

# THE LITERARY FANTASTIC –BA SURVEY Anna Kérchy ([akerchy@gmail.com](mailto:akerchy@gmail.com))

**Course description:** The course provides an overview of the literary-historical development (since the Enlightenment) and the manifold theoretical problematizations of Fantastic Fiction in English. We shall explore the purest form fantasy along with the amazing variety of subgenres ranging from Gothic ghost stories to postmodern cyberpunk, discussing on our way Romantic tales, Victorian phantasmagorias, high fantasy legendarium, modernist de/mythologizations, magic/al ir/realism, urban fantasy, dystopia, science fiction, steampunk, dark fantasy, paranormal romance, feminist/queer revisions, heroic fantasies of history and religion, contemporary young adult and children's quest fantasies, horror and body genres, and the filmic fantastic. Students will be familiarized with recurrent themes and critical-theoretical concerns of the fantastic mode such as worldmaking, rhetorics, topography, hesitation, subversion, metamorphosis, mirror images, multiplying selves, bodily disintegration, dis/enchantment, escapism, non-signification, etc. Authors covered include Shelley, Stoker, Stevenson, Wilde, Carroll, MacDonald, Poe, Woolf, Wells, Tolkien, Lewis, Lovecraft, Baum, Le Guin, Bradbury, Herbert, Rushdie, Morrison, Carter, Winterson, Atwood, Burgess, Adams, King, Rowling, Gaiman, Pratchett, Pullman, Miéville, Martin, Martel, Burton, Lynch, Miyazaki. Evaluation: final written exam.

## Recommended readings

- JRR Tolkien. "On Fairy Stories." *Tree and Leaf*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- CS Lewis (1952) "Three Ways of Writing for Children." *Of Other Worlds. Essays & Stories*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt. 1994. 22-35.
- GK Chesterton, (1908) "The Ethics of Elfland." *Orthodoxy*. Rockville: Serenity, 2008. 40-56.
- Tzvetan Todorov "The Uncanny and the Fantastic" in *The Fantastic*, Cornell UP, 1970.

## List of Compulsory Readings

### VICTORIAN PHANTASMAGORIAS

Robert Louis Stevenson. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* OR Bram Stoker. *Dracula*

### HIGH FANTASY

JRR Tolkien. *The Hobbit* OR CS Lewis: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

### MAGIC REALISM

Jeanette Winterson. *The Passion* OR Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

### SCIENCE FICTION

Philip K Dick. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* OR Kazuo Ishiguro: *Never Let me Go*

### DYSTOPIA, HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* OR Toni Morrison. *Beloved*

OR Anthony Burgess. *A Clockwork Orange*

### YOUNG ADULT TRAUMA/ GOTHIC

Patrick Ness. *A Monster Calls* OR Neil Gaiman. *Coraline*

### TRANSMEDIA PICTUREBOOK

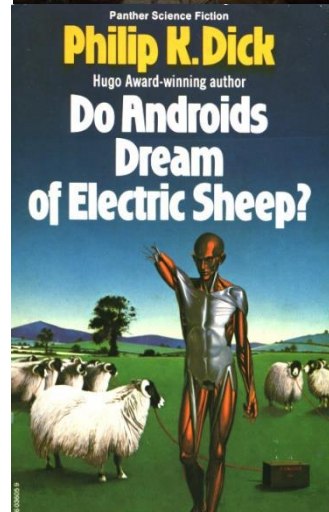
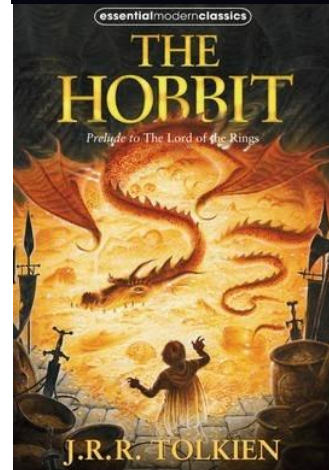
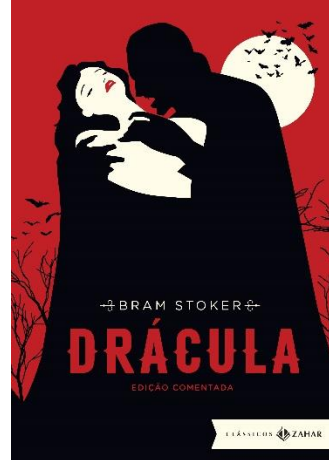
Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. *The Wolves in the Walls*

### SHORT STORIES

ETA Hoffman. "The Sandman"

EA Poe. "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Angela Carter. "The Company of Wolves"



## Schedule

1. Orientation
2. Introduction: Lit History, Genres, Clusters, Rhetoric, Theoretical Approaches
3. The Romantic Fantastic, Gothic Origins
4. Victorian Phantasmagorias
5. High Fantasy Legendarium
6. Modernist De/mythologizations
7. Magic/al Ir/realism
8. Urban Fantasy, Dystopia
9. Sci-fi, Steampunk, Cyberpunk
10. Dark fantasy, paranormal romance, feminist revisions
11. Quest narratives, Heroic fantasies of history and religion
12. Postmodern Young Adult fantasy, Contemporary children's Gothic
13. (12.05.) Horror and Body Genres

Filmic adaptations of the fantastic from Méliès to Lynch

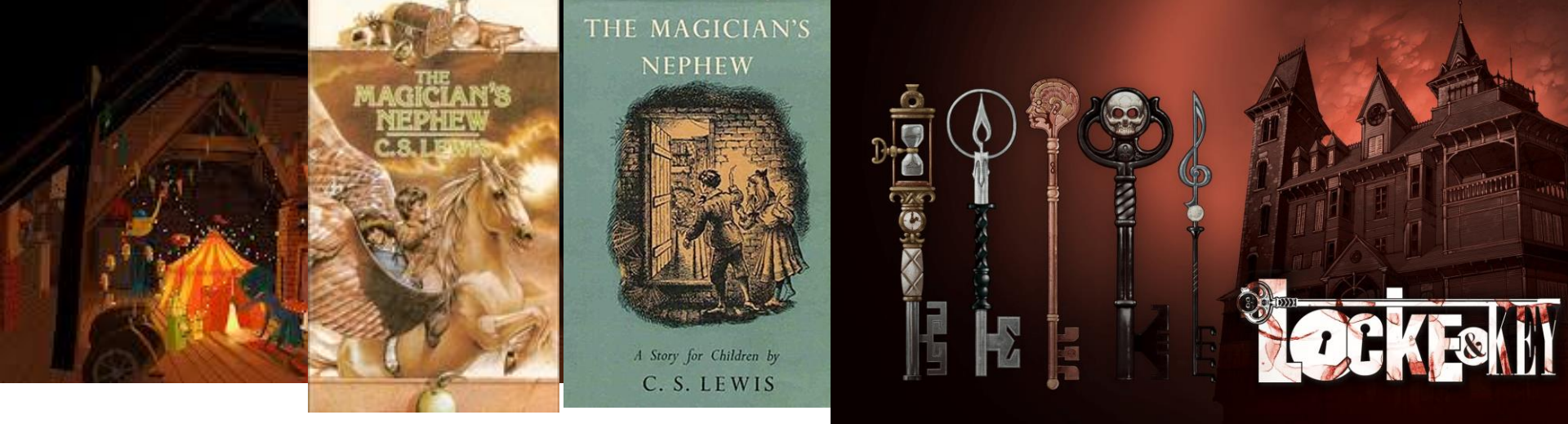
**Evaluation: final written exam. Max 6 absences allowed.**



# *The difficulty of defining the Fantasy Genre/ The Literary Fantastic/ Fantastic Fiction*

- „A genre of fiction that commonly uses magical, supernatural, wondrous phenonema as primary plot element, theme, setting, structural pattern”
- Non-realistic → „a willing suspension of disbelief”
  - fantastic universe, alternate reality, secondary world-building
  - speculative fiction
  - creates WONDER + makes you think (metafiction, questions consensus reality)
- ❖ a „**FUZZY SET**” (Clute & Grant, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 1997)
  - Pure Fantastic?
  - overlapping subgenres, generic mixtures (eg. Harry Potter)
  - Lacks specificity of horror or science-fiction → Umbrella term
  - Etymology: fancy vs. imagination (daydreaming, fantasizing, make-believing)





“Fantasy is not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses, such as the one that entranced us in C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* with its connecting attics, each with a door that leads into another world. There are shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal décor can differ wildly, and the lives lived in these terraced houses are discrete yet overheard.”

(Farah Mendlesohn: Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*)

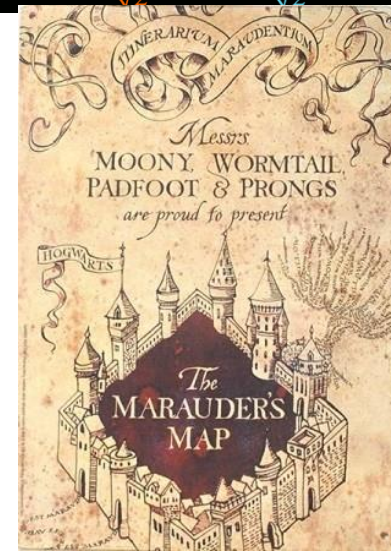
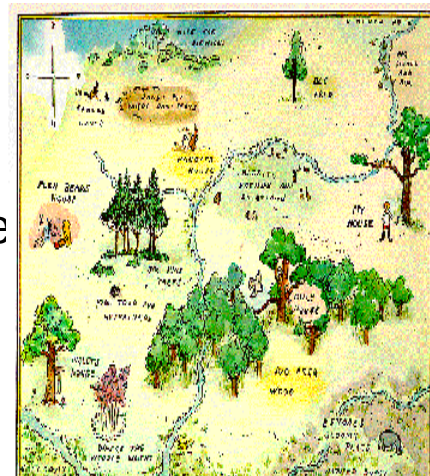


FULL of PARADOXES

|                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Evokes WONDER</b><br>Calculable affective response:<br>amazement by impossible turned possible:<br>Empathy | <b>INTELLECTUAL</b> agency<br>constructs impossible world to reflect on<br>real, thought experiments<br>Meta-fantasy |
| „willing suspension of disbelief,” immersive<br>experience                                                    | COGNITIVE DISSONANCE<br>hesitation, alienation, metafictional aspects                                                |
| escapism<br>(far away and long ago)                                                                           | social criticism<br>(dystopia’s worst case scenario, fairy tale’s<br>democratic intent, speculative fiction)         |
| Poetics (Wonder resides in lgg)                                                                               | Politics (Wonder relates to hope, promise of<br>change, metamorphosis, wishful thinking)                             |
| Lure of enchantment in disenchanted,<br>secularized reality                                                   | Commodification of fantasy, ideological<br>saturation of „happily ever after”                                        |
| <b>Themes of longing and belonging</b><br>Timeless                                                            | <b>Fictionalization of cultural anxieties</b><br>Historically specific                                               |
| Individual invention                                                                                          | Rooted in collective storytelling experience<br>of oral tradition                                                    |

## ❖ WORLDBUILDING

- Fictional elsewhere
- Otherworld, Secondary World, Alternate Reality, Fictional Universe
- Possible World= impossible yet self coherent
- Wonderland, Gameworld, Fantasyland, Neverland, Neverwhere
- Feasibility justified
  - by maps, invented languages, fictional species, myths
- Transmedia storytelling: extension of storyworld w tie-in products
- Parallel World, reality as a multiplicity of unrealized possibilities
- Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment of quantum physics
- „WHAT IF?“
- Theme of quest: involves spatial/temporal movement („There and back again“)
- Fantastification of Nature (enchanted woods), technodystopia, urban fantasy
- Engages audience



*"It is necessary to create constraints, in order to invent freely. In poetry the constraint can be imposed by meter, foot, rhyme, by what has been called the "verse according to the ear."... In fiction, the surrounding world provides the constraint. This has nothing to do with realism... A completely unreal world can be constructed, in which asses fly and princesses are restored to life by a kiss; but that world, purely possible and unrealistic, must exist according to structures defined at the outset (we have to know whether it is a world where a princess can be restored to life only by the kiss of a prince, or also by that of a witch, and whether the princess's kiss transforms only frogs into princes or also, for example, armadillos)." —*

**Umberto Eco**, postscript to *The Name of the Rose*



## ***Fantastification of consensus reality***

- turn familiar into unfamiliar: recognizable yet different
- multiplication of perspectives: invites to think otherwise: imagination teaches empathy
- Transition in time/space/level of reality (antiquation/exotication/uncanny)
- Metamorphosis, transgression, violation of limits
- bw life/death (ghost story),
- human/machine (sci-fi cyborg),
- human/animal (interspecies romance, anthropomorphic animals, bestial humans, hybrids),
- magic/real (alternate history, magic realism, sword&sorcery)
- past/present/future (dystopia, retrofuturism, medieval fantasy)
- Destabilization of ready-made truths (hauntings, prophecies, hesitation)
- connection bw fantastic/consensus reality (portals)
- Recycling myth, folk/fairy-tale tradition
- the power of language: act of speech = act of creation (Bible, magic spells, taboo words)
- Magic objects: Enchanted book



- **CLASSIC FANTASY:**
  - immersion into radically differing elsewhere accepted w „WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF”  
(Before 1600 NO distinction bw fantastic/ realistic writing, magic is accepted as part of reality)
- **After ROMANTICISM**
  - scientific discoveries of Industrial revolution: ‚real’ vs impossible’ divide
  - Imaginativeness token of intellectual sophistication, aesthetic sensibility
- **VICTORIAN ERA**
  - Coexistence of multiple contradictory worldviews & belief systems
  - scientific/religious/superstitious --- hypothesis/faith/fantasy/delusion
  - Use of myths, legends, folk tales for Nation building
  - Interest in Dream States
- **(POST)MODERN FANTASY:**
  - alienation, disenchantment, parody, self-irony, metafictionality, fractured narrative, relativization, rewriting, unreliable narrator, imaginative resistance, politicization of genre: ethical impossibility
  - fantastic causality seen as pathological, infantile (animism), experimental



Fantastic fiction=  
dialogue  
bw author & reader  
for consensual  
construction of  
wonder & belief  
(Mendlesohn)

**Herbert James Draper.**  
**The Lament for Icarus**  
**1898**

- Epic failure of overreacher character
- Heroic struggle
- Failed desire to unite w transcendental (sun)
- Cathartic
- Fallen hero= emblem of artist
- Sensual depiction of
- Magnificent winged creature

**HIGH FANTASY style**



**Pieter Bruegel: Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, 1555**

mannerist inversion: low vs high theme, warn ag ambition, indifference of people, blindness to wonder , limits of representation, META FANTASY



## ❖ FANTASY STRUCTURE: (Tolkien)

1. BONDAGE (Wrongness/Thinning)
2. RECOGNITION (Quest, labyrinth becomes path to follow, recognition of misrecognition)
3. METAMORPHOSIS (shapeshifting, rite of passage, release from bondage, revelation of Freudian Unconscious/Jungian Shadow, authentic self)
4. EUCATASTROPHE (Consolation, Healing, Recovery, a „piercing glimpse of joy”)





# Tzvetan Todorov: The Fantastic. A structural approach to a literary genre (1975)

**HESITATION:** a major mark of fantasy

Diff: **uncanny ↔ fantastic ↔ marvellous**

- **MARVELOUS:** alternate universe, diff rules of functioning, flying carpets, talking animals, magic, fairy tale, the supernatural accepted supernatural

1. Hyperbolic marvellous // 2. exotic marvellous // 3. instrumental marvellous // 4.

scientific marvelous

- **UNCANNY:** rational explanation of supernatural (EA Poe, crime mystery)

- **FANTASTIC:** UNCERTAINTY, AMBIGUITY, HESITATION, unreliable narrators

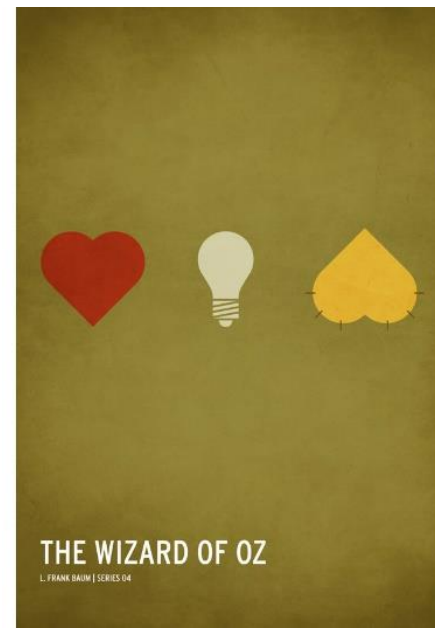
“‘I nearly reached the point of believing’ – neither total faith, nor total incredulity

Horrific events ≤ the horror resides in the readers’ reaction to events, unjustified fear, superstitions, No 13

Overlappings w Freudian uncanny & magical realism

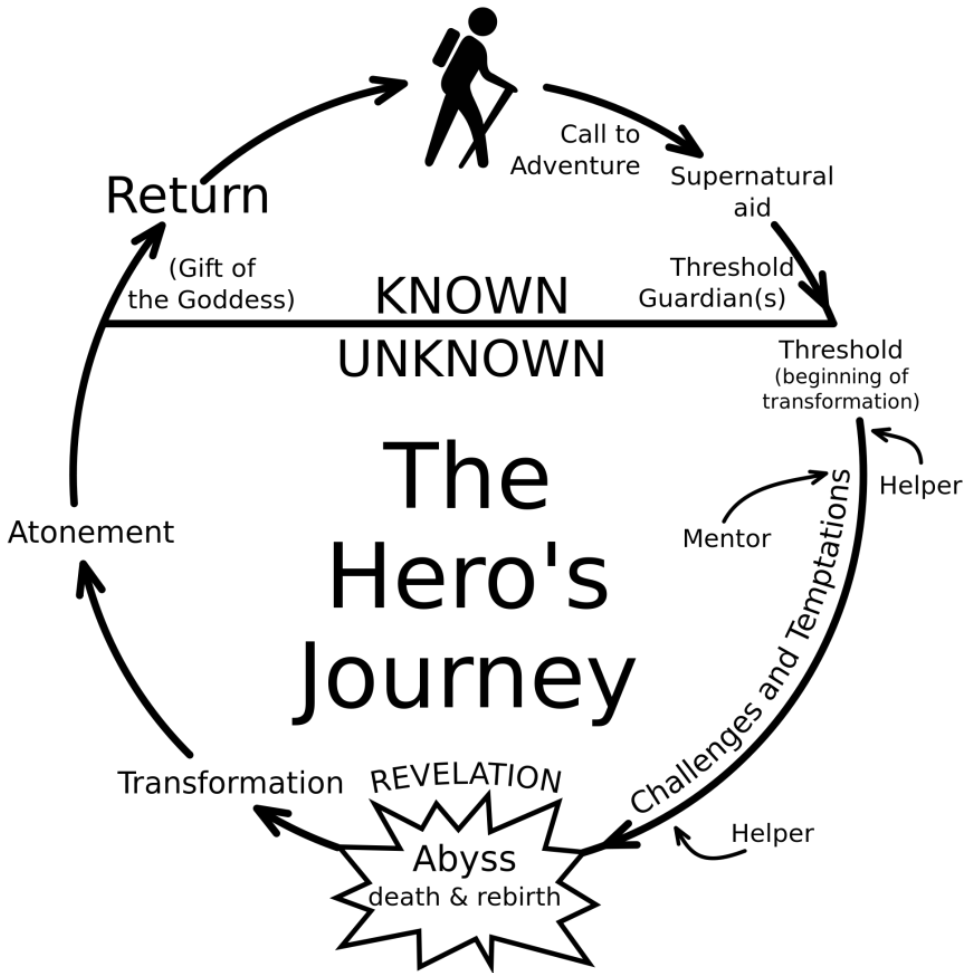
*An apple is never just an apple, a mirror does much more than mirroring, and the forest means more than just a bunch of trees. Simple things – like a briar rose, a red hood, or a glass slipper – gain an emblematic significance as elementary motifs from a “collective cultural imagination’s archive” (Warner), which excite human fantasists of all ages and eras. “Guided by the symbolic icons, readers create their own tale in their own language”*

Warja Lavater’s imageries, Christian Jackson’s Minimalist Fairy Tale Posters

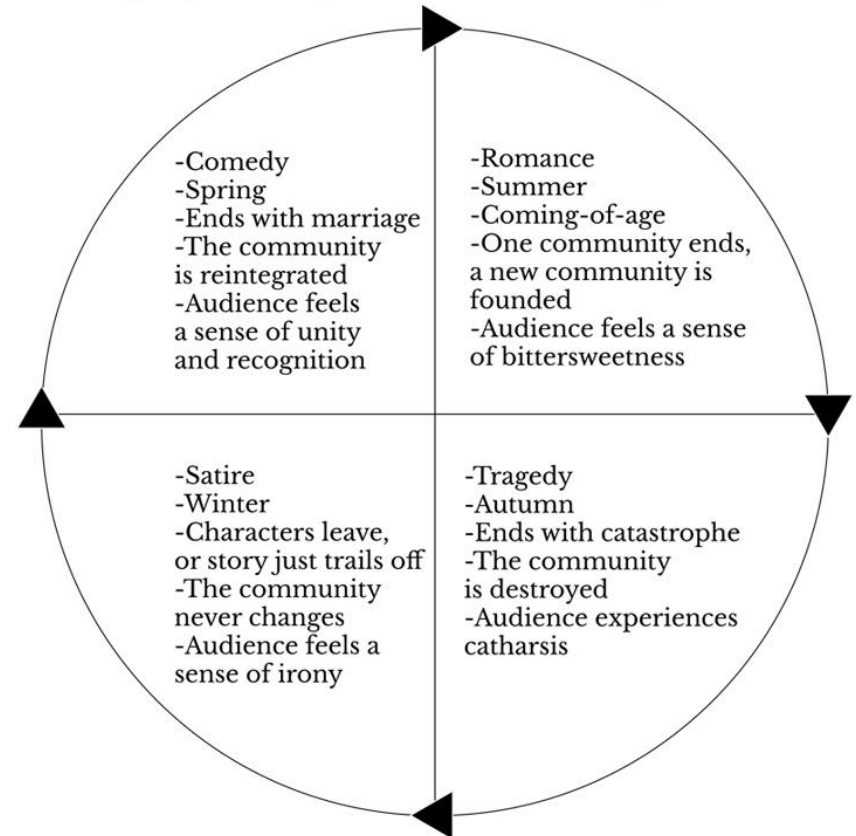


## ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM:

- study of grand overarching myths, sacred practices (rituals, ordeals, sacrifices, initiations) liminal experience (border crossings, transitions)
  - Greek mythology
  - **Gustav Jung**: collective unconscious, archetypes, animus/anima, mother, child, trickster, flood, old man
  - **Sir James Frazer. *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (1900)**  
religion as a cultural phenomenon not from theological perspective, fertility rite, cyclical season, death of old King Winter and advent of Spring, resurrection of Christ – Freud: *Totem and Taboo*)
  - **Otto Rank. *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1914)**  
(Greek dramas, Jungian archetypes, early traumas)
  - **Joseph Campbell *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)**  
(Osiris, Prometheus, Buddha, Moses, Christ, Harry Potter, Star Wars)
- MONOMYTH** 1. separation, 2. initiation 3. return home (recurring plotline & patterns)
- **Claude-Lévi Strauss. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship***  
(binary oppositions: evil dark vs good light)
  - **Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)**  
study of tragic, comic, and thematic literature divided into five "modes", each identified with a specific literary epoch: mythic, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic.



Northrop Frye's Literary Modes from The Anatomy of Criticism



**PORTAL** (travel in time/space/self) → Hero on **QUEST** → **METAMORPHOSIS**

**Protagonist's relation to fantasy world** (focalization!! ≈stylistic decisions, political agenda)

Mendlesohn's taxonomy based on how the fantastic enters the narrated world:

1. **Portal Quest Fantasy** (we are invited into through the Fantastic)
2. **Intrusive Fantasy** (the Fantastic enters the fictional world)
3. **Immersive Fantasy** (no escape, no explanation)
4. **Liminal Fantasy** (magic hovers in corner of our eyes, leakage of monstrous, hesitation  
(in Farah Mendlesohn: *The Rhetorics of Fantasy*)

discloses taken for granted consensus reality of bourgeois world as ideological construct  
+ reveals Metamorphosis behind stasis + shift in perception, multifocal viewpoint→  
**DE/FAMILIARIZATION** → HESITATION/CERTAINTY („negative capability,” benefit of doubt)

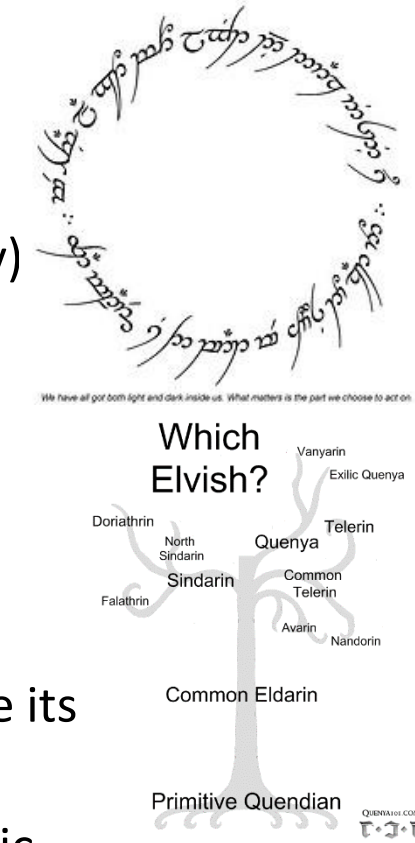


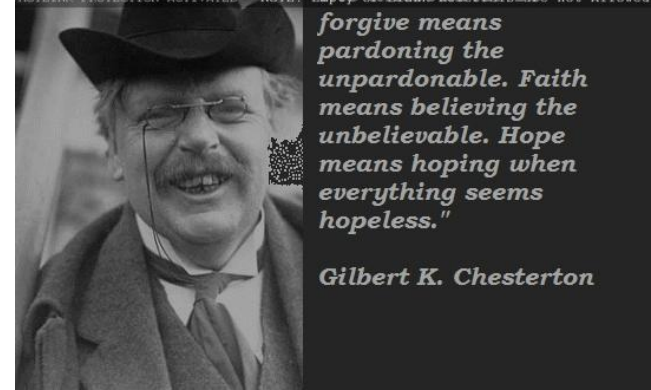
- **Psychoanalytical approaches to Fantasy Lit.**
- **fantasy as the literature of subversion (Rosemary Jackson, 1981)**
- **MIMESIS+ FANTASTIFICATION**: fantasy establishes consensus reality through mimesis, then moves to another marvellous, supernatural zone, that is still not entirely different because of grounding in the real
- fantasy as the **LITERATURE OF DESIRE**: seeks that which it experiences as absence and loss, compensates for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: we can act out our secret desires and fight our fears in fantasy
- **Face return of the REPRESSED** & defeat it
- Libidinal drives, death drive, **EROS & THANATOS**, Oedipal desire, castration complex (severed hand, fear of being buried alive, blindness, disempowerment), penis/womb envy
- **FANTASY LAND: disorderly** space: defeating reason: Q unity of time/space/ego
- **THE DOUBLE**: the divided self, the doppelganger, the monstrous Otherness within the self
- **UNCANNY**, unheimlich (Sigmund Freud): the strangeness of the familiar, or the déjà vu feel of the alien suddenly revealed → perplexing sensation, „THE UNSPEAKABLE”
- **INFANTILE COMPLEXES, REPRESSED INSTINCTS, PRIMITIVE BELIEFS, SUPERSTITIONS FICTIONALIZED**
- **the UNCONSCIOUS**, the shadow, the bestial, animus/anima: both terrifying+fascinating (Robert Holdstock: *Mythago Wood* (1984))
- Bruno **Bettelheim**: *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976)
- **FAIRY-TALE THERAPY**: safe release of repressed psychotic contents: deal w incomprehensible (sexuality, death, trauma), transmit moral values, develop imagination, curiosity, empathy, hope!

Fantasy: defense mechanism resulting from psychic/social repression vs.

Fantasy: mystical insight into realms of possibilities, escape from reality (Tolkien)

- **Languages of the fantastic**
  - magic spell
  - significance of naming (ownership, worldbuilding, teasing fantasy)
  - taboo on words (*You-Know-Who*, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Nameless Things in horror, Lupus in Fabula)
  - fictional languages (Naavi, Elvish, Klingon, literary nonsense)
  - names create fictional universe
  - Logos, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God.”
  - Ursula K Le Guin: “To change a rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. And to do that...is to change the world.”
  - Fantastic styles: hierathic, archaic, ecstatic, ironic, absurd, demotic, re-estranged, deictic language
  - JRR Tolkien, philologist:
- the Wonder of Language, esp. adjectives make new forms, call Fantasy to being, begin Faerie, turn Man into a Sub-creator.





- **Ethics of Fantasy:**

- **GK Chesterton. "The Ethics of Elfland" in Orthodoxy**

"We believe in bodily miracles, but not in mental possibilities."

- rational necessity vs imaginative possibility
- laws of nature, scientific explanations vs/ & magic
- contingency of world based on enchantment
- **fairy tales' ability to open your eyes to the sheer wonder of existence**
- sense of wonder: inherent given of child

"A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door."

- **"fairy-tale logic," "elfin ethics," "wondrous nonsense" of fairy tales**

teach us that "this world is a wild and startling place, which *might have been* quite different, but which is quite delightful; [and] that before this wildness and delight one may well be modest and submit to the queerest limitations of **so queer a kindness**"

**–challenge us to accept alternative, 'magical' world(view)s different from our own**

- **FAIRY-TALE LOGIC:** incomprehensible happiness always rests on incomprehensible conditions

"You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, if you do not say the word 'cow'"; or "You may live happily with the King's daughter, if you do not show her an onion."

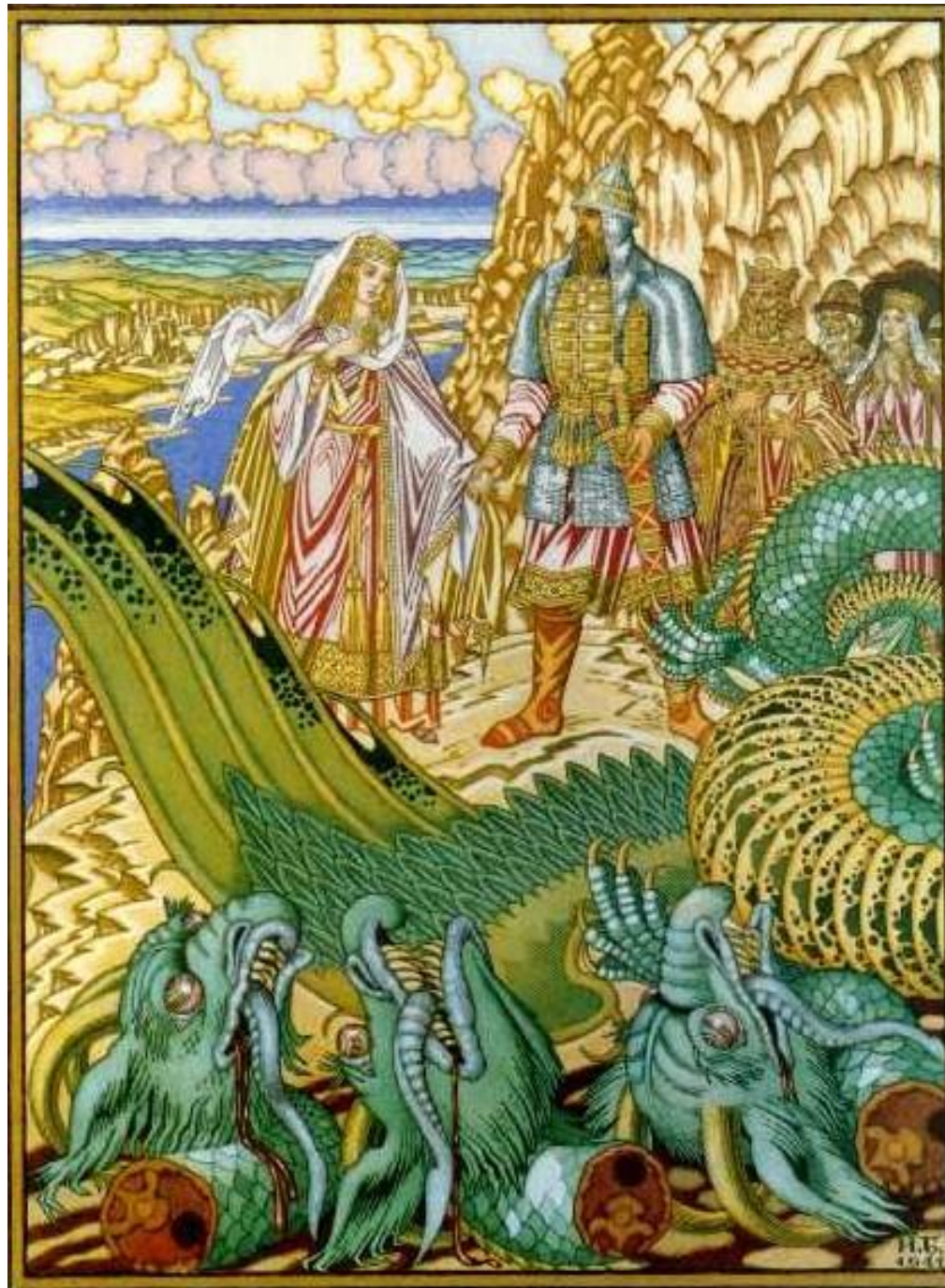
→ real life is also full of unpredictable magic, rationality is permeated by imaginativeness, multiple potentialities coexist

- **creative imagination = a Gift from God**, a condition of individual/communal happiness, more trustworthy than scientific explanations

**• reality is reinterpreted in terms of wondrous possibilities instead of a rational necessity**

„So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper. Everything has in fact another side to it, like the moon, the patroness of nonsense. Viewed from that other side, a bird is a blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk, a man a quadruped begging on its hind legs, a house a gigantesque hat to cover a man from the sun, a chair an apparatus of four wooden legs for a cripple with only two.“

CHESTERTON, G.K., *A Defence of Nonsense* = The Defendant, London, Brimley Johnson, 1901.



CHESTERTON: THE ETHICS OF ELFLAND

„I observed that learned men in spectacles were talking of the actual things that happened — dawn and death and so on — as if THEY were rational and inevitable. They talked as if the fact that trees bear fruit were just as NECESSARY as the fact that two and one trees make three. But it is not. There is an enormous difference by the test of fairyland; which is the test of the imagination. You cannot IMAGINE two and one not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit; you can imagine them growing golden candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail. These men in spectacles spoke much of a man named Newton, who was hit by an apple, and who discovered a law. But they could not be got to see the distinction between a true law, a law of reason, and the mere fact of apples falling. If the apple hit Newton’s nose, Newton’s nose hit the apple. That is a true necessity: because we cannot conceive the one occurring without the other. But we can quite well conceive the apple not falling on his nose; we can fancy it flying ardently through the air to hit some other nose, of which it had a more definite dislike. We have always in our fairy tales kept this sharp distinction between the science of mental relations, in which there really are laws, and the science of physical facts, in which there are no laws, but only weird repetitions. We believe in bodily miracles, but not in mental impossibilities. We believe that a Bean-stalk climbed up to Heaven; but that does not at all confuse our convictions on the philosophical question of how many beans make five. (44)

- ...
- When we are asked why eggs turn to birds or fruits fall in autumn, we must answer exactly as the fairy godmother would answer if Cinderella asked her why mice turned to horses or her clothes fell from her at twelve o’clock. We must answer that it is *magic*. It is not a “law.” [...] It is not a necessity. [...] We have no right to say that it must always happen. (45)”