

The Psychology of Fantasy

The general tone of novels is so literal that when the fantastic is introduced it produces a special effect: some readers are thrilled, others choked off: it demands an additional adjustment because of the oddness of its method or subject matter – like a sideshow in an exhibition where you have to pay sixpence as well as the original fee.

E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1954), 160.

Fantasy literature offers the reader much of what general fiction offers – escape and adventure – but it goes far beyond the familiar realm of belief. It allows us to enter a world of “contrasts and opposites”, to break away from the entrapment of realism. While some may consider this genre to be of little importance or value to the psychological health of the reader, many may argue that it is integral to a healthy state of mind.

Critics of the fantasy genre believe that indulging in fantasy stories can shift a person’s focus to less productive matters. They argue that it tempts readers into avoiding the realities of life by putting off real-world responsibilities and evading serious personal issues. To these people, fantasy equates to useless daydreaming and nostalgia. “In fact, they conclude, fantasy is evasive, escapist, and counterproductive” (Pamela S. Gates).

Several people oppose these beliefs. While they acknowledge that fantasy may encourage the evasion of real-life problems, they argue that the value of the genre cannot be overlooked. Fantasy, they propose, provides not only a temporary, healthy

escape, or break from the demands of reality; it can actually be productive in building problem-solving skills. It can encourage readers to imagine themselves in different roles and scenarios, pursuing alternate decisions and actions without experiencing any real risk. By living vicariously through fantasy characters, readers can expand on their techniques for solving personal problems.

The ability to imagine is a mechanism for survival; fantasizing is a human activity essential to creating a balance in one’s life. As Lloyd Alexander explains, “paradox and polarity are inherent in the very structure of the brain . . . one hemisphere is rational, cognitive, analytical; the other, non-rational, nonverbal, intuitive. One half an intellectual; the other a visionary. We need both to maintain equilibrium in this universe within our heads”. Reading fantasy can therefore produce this mental balancing effect.

Dreaming is another human survival mechanism, proven essential to mental health by scientific studies. Entering a dream state on a regular basis refreshes the mind in order to cope with the demands of a new day. In dream deprivation experiments, where subjects are deprived of REM sleep (i.e., dream-stage sleep) mental deterioration occurs rapidly. Without dreams, without fantasy, we become shells of our potential selves.

Fantasy is therefore important to mental well being, particularly for the young adult reader. It provides a momentary escape, a release. It helps increase the potential of ones’ imagination to solve life’s problems. It can help resolve emotional conflicts and alleviate teen anxieties.

References

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