormous to the Creator, for the wild magic contained in his white gold ring, while proving a key instrument in Foul’s defeat, would have enabled Foul to destroy the Land and rival the Creator had the evil god captured it. Gandalf, to a certain extent, also serves as an earthly representative of Iluvatar, seen most clearly in his description of his victory over the Balrog, after which he “strayed out of thought and time” yet “was sent back - for a brief time, until my task is done” (*LOTR*, 524). We must assume from this information that it is Iluvatar who sends Gandalf back to complete his battle against Sauron. However, we must also consider Tolkien’s assertion that “there is no ‘embodiment’ of the Creator anywhere in this story or mythology” (Carpenter 237). Thus we cannot equate Gandalf with a figure as strongly connected to the Creator as is Jesus or even Rand. Rand exists as a powerful delegate of his respective Creator, destined to battle Baalzamon and hopefully seal him back in his prison. Rand’s link to the Creator is further
strengthened by his connection to Lews Therin as a man who, like the Creator, once confined the Dark One from the world of men. Some even consider Rand more than a mortal man, like Masema the mad Prophet who fervently proclaims: “The blessed Lord Dragon is not as other men... He is the Light made flesh” (*The Path of Daggers*, 580). As the Dragon Reborn, Rand must continue in the tradition of the Creator and Lews Therin and combat the Dark One despite the improbability of prevailing against a god.

Differing from the works we have examined so far, polytheism reigns in the world of Conan, with no one Creator or Dark Lord figure present. Every man is free to choose his own god. Conan and his people, for instance, follow the god Crom, lord of the mountain who gives a man life and will but nothing else: a harsh god for a hard people. This does not mean Conan does not believe in the gods of other countries. Far from it, Conan is constantly battling against the demons and deities of other religions, often the Stygian god Set. In this respect, the gods in Conan’s world are similar to the gods of classical antiquity: figures that are constantly striving with one another but to whom ‘good and evil’ are difficult terms to attach.

An interesting theme played out in various ways throughout fantasy literature is the afterlife. Tolkien’s afterlife is somewhat reminiscent of Hades. Slain elves are forever assigned to the halls of Mandos, caretaker of the dead. The ultimate fate of men, however, is left unclear in Middle Earth. Even more similar to the classical conception is the afterlife presented by Goodkind. All souls are subject to the Keeper, yet those deemed worthy by the Creator (apparently) are designated “the good spirits” upon death and reside in a paradise similar to the Elysian fields of Greek and Roman myth. WOT and the Covenant series favor instead the idea of reincarnation, seen in the rebirth of Rand as the Dragon and Covenant as Berek Halfhand. Other mythical heroes in WOT, such as Birgitte or Artur Hawkwing, share Rand’s fate of
continual reincarnation, bound to the Wheel, as it is called by Jordan. While somewhat vague in
depiction, the Conan series seems to harken to the Norse image of the afterlife, evident in
Conan’s reference to his death in the movie *Conan the Barbarian*, where he explains that if he
fails to recite the Law of Steel to Crom upon his death, the god will “laugh at me and cast me out
of Valhalla”. A customary Conanian farewell on the eve of a battle would have the Cimmerian
savage bidding a friend to “take a pull on the Hellhorn, an you get there before me”, apparently
referring to the announcement of a warrior to the land of the dead. We can see then that the
conception of the afterlife is extremely variable in different fantasy stories, coming from a
variety of sources.

The final aspect of the immortal world to be here considered involves the concept of
absolute evil. We all know the common characteristics of the Dark Lord figure associated with
evil: cruel, greedy, violent characters who are inherently opposed to the forces of good,
represented by the hero of the tale. But how evil are these Dark Lords? Are they the ultimate
manifestation of malfeasance? Perhaps they were once good characters who fell into depravity.
Or maybe they are simply extremely powerful figures with evil tendencies but who are not
designed to represent supreme vice. As with the concept of the afterlife, the answer varies from
story to story. To the surprise of some who have not read *The Silmarillion*, Sauron does not
represent all that is bad in the world. In a letter, Tolkien elucidates:

“I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero.
I do not think any ‘rational being’ is wholly evil. Satan fell. In my myth Morgoth
fell before Creation of the physical world. In my story Sauron represents as near an
approach to wholly evil will as is possible” (Carpenter 243).
Sauron, like Satan in the Christian belief, was once an angel. He is not absolutely evil in Tolkien’s story, only very close. Also like Satan, however powerful Sauron may appear to be, he is insignificant next to the might of the Creator, and thus cannot serve as his true antithesis. In other fantasies, such as WOT, *Sword of Truth*, and the Covenant novels, absolute evil is very much extant. The Dark Lords in these works are presented as eternally evil; they were never children of the Creator as was Morgoth of Iluvatar, but rather always existed as the Enemy. Also unlike Sauron or Morgoth, they are given very nearly as much power as the Creator himself. To be fair, it does seem that in WOT and the Covenant series the Creator has a bit of an advantage over the Dark Lord, as it was he who placed the Enemy in his prison in the first place. Yet there is always the danger that these evil figures will break free of their jails and throw down the Creator in a reversal of fortune. Such a possibility does not exist in LOTR. Sauron could be the lord of the world should he recover the Ring, but he could never challenge Iluvatar the way Foul could rival the Creator.

A common theme previously alluded to involves the rise of a simple character to a figure of either great power (Rand or Richard) or great importance (Frodo or Covenant). Referred to by Tolkien as “the ennoblement (or sanctification) or the humble” (Carpenter 237), this is the thread that ties together so many fantastic protagonists and makes them so endearing to the reader. Also, because the characters begin their tales innocent and inexperienced, it leaves tremendous room for character development as the adventure progresses. This development can advance in any way the author sees fit. Frodo, for example, while significantly altered by his quest to the point where he must leave Middle Earth entirely, never abandons or betrays his kind and gentle nature. The destruction of the Ring is ultimately achieved not because of any great strength or wisdom on the part of Frodo, but as a result of his mercy in sparing Gollum’s life, as
it is the ruined hobbit who is truly responsible for the Ring’s unmaking. Tolkien explains: “In this case the cause (not the ‘hero’) was triumphant, because by the exercise of pity, mercy, and forgiveness of injury ... disaster was averted” (Carpenter 252).

Differing completely from Frodo is Rand, whose development into a hard, unforgiving character has become a point of great concern in the later books. Discussing the situation in book eight, the Aes Sedai Cadsuane engages the Aiel Wise Woman Sorilea:

‘‘Do you believe a man must be hard?’ she asked... ‘Or strong?’ By her tone, she left no doubt she saw a difference... ‘Most men see the two as one and the same,

Cadsuane Melaidhrin. Strong endures; hard shatters’’ (The Path of Daggers, 279).

Once the two realize they are of the same mind regarding Rand’s faults, they become “bound as one, to teach Rand al’Thor laughter and tears” (The Path of Daggers, 280). Whether the two will succeed in their endeavor, which could ultimately bring Rand back from the brink of madness, is yet to be seen. Comparing Rand’s hardening to Frodo’s enduring kindness emphatically displays the differing ways in which two originally similar character can develop, based on the events in their lives and the very nature of their souls.

The ‘king in disguise’ motif is a common theme played out in many forms of fiction, fantasy being no exception. Most famously for the fantasy world is certainly Aragorn in LOTR as the true king of Gondor under the guise of a travel-stained Ranger. His direct reflection in WOT (as we saw in chapter four) is Lan, Moiraine’s Warder who is eventually revealed as king of lost Malkier. Both of these figures probably owe some of their character to the Odyssey, when Odysseus king of Ithaca returns to his homeland arrayed as a beggar. In a touching scene, Athena momentarily transforms Odysseus back to his true self so that Telemachos might recognize his father:
“his chest turned bright and clean; she increased his strength and stature. His dark color came back to him again, his jaw firmed, and the beard that grew about his chin turned black” (Lattimore 174-6).

Compare this to the scene in LOTR when the company approaches the Argonath: enormous statues of Aragorn’s ancestors:

“In the stern sat Aragorn son of Arathorn, proud and erect... his hood was cast back, and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, a light was in his eyes: a king returning from exile to his own land” (LOTR 413).

Both men cast off their weary countenance upon return to their homeland. Lan’s viewing of his own country is quite different, “his face as lacking in emotion as a stone” as he surveys the ruins of Malkier (Eye of the World, 727). If Lan’s return as a king is to be as fully consummated as is Aragorn’s and the people of the Borderlands to once again rally behind Malkier’s banner, Jordan has yet to write it.

In our last topic for this section we will take a look at an absolutely integral part of the fantasy equation: the differing systems of magic and the manner in which they operate. The complexity and technicality of magic varies with the work, ranging from vague and obscure (as in LOTR) to a precision very nearly lending the story a scifi classification (as in WOT). We have already seen in chapter two how LOTR and WOT exist on opposite ends of the spectrum when considering the complexity of magic, but what about some of the other major fantasy works? Where do they lie in this spectrum? Tending more towards the mysterious than the explicit is the magic in Donaldson’s work. The Land is suffused with a multitude of magical forms, many seemingly distinct to a particular species. Ur-viles possess a certain unique dark magic, intensified by their peculiar battle formation of the wedge. Equally particular is the
magic of the Wraiths Covenant encounters during his first trip to Revelstone. Both the Woodhelvennin and Stonedowners practice their own forms of magic, largely revolving around wood and stone. The Lords of Revelstone, as defenders of the Land, work to master Kevin’s Lore, the Earthpower that has combated Foul for centuries. And strangest of all is Covenant’s wild magic, completely foreign to the Land and virtually uncontrollable by Covenant himself. None of these systems is explained by Donaldson. We are left uncertain as to how they operate, the limitations of their power, and the requirements for that magic to work.

The *Sword of Truth* series, existing in this respect as a weak reflection of WOT, seeks to emulate the vividly depicted interaction of *saidin* and *saidar* in Jordan’s work by replacing them with the force Goodkind calls “Han”. While similar in theory, Goodkind ultimately fails (or chooses not) to continue his paralleling of Jordan’s magic by ceasing to further develop his concept of Han after the first few books of the series. Offering a rather unique perspective on the workings of magic are the writings of Modesitt, whose world of Recluse operates around his “order” and “chaos” magic. Turning the common motif of the color black as associated with evil (the ‘Dark’ Lord figure) on its head, Modesitt instead associates black with order magic and white with chaos. Thus, most of the heroes in the series, such as Lerris from *The Magic of Recluse*, eventually become wielders of the black order magic, associated with construction and healing, whereas many of the antagonists are white chaos masters, analogous with death and destruction. Because Modesitt exerts an enormous effort in his explanation of Recluse’s magic, his design nearly rivals the complexity of WOT, which remains as probably the greatest system of magic ever seen in the fantastic world.
5.2 Styles

In the second section of this chapter we will take a very brief look at some of the styles permeating fantasy literature. While almost every author partakes in fantasy’s inherently rich imagery and otherworldly elements, they can differ enormously in other aspects, thus creating a wonderful array of styles that continually renew and refresh the genre.

An important stylistic component to consider in any genre of fiction is the narrative differences between works. Rarely in fantasy do we see a first person perspective, Modesitt’s work being one of the few exceptions. Most often a third person narrator is employed as the teller of the tale. The particulars of such an approach can vary greatly. Tolkien makes use of a third person omniscient narrator: a story-teller who is not anywhere seen in the tale but who seems to possess an intimate knowledge of the tiniest details, extending even into the characters’ minds in order to accurately depict their thoughts to the anxious audience. This is by far the most common form of narrative approach. More recent fantasy authors have built upon Tolkien’s method, creating a fascinating form resembling stream of consciousness that is able to alter its format according to the character in question. Of this form Robert Jordan is surely the master. The later books of the WOT series make extensive use of this style with a quality unrivaled anywhere in the fantasy world. Jordan’s approach is notable: he selects a character at the beginning of each chapter who the reader will use as a conduit to the events taking place, riding in the back of that character’s thoughts for the duration of the chapter. The diction and syntax of the chapter is totally dependent on which character the reader is currently seeing through. A chapter through the eyes of Rand, for example, will be filled with a bleak desperateness and the insane rambling of Lews Therin, residing as a disembodied voice inside
Rand’s head. A chapter courtesy of Elayne or Nynaeve will most likely consist of their typical whining regarding Sea Folk or other Aes Sedai and a generally male-unfriendly thought process. Viewing a chapter with a Forsaken guide will be an exceedingly dark, mysterious, and oftentimes gruesome experience, supplemented by unfamiliar words from the Age of Legends commonly utilized by the Forsaken. In Jordan’s writing, we are not simply told a character is evil by some immaterial narrator. We are able to actually see the world through that character’s eyes and hear his thoughts, determining for ourselves the extent of that evil. In fact, the only time (in the later books) that a truly impartial narrator is implemented is during either the epilogue or the first few paragraphs of chapter one, where a wind blows from some undetermined location and latches onto a certain character, who will consequently serve as the reader’s first guide of the book.

Terry Goodkind also makes great use of such a style, but lacks the force and narrative variation with which Jordan instills his work.

On the surface, differing styles within the fantasy fiction genre may appear to have little to do with the video gaming world. Yet as electronic games have developed over the years with ever improving graphics and play control, the underlying stories behind adventure and role-playing games have also grown increasingly more complex and intricate. Players are no longer satisfied with games that appear to have no rhyme or reason to the action; they want to understand exactly why they are venturing into a dark dungeon or battling a gigantic frog monster. Thus, the style of the story writers has improved vastly from the early days of video gaming. In the old Final Fantasy game the player is presented with a background story easily fitting on one page, yet in the recently released Warcraft 3 the preliminary plot fills nearly fifty pages of the instruction manual. So vital has the plot become to the video gaming industry that some games, like the Diablo series, have even spawned entire books based on their original
story. Such books are detailed enough to survive completely unconnected to their mother game as legitimate works of fantasy in themselves.

The role of women in any fiction remains a favorite topic of many readers, particularly in relation to fantasy, which is often criticized as an overwhelmingly male dominated genre, both in writers and readers (an observation possessing a certain validity for reasons that I won’t begin to discuss). Indeed, one of the few criticisms commonly cited about Tolkien’s work revolves around the seemingly insignificant role he allots to women. In Harold Bloom’s collection of critiques on Tolkien is contained a short piece by Catherine Stimpson, who blasts Tolkien for what she believes is a terrible usage of the female character:

“Tolkien is irritatingly, blandly, traditionally masculine. Not only does he apparently place more faith in battles than in persuasion, but he makes his women ... the most hackneyed of stereotypes ... Most often women are just ignored, unless ... a necessarily fillip for the plot” (171).

Fair enough, although Tolkien would assuredly have much to say in reply, no doubt defending the ‘vital’ roles of figures like Galadriel and Eowyn (they are, in fact, less crucial than Tolkien would have us believe). Le Sprague de Camp takes up the gauntlet in defense of Tolkien, commenting on his lack on feminine inclusion:

“Women’s Lib not withstanding, it is a fact that men have, throughout history, lived on an average more active, adventurous lives than women ... It is only logical that adventurous fiction should reflect this fact” (242).

Regardless of whether or not he was justified in doing so, it is fairly well agreed upon that Tolkien makes minimal use of women in his tales.
Such a tendency has changed radically in more modern fantasy fiction. The Aes Sedai in Jordan’s work represent the culmination of this reversal. The fact that only women in the world of WOT can safely wield their magic without going mad gives them enormous power over pretty much everyone in the world. Even queens bow to Aes Sedai. The Amyrlin Seat, as the leader of the Aes Sedai, is recognized the world over as the most powerful single figure anywhere; that is, of course, until Rand announces himself the Dragon Reborn, thus turning the world on its head. Aes Sedai can (and frequently do) send servants fleeing with but a look and can bind the strongest man with a simple flow of air, rendering him completely at their mercy. The importance of women is likewise carried over into the Sword of Truth series, most tellingly in Richard’s wife Kahlan who, as the Mother Confessor, represents the most powerful person in the Midlands. As reflections of Aes Sedai, the Sisters of Light also carry a certain amount of prestige, though not nearly as much as Aes Sedai due to their counterbalance in the male wizards under their tutelage.

A second criticism regarding Tolkien’s dealings with women is centered around the romances presented in LOTR. Compared to other fantasies, both before and after his, Tolkien is rather prudish in his depiction of male-female relationships. The only real romances (Aragorn and Arwen, Faramir and Eowyn, Sam and Rosie) are given but passing attention. We certainly are not presented with any of the sexually graphic imagery seen in other fantasies. In this one respect does Goodkind’s work far outstrip Jordan’s. Romances and sexual situations are dealt with mildly in WOT, existing in much greater detail than in LOTR, but never approaching the explicitness seen in the Sword of Truth, where the descriptions of Richard and Kahlan’s sex life often seem to belong more properly in a romance novel than a fantasy fiction. The ‘crudity’ of the Conan novels in this regard seems to me the most suited for fantasy adventure: neither
lacking the proper attention due sexual situations (as in LOTR) nor supplying excessively graphic details (as in Sword of Truth). In relation to WOT, the best way to describe the Conanian manner of dealing with women would be to take the mannerisms of Mat, Rand’s roguish childhood friend with an eye for the ladies, and multiply them severalfold. Consider the second chapter of Conan the Invincible, by Robert Jordan. Within the space of eight pages, Conan rises from bed with a tavern whore, kills three men in a bar fight, and finally “settled down to serious drinking” (26). Try to imagine Aragorn in such a situation. Impossible? Most assuredly, and in this we can see the vast difference between Tolkien prudishness and Conanian debauchery.

The clear-cut good and evil forces in Tolkien’s work exist as a third stylistic approach on which he has been constantly criticized, albeit somewhat unfairly. True, it is simple to recognize many heroes and villains in the tale, but what about Gollum, the twisted yet not wholly evil creature who proves the savior of the entire quest? How about Boromir, who is at heart an honorable man yet succumbs to the Ring and betrays his companions? These characters, among others, throw a bit of a curve into the straight line between good and evil that many critics attempt to draw in Tolkien’s work. However, the ambiguity of good and evil has certainly increased in more recent fantasy, presenting readers with engaging conundrums such as the hero/antihero qualities of Covenant or the similarities to both Jesus and Satan manifest in Rand’s character. In the first book of Goodkind’s series, Richard’s grandfather Zedd explains to his reluctant grandson the nature of evil, using Darken Rahl (Richard’s evil father) as an example:

“Darken Rahl does the things he does because he thinks them right, just as you do the things you do because you think them right. The two of you are more the same
in that than you think ... In your eyes he is evil, but to his eyes, you are the one who is evil. It’s all just perception" (Wizard’s First Rule, 128).

Zedd’s explanation perfectly embodies this obscurity between good and evil in modern fantasy. Unlike Tolkien, many of these more recent authors make the reader decide on their own which characters are truly evil and which good, or at least to what magnitude that good or evil extends.

5.3 Parallel Story Lines

In the last section of this chapter are discussed some specific connections between the plot of LOTR and various modern fantasies. These connections are often very basic, existing as similar locations or developments in the plot that are obviously modeled after Tolkien’s story. In such ways can we see Tolkien’s influence on a fundamental level, not in some ancient motif or character mold, but in very particularly Tolkien elements.

I have mentioned several times the humble beginnings of many of the main heroes in the fantasies we have been discussing, but the actual similarities manifested in these beginnings are striking, especially between LOTR and WOT. Frodo, Rand, Richard, and even Covenant (to a certain extent) all begin their respective tales in a small farming community. This could be just coincidence, but such an event is unlikely. WOT takes the Tolkien parallel the furthest with respect to beginnings of the tale. For example, the seemingly insignificant fact that The Two Rivers is noted only for the excellent tabac (a weed similar to tobacco) it exports, is just too similar to the Shire, famous for its pipe-weed. As Merry Brandybuck tells us: “This [pipe-weed] is the only art that we can certainty claim to be our own invention” (LOTR 20). It is unlikely Jordan would pick such a particular agricultural item that his hero’s small home town would be
noted for if he was not hinting at a Tolkien influence. Also very curious is the fact that Jordan begins his tale with a great festival known as Bel Tine with a particular emphasis on the fireworks that will be present, just as Tolkien begins LOTR with Bilbo’s birthday, during which Gandalf performs some of his magical fireworks for which he has become famous around the Shire. Finally, we can see a gift from the father figure in both tales. Just as Bilbo leaves the Ring to Frodo with the intention that it will aid him during his life, so does Tam bestow his magic sword on Rand so that he may be armed during his quest.

The early plot regarding enemy movement is also very similar between LOTR, WOT and Sword of Truth. In all three cases, the hero is driven from his quiet homeland because of a massive search undertaken by the Dark Lord figure. Sensing that the hero possesses something of great power or importance (Frodo having the Ring, Rand as the Dragon Reborn, and Richard as the only living person with a knowledge of the Book of Counted Shadows), the enemy sends forth his minions to search for and capture these characters. Also significant is that when the heroes finally leave their hometowns and are set in their quests, it is decided that success lies not in strength or numbers, but rather in secrecy. Thus, the fellowship of the Ring is limited to nine, Rand’s original party consists of eight members (Nynaeve’s eventual inclusion makes nine, mirroring Tolkien once again), and much of Richard’s initial adventure is undertaken by him and Kahlan alone. During the selection of the nine, Elrond tells Frodo: “the numbers must be few, since your hope is in speed and secrecy. Had I a host of Elves in armour of the Elder Days, it would avail little, save to arouse the power of Mordor” (LOTR 292). As a result of such scant numbers, the heroes selected are given a much greater opportunity to display their heroic talents than if surrounded by a whole host of allies. In this respect, the small number of companions functions just as does the lack of the Creator figure to combat the Dark Lord - allowing the
mortal heroes the chance to battle against overwhelming odds, and in so doing prove their mettle.

An important lesson learned late by the hobbits during the scouring of the Shire is that after an adventure of such grand proportions, it is impossible to return to one’s previously simple life. The world has progressed while the hobbits were away, and they find the Shire much altered upon their return. Even after the corruption has been cleansed from their homeland, matters are never the same as they were before the Ring quest, seen most tellingly in the dark pain carried by Frodo as a result of the Morgul knife wound. We see this idea also carried out in WOT when Perrin returns to the Two Rivers in book four to defend his homeland against a Trolloc invasion. As much as he tries to discourage it, the town drastically changes after Perrin successfully leads the defense, adopting him as their lord and even building him a manor house of sorts. Like Perrin, who dreams of being just a simple blacksmith instead of ‘Lord of the Two Rivers’, Richard wants nothing more than to return to his life a woods guide, rather than serve as Lord of D’hara. But just as Frodo and Perrin discover, Richard cannot revert to his past life now that he experienced so much of the outside world. When he does attempt to reenter his old life in book six, he is rejected by his townsfolk and driven into the mountains, signifying quite clearly that he must accept his new role in life without whimsically wishing for days gone by.

In addition to The Two Rivers and Westland (Richard’s homeland) resembling the Shire in certain aspects, many other specific locations in Middle Earth are reflected in later fantasy works. The forest of Fangorn, home of the Ents, is closely mirrored in the Covenant series by the wood of Morinmoss. Just as Legolas comments that in Fangorn “there is watchfulness, and anger” (LOTR 512), so does Lord Prothall caution Covenant: “the power of Morinmoss could crush a thousand thousand men if the trees were pained into wakefulness” (Lord Foul’s Bane,
Both forests are places of mystery and danger, perhaps not exactly perilous for a traveler of pure intentions, but neither exactly safe, as many of the trees hold no love for those they consider murderers of their kind. In WOT, the closest reflection of Fangorn is seen in the Ogier stedding, places of great age and enormous growth where trees are held in reverence. The trees in a stedding are not alive in the way they are in Fangorn or Morinmoss, yet the Ogier care for them with the same protective instincts that the Ents do for their own trees.

Geographically speaking, the shape of the land in various fantasy works is surprisingly similar. Generally, the hero begins his quest in the western region of the map; a quiet land usually closely bordered by a large sea to the west and mountains of some sort to the immediate east. His ultimate destination lies far to the east, where most often the enemy / Dark Lord of the tale resides (see the maps at the end of this chapter). This basic layout is seen first in the design of Middle Earth and consequently serves as a model for the nearly identical geography of the worlds of Donaldson, Goodkind, and Jordan. Tolkien’s conception of the far east as the seat of evil and the western shores of the continent as the home of the hero can be seen as just another concept in his work that has been so closely followed by subsequent authors.

The evil land of Mordor is reflected in WOT by an area known as The Blasted Lands and in the Land by Foul’s Creche. Shortly after his capture by Frodo and Sam, Gollum describes Mordor with his usual eloquence: “Ashes, ashes, and dust, and thirst there is; and pits, pits, pits, and Orcs, thousands of Orcses” (LOTR 640). Later, Sam and Frodo are privileged to experience Mordor first hand: “Between them and the smoking mountain, and about it north and south, all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked” (LOTR 958). These descriptions (aside from the Orcses) could be almost interchanged with descriptions of the Blasted Lands, the area
surrounding Shayol Ghul, the Dark One’s prison. Likewise is Foul’s Creche a land of death and morbidity, reflecting perfectly the demeanor of its evil master.

Other locations from LOTR are used as models for specific stopping points during the hero’s journey. Bree, for instance, serves as the first ‘big city’ in which the hobbits rest from their journey. In WOT, Bree is recast as Baerlon, the largest collection of humanity that Rand and his friends have ever seen, yet paling in comparison to real cities such as Caemlyn or Tear, just as Bree is insignificant next to Rivendell or Rohan. Even more explicit is the connection between Minas Tirith and Fal Dara. In LOTR, Minas Tirith stands as the last vestige of humanity before the horror of Mordor, existing as a buffer that has protected the world from Sauron’s malicious intent for hundreds of years. It also serves as a last resting point for many of the heroes in LOTR before they march to Mordor. Likewise, Fal Dara, the capital city of Shienar, is a great fortress constantly at war with the evil forces streaming out of the Blasted Lands. Lying directly on the path from Tarwin’s Gap, Fal Dara is the first city encountered if traveling out of the Blasted Lands, and thus protects the rest of the world from Baalzamon and his minions. Also like Minas Tirith, Rand and his party use Fal Dara as their last stop before their ultimate goal, residing deep in the Blight where no cities exist.

A final specific connection between LOTR and WOT turns up in book two when Rand and his party approach an inn with a name very familiar to a Tolkien audience. Jordan playfully entitles the chapter “The Nine Rings”: consequently also the name of the inn. When a fantasy-loving audience hears the number ‘nine’ directly followed by ‘rings’ of course they are going to be reminded of the nine Ringwraiths, the servant of Sauron who each possess a ring of power and remain perhaps the most memorable villains in the story. As if this were not enough, Jordan emphasizes the point with Rand’s narration concerning the inn:
“Rand swung down with a smile and tied Red to one of the hitching posts out front.

‘The Nine Rings’ had been one of his favorite adventure stories when he was a boy; he supposed it still was” (The Great Hunt, 306).

With this slightly mischievous allusion Jordan is openly proclaiming Tolkien’s influence on his work for those who had perhaps missed some of the earlier connection between Tolkien motifs and ones implemented by Jordan.

In this chapter we have examined some of the most important archetypal themes for fantasy literature, not only in the ways they have been in continual use but also in the manner and extent to which they have been altered. Many motifs utilized (or created) by Tolkien have been preserved over the years and carried over into recent fictions, while others have been expanded upon or modified dramatically. The next chapter will conclude our discussion of archetypal patterns, where I will tackle the subject of common images and symbols used throughout the history of fantasy.
Map of Middle Earth
Fig 5.2

...and reaches enemy in east

Goodkind's world
Fig 5.3

Hero's home

Enemy's abode and hero's final destination

The land in WOT
Fig 5.4

Rand's home

The Dark One's home
Chapter 6: Symbols and Images

"Callandor, hanging hilt down in midair, waiting for no hand but that of the Dragon Reborn. As it revolved, it broke what little light there was into splinters, and now and then it flared as if with a light of its own. Calling him. Waiting for him."

- Callandor, the Sword That Is Not a sword, as observed by Rand al’Thor, the Dragon Reborn

Symbols and images have proven two of the most vital components of the fantasy realm, linking modern fantasy with its predecessors as far back as antiquity with a strength at least equal to character or thematic connections. For much of fantasy, magical symbols lie at the very heart of the tale, intimately merged with the characters and themes in such a manner that it would be impossible to remove one from the other without serious repercussions. Where would The Lord of the Rings be without the One Ring, or Thomas Covenant without his white gold ring? How about Arthur without Excalibur or Perceval without the Grail? Zeus without his lightning bolts or Herakles without his club and lion skin? Perhaps these stories and legends could exist without their defining symbols, but their entire meanings would be drastically altered. The One Ring serves not simply as a device for the plot, but as the most explicit manifestation of the danger associated with power, as seen in our investigation of themes. Excalibur is not just a magic sword, but in many stories exists as proof of Arthur’s birthright and allows him to succeed to the throne. Such images (and those subsequently based on them) are as integral to the work as are the characters who make use of them. Like characters and themes, many of the most popular images have endured over the centuries in the form of myth and legend, eventually finding their way into modern fantasy with much of their original connotation intact. This chapter is concerned with an investigation of specific images recurrent throughout fantasy literature, magic
rings and swords included as the most significant. Because magical symbols abound in the fantasy realm, I shall trace only the path of a very few in the hope of focusing in on these selections rather than engaging in a vague discussion of numerous images.

The symbol of the magic ring has been designated by some as one of the most prolific images not only in fantastic legend, but in actual historical events. Magic rings are vitally important to the works of Tolkien, Donaldson, and even Jordan (to an extent), but the history of the ring as a symbol of power begins thousands of years before LOTR was even begun. In his chapter ‘War of the Rings’, David Day traces the importance of the ring throughout the history of the western world. Citing some telling examples of the power the ring symbol held over people, Day includes the use of the ring to determine emperors of Rome, its association with sorcery in 14th century England and 16th century Holland, and its miraculous appearance at a state dinner in the Republic of Venice as a premonition of disaster for the nation. Day’s point is that throughout history rings have been held as magical objects capable of witchcraft, alchemy, and perhaps most importantly, prophecy and divination. Due to the prevalence of such beliefs, the power of rings was carried over into the myths and legends of many cultures, there thriving as one of the most popular and commonly used symbols among a myriad of magical objects. Speaking on the dominance of the ring symbol over any other single emblem, Day states:

“If these surviving pagan beliefs were to be represented by any single image in the way that Christianity is represented by the Cross, there is no doubt that that single image was the ring” (34).

Thus, just as the Cross is by far the most characteristic image of the Christian belief, so is the ring the greatest of all fantastic symbols.
Often intertwined with the use of the ring in a legend is the so-called ‘ring quest’: a pattern of events and characters revolving around a magical ring and a hero’s pursuit of it. Day lists these vital elements, including “the magician, the smith, the warrior, the sword, the dwarf, the maiden, the treasure, and the dragon” (27). The use of these figures and symbols, as in the Volsung Saga, might proceed in an abbreviated version as thus: a magical ring is crafted by a dwarvish smith and somehow becomes the possession of a fierce dragon. A great warrior wielding a magic sword defeats the dragon, rescues a maiden, and seizes the ring and other treasure from the dragon’s horde as his own. Of course, variations occur from tale to tale, but many such legends share the same basic format. As versed as he was in medieval and pre-medieval legend, Tolkien’s ring quest in LOTR contains virtually every element commonly seen in the ring legends of Europe. However, as we shall see a little later on, the LOTR ring quest, while sharing all the same elements, is fundamentally opposed to ring stories of many cultures.

In more recent times many requisites of the ring quest have been dropped. The white gold ring of Donaldson’s story, while remaining the central image of the work, is not part of the typical ring quest. Perhaps Donaldson viewed the quintessential ring quest elements as too restrictive, wishing rather to utilize the ring symbol without adhering to its common associates. He includes no dragon, no smith or dwarf, no treasure, no sword, and really no warrior (unless one wishes to stretch Covenant’s character into a weak champion). The only true element that has survived from the old ring quest stories is the ring itself, and even that is more properly based on the writings of Tolkien, who changes the ring from an object actively sought after by the hero to one he ventures to dispose of. This reversal of the ring into an evil image is seen in Covenant’s ring by the incredible yet uncontrollable power it grants the reluctant antihero, as well as the potential for disaster should Foul gain mastery of the ring.
Day tells us that “no people in history were as obsessed with the power of the ring as the Vikings” (29). Consequently, no culture’s ring tradition was as influential on Tolkien as was the Vikings’. It was in the Viking culture that the ring quest motif was brought to its fullest manifestation. “Virtually all subsequent ring quest tales in myth and fiction are deeply indebted to the Norse myths” (Day 30). This holds true for Tolkien. He claims that his Ring is “in a certain way ‘der Nibelungen Ring’” (Carpenter 306), or the ring of the Nibelungs, but in reality Tolkien’s Ring is largely based on Draupnir, the magical ring of the Norse god Odin. Draupnir has the power to magically create eight other golden rings of equal weight every nine days, thus giving Odin not only control of the Nine Worlds, but also nearly infinite wealth (Day 42). Many of the rings are dispensed by Odin to lesser gods and mortal heroes as signs of favor, thus making Odin as much a Lord of the Rings as is Sauron in Tolkien’s work. Like the domination of Sauron’s One Ring over all other lesser rings, Draupnir remains the master over all its offspring.

While Draupnir and the Norse culture remain the greatest contributors to Tolkien’s work, specifically with the image of the ring, certain Biblical connection also exist in this respect. Indeed, Day claims that aside from the philosophical comparisons (involving good and evil, the creation of the world, etc.) “the strongest links between biblical legend and Tolkien’s tales relate to the belief in the power of rings” (127). To back his claim, Day cites the example of Solomon’s ring, which he puts forth as the most similar to Tolkien’s Ring in any ring legend anywhere with its power to corrupt its master regardless of his moral superiority. In such examples we can clearly see that the belief in magic rings was prevalent in a multitude of cultures, many of which Tolkien took into account with his One Ring.
Tolkien’s revolution of the ring quest (alluded to above) lies in his reversed presentation of the Ring as compared to standard ring quests. If LOTR were a more typical ring story, Sauron would regain his rightful Ring by journeying into a hellish land and defeating the thief who had stolen his property, thus restoring peace and stability to the world. Obviously, quite a different situation exists in LOTR, where Sauron actually resides in a hellish region (Mordor), and his regaining of the Ring would signal destruction and chaos for the world. Furthermore, the ‘thief’ of the Ring (Frodo) does not wish to horde his treasure and exploit its powers, but rather to dissolve the Ring in the fires of Mt. Doom. Thus, the entire ring quest is not to regain a ring, but rather to destroy one.

It is possible that with this dramatic and extraordinarily powerful reversal of the ring quest tradition that had survived for hundreds of years Tolkien effectively weakened the motif to the point that a true ring quest in modern fantasy is a rare occurrence indeed, perhaps even a no longer existent one. This is seen very well in Donaldson’s work, where a magical ring is certainly present, yet glaringly lacking are other ring quest elements. In WOT, magic rings really only serve as enhancers of power (angreal) with none of the inimitability of Tolkien’s or Donaldson’s ring. WOT rings can assuredly prove dangerous, granting their wielder great power, but they exist as separate symbols in themselves, not intertwined with other necessary elements as in a classic ring quest. So potent is Tolkien’s depiction of the Ring that it far outshines the other essential constituents of a true ring quest also contained in his work. As a result, the use of the ring as a symbol of power and danger has been greatly promoted by subsequent authors, while its association with elements like dragons, smiths, dwarves and swords has been largely forgone. The ring itself remains; the ring quest has been nearly killed.
Closely related to the ring image is the ancient symbol for eternity, often depicted as a serpent biting its own tail and thus forming a closed loop. The serpent loop is called the Ouroboros, existing in a host of mythologies: “the Babylonian serpent called Ea, the Greek Ophion, the Hindu Sheshna, the Chinese Naga, and the Norse Jormangand” (Day 147). So powerfully does Day believe in the connection between the Ouroboros and the ring that the cover of his book is adorned with an illustration of a snake coiled around a golden ring, forming a double circle (see Fig 6.6). The Ouroboros is believed in many mythologies to be an ancient figure that encircles the Earth or universe, eventually coming back on itself to bite its own tail, thus forming the boundary of existence. Sometimes depicted as a simple circle, as in Day’s presentation, the Ouroboros can also take on the appearance of a figure eight lying on its side, consequently the symbol for infinity.

The Ouroboros, like the ring, has proven an instrumental symbol for the fantastic world. Differing from the ring, however, the manifestations of the Ouroboros in modern fantasy fiction remain very close to its meaning in ancient times; a serpent biting its tail is still most commonly used as a symbol for eternity, while the original elements of the ring quest have been mostly dropped. An obvious representation of the Ouroboros can be seen in the serpent ring of the Aes Sedai, symbol of their sovereignty and power. The Great Serpent Ring is described as “an even older symbol for eternity than the Wheel of Time” (*Eye of the World*, 27) and serves not only as a reminder of the thousands of years of service to the people by Aes Sedai, but as an intimation to the insignificance of each individual person in the timeless scheme of the Wheel. In addition,
the Wheel itself is often depicted as intertwined with the sideways-lying figure eight Ouroboros, representing the eternity of the Wheel’s turning. The Ouroboros is a perfect symbol for Jordan’s work, considering its cyclical nature in regard to time and reincarnation.

In the Covenant series, the Ouroboros is used in its earth-encircling manifestation, called the Great Worm at the World’s End. Donaldson relies heavily on the Ouroboros in the second trilogy of his series, presenting a whole new philosophy of the Worm as a sort of slumbering guardian of the Land whose awakening will result in the destruction of the world, very similar to the Norse Jormangand whose arousal is a major sign of Ragnarok. The inclusion of the Worm in the second series only leads to confusion and contradiction with the philosophy of the Creator and the Rainbow presented in the first trilogy, serving as one of the reasons the second trilogy is less impressive. Donaldson’s use of the Ouroboros symbol is excellent if considered in a vacuum, but complications arise when trying to reconcile the differing creation stories of two trilogies. Like Donaldson’s usage of the Ouroboros, much of the video gaming world adheres to the world-encircling style of the great serpent, such as in the Midgard scenario of Civilization 2 where Jormangand forms the northern and southern boundaries of the map.

The Sun played an incredibly important role in ancient mythologies. Many, like the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Aztecs believed the sun to be a deity in itself, offering sacrifices and worship to it on a regular basis. Such beliefs are not difficult to understand considering its life-giving qualities. Without the warmth of the Sun, death reigns, and as is such countless
cultures adopted the Sun as a divine symbol. Quite a different arrangement exists in LOTR and *The Silmarillion*:

“A marked difference between these [Tolkien’s] legends and most is that the Sun is not a divine symbol, but a second-best thing, and the ‘light of the Sun’ (the world under the Sun) becomes terms for a fallen world, and a dislocated imperfect image” (Carpenter 148).

In Tolkien’s mythology, the Sun exists only as a pale reflection of the light of the Great Tree in Valinor that was corrupted and destroyed by Ungoliant the evil spider. Some of its light was saved ere its death and placed in a sphere (the Sun) to light the world. It is possible that Tolkien’s motivation behind this was to further distance his work from any pagan worship of the Sun as a deity, instead presenting the Sun as a consolation for the loss of the true light created by the immortal Valar. In LOTR, the Sun is not a god, but rather comes from God.

The Sun in WOT exists as neither a deity in itself nor a representation of some divine creation. In fact, the Sun is not worshipped at all beyond a basic understanding of its importance to life. Rather, the important manifestation of the Sun in Jordan’s world is seen in the concept of light. Like much of fantasy fiction, the battle of light against dark as representations of good and evil is a central image in WOT. The motif takes on an added dimension with Jordan’s concept of the ‘Light’ as stemming directly from the Creator and symbolizing ultimate purity. Many times we hear phrases like “go in the Light” or “walk in the Light” as friendly parting words (or in the case of the Whitecloaks, a stern warning). The Light exists as a symbolic representation of the Creator’s power that characters feel rather than see. Supposedly, darkfriends and Black Ajah Aes Sedai swear off the Light when they proclaim allegiance to Baalzamon, thus severing their link to the Creator that is the gift to every person upon their birth. The Light represents the
Creator’s mercy and power on earth. It is not the Sun which is divine in Jordan’s world, but instead a concept often associated with its power: light.

Certain Biblical images have been used to an extraordinary extent in the fantastic world in both a direct and slightly altered manner. Relating somewhat to the spear thrust in the side Jesus suffered at the hands of the Roman soldier Longinus during his crucifixion, the motif of the hero’s incurable wound has been made use of in past legends and perpetuated into the fantasy tradition. Arthurian legend incorporates the unhealing wound in multiple stories, including the Fisher King’s groin injury which is explicitly tied into the wound of Christ by the inclusion of the mystical spear that continuously drips blood from its tip (supposedly the blood of Christ). In the movie Excalibur Lancelot is finally undone not by an injury from a mortal man, but by the mysterious wound he suffers in the symbolic battle against himself as he tries to reconcile his love for Guinevere and his loyalty to Arthur: an attempt in which he utterly fails. Lancelot bears the wound in his side his entire life, finally succumbing to death in the final battle during the fall of Camelot. In LOTR the never-healing wound is manifested in the Morgul knife thrust Frodo suffers from the Nazgul. Elrond partially heals the wound, but it is never completed cured. As Frodo lays resting in the house of Elrond following his treatment, Gandalf gazes on the young hobbit, detecting “just a hint as it were of transparency ... especially about the left hand “(LOTR 239). The transparency represents Frodo’s now-intimate connection to the world of wraiths, and he is not remedied of his pain until the end of the tale when he leaves the mortal realm for the shores of Valinor. Donaldson includes the unhealed wound of the hero in his work with Covenant’s leprosy, yet interestingly reverses the decay process when Covenant is in the Land: a testament to the healing and restorative powers of that magical realm. The wound in WOT follows in the tradition of the Fisher King in its connection to Christ with the horrible gash in
Rand’s side received during his battle with Ishmael. Rand’s wound has yet to be completely healed, and it frequently breaks open when he exerts himself, requiring the deft hand of an Aes Sedai to temporarily close the injury once again.

Why do so many authors follow this tradition of the never-healing wound? In most cases, the wound serves as a specific plot device. The Fisher King’s groin injury in Chretien’s *Perceval* exists primarily so that Perceval can initially fail in his quest (by neglecting to ask what ails the king), realize his mistake, and set out to rectify matters: symbolic of Perceval’s growth as a character towards full knighthood. Lancelot’s wound is a manifestation of his infidelity to Arthur (of which he ultimately repents upon his death), while Frodo’s not only grants him a special insight into the evil of Sauron, but also serves as a device to ultimately drive him from Middle Earth to a land of peace and tranquility. Covenant’s leprosy proves his only defense in the final battle against Lord Foul, where he tells the evil deity: “I’m a leper, Foul. I can stand anything” (*The Power That Preserves*, 461). Aside from Rand’s wound, of which it is difficult to predict an ultimate fate, notice that in each example something beneficial results from a grave wound, whether it be eventual healing and rebirth, repentance and acceptance, or ultimate victory over evil. Just as Jesus’ crucifixion is necessary for his resurrection and ascendance into heaven (by far the most important events of the Christian belief), so are the wounds of the various heroes mandatory for some greater purpose.

Further drawing upon Biblical images, Jordan incorporates the seven seals on the scroll of Apocalypse seen in *Revelations* in his work with the seven seals which supposedly hold Baalzamon away from the world of men. In *Revelations*, disasters from fire to plague to monsters are unleashed upon the earth as each successive seal is broken, ultimately leading to the destruction of the earth and the second coming of Jesus (Judgment Day). Like the Biblical story,
in WOT the seals on the Dark One’s prison have been slowly breaking and in so doing
unleashing catastrophes on the world, including monsters and mutations (described as “bubbles
of evil”), the release of the Forsaken (possibly equitable with the four horsemen of the
Apocalypse), and perhaps most devastating, the extended drought that caused starvation and
death of thousands before done away with by a collection of Aes Sedai and Windfinders. The
difference between the two legends is that while Baalzamon is definitively imprisoned by the
seven seals, Jesus is not in any way held back from the earth by his respective seals, using them
rather as devices to achieve his ultimate purpose of the new Jerusalem. A more subtle Biblical
symbol adopted by Jordan is seen in his word “sa’angreal”, an object designed to vastly amplify
the magical power of anyone capable of wielding it. Many Arthurian stories, such as Malory’s
Le Morte Darthur, refer to the Grail with a similar word, often “sangrail”, “sangreal”, or
“sangraal”. The connection between the two images is obvious, especially when considering the
incredible magical powers that stem from both.

As we’ve seen in several instances, the work of Jordan has been used to an incredible
extent by Goodkind in his Sword of Truth series. The area of symbols and images proves no
exception. Perhaps most relevant is Goodkind’s inclusion of the ‘Hadah han’, collars used by
Sisters of Light to control and train young wizards at the Palace of Prophets. The collars are not
only tools for instruction, but can be used to inflict great pain on a wizard if so desired by the
Sister in control of him. The entire concept of the Hadah han is based directly on Jordan’s
‘a’dam’, a silver collar connected by a leash to a bracelet which is used by the Seanchan to
enslave any women with the magical ability to channel. In essence, the two collars are identical,
both used to control wizard-type characters, both capable of producing excruciating pain, and
both unable to be removed by he/she who is leashed. A more explicit yet less symbolic
The connection between the two authors is seen in the title to Goodkind’s second book: *Stone of Tears*, obviously a result of the name Jordan bestows upon the great fortress Rand conquers called The Stone of Tear.

Why does Goodkind continually include such distinctly Jordian material? It often seems rather unnecessary, especially in instances like the collar or Stone of Tear that are insignificant elements to the story which could be easily dropped or modified without any damage to the work. Perhaps the answer lies in Goodkind’s simple desire to ride the wave of WOT. Considering the wild popularity of Jordan’s work at the present, Goodkind may intentionally incorporate material that audiences will assuredly recognize as Jordan’s in an attempt to ingratiate himself to the WOT-loving readers of today.

The Norse legend of Yggdrasil, like the Ouroboros and ring, is a symbol that has remained popular in fantasy fiction. Yggdrasil is the great tree of Norse myth that supports the Nine Worlds. So huge is this tree that its top stretches all the way to Asgard while its roots penetrate deep into Hel. In modern fantasy, the name ‘Yggdrasil’ has been dropped, but the symbol of an enormous tree upon which the world depends has thrived. In the second Covenant novels we are presented with the One Tree that Covenant descends in his quest to reach the Great Worm. The One Tree is an obvious reflection of Yggdrasil, both serving as enormous structures which support the world. As with the Great Worm, the concept of the One
Tree is somewhat contradictory with (or at the least, askew to) the world philosophy Donaldson portrays in his first trilogy. It is almost as if Covenant is thrust into an entirely different world with a totally foreign set of rules and legends in the second series of books. Goodkind also includes the great tree image in his work, but in a slightly altered form that has yet to be fully developed. In the latest book of his series is introduced the “Pillars of Creation”: great columns of stone deep in the Old World that reach into the heavens and below the earth. Day describes Yggdrasil as “a pillar to support these worlds” (39), and in this respect we see its similarity to Goodkind’s pillars, as their main function is the preservation of the living realm. Should the pillars be destroyed, it is rumored the Keeper of the Dead would be free to wreck his evil in the world of men. The great tree image also thrives in the gaming world, such as in The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, where the death of the Great Deku Tree is a grievous blow to the world, or in The Secret of Mana, where the Mana Tree serves as the guardian of magic and its death forces you (as the hero) to defend the world from the evil threatening magic’s existence.

Our last example, the magic sword, is without a doubt one of the most significant and widespread images in the entire history of fantastic legends. Along with rings, swords do more than any other symbol to draw together myths and stories from the past with those from more modern times. Existing as the most common weapon of any epic or fantastic hero, swords are often magical and possessing of incredible power that sets them apart from other weapons. The list of magic swords throughout literary history is extensive, but we shall select a few of the most significant to the modern fantasy novel.

Historically, the rise of the sword as the most noble and effective of all battlefield weapons (in Europe) occurred in the Middle Ages. Previously, a warrior’s choice of weapon was rather varied. In The Iliad the javelin is considered a true warrior’s primary weapon, and it
is only when the javelin has been cast that the sword will be drawn as a backup weapon. Of course, between antiquity and medieval times swords were favored by many fighters of both actual and fictional existence, but it was really not until the rise of chivalry that the sword became associated with justice and righteousness. For a chivalric knight, the sword was a symbol that defined him and separated him from the barbarian hordes, many of whom preferred clubs, maces, or axes in battle. Edward Oakeshott, a medieval historian who made a study of such weapons, comments on the role of the sword: “Very efficient as a weapon if used properly, it was also symbolic of all the high ideals and aspirations of chivalry. It was, as it were, a badge of rank” (88). The design of the sword itself is associated with the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified, the reason knights often held their sword upside down at formal ceremonies. Such a custom clearly shows the connection between knights and the church, as the knight was not just a powerful warrior, but a champion of Christianity. A fully armed knight on a horse would most often choose the long sword as his weapon when entering a thick melee. With such an instrument, he could easily reach an enemy on horse or foot. A knight who preferred rather to fight on his own two feet most commonly made use of the broad sword or the two-handed sword. While these weapons might be thought of as clumsy and unwieldy, in comparison to other weapons used during battles, such as the pole hammer or battle ax, they were actually quite light and nimble. As a result of the glorification of the sword as the weapon of a righteous warrior, as well as its overall versatility and effectiveness in battle, the sword became by far the most common weapon utilized in fantastic tales, especially in the hands of a noble hero.
Examples of magic swords abound. Undoubtedly the most famous sword in any legend is Excalibur, the magical sword of King Arthur which, in many tales, he draws from a stone and proclaims himself king of the Britons. Also commonly referred to as Caliburn, the sword of Arthur has proven the basis for more magic swords in modern fantasy than probably all other legendary swords combined. In the world of Norse mythology, the most famous sword is surely Gram, the magical weapon of Odin. Odin’s thrusting of Gram into the tree of the Volsung hall proves the key event for the rise of Sigmund, as he declares himself a great warrior as the only man who can remove the sword from the tree. It is very possible that this motif of drawing a weapon to prove oneself seen in the Volsung Saga proved influential on the formation of Arthur’s removal of Excalibur. Looking even further back, however, we see the same motif in The Odyssey, where Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is the only man in his hall capable of stringing his mighty bow, thus proving himself the master of the house. Following in the Volsung tradition is the medieval German epic of The Nibelungenlied, where the hero Siegfried’s magic sword Balmung proves instrumental in the slaying of an evil dragon whose blood consequently grants Siegfried virtually invincibility. Both Gram and Balmung, among many other legendary sword, make frequent appearances in adventure or role-playing video games such as Ogre Battle 3: a testament to the influence of fantasy beyond the realm of literature. In modern fantasy, Gandalf’s Glamdring and Frodo’s Sting come to mind as two of the most famous magic swords. Also vital to the workings of LOTR is Aragorn’s legendary sword Narsil, the sword of his ancestors which cut the Ring off Sauron’s hand thousands of years before Aragorn’s time. When Aragorn reforges his sword,
renaming it Anduril, the ‘flame of the west’, it symbolizes an incredibly vital step towards his consummation as king of Gondor.

As mentioned above, Excalibur serves as the archetypal sword for many of the weapons wielded by modern fantasy heroes. In the game *The Secret of Mana* the hero begins his quest by pulling a mysterious sword out of a stone in a river. Later, he learns that his newfound weapon is actually the Mana Sword, and that no one but the Mana Knight could have possibly pulled it free. The similarities to Excalibur are obvious. Richard Rahl’s Sword of Truth is a reflection of Excalibur not because Richard removes it from any stone or some such, but rather because the sword can only be wielded by the ‘Seeker of Truth’, a title bestowed upon a person by a wise wizard with the ability to perceive true Seekers. Just as Excalibur defines Arthur as king, so does Richard’s sword proclaim him the Seeker, a figure at least as prominent as a king in that the Seeker is subject to no law but his own. The Sword of Truth also resembles Excalibur in its magical properties that make it far superior to any other sword. In the movie *Excalibur*, Arthur calls upon his sword’s inherent otherworldly power to defeat Lancelot in their first encounter, slicing through Lancelot’s weapon with ease to strike him on the shoulder, just as does Richard constantly prevail in battle because of the unstoppable force of the Sword of Truth.

The most important manifestation of Excalibur in modern fantasy, however, lies in Rand’s magic sword *Callandor*. Without even knowing anything at all about the sword one can see the semblance to Arthur’s sword in the close proximity of the name ‘*Callandor*’ to
‘Caliburn’. The similarities go far beyond names, however. Callandor is an ancient sword that has resided in the land of Tear for countless years. Like Excalibur, no one can draw Callandor (or even touch it!) but the ‘chosen one’, in this case, the Dragon Reborn. Should a man draw Callandor, it would prove to the world his true identity as the Dragon. Rand, of course, finally draws Callandor in book three and in so doing, conquers Tear and proclaims himself the Lord Dragon. Callandor can function like a normal sword if need be, yet like Excalibur its true power lies in its magical properties. In a final subtle connection, the building in which Callandor resides, waiting for the Dragon Reborn, is dubbed ‘The Stone’. Thus, when Rand grasps Callandor before all the nobles of Tear he is effectively drawing ‘the sword’ from ‘the stone’. Rand’s association with Callandor serves as his most important link to the Arthur figure.

Just as archetypal characters and themes within a fantastic context have evolved over time, so have images and symbols varied from their original form. Yet in many of these patterns, the core of what they represent is maintained, thus preserving the link to the past that is so vital to fantasy fiction. Largely because of this incorporation of prior forms and reliance on the myths and tales of old, fantasy remains among the most historically conscious and inclusive (in a literary sense) of all modern genres. Despite its loyalty to its roots, however, fantasy is continually moving forward in new and exciting ways. It does not remain stagnant as just a continual repetition of old stories. The best fantasy authors will pick and choose certain elements from the past and incorporate them into their own original ideas to form a blend of innovative fantasy. Robert Jordan may borrow heavily from the Arthurian tradition and from the works of JRR Tolkien, but the vast majority of his material is undeniably his own. Thus, his story is not repetition, but rather a new legend with familiar elements. The field of fantasy has near infinite room for development, along with a virtually inexhaustible source of material from
which to draw: the collective myths of mankind over thousands of years. Fantasy has become a modern day system of mythology; not a mythology that anyone believes in, but one that represents stories from cultures the world over. The elf and the dwarf, good versus evil and the nature of God, magic swords and rings: modern fantasy uses them all, preserving the tales of the past while adding its own contribution to the legacy of fantastic legends from which future generations will no doubt base their own stories and so enrich the fantasy tradition.

Ouroboros and Ring intertwined

Fig 6.6
Conclusion: In Defense of Fantasy

“One is puzzled to know why the author should have supposed he was writing for adults ... except when he is being pedantic and also boring the adult reader, there is little in The Lord of the Rings over the head of a seven-year-old child. It is essentially a children’s book - a children’s book which has somehow gotten out of hand, since, instead of directing it at the “juvenile” market, the author has indulged himself in developing a fantasy for its own sake.”

- Edmund Wilson, writing for The Nation, attacking Tolkien and LOTR

While going through the preliminary stages of this paper I was required to present my topic for evaluation and approval. At such an early point, I had decided little regarding the specifics of the subject. Consequently, all I could tell the professor was that I was planning to write on fantasy literature, with a special emphasis on JRR Tolkien as a central figure to the discussion. The professor looked at me for a while and finally grudgingly approved my topic, commenting that it would be acceptable for a senior thesis. I was then informed, however, that I would be ill-advised to attempt a similar endeavor if I ever intended to write a thesis for a master’s degree or Ph.D. Curious to hear her reasoning, I inquired why my topic would be considered unworthy of a more scholarly paper. Her response, though somewhat painful, was not totally unexpected. Tolkien, I was matter-of-factly told, was not respectable enough an author for a higher level thesis. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she then went on to cite a more ‘proper’ author, one of whom (coincidentally) I have never been a huge fan: Virginia Woolf.

As much as it troubles fantasy readers, such an attitude is not uncommon among critics and the highly educated. Fantasy fiction is constantly put down as an inferior form of literature, too crude and crass for worthwhile study or even consideration. Even in light of the abundant manifestations of fantasy in modern society that we have explored throughout the course of this
discussion, the realm of the fantastic is still too often delegated to the depths of literature. The now infamous critic Edmund Wilson took every opportunity he had to decry Tolkien, describing LOTR as “juvenile trash” and “balderdash” (Shippey 307). A critic for the *London Observer* expressed his view in accordance with Wilson that LOTR was “sheer escapist literature... dull, ill-written and whimsical” and believed the whole craze started by the book would soon pass into “merciful oblivion” (Shippey 306).

How can this be when we know that fantasy has an incredibly rich background, reaching back all the way to antiquity? How can anyone, especially the educated, deny the spectacular influence fantasy has on modern society? Sadly, the answer reveals itself: all too easily. Intellectual snobbery condemning fantasy as “overvalued, escapist, useless, false” (Sammsons 4) exists at many levels of education. Consider the course selection of an English department at any college in America. Classes studying American and British fiction abound. Studies of Shakespeare, the postmodern movement, or feminist literature can be found almost everywhere. One could take an entire semester on Virginia Woolf if so desired, though I would not care to engage in such an undertaking myself. Few and far between are the schools, however, that will offer a class dealing with a fantasy author; not, anyway, fantasy as we know it today. Degrees are offered in almost any area of literature, ranging from the mainstream studies of English or American literature to more obscure areas like Teutonic or Classical studies. Yet where can we look to become certified in the strange and dark corner of literature that is fantasy?

Fantasy is also denied its due in other aspects of society. Almost countless are the times categories like ‘classical mythology’ or ‘American poets’ have appeared on *Jeopardy*, yet how often do we see ‘fantasy literature’ pop up on the board? For that matter, would viewers even be aware what fantasy literature referred to? Such is the nature of fantasy as a relatively new genre
on the literary scene despite its popularity in the realm of literature and film. Unless one is specifically acquainted with fantastic works, it is highly probable that confusion exists over the very nature of fantasy as a whole. People may love Willow or Star Wars without knowing the name of the genre from which it originates. Several times I have talked to individuals who thought I was writing a thesis on trashy romances novels as soon as the word ‘fantasy’ left my mouth. For many such, the two may be almost equivalent in terms of a worth.

Tolkien may be, on occasion, the only author to escape this prejudice, as even those opposed to fantasy are forced to recognize the impact, if not quality, of LOTR. Tolkien’s credentials and education make him too impressive to dismiss as merely just another worthless escapist author fleeing from reality. Unfortunately, due to the great length of LOTR and the time that must be invested in order to extract the most pleasurable reading experience, The Hobbit is often chosen as the one fantasy fiction that high school, or more commonly, middle school teachers will ‘lower’ themselves to teach in their classrooms. I suppose this is better than no fantasy at all, but it may give students who have never engaged in a fantastical text a sense that all fantasy is too childish for them to pursue in their leisure reading.

From where does this aversion to fantasy among the educated originate? Why does the belief that fantasy is inferior to more standard forms of literature persevere? The answers to these questions are numerous and variable, according to the source consulted, but several general beliefs seem to head the list. For some the discrimination arises from what they view as the rather crude, blunt diction and violent imagery which comprises many fantasy works, especially sword and sorcery stories like the Conan series. For refined tastes more familiar with a carefully worded Frost poem or the complex storyline of a Faulkner novel, the sheer violence and at times bawdy imagery of some fantasies might come off as dreadfully offensive. Firstly, such an
observation is not necessarily true. LOTR and WOT are many things, none of which is crude or simplistic, especially in their diction or imagery. Even the sword and sorcery fantasies (thought of as less admirable than the ‘high’ fantasy of LOTR) often contain beautifully worded imagery intertwined with the death and violence that are inherent to the style. Yet even so, why should the violence or vulgarity of some fantasies be condemned while it is praised (or at least accepted) in other genres of literature? Many of Shakespeare’s plays are loaded with coarse imagery, and works like Titus Andronicus and Hamlet end in virtual bloodbaths of brutality. The plays of Aristophanes are reliant upon simple sexual innuendos and toilet humor. Yet do we swear off these poets because they partake in less-than-proper styles? Does their vulgarity in some way lessen the quality of their work? Granted, crudity can sometimes indicate ignorance or incompetence, but no work should be automatically condemned as such without a fair analysis. 

In the realm of fantasy, too often authors are put down as simplistic and vulgar, even when such allegations are clearly untrue.

Rather than existing as a genre of crass style, fantasy stands at the apex of modern literature in the variety and quality of its imagery. In order for a story placed outside of reality to be successful, it must rely heavily on the proper imagery to position the reader inside the realm created by the author. We all know what to expect when an author refers to common images like a horse or stable, but what exactly is an Orc, and what does the tower of Barad Dur really look like? It is precisely because of these totally unfamiliar elements that fantasy authors must be incredibly careful in the choice of imagery they select, for otherwise the reader can be left confused or uncertain regarding a creature they have never heard of. To say that fantasy imagery is simplistically violent (as in a Conan book) or childishly cute (as in The Hobbit) is simply untrue. Skilled fantasy authors can switch from beautiful descriptions of soaring towers and
sparkling white spires to a bloody scene of a grisly melee with ease, endowing each description with the proper imagery and diction. Such versatility is admirable in an author and should not be overlooked.

Many fantasy authors, especially Tolkien (as we have seen), borrow heavily from the Norse and Celtic traditions for their material. For some critics, who are undoubtedly very much more familiar with the Biblical or classical myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans, such northern mythology is less respectable considering the ‘barbaric’ people from which it originates. While it is true that Vikings did not produce the literature, philosophy, or art of the Greeks, this does not signify a lack of merit in the stories told among their peoples. They are no less credible than classical tales: not barbaric and crude, but fascinating stories that represent a culture of rich mythological tradition. Yet sadly, while the majority of college students have encountered the works of Homer at least once (or more) during their education, it is far less likely that they have studied the Volsung Saga or are versed in the classic Arthurian legends. The northern mythologies are often looked down upon as inferior to the classical tradition (or at least, less significant to the western world) and thus, through its connection to the Norse, Welsh, and Celtic tales, fantasy is also passed over in favor of more mainstream literature.

Others may disparage fantasy due to its very nature of a story set outside of reality. They dislike the tampering of the ‘real world’ with which fantasy authors must engage in order to create their tale. Some may believe this tampering results from a lack of skill on the author’s part, that he must make up his own world for the story to work, instead of setting it in the one that already exists. Critics can view fantasy as simply a flight from reality with no real meaning or depth behind it. Tolkien tells us in “On Fairy-Stories” that such people are confusing “the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (*The Tolkien Reader 79*). “Why should a
man be scorned”, Tolkien muses. “if, finding himself in a prison, he tries to get out and go home?” (The Tolkien Reader 79). Just because a man may read a story to escape his everyday life and travel to some far off world of imagination does not mean he is debasing himself with a piece of fantastical trash, unworthy of a more serious reading. In this we can see one of the beauties of the great fantasy works coming from authors like Tolkien and Jordan. If so desired, such stories can be read for pure pleasure and escape to a land of wonder. Yet they also possess the ability to be read on a deeper level in a search for a myriad of topics (as I have attempted in this paper), whether it be archetypal patterns, real life allegory, or philosophical rhetoric. Such is the multifaceted nature of fantasy, that it can read on whatever level the reader desires and still produce pleasurable results.

Finally, too often adults believe fantasy literature is more suited for children than for themselves. Unfamiliar with modern fantasy fiction, they view all fantasy as the fairy tales they heard growing up: stories of frogs changing into princes, pigs hiding from blustering wolves in houses of varying construction, and of giant eggs falling off walls to be smashed into a thousand pieces, much to the dismay of the king’s men. Thus, since these stories contain fantastical elements (talking animals, mythical creatures, etc.) and they have been delegated to children by society, then logically the rest of fantasy must be suited only for children as well. Because of the mystical and imaginary nature of fantasy, many are convinced they are too mature for such nonsense that does not seem to directly pertain to reality.

Thus have we seen some of the main reasons that fantasy is often denied the credibility it is due. Yet most of these arguments are based on a shallow perspective of literature, and possess little fact to back them up. Tom Shippey claims that such critics are really giving only “hints and sneers rather than statements” (305), content to proclaim fantasy as having little literary worth
yet lacking the evidence to prove it. In direct contrast, Shippey contends that fantasy has been the
dominant genre of the 20th century (vii), spearheaded by Tolkien and exploding onto the literary
scene following the publication of LOTR. I am inclined to agree. I can think of no other genre
which has become so popular so quickly and pervaded so many aspects of society. Yet
ironically, great authors like Donaldson, Jordan, and even Tolkien remain excluded from the elite
of the literary world despite the caliber and impact of their work.

Perhaps one of the most important factors we must take into consideration when
attempting to critique or defend fantasy is that, just as in every other form of literature, both
admirable and inferior authors exist. Also like all genres, there are many more mediocre-at-best
writers than great ones. The authors receiving the heaviest concentration in the discussion
throughout this paper are considered the leading writers in fantasy fiction, but it must be
understood that most works will be hard pressed to match the stories of such superior writers.
An egregious error has been committed if the reading of a lesser quality fantasy novel leads to an
embargo of the entire genre. Just as we are warned not to judge a book by its cover, neither
should we decry all of fantasy as a result of one unsatisfactory reading.

The great proliferation of fantasy in modern society indicates some its importance.
Admittedly, popularity does not necessarily signify quality, but at the least success of a certain
literary genre merits a look at the elements which cause it to be popular. Shippey believes
Tolkien’s coming was a sort of literary revelation that critics overlooked because it came not in
the elitist form, but rather in the populist (308). “It did not provide that comfortable sense of
superiority to the masses without which the English-speaking literary intellectual, it seems,
cannot cope at all” (Shippey 308). Shippey’s point is that LOTR was aimed directly at the
popular reader, rather than over his head where the “literary intellectual” resides and expects all
‘good’ literature to aim for. Yet it is difficult to believe that a genre relatively unpopular in the US until the 1950’s could extend so profusely into multiple mediums without some degree of worth. There is simply too much imagination and vision in the fantastic for it to remain outside of movies or electronic gaming: two areas where creativity is of paramount importance.

One of the most telling factors pointing towards the worthiness of fantasy among the more respected forms of literature is the incredible hold it has over so many loyal readers and gamers. The extraordinary power of imagination and creativity imbedded in the best of fantasy books, games, and movies has created a legion of devoted followers (some might even call fanatics) who just can’t seem to get enough of the fantastic world. While this can be seen quite readily in modern time, the remarkable influence of fantasy works on the minds of its readers can be seen even hundreds of years ago, perhaps more so than any other form of literature. It was not stories of ordinary people in an ordinary world that seized the mind of Don Quixote and sent him on his mad quest, but tales of knights errant, of giants and battles and evil sorcerers. True, Don Quixote was meant to be a parody of knightly tales, but the very fact that Cervantes chose such literature to possess the mind of his hero hints at the ability of fantasy to greatly impress itself on readers.

Today, and in the past thirty or so years, fantasy zealots can be seen waiting in line for the Star Wars movies, dressed up as their favorite characters. Or we can survey the strange world of the Dungeons and Dragons fanatics, who gather in groups around their cards and game boards to wage war with their characters and spells. Star Trek conventions are infamously known as gatherings of sci-fi ‘geeks’ who garb themselves as their favorite aliens and argue over proper Klingon etiquette. There are medieval-style restaurants scattered across the country, complete with goblets, serving wenches, jousts, and a general lack of eating utensils. And of
course Tolkien societies abound even today, two decades after his death. The release of the recent LOTR movies has resulted in a resurgence of Tolkian zealotry, and you can be sure to see a few brave souls dressed as Gandalf on the opening nights of each movie.

Where else can such devotion and love for a particular literary genre be found? It is the populist qualities referred to by Shippey that makes such dedication possible in the fantasy realm. The duel nature of fantasy grants it the ability to be loved by the popular and intellectual audience alike, although in reality many such elitists refuse to acknowledge such a fact. A reader with absolutely no mythological background of any kind can be as enamored of LOTR as the classical scholar. Thus fantasy fiction extends itself to an extremely broad audience, and those who grow a great love for fantasy might soon find themselves learning to speak elvish.

The reader may have noticed (and protested) by this point my seemingly unjustified attack on Woolf as an author whom I simply do not like. It’s not even as if I cannot stand her work (though I don’t necessarily enjoy it), but rather it irks me how she is elevated as such a great author while a truly inspiring man like Tolkien is denied his due. I fail to see any superior aspect of her work. To be fair, the two are writing in completely different genres and thus it may be difficult to compare them, but still there is no way I will ever be convinced Woolf was as influential as Tolkien. They represent completely different audiences: Woolf glorified by the elitists as one of the greatest modernist writers, and Tolkien beloved by the populist public. Yet Tolkien, and consequently all of fantasy, assimilates more easily to readers of different educational levels. Thus, however unfair it may seem to Woolf lovers, she serves as the piñata of my attack on the elitists. Shippey picks up on this very point, citing the amusing excerpt from Woolf’s diary where she refers to James Joyce as “illiterate, underbred” (311). If James Joyce, recognized as one of the great authors in the last couple centuries, is unworthy of Woolf’s class,
what might she think of Tolkien or Jordan? Perhaps even the father of fantasy himself might be dismissed as insignificant.

In an interesting follow-up, Shippey compares fantasy to modernism in a manner which seems to somewhat elevate the former over the latter. In fantasy (Tolkien in specific), Shippey maintains that it does not matter whether or not a reader correctly identifies the allusion an author might be using in his story (314). Just because the Beowulf legend may be totally unknown to a reader does not in any way mean he cannot understand LOTR. Comparatively, he would have to be a virtual master in classical mythology to understand even half of Eliot’s *Wasteland*, and a working knowledge of *The Odyssey* is recommended for anyone attempting Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In such stories, it is crucial to understand the allusion in order to get the most out of the work. Fantasy has the advantage of be able to convey its entire meaning without reliance on the reader’s knowledge of works upon which the story may draw elements. It is interesting and pleasurable when we, as readers, recognize that Gandalf shares much with the Norse god Odin or that Rand is certainly an Arthurian figure, but such observations are in no way obligatory.

Coupled with modern fantasy’s role as the successor of the epic is its historically rich background, a certitude that cannot be overvalued. The epic is one of the oldest and time-honored literary genres. What liberal education is complete without exposure to Homer and Virgil? Who can call himself a master of Teutonic literature without knowledge of the *Nibelungenlied*? What opera buff can look a colleague in the eye and not be able to discuss Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*? When all these incredible works spring from the epic tradition and are so highly regarded, why is it that fantasy does not share the same luxury? Certainly Homer was the dominant author of his era, as was Virgil of his. Arthurian legend is beyond a shadow of a doubt
the most defining form of literature to come out of the Middle Ages, and assuredly comprised the most popular stories of its time. Fantasy follows directly in the footsteps of such traditions and represents the modern evolution of the epic. Yet while fantasy tales are deemed juvenile by elitists, the original forms (myth and legend) that comprise the core of the fantastic tradition are still upheld as great works of western civilization. Such a view seems intrinsically flawed when we consider the great improvements fantasy has made over its predecessors in the form of plot cohesion, character development, and complexity. LOTR is the definitive epic of the 20th century, yet still does not receive the recognition it deserves, to say nothing of lesser known authors of impressive talent like Jordan and Donaldson.

Even if we put aside the rich culture history fantasy draws upon, all the incredible detail and imagery that make it so vibrant, all the skill that goes into the creation of a successful plot, and all the popularity it enjoys in modern society, I still do not see why fantasy should be condemned as inferior. Critics will say that fantasy is just a shallow flight from reality; nothing more than a story with talking beasts and strange creatures. Yet I (and Tolkien) answer: what is wrong with that? Why should something be condemned as ‘just a story’? If the story is skillfully crafted and brings enjoyment to the reader, should it not be considered an admirable piece of work? Too many people are under the illusion that a work of fiction has to have some overarching message that gives the reader some kind of advice on how to live in order for the book to be worthy of the elite. Plotlines can still be incredibly intricate (as in WOT), characters can be multifaceted (Gollum or Covenant), and numerous themes can be traced throughout an entire story. I would even go so far as to hazard that Donaldson’s Covenant is at least as complex and intriguing as Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov. All the beneficial elements of more
‘respectable’ fiction (which critics claim fantasy lacks) are actually present in abundance in a quality work of fantasy fiction.

Neither in any case is fantasy devoid of the philosophy or real world allegories that some dote upon as necessary for a true fiction. I once heard a professor lecture on morals and allegory, claiming that almost every good work of fiction has an underlying message or moral … except escapist literature. In such a statement, as in the anecdote opening this chapter, can we clearly see the prejudice among many of the educated against fantasy as mere escapism. It is true that Tolkien disliked allegory for its own sake and violently denied several false allegorical readings of his tale, yet his view is not representative of the entire genre. Goodkind’s work is loaded with political allegory, as are C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* filled with Christian metaphors. Even Tolkien’s work contains ‘messages’ for real life, as we saw specifically in our discussion of power and danger in chapter five. Fantasy and science fiction works have a tendency to point out morals, thereby using their imaginative powers about other worlds to reform the real one. Here is evident once again the many layers of the fantasy novel; it can be read for simple amusement, or for some deeper meaning. To claim fantasy fiction is simply escapist and contains nothing beyond the elementary plot line shows a fundamental ignorance of fantasy’s true depth.

The defense of fantasy as a legitimate form of literature can be summed up in the answering of one simple question: why do people read fiction? Generally, people read fiction to seek an alternative experience to their own lives. Fictional tales allow the reader to enter a world of characters who often do not exist and of places with which they are probably unfamiliar. Because of this, fiction can take a reader anywhere in the world (or even outside of it) without the need to step a foot outside the door. It does not matter that the events in the story are imaginary. In fact, that is just the point. Readers enjoy a good story, knowing that the tale never
actually occurred, because it allows their mind to roam. If they wanted truth, nonfiction would dominate the literary world. Yet such reading would grow dull and colorless. By accepting the world and characters of the author even though they do not exist, the writer is granted the license to apply his imagination and creativity to his work to the fullest possible extent. It also permits the author the opportunity to create recurring themes and carefully constructed plot lines, shaping the story meticulously so that an early event will be recalled near the conclusion of the tale. Such a telling is not possible in nonfiction, because, simply put, the real world is much less well-ordered than the manner in which a writer of fiction constructs his story.

Since we have established fiction as enjoyable precisely because of the illusory world in which it abides, let me conclude by pointing out the relevance of that fact to the defense of fantasy. Literature of the fantastic realm serves as one the highest forms of fiction. No other genre even approaches the quality of imagery in fantasy fiction, nor does any form engage the reader’s imagination in the manner of fantasy. If it is the alternative experience of fiction that makes it so enjoyable, that thrill can be doubled or trebled in the world of fantasy, for what is more alternative to reality than a world populated by magic, dark lords, and avenging wizards? In a world where increasingly more of the universe becomes less mysterious as science advances, fantasy grows more important to readers seeking that alternative experience which was satisfied by standard fiction no more than a hundred years ago. It is even possible that fantasy serves as the genre best suited to point out morals or lessons. A certain topic is often better illustrated if placed in an alternate world, for in such a setting the reader latches onto the topic as something familiar, and thus begins to see its applicability to real life.

Synthesizing elements of so many traditions, fantasy has grown into perhaps the most pervasive genre of literature in the western world. The archetypal adventures and themes that
have been carried into fantasy through ancient legends and myths have survived over the ages because it was decided long ago those tales had great worth. It was the unpopular and poorly formed legends that died out, while the superior stories were carried from culture to culture under new guises. In this way, fantasy can be seen as the culmination of human legends, filtered throughout history so that only the great tales remain. On what greater pedestal could a form of literature be based? Fantasy has even continued the refinement process in the last fifty years, with active writers like Jordan and Goodkind incorporating elements from the greatest of previous fantasy authors like Tolkien, Howard, and Donaldson. Thus fantasy is continually improving upon itself and evolving in new ways through its modification of old themes. How long can critics refuse to recognize fantasy as a legitimate form? With such admirable authors writing today, it seems logical that the answer would be sooner rather than later. Might fantasy be vanquished by sneering critics and replaced with another form of fiction? Gandalf claims even the Wise cannot see all ends, and while in no way do I profess such wisdom, I find it difficult to believe that, as the successor of mythology, fantasy will ever fizzle and die. A force greater than all the magic swords and rings combined would be necessary to kill four thousand years of human imagination.
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