

The Allure of Fantasy, Part One

John de Gruchy

Abstract: this essay attempts to explain why three of the best-selling works of fiction of all-time are fantasy novels. I discuss the influence of the Bible on *Lord of the Rings*; *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*; and the *Harry Potter* series; examining the idea of sacrifice, perspectives on nature, and characterization.

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For the past few years I have been teaching *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950; hereafter *LWW*) in a children's literature class. While explaining something of the background of this classic tale from C.S. Lewis's popular series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956; hereafter *CN*), I take the opportunity to briefly compare C.S. Lewis with his close friend and associate, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the equally famous trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955; hereafter *LOTR*). Aside from the remarkable coincidence that both Lewis and Tolkien served on the English faculty at Oxford University at the same time, and that both published within a few years of each other two of the most popular and successful stories of the twentieth century, it seems to me exceptionally intriguing that both of their works should happen to fall within the literary genre of *fantasy*.

Indeed, *LOTR* is one of the best-selling books of *all-time*, having sold over 150 million copies. *LWW* is not far behind, with all-time sales of approximately 85 million copies. Scrolling down the list on Wikipedia, we also find *Harry Potter* (hereafter *HP*), a series of seven books published between 1997-2007, with approximate sales of over 450 million copies, which makes the *HP* series easily number one for fiction of all time.¹ Moreover, many readers in numerous polls have elected *LOTR* the greatest book of the twentieth century, much to the chagrin of Tolkien detractors in highbrow academic literary circles.² These extraordinary numbers do not even include the billions who have accessed the stories through their film versions, which have also been phenomenally successful. What is intriguing to me here is that now *three* of the best-selling books of all time should be

* Kagoshima Immaculate Heart College, English Department, 4-22-1 Toso, Kagoshima-shi 890-8525, Japan

fantasy, rather than some other genre such as mystery or crime, or a novel of social realism by Tolstoy or Jane Austen. What is the allure of fantasy? That is the question this essay shall attempt to answer.

Let us begin by noting that *the* topmost selling book of all-time is in fact the Bible.³ I should make it clear that I see the Bible here as a literary text, undoubtedly the single most influential text in Western culture, which has had a profound influence on the development of English language and culture. Further, I am viewing the Bible as a unified book with a distinct beginning, middle and end, and not as a collection of myriad texts by multiple nameless and forgotten authors. This is of course nothing more than the central thesis of Northrop Frye, once a divinity student and a preacher in the United Church of Canada. In his provocative *Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), Frye writes that the Bible “begins where time begins, with the creation of the world; it ends where time ends, with the Apocalypse, and it surveys human history in between, or the aspect of human history it is interested in, under the symbolic names of Adam and Israel” (xiii). Frye draws attention to the “U-shaped” narrative structure, which plots a beginning in an idyllic, harmonious state in Genesis, a descent or fall into chaos and uncertainty, and an eventual return to a more or less happy or restored state at the end of Revelation (169). Unity is enhanced in the Bible through recurring images of “city, mountain, river, garden, tree, oil, fountain, bread, wine, bride, sheep, and many others” (Frye xiii). This narrative structure “recurs in literature as the standard shape of comedy,” Frye continues, and it also happens to be the narrative pattern followed by the three works of fantasy under discussion here (169). Let us briefly review how the three fantasy texts follow this pattern, and then we will examine some interesting parallels and common motifs in all four texts. In particular, I would like to look at sacrifice, nature, and characterization.

LOTR begins in the Shire, an idyllic rural setting of peace and contentment, “well-ordered and well-farmed.” It isn’t nature in its original state but a harmonious balance between nature and human (or hobbit) activity—pre-industrial and agricultural: the hobbits “do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools” (*LOTR* 13). The Shire was, in truth, “Tolkien’s representation of all that he loved best about England,” writes his biographer, Humphrey Carpenter (213). The fall or descent occurs with the discovery by the Dark Lord of the One Ring of Power, the introduction of evil into this garden. The hobbits set out on a perilous journey or exodus involving many challenges, in which strength, courage and faith are tested to the limit. Evil is eventually overcome and harmony restored with the destruction of the Ring, although there lingers a certain sadness in the ending of the mythical age of elves and the final parting of friends. The advent of the age of Men doesn’t feel like such a happy ending.

LWW doesn’t begin in such an idyllic place as the Shire; indeed, it is the middle of war

and the Pevensie children are themselves fighting with one another. But the English countryside to which they escape is presented as an oasis of safety and tranquility within a world of chaos. There is a timelessness about the old English country house, an ideal point of departure for a descent. Like the hobbits, the Pevensie children find themselves drawn into an adventure the magnitude of which they themselves don't as yet fully comprehend, a classic struggle between Good and Evil, the Christ-like Aslan versus the evil White Witch. Strength and courage, faith and loyalty are severely tested. With the eventual defeat of the White Witch, harmony is restored, temporarily.

For *LWW* is but one of seven books in the *CN* series. Michael Ward has argued quite convincingly that the seven books correspond to the seven heavenly bodies of medieval cosmology. Each of the seven heavenly bodies is, of course, associated with a day of week, seven altogether for the days of creation. It matters little that the books did not appear chronologically; *LWW* is associated with Jupiter, Thursday. What is significant to note for our purposes is that Lewis followed Christian mythology in his own act of creation.

Each of the seven books of the *HP* series also follows a similar pattern of descent into danger and darkness, tests of Harry's (and other characters') courage and faith, and ends with a partial restoration of calm. The series as a whole is one great U-shaped narrative, though a reader might be hard-pressed to find any idyllic setting or state at the beginning of the series. It certainly isn't with Harry's adoptive family, the Dursleys. Nor could we say that Hogwarts corresponds to anything quite so enchanting as the Shire. It is full of dark corners and dangers, and nature here is not benign and friendly—the Whomping Willow tree would just as soon strike Harry and his friends dead as provide anything nurturing. As Rowling herself remarked, Hogwarts is “a huge, rambling, quite scary-looking castle, with a jumble of towers and battlements.”⁴ Yet for Harry this intimidating structure becomes home, and the friends that he makes there—Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, Hagrid, and many others—become family, the only home and family that Harry will know. Home and family, bound by love, constitute an ideal state for the orphan boy.

It is interesting to note that Frye also identified six distinct falls and rises in the Bible, “with a seventh forming the end of time,” corresponding to the seven days of creation (170). These are important events that take place within the Biblical story, although we need only note their number here. It seems clear that Lewis and Rowling were consciously working within a Christian framework. This is now well-known about Lewis, although to my knowledge, Rowling critics haven't noted any connection between the number seven and the Bible. An entire webpage is devoted to the significance of the number seven in *HP* without any mention of its origin in Christian mythology.⁵ Yet, it seems to me no coincidence that Rowling chose to divide the series into seven distinct books but a deliberate decision, a gesture acknowledging the influence of C.S. Lewis, and also drawing attention to her own use of Christian themes and ideas in her creation.

Let us now turn to some of the common elements of the fantasy stories beginning first with the idea of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the essence of heroism in Western culture. “The greatest heroism is the victory over self for the sake of others,” as Gino Dalfonzo writes in an article on Tolkien (n.p.). Although its history stretches back to before recorded history and has been observed in many non-Christian cultures around the world (see Hughes), I believe sacrifice as a transformative and ennobling act really stems from the Bible. Sacrifice is a central theme in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. God demands of Abraham in Genesis 22: 1-19 that he sacrifice his only son, Isaac. This Abraham is willing to do because God has asked it of him, though God intervenes at the last minute to spare Isaac, satisfied that Abraham has passed the test and is faithful to Him. God also commands Adam in Moses 5: 4-8 to make sacrifices of animals to Him, as reminders to people of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ that was to come. Thus Jesus’ sacrifice is foretold, and when it comes, as it is narrated in the Gospels, it is a known and willing sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity and to ensure salvation by God. This event has been celebrated by Christians for two thousand years, through the Eucharist and on Good Friday, as it represents the reconciliation of Man with God. For two thousand years, acts of sacrifice and self-sacrifice have been portrayed in Western culture as acts of heroic selflessness, deeply ennobling, and reminding all readers of Christ.

Sacrifice is also central in the three fantasy texts under discussion here. In *LOTR*, we witness Gandalf sacrificing himself in battle with the Balrog, enabling the other members of the fellowship to carry on with their mission. Perhaps as a reward for his sacrifice, Gandalf is returned to life and the world, reborn as Gandalf the White, with greater powers, now able to confront, and eventually defeat, Saruman. The greatest instance of sacrifice is of course made by the Christ-like Frodo, who bears the burden of the Ring and suffers accordingly, but eventually carries it up Mount Doom to destroy it. He must constantly resist the temptation to wear the Ring and succumb to its supernatural power to corrupt and lead him into evil. The entire sequence evokes Christ carrying the burden of the Cross, and it is a metaphor for everyone’s struggle to resist the temptation of sin and the corruption of power.

But at the last minute, at the very Crack of Doom, Frodo is unable to complete the task. “‘I have come,’ he said. ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!’ And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam’s sight” (*LOTR* 981). Frodo finally loses the battle with the Ring, the struggle with the self against temptation. The Ring is eventually destroyed, but not by Frodo’s will. My opinion of this climactic scene is that Tolkien means for us to understand that Frodo is a Christ-like figure, showing many commendable parallels, but not Christ himself. At the very end, he requires help from ‘outside,’ which in theology means grace, as Dalfonzo explains. It is an example of ‘eucatastrophe,’ or the “Consolation of the Happy Ending,” as Tolkien wrote

in his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” which is “a sudden and miraculous grace” which “denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a glimpse of Joy” (60). So Frodo is ultimately successful and Sauron defeated because the fantasy, or fairy-story, requires this ending, and Tolkien is not writing a tragedy. Other examples of eucatastrophe, explains Tolkien in the same essay, are the Birth and Resurrection of Christ, another story that “begins and ends in joy” (63).

Tolkien tried to discourage any attempt to identify Frodo with Christ, though Christ was surely the model. He cut out all references to religion of any kind in *LOTR*. At the same time, in an oft-quoted letter of 1953, he declared that

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters* 172)

Frodo is not Christ or an allegory of Christ, but as Tom Shippey says, “he represents something related.” This may be “an image of natural humanity trying to do its best in native decency . . . past mere furious heroic dauntlessness (Boromir and the rest),” Shippey continues (187). It is Frodo’s willingness to sacrifice himself, I believe, to willingly accept his own demise for the survival not only of his friends but of the entire world, without any expectation of reward or any thoughts of heroism or personal ambition; that is the ultimate act of heroism. The willing sacrifice is the key, and its source is clear.

In *LWW*, the Biblical echoes are even more pronounced, but that was quite deliberate. For unlike Tolkien, Lewis did not eliminate direct references to any form of religion. *LWW* is full of them, and perhaps the most obvious is Aslan’s willing self-sacrifice to save Edmund. A religious framework had earlier been hinted at with the description of the Pevensie children as “Sons of Adam” and “Daughters of Eve,” but it is Aslan’s sacrifice on the Stone Table that becomes the pivotal point of the story and makes it clear that Lewis is writing a Christian allegory. Edmund had in fact been guilty of betraying his brother and sisters to the White Witch, and according to the laws of the Deep Magic, the White Witch is justified in demanding that moral law—similar to the laws and rules of the Torah—be carried out through Edmund’s death. By taking Edmund’s place, however, Aslan saves Edmund, and he also saves Narnia. His sacrifice represents Christ’s crucifixion, the act of sacrifice by which Jesus atoned for the sins of the world. The Deeper Magic that Aslan understands is symbolic of the grace, mercy, and sacrifice emphasized in the Christian New Testament: “when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward” (179). Aslan’s sacrifice delivers ultimate victory of Good over Evil and “brings new life . . . even to those who have been turned into statues,” as Alan Jacobs writes (150).

The idea of sacrifice is also important in the *HP* series, particularly in the final novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007; hereafter *DH*). There Harry finally confronts his nemesis, Voldemort, face to face, knowing that he will certainly be killed. He does so because he has come to understand and accept that his sacrifice will be the only way to defeat Voldemort and save his friends: “Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death’s welcoming arms. Along the way, he was to dispose of Voldemort’s remaining links to life . . . neither would live, neither could survive (*DH* 554). Yet after his execution, Harry finds himself in a strange place face to face with the deceased Dumbledore who informs him that Harry is not dead. “But . . . I should have died—I didn’t defend myself! I meant to let him kill me,” says the confused Harry. “And that . . . will, I think, have made all the difference” explains Dumbledore (*DH* 567). “That” refers to Harry’s willing sacrifice, offered out of “love, loyalty and innocence,” which have power “beyond the reach of any magic” (*DH* 568). And so Harry is returned to life and the world to complete his battle against Evil. The details are very reminiscent of Aslan’s sacrifice and resurrection in *LWW*.

Throughout the series, Harry has been a Christ-like figure, the chosen one, “The Boy Who Lived.” His special power is symbolized by the lightning scar on his forehead, a mark of the divine. Harry’s strength, however, is not measured by magic or power or other skills, but by “his ability to love despite his neglected upbringing” (Littlefield 127). Some critics go so far as to suggest that in creating Harry Potter, Rowling was “rewriting the story of Christ,” and thus Harry is “a successful embodiment of the central myth of Western culture” (Killinger 7, 9). So John Killinger insists that “we cannot examine Harry apart from the story of Jesus; and if the story of Jesus is fully told, it must now include an examination of the story of Harry Potter, for Harry mystically embodies and extends that story” (9). I feel that this might be taking the argument a little too far, for Harry is not Christ. However, the Christian story of sacrifice, death and resurrection is paralleled by Harry, and I think Rowling was attempting to affirm the Christian values of love and faith that Harry shows against pure evil and power as depicted by Voldemort, in a story that would be both interesting and accessible to children. In this aim, she succeeded wildly beyond her expectations, and the fantastic success of *Harry Potter* has put it in the company of its great predecessors, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Turning now to perspectives on nature observed in these fantasy stories. It is here that fantasy literature may appear at first sight very different from the Bible. Genesis most clearly illustrates the relationship between Man and nature:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” . . . And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply,

and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gn 1: 26 Revised Standard Version)

And Man has obeyed. For thousands of years, people have been subduing the earth, until now in the 21st century, it is widely feared that the earth may no longer be able to sustain human life much longer. In all fairness, the authors of the Bible could have had no conception of what was to happen several millennia in the future. The Bible was written many centuries before industrialism or the scientific revolution. An expression of human dominance over nature did not have the negative emotive power that it has today. The Bible is also replete with pastoral imagery in which Man is quite in harmony with nature and the country is idealized, for instance in the agricultural setting in which the love of Ruth and Boaz is nurtured, or the use of idyllic natural imagery in the Song of Songs:

My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove
Is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
And the vines are in blossom;
They give forth fragrance.
Arise my love, my fair one,
And come away. (Sg. 2: 10-13)

Natural imagery here is, of course, a metaphor of fertility, the budding sexuality of the lovers. But the imagery suggests a benevolent nature with which Man is in harmony.

Tolkien clearly presents the Shire as a pastoral ideal not unlike an imagined Garden of Eden. The hobbits live a simple and peaceful agricultural life, undisturbed by the outside world, until Bilbo’s discovery of the One Ring. Saruman’s crimes are not only a lust for power and control, but his attempt to industrialize the Shire, chop down the trees, and destroy the landscape, upsetting the natural harmony. In Tolkien, trees are sentient beings, and their destruction cannot be forgiven by the Ents, the ancient shepherds of the forests who closely resemble trees. Talking trees are not uncommon in folklore, and the worship of them is widespread in religion and culture, from Norse and Celtic mythologies, to Indian Hinduism and Shintoism in Japan. Christianity held that the worship of trees was idolatry, but their importance remains in such symbols as the Tree of Knowledge, or even the

Christmas Tree as symbol of Christ and His light.

But *all* of nature is animate in Middle-earth, not only the trees. “Each forest, each river, each mountain range is distinctive, and *a fortiori*, more precise places (such as Caras Galadhon, Rauros, and Moria) each has its own personality” (Curry 453). The overall effect is one in which nature is not something the characters have dominion over, but one in which all are equal, and equally alive. Nature is enchanted and full of wonder, mystery, and yes, even danger. We are encouraged thus to condemn its wanton destruction and to show it the humble respect it rightly deserves. If such a thesis would seem to associate Tolkien with the modernist quest for the Golden Age, which Raymond Williams called the “organic society,” and which has always already gone (11), Tolkien’s depiction of nature is “not necessarily purely nostalgic,” Patrick Curry writes. For contemporary readers, *LOTR* has helped “reawaken awareness of the enchanted nature of the “real” world here and now. His work thus also has interesting resonances with contemporary environmental and ecological movements such as Deep Ecology” (Curry 454). In other words, some of the appeal of *LOTR* can be explained by its depiction of and sensitivity to very real modern concerns.

In Narnia, trees are also sentient, and they carry messages across great distances at great speeds. However, they are not always good, for some of them act as spies for the evil White Witch. The White Witch named Jadis shares with Sarumon this common trait: in addition to her desire for power, one of her major offences is against nature. Her reign is one of an endless winter in which Christmas never comes. The weakening of her power corresponds with the return of spring, and the growing strength of Aslan. Aslan is the creator of Narnia, although his creation occurs in *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955), a prequel that depicts the world a thousand years before *LWW*. Aslan sings Narnia into existence, creating stars, plants, animals in a scene that deliberately recalls Genesis, except that the God Aslan bestows on some of the animals the power of speech. So nature is animate and enchanted in *CN* as it is in *LOTR*.

There is also a sentient tree in *HP* that can be seen as a character in the stories, and it is not friendly. The Whomping Willow is a magical plant whose branches function as arms, reaching out to destroy anyone who comes close to it. Similarly, the Forbidden Forest presents nature as something more akin to the dangerous forest as depicted in “Little Red Riding Hood.” It is the home of magical creatures and strictly off limits to all students. The forest is a dark and menacing place where Harry meets dangers in the form of vicious spiders, and where he encounters Voldemort on several occasions. I think the main point about nature in *HP*, just as it is in *LOTR* or *CN*, is that it is alive; its representatives have personalities, souls, and they do not simply exist to be dominated. If this perspective would seem to put fantasy at odds with the Bible, which “extols a disenchanting world where subjectivity and agency are confined to humanity alone,” I would suggest that Tolkien,

Lewis, and Rowling are asking modern readers to reconnect with an enchanted world and give it the “respectful attention” it rightfully deserves (Curry 454). To put it another way, the ‘real’ world, our world, is a miraculous Creation full of wonder, mystery and enchantment, if we only had the eyes to see it.

A third common aspect of the three fantasy stories under discussion here that readers cannot fail to notice is the extent to which the heroes are uncommonly ordinary. Gino Dalfonzo aptly describes this as “humble heroism” and maintains that Tolkien’s “devout Catholic faith” gave him the vision to shape the kind of hero he needed. Hobbits stand out from the other characters in the story by their small size, and by their lack of special powers or fighting skills. For this reason, other characters such as Boromir and Théoden are inclined to dismiss them; Théoden, for instance, enlists Merry into his army but refuses to let him take part in the battle of Pelennor. Forceful personality and great physical strength, however, are rejected as true heroic traits, as Boromir is the first of the Fellowship to succumb to the power of the Ring, and the only member of the Fellowship to be killed by Orcs. It is also ironic that Théoden is slain by the Witch-king of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgûl, but it is Merry and his daughter Éowyn—a hobbit and a woman—who then together slay the supposedly invincible Witch-king. Raw physical power is no match for courage and cooperation; true strength is inner.

Tolkien chose a companion to accompany Frodo into the heart of Mordor, Samwise Gamgee, or Sam. If Frodo is notable for his humility and weakness, Sam is even more humble. His profound humility makes him virtually incorruptible, and therefore unsusceptible to the temptation of the Ring. Frodo carries the burden of the Ring, but Sam carries Frodo. Both seem equally deserving if there were only a single prize for ultimate hero, but Frodo possesses other qualities that make him unique; these are his ability to love and to forgive, his greatest Christ-like qualities. It is out of love for his friends that Frodo decides to abandon the Fellowship and head for Mordor alone, having witnessed the terrible power of the Ring over Boromir. Sam follows him, and so does another character, the wretched creature Gollum. Sam sees the evil in Gollum and would kill him, but Frodo, even at the risk of his life, chooses to show ‘Christian’ mercy and forgive, feeling sympathy for the pathetic Gollum. Love, mercy and forgiveness are the qualities of the true hero.

The hobbits are child-like, but they are not children. The Pevensies most certainly are. Though called Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve, and later Kings and Queens of Narnia, readers can never really stop seeing them as only innocent children. Interestingly, it is the youngest and weakest of them all, Lucy, who has the greatest inner strength. It is she who finds the wardrobe, the first portal into Narnia, and it is she who feels and understands the love of Aslan greater than her brothers and sister. The smallest and weakest has the deepest faith.

Humility is the defining feature of Harry Potter, in spite of his magic power and

legendary status as “The Boy Who Lived.” He isn’t especially large, bright or good-looking. The bespectacled Harry grows up in obscurity as a mere servant of his adoptive family, the Dursleys: “Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. . . . Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose” (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* 20). Yet even when Harry learns that he is famous, rich, and (later) powerful in the wizarding world, he never stops being kind, forgiving, and meek. He accepts friends who are spurned by others for their lack of social standing (Ron) or their ‘Mudblood’ parentage (Hermione), but neither does he seek revenge on those who persecute him (the Dursleys or the Malfoys). He remains just and fair throughout.

It is clear then that the Bible and Christianity greatly influenced Tolkien, Lewis and Rowling, though I wonder if this adequately explains the popularity or *allure* of fantasy. Let me sum it up this way: the twentieth century saw a general decline in organized religion which continues to this day, but if the Church was seen to have failed, it left behind a spiritual hunger, a longing for new heroes, new moral and spiritual guides, new myths. Tolkien and Lewis deeply believed that Christianity was a ‘true myth’ that contained universal truths that still had relevance for the modern world. Tolkien blended this belief with his love and knowledge of Old Norse mythology to create a new mythology, but one that still illustrated basic Christian concepts. Lewis retold the Christian story in a more direct way but combined it with adventure and enchantment that made it more accessible and appealing to children. Rowling, undoubtedly under the heavy influence of both Tolkien and Lewis, repeated the pattern of their success, adding new elements such as magic and a special school for magicians. It was a winning formula.

The idea of literature as a displaced version of religion is not new. In his *Literary Theory*, for instance, Terry Eagleton explained succinctly in 1983 how the rise of English studies had coincided with a corresponding decline in religion:

If one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century, one could do worse than reply: ‘the failure of religion’. By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable, immensely powerful ideological form was in deep trouble. It was no longer winning the hearts and mind of the masses, and under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating. . . .

Fortunately, however, another, remarkably similar discourse lay to hand: English literature. George Gordon, early Professor of English Literature at Oxford, commented in his inaugural lecture that ‘England is sick, and . . . English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature now has a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.’ (22-23).

Very tall orders indeed. Writing twenty-eight years later, however, Margaret Atwood came to a similar conclusion:

Why this migration of the West's more recent founding mythologies—our once-essential core stories of the Judeo-Christian era—from Earth to [other worlds]? Possibly because—as a society—we no longer believe in the old religious furniture, or not enough to make it part of our waking 'realistic' life." Our gods and heroes have moved to other imaginative worlds because they are "acceptable to us there, whereas they wouldn't be here (64-65).

By other worlds, Atwood means fictional worlds, but that does not make them any less real or necessary: "many of us are more than willing to engage with them there because—say some theorists—our own deep inner selves still contain the archetypal patterns that produced them" (65). So the archetypes are unchanged but the settings have moved—to Middle-earth, to Narnia, or they are still right here right now, if only we could see them.

Fantasy as religion? It seems a stretch for a band of merry hobbits or Hogwarts's young wizards, but perhaps not. Writing in the religion section of *The Huffington Post*, Greg Garrett maintains that *HP* teaches us important spiritual lessons, among them "the responsible use of power, the formative power of community and the nature of true heroism." Harry is uncommonly ordinary, but "he is also part of a holy trinity without which he would not survive his many tests. Hermione Granger, the brainy friend, and Ron Weasley, the steadfast friend, are at his side for almost every challenge he faces." And Garrett concludes, "Harry is a Christ-figure . . . so perhaps it's not surprising to hear people talk of Harry Potter in spiritual and even religious terms. . . . Harry is not Jesus. But Harry can point the way." Lewis maintained that his *Chronicles* were intended to do just that: he apparently learned that a young American reader, Laurence Krieg, feared that he may love Aslan more than Jesus. Lewis replied to the boy's mother in a letter worth quoting:

But Laurence can't *really* love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that's what he's doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before. (qtd. In Jacobs 289)

Aslan is not Jesus, but Aslan can point the way. It is astonishing to think that a literary text, a work of fantasy, can have the power of religion, or can at least lead the reader towards religion, and yet that is what many readers and critics have been describing.

A final aspect of the three stories to consider is their incredible power as consumer brands. Three of the most popular works of fiction of all-time are not only literary texts but also hugely successful popular films, with vast webs of related consumer merchandising, distributing and licensing deals. There is a Harry Potter theme park in Orlando, Florida, with others planned for Hollywood and Japan; an online Narnia store (*narnia.awestores*).

com), where you can find posters, clothes, books, statues, play swords, and more; there was Tolkien Enterprises, now Middle-earth Enterprises, which owns exclusive copyrights to certain elements of Tolkien's stories, including "the titles of the works, the names of characters contained within as well as the names of places, objects and events within them, and certain short phrases and sayings from the works."⁶ Each year hundreds of thousands of devoted fans make pilgrimages to the sites associated with the stories. For Tolkien or Lewis fans, it may be Oxford, England, where the authors lived, or it may be in New Zealand where *LOTR* was filmed. Google "Harry Potter pilgrimages" and you get many holiday options. There's even an actual Platform 9^{3/4} erected in King's Cross Station, London (but don't try to run through intending to catch the Hogwarts Express; the Platform is just a tourist photo spot). Back in the classroom, Petra Rehling informs us that utilizing *Harry Potter* "to communicate Christian belief is only just taking off" with the advantage over the holy Bible that the language and setting of the story are contemporary and so "people of all ages and nations can relate to them." "Whoever the bible did not convert," she concludes, "*Harry Potter* will" (255). I suppose the only question left to ponder, then, is whether the cultural phenomena of *Harry Potter*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* will last two thousands years.

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1 "List of Best-Selling Books," accessed 29 January 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books

2 For example, Harold Bloom writes of *LOTR*, "Its style is quaint, pseudobiblical, overly melodramatic, and its personages are so much cardboard" (vii). And, "*The Lord of the Rings* seems to be inflated, overwritten, tendentious, and moralistic in the extreme" (1).

3 "Best-Selling Book of Non-Fiction," accessed 29 January 2013, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-1/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction/>

4 J. K. Rowling cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hogwarts#Forbidden_Forest. Accessed 6 February 2013.

5 <http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Seven>

6 Middle-earth Enterprises. Accessed 27 Aug. 2013. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle-earth_Enterprises

