

## **Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories***

*Dr. K's outline*

**N.B. Not all direct quotes are in quotation marks—check originals before citing**

- 1) Introduction
  - a) What are fairy stories?
  - b) What is the use of them?
  - c) What is their origin?
  
- 2) Fairystory
  - a) *OED* definitions—late and not very useful
    - i) *In particular* “a tale about fairies, or generally a fairy legend, with developed senses”
  - b) Work with definition of “fairy”—supernatural being, not necessarily diminutive (though that is the modern use). Modern use mostly from English literary tradition.
  - c) Concept of “fairy” comes from rationalizing natural phenomena
    - i) Examples from Renaissance literature, Gower
  - d) Better definition: about adventures of Men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches
  - e) Definition depends upon the nature of Faerie, the Perilous Realm itself, though Tolkien doesn't try to define that nature: “A fairy story is one that touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be....Faerie itself may perhaps be most nearly translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power
  - f) Term “fairy story” used too loosely; gives examples of what is in (Perrault, Grimm) and what is not (Lilliput, *The Time Machine*, dream visions, Beast Fable)
  - g) Fairy story must be presented as “true”—we must enter into it as a reality
  
- 3) Origins
  - a) Study of individual elements of fairy stories alone is the work of folklorists and anthropologists (archetypes, symbols, etc)—get too caught up in motifs and patterns
  - b) Fairystory needs to focus on what is true: “It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purpose that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot”—see the soup and not just the bones that have been boiled to make it
  - c) Fairystories are very ancient, crosscultural—invention, inheritance and diffusion all play a role
  - d) Language (philology) cannot adequately deal with the sense of Faerie
  - e) The stories make “immediately effective by the will the visions of ‘fantasy’.”
  - f) Nature myths
    - i) Olympus
    - ii) Thor
  - g) Glimpse of divinity

- h) Fairy stories have three faces: the Mystical toward the Supernatural, the Magical towards Nature, and the Mirror of Scorn and Pity towards Man
  - i) Old stories get recycled—
    - i) Charlemagne's mother to Little Goose Girl
    - ii) King Arthur
    - iii) Hrothgar
  - j) Fairystories preserve sense of fear and horror—can't be sanitized out—sense of taboo
- 4) Children
- a) Thinks association of fairy stories and children to be a false and misleading one; not all children and not all adults have a taste for them
  - b) Collections of fairy stories, even Perrault's, are very haphazard—not systematic.
  - c) They appeal to people who can imagine and inherit a Secondary World
    - i) Secondary World must be real; when illusion is broken, tale loses its magic
    - ii) Children ask “is it true” but they don't really understand what they are asking
    - iii) Fairystories are about desirability; verisimilitude comes in the way they are told
    - iv) Examples of writers and collectors of fairy stories critiqued
    - v) Don't divide world into Eloi and Morlocks (wizards and Muggles)
    - vi) We must travel hopefully if we are to arrive (15)
- 5) Fantasy
- a) Connection between Imagination (mental power of image-making) and Art (the achievement of the expression of the Imagination)—expression is derived from the image
  - b) Tolkien uses Fantasy to express to power of the expressed Image—starts with “arresting strangeness”
  - c) Drawback of Fantasy is that it is difficult to achieve
  - d) Making a Secondary World that commands Secondary Belief requires labour, thought, and a special skill, “a kind of elvish craft”
  - e) Better left to words than to art
  - f) Criticism of ‘fantasy’ as a genre comes from those who write other genres
    - i) Fantasy rarely succeeds in drama: pantomime, the witches in the Scottish play
  - g) Magic: “Magic should be reserved for the operations of the Magician. Art is the human process that produces...Secondary Belief. Art of the same sort, if more skilled and effortless...I shall call Enchantment.” “Magic produces an alteration in the primary world; Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside, but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose.”
  - h) Fantasy aspires to create Enchantment.
  - i) “Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason, and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific” truth.

- j) Fantasy can be carried to excess, but that's the fault of the doer, not the fault of Fantasy itself.
- 6) Recovery, Escape, Consolation
- a) Analysis of fairystories is bad preparation for writing them
  - b) Fantasy has three values: Recovery, Escape, and Consolation
    - i) Recovery
      - (1) Regaining of a clear view, a cleaning of our mental and imaginative windows to that we can see clearly without the masks of every-dayness.
      - (2) Not the only means of recovery but a very useful one.
      - (3) Opens your "hoard and lets all the locked things fly away"
    - ii) Escape
      - (1) Escape a good thing, not a thing to warrant scorn or pity
      - (2) "Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic"
      - (3) Escape is not desertion
      - (4) We are too surrounded by the manmade and the mechanical; it's good to get outside these sometimes; modern life can be raw, ugly, and soulless.
      - (5) Fairystories have always provided escape from uglier things: hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death (22)—all the outcomes of the Fall
      - (6) The Great Escape—the escape from Death
    - iii) Consolation of the Happy Ending
      - (1) If tragedy is the end of drama, then "the opposite is true of Fairystory"
      - (2) **Eucatastrophe:** the sudden turn, the unexpected happy ending. Doesn't deny existence of **dyscatastrophe** but it gives "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief"
      - (3) "It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality." (23)
- 7) Epilogue
- a) All makers of fairy-stories hope they are drawing on Reality
  - b) The eucatastrophe "can therefore be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a 'consolation' for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, 'Is it true?'"
  - c) A way of reading the Christian story as fantasy story
    - i) Just because a fantasy is found to be historical fact doesn't lessen the joy
    - ii) Christians still have to work at this