From Middle-Earth to Macondo:
Tolkienian Fantasy, Aesthetic Response, and Magical Realism

A project completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program

by

Luke Antony Carothers

3 May 2016

English
Ohio Dominican University

Approved by

Advisor

Reader

Accepted by

Director, ODU Honors Program
I. Introduction: Towards a Definition of Tolkienian Fantasy

The vast majority of scholarship surrounding the literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien has come in two distinct waves. The first wave came around the time of Tolkien’s death in 1973. These critics first wave viewed Tolkien’s work in a rather traditional sense. These traditional explorations viewed works such as *the Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as from either an allegorical or environmental standpoint.¹ Along with these traditional literary explorations, the main literary themes of the day cropped up throughout: structuralism, deconstructionism, aesthetic response. The next wave of criticism surrounding Tolkien’s work came as a result of the box office success of Peter Jackson’s film versions of the book; this wave of Tolkien criticism differs vastly from the first in that it explores previously untouched subjects such as Tolkien’s poetry within the novels. However, throughout the two waves of Tolkien criticism, there is a common theme that has formed; this theme is the formation of what is now known as Tolkienian fantasy. The fantasy genre has been plagued by a lack of a solid definition throughout the 20th century. While Tolkien’s works seemingly fit directly in the middle of the fantasy genre, the fringes are marked with a gray, blending into different genres. In order to soundly identify what is and what is not fantasy literature, one must begin at the roots of the argument. The first major exploration towards a definition of fantasy literature comes in Eric Rabkin’s book *The Fantastic in Literature*. *The Fantastic in Literature*, which was published in 1976, was among the first book length explorations of the fantasy genre; it is largely responsible for the current academic discussion surrounding fantasy literature. According to Rabkin, fantasy literature must achieve two ends:

1. It must extend experience

2. It must contradict perspective (5)

Although Rabkin clearly defines fantasy literature, his definition still raises a number of important questions. The main question arises in reference to the subject matter at hand; who is it that has their experience extended, and who is it what has their perspective contradicted? In tackling this problem from the most basic standpoint, it is understandable to look at the main character of a story as the ruling subject matter for these rules. Taking into account Tolkien’s fiction, Bilbo—the main character of *The Hobbit*—is the prime example of the application of Rabkin’s rules. Bilbo begins *The Hobbit* in the role of a rather limited experience; he only knows the Shire and is largely unaware of the surrounding areas of Middle-Earth. However, through the course of the narrative Bilbo is able to extend his experiences to the greater majority of Middle-Earth. Furthermore, Rabkin’s second rule—a contradiction of perspective—is also achieved in the scope of Bilbo’s actions throughout the story. The first step in exploring this assertion is determining Bilbo’s perspective. The answer to this can be found in the opening pages of the novel:

> You could tell what a Baggins would say on any question without the bother of asking him. This is the story of how a Baggins had an adventure, found himself doing and saying things altogether unexpected. He may have lost the neighbours’ respect, but he gained—well, you will see whether he gained anything in the end. (Tolkien 7)

Given Rabkin’s previously stated rules, this passage serves an undeniable purpose: to hint that, in the coming pages, Bilbo’s previous experiences and knowledge will be severely challenged and replaced. The question of Bilbo’s perspective and experiences is closely tied to the often mentioned element of “sub-creation.” From the reader’s perspective, everything within the
Hobbit seems to challenge both experience and perspective; this is because it is set in a highly fantastic fashion. According to Rabkin, “sub-creation” falls within the boundaries of an author or artist creating a narrative that has its own internally consistent ground rules (7). From the opening pages of *The Hobbit*, it is clear that the world in which the story takes place is significantly different from the ‘normal’ world. Thus, the opening pages, as referenced in the above quote, serve to set the ground rules regarding Bilbo’s experience and perspective. Bilbo’s experience and perspective are limited to his own community at the beginning of the novel.

A number of critics have built upon Rabkin’s work on the fantastic; these endeavors have led to the separation of Tolkienian fantasy from the traditional definition. One such critic is Greg Bechtel in his essay “‘There and Back Again’: Progress in the Discourse of Todorovian, Tolkienian, and Mystic Fantasy Theory”. Bechtel makes a point to distinguish Tolkienian fantasy from the vast majority of the fantastic canon; he uses Tolkien’s seminal work on fantasy literature (“On Fairy Stories”) to create a solid definition for Tolkienian fantasy. While a number of critics of fantasy literature focus on characters as a production of fantasy, Tolkien and Bechtel both focus on the world in which the story takes place. Fairy stories—which Tolkien uses interchangeably with fantasy literature—can be defined in rather simple terms. Bechtel explains this definition by saying:

Fairy stories, for Tolkien, are not simply stories about fairies, but are rather stories about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. The key elements of a fairy story are the production of wonder (through the action of human fantasy or imagination) and the fictional presentation of an internally consistent imaginative world. (150)
This can be used to build upon Rabkin’s understanding of fantasy literature. Bechtel emphasizes that Tolkienian fantasy can be applied to both the reader and the text; it is not dependent on one or the other. As previously noted, Rabkin’s definition falls short in solidly identifying the agent of the experience and perspective. However, in using Bechtel’s research to build upon Rabkin’s assertions, one can see that both the reader and the characters are important in satisfying the two rules of fantasy literature. In order to further his assertions, Bechtel makes use of Tolkien’s elves to illustrate his point. Bechtel notes that, “Tolkien explicitly recognizes the elves as fantastic, imaginary beings, and yet he simultaneously grants these imaginary beings agency in the ‘real’ world.” (151) As realistic beings, elves, are textually “real”, and they are free to maintain their own sense of perspective and experience. In illustrating the realistic nature of Tolkien’s characters, Bechtel has created an important distinction of Tolkienian fantasy. The reader is tied to the story through the physical act of reading, and, like the textual characters of the story, the reader must achieve the two rules of fantasy literature in order for a work to be considered fantastic.

Throughout his career as a fantasy writer, Tolkien was often at odds with the belief that his work was, in some form or fashion, didactic. Astute literary critics were quick to point out the allegorical connections between Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy and WWII; they claim that Tolkien’s fiction is in some respects an interpretation of the events that were unfolding within his lifetime. Susan Cooper, a literary critic who was Tolkien’s student at Oxford, points out the clear cut line between, “good and evil” in Tolkien’s fiction; for Cooper, good represents the Allied nations, and the bad represents the Axis nations. (143) While this might be true on some level, it begs the question of the importance and task of literary criticism. Critics are often in search of a text’s meaning. In fact, Gregory Bechtel points out in “There and Back Again:
Progress in Todorovian, Tolkienian, and Mystic Fantasy Theory” that the active of literary criticism is, “always an act of creative fantasy.”(139) In other words, by trying to find truth in objectively viewing a text, the critic falls under the ruse of creating their own form of fantasy that is on the basis of a “what-if” proposition. Using Cooper as the example, she uses her personal experience to shape the events of Tolkien’s work; her view of good and evil is projected onto the text through her analysis. As the art of literary criticism goes, the critic used the text as their primary source for their foundation of a truthful interpretation.

The notion of the interdependence of reader and the fantastic is explored in the essay “Can Fantasy be More Real than Reality? The Fantastic, the Realistic, and Textuality in Literary Criticism” by Yuko Ashitagawa. In her academic career, Ashitagawa focuses on the role of myth and fairy tales in society; in essence, her focus is on the application of fairy tales and myths to the development of the reader or listener. Ashitagawa focuses on the implications of a realistic reader interacting with a fantasy text. Again, Ashitagawa makes reference to Tolkien’s influential essay “On Fairy Stories” in order to explore this idea; she notes that Tolkien uses the idea of a mutually dependent relationship in order to defend fantasy.”(Ashitagawa 36) While Ashitagawa continues to use this point to defend fantasy as a legitimate literary genre, she does not apply it directly to the structural aspects of the stories. Again, in the opening pages of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien shows hints of this dependent relationship when he writes, “the mother of our particular hobbit…what is a hobbit?”(7) Following this line, Tolkien proceeds to give a satisfactory account hobbits as a creature. This line is evidence of Tolkien’s belief in the dependent relationship between fantasy and the reader. By pausing mid-thought, Tolkien actively engages the reader by recognizing his/her need to have further explanation. Furthermore, this quote is a sign of Rabkin’s first rule of fantasy literature: extended experience.
By going into more detail about hobbits as a creature, Tolkien is extending the experience of the reader.

Furthermore, there is another quality of Tolkienian fantasy that is not generally explored to the same degree that the previous elements have. This idea is closely tied, again, with the idea of “sub-creation”. For many scholars, Tolkien’s production of fantasy is not a result of the landscape in his stories; rather, it is a result of Tolkien using “realistic” landscapes that have been painted with “fantastic” characters. Thomas Gasque explores this idea in his essay “Tolkien: the Monsters and the Critters”:

Although at times the landscape literally comes to life, in a geographical sense Middle-Earth is hardly fantastic. Rather what really makes Tolkien’s province a world of its own is the large population of sundry creatures, for Tolkien has put the monster—and the critters—at the center of his story, and it is they who provide the interest. (152)

Another important characteristic of Tolkienian fantasy comes to light: a character focused story as well as a sense of realism brought forward by realistic landscapes. For example, there is nothing entirely fantastic about the Shire. Rather, it is the characters who live within the Shire that produce a sense of fantasy within the mind of the reader.

Having given a general overview of Tolkien criticism, it is now important to explore the implication and further applications of what has already been discussed. A common theme exists while discussing the history of Tolkien criticism: the role of the reader. In fantasy literature criticism the reader is constantly at the center of the discussion. In the realm of literary criticism, the exploration of a relationship between reader and text is known as aesthetic

---

2 Thomas J Gasque is a prominent Tolkien scholar; along with being one of the first scholars to promote a large portion of his academic study to Tolkien, his essays on Tolkien have been published in collected works of Tolkien scholarship such as Tolkien and the Critics and Middle-earth and Beyond: Essays on the World of J.R.R. Tolkien
response theory which is more commonly known as “reader-response theory.” Aesthetic response theory, which was developed by critics such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, is a direct response to earlier literary theories that viewed literary texts objectively. Aesthetic response theory recognizes the reader as an agent of the story. In other words, a reader imparts his/her personal views on a literary text. A useful exercise in examining the role of the reader in processing a literary text comes with the question: if there is a book and no one is afforded the opportunity to read it, does it truly exist? This begins the exploration of the purpose of the written language; language comes as a result of a human necessity to communicate. As Wolfgang Iser points out in his preface to The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response, “as a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process.” (ix) Iser continues by highlighting the importance of reality within texts by saying, “the literary work is a form of communication…it impinges upon the world.”(ix) This highlights one of the seminal beliefs of the aesthetic response movement: the text’s reliance on the pre-existing world and influences of the reader. Georges Poulet is a literary critic who lived and wrote during the 20th; he is most commonly known for his belief that a reader must be open to the emotions of a text as written by the author. In this sense, Poulet is similar to the aesthetic theorists, but Poulet took the theory further by including the author in the process of reading. In “Criticism and the experience of Interiority”, Poulet approaches the commonly held belief that books—and, the extension, all of literature—are simply objects to be studied. According to Poulet, books, unlike other pieces of art, allow you to, “Exist in it.”(42) In other words, literature seeks to allow the reader to become part of it, to add to it in some form or fashion. If literature exists in a reader-welcoming environment, the question must be asked: How does fantasy literature—and, by extension,
Tolkienian fantasy specifically—allows the reader to engrain herself/himself in the text? This answers the question of subject regarding Rabkin’s two rules. The reader is to have his/her experience extended and perspective contradicted. In reference to Tolkienian fantasy specifically, a number of methods exist to weave a bond between the reader and the text. Gasque’s assertion that Tolkien created fantastic creatures to paint a realistic landscape is simply a function of the story impinging upon the reader’s everyday world.

Using the thoughts of literary critics from a number of different schools of thought, Tolkienian fantasy now holds a clearer definition. According to Rabkin, there are two rules that all fantasy literature must follow. These two rules are applicable to all fantasy literature, but they are slightly altered when the task is creating a more solid definition of Tolkienian fantasy. The questions are different when it comes to defining Tolkienian fantasy. Who is the recipient of an extended experience? Who exactly has their perspective contradicted? Georges Poulet begins his essay “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority” by painting literature in a light that invites the reader into another world; he writes, “Read me, [books] seem to say.”(41) This brings to mind the important relationship between a literary text and its reader; a text does not exist without reader interpretation. Thus, when considering the “meaning” of a literary text, the reader’s perspective and influence should be taken into account. In order to explore this relationship between text and reader, one must look deeper into more modern scholarship. Ashitagawa notes that Tolkien believes in a dependent relationship between reality and the fantastic text. This relationship is crucial to understanding Tolkienian fantasy’s relationship to Rabkin’s stipulations. In recognizing Tolkien’s academic work on fantasy literature, it is clear that both the reader and the characters in the story must follow the rules set forth by Rabkin. Bechtel illuminates this in his exploration of Tolkien’s academic work. For Bechtel, Tolkienian fantasy exists in two parts.
The first part—production of wonder—explores the relationship between the reader’s imagination and the text. The reader’s experiences are extended and perspective is contradicted through the mechanism of human imagination. Production of wonder becomes a way for the reader to observe Rabkin’s two rules. The second part of Bechtel’s exploration of fantasy literature is tied to Tolkien’s idea of “sub-creation”; a text must remain internally consistent, and it is governed by the ground rules that it creates. This second part can be applied to the story’s characters completing Rabkin’s rules. By creating an internally consistent work, the writer of fantasy is able to create believable characters, even though they may be fantastic from the reader’s perspective. These “realistic” characters function in a manner that allows them to have their own experiences and perspectives. Relatively unrelated to the previous examples, except through “sub-creation”, the final element of Tolkienian fantasy is the creation of fantastic characters against a realistic landscape. In the case of *The Hobbit*, the landscape changes as a result; it begins and ends in the Shire, but the narrative is taken to a number of places that shock only Bilbo. The fantastical element of these creatures comes as a result of the reader’s interaction with the story.

One objection to these assertions is that they apply to a wide range of genres other than fantasy. For example, if one were to examine the work of Kafka, particularly his story *The Metamorphosis*, one would find many similarities with the structural elements of Tolkienian fantasy; there is a realistic landscape with one extraordinary character; it is somewhat internally consistent. However, stories such as this do not stand up to the scrutiny of Rabkin’s aforementioned rules in regards to both the reader and the characters of the story. There is no contradicted perspective within Gregor; his perspective is static outside of the first few moments of the story. In essence, Gregor’s transformation is not the focus of *The Metamorphosis*; rather,
it is more focused on applying an unaltered perspective to new physical circumstances. Despite Gregor’s physical change, he remains the same meek and mild-mannered man that he was before. Despite this objection and dismissal, there are a number of stories within other literary genres that can be closely tied with Tolkienian fantasy. A vast majority of these stories can be found within the modern genre known as Magical Realism, which exploded onto the literary scene of Latin America with the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and others. Magical realism has its roots firmly spread throughout the literary world, not just in Latin America. While magical realism exists in a variety of forms throughout literature, there are a number of commonly accepted themes. For example, magical realism tends to use “magic” as a separate means within an otherwise rational world. Thus, magic acts in the same way in magical realism that Tolkien’s creatures do within the text. Magic exists in magical realism to engage with both the characters of the story, as well as the reader. This relationship has been largely ignored, but it comes to be seen when texts from both genres are examined through the lens of aesthetic response theory. In terms of Tolkienian fantasy, The Hobbit is the most useful example; it will represent Tolkienian fantasy in this examination. On the magical realism side, three texts will be examined: Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, Julio Cortázar’s “The Axolotl”, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s “A Village After Dark”. Despite the fact that these works come from varying backgrounds, they show that magical realism has its roots firmly planted in Tolkienian fantasy.

As previously noted, the importance of Wolfgang Iser to understanding the relationship between a reader and a text cannot be ignored. With this in mind, Iser’s book, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response, will provide the conceptual framework for this exploration of the connecting techniques between Tolkienian fantasy and magical realism.
Using Iser’s work as a frame for the exploration, the work of other prominent aesthetic theorist and Tolkien critics will provide further support. In essence, the aim of this exploration is to secure J.R.R. Tolkien, and his fantasy novels, as one of the main influences on the literary movement known as magical realism. An entirely reasonable objection to the scope of this project would be to say that influence is impossible to measure; it is impossible to know whether or not the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien directly influenced the work of Latin American magical realists and Post-Colonial British writers, but this objection can be answered in terms of larger literary movements and trends. The question of whether or not these writers read The Hobbit or Tolkien’s other works, but, rather, it is important to understand that they all belong to intertwined literary movements. If a contemporary of Tolkien is under his influence—stylistically—then he/she goes on to influence another writer, the third is still indebted to Tolkien in terms of influence. This is not a new assertion; writers tend to follow the trends of large literary movements. However, what is important is to pinpoint the beginnings of a particular literary movement. In the case of this particular brand of fantasy, Tolkien laid the foundation which was then passed down through the flow of literature and arrived in the minds of writers around the world. This is why critics, who often get caught in the toil of studying the exact nature of writer’s lives, often overlook stylistic elements in favor of biographical information. Thus, it is important to put the question of biographical influence to the side in favor of stylistic influence. Tolkien’s influence is among the most widespread in terms of modern literary movements.

II. Extending the boundaries of Tolkienian Fantasy

a. One Hundred Years of Solitude

Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude is often regarded as one of the most dazzling examples of magical realism. In a poignant review of One Hundred Years of
*Solitude* published in the *New York Times*, Salman Rushdie, who is himself a renowned magical realist, pays tribute to Garcia Marquez by writing, “[in] the Macondo of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, imagination is used to enrich reality, not to escape from it.” (Rushdie) Rushdie’s praise is at odds with the popular notion surrounding magical realism, the notion that ignores the latter half of the phrase: realism. While magic is important to the genre, its realism is often, understandably, overlooked. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tells the story of a mythical town—Macondo—and the events that take place in the town and surrounding it. The novel introduces Macondo in a manner that allows the reader to understand that it is not a typical town:

> At that time, Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that man things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point. (Garcia Marquez 1)

On one hand, this is a rather peculiar setting, but that exists more to the point that Garcia Marquez extends the reader’s sense of time. Extending time is a stylistic technique that plays upon the reader’s interpretation of the narrative timeline; in other words, Garcia Marquez uses this technique to extend the novel’s time to before the narrative begins; he is showing that the story is older than the narrative timeline given. The city of Macondo is set within a relatively realistic landscape; he makes reference to, “adobe houses” as well as physical lands—albeit far away—such as Macedonia and Persia. Like Middle-Earth, Macondo has some odd characteristics, but it is set within a rather realistic landscape. This function is pivotal to understanding what is now known as Tolkienian fantasy. As Thomas Gasque notes Tolkien uses a realistic landscape to focus on the extraordinary effects of the characters within the story (154).
By the same token, Garcia Marquez creates a similar opening. This comparison is better understood when looking at some of the opening lines in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*:

> In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. (Tolkien 7)

In essence, Tolkien and Garcia Marquez are using the same elements in their opening; they both use realistic aspects—realistic meaning it is easily recognizable to the reader—such as worms and adobe houses, but these realistic aspects are countered by elements that serve to highlight the characters: hobbit-holes and prehistoric eggs. The effect on the reader is precise. The reader is introduced to a realistic world in each of the openings, but they are also introduced to the fantasy elements in the same breath. For Tolkien, the fantastic element that has been introduced in his opening is a particular set of creatures—hobbits. For Garcia Marquez, the fantastic element that has been introduced is the warped sense of time and creation. As Poulet noted earlier, a reader is part of the creative force in a literary text; the text exists only as a function of the reader. (41) In order to understand this characterization, the focus must be placed on a reader before they become engaged with a literary text. A reader, when picking up a new book, will often flip to the first page and read the first line(s). Thus, the opening line of a story carries an immense amount of weight concerning its ability to interact with a reader. This is why often canonized books have memorable first lines. For example, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*—“Call me Ishmael”—and George Orwell’s *1984*—It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen—each have first lines that seek to capture the reader’s attention and keep hold of it. The list is as long as the literary canon is, but there is a specific technique, in terms of the opening line, that reflects in both *The Hobbit* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *The Hobbit’s*
opening line, while it is not often considered one of the more famous, provides both realistic and fantastic elements that implore the reader to continue into the book; “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” (Tolkien 1) There is a certain mystery in this opening line, and it is created by a strong contradiction. The contradiction lies in the reader’s association with holes in the ground; in the realistic mind, nothing human-like lives in the ground. Tolkien is playing upon the reader’s preconceived notions; he is, essentially, challenging our belief that living in the ground can be classified as dirty. The opening lines of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* function in the same way; they read, “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” (Garcia Marquez 1) The contradiction lies in the connection between facing a firing squad and discovering ice. This strikes the reader as odd; it plays upon the already existing structure of history within the reader’s mind. In essence, both of opening lines are built upon contradictions, based upon the reader’s preconceived notions of the natural and human world. These contradictions form a sort of puzzle in the reader’s mind that can only be solved by reading further into the text.

In the opening chapters of Rabkin’s *The Fantastic in Literature*, the issue of establishing fantasy is explored; he asks the questions that surround the foundation of a fantasy story. (Rabkin 5) This applies to the relationship between the reader and the text. Both Tolkien and Garcia Marquez introduce their fantastic characters in a particular manner. Tolkien begins this introduction to the fantastic with a rhetorical question: “what is a hobbit?” (1) This single question is of the utmost importance when examining the relationship between Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and the reader. By asking this question, it is clear that Tolkien understands connection between his audience and the story. The reader must form the ground rules of the story through
her/his interaction with the text. By asking this question, Tolkien establishes a highly important ground rule within the text: the reader does not know what a hobbit is (they are fantastic). This textual relationship is mirrored within Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude when the reader is introduced to Melaquiades—a travelling gypsy who presents the characters with a number of magical elements. Melaquiades repeatedly defies what the reader commonly accepts as reality through feats such as reverse-aging and extraordinary feats of strength (such as being able to pull down a horse by its ears). The textual ground rules of fantasy are established through the sharp contrast between the village patriarch Jose Arcadio Buendia and Melaquiades. The only extraordinary quality that Jose Arcadio Buendia possesses is his remarkable persistence and inventiveness. Garcia Marquez’s introduction of Melaquiades partially establishes that he is not an ordinary man:

A heavy gypsy with an untamed beard and sparrow hands, who introduced himself as Melaquiades, put on a bold public demonstration of what he himself called the either wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia. (5)

The public demonstration in question is a display of an incredibly powerful magnet. While the reader knows that magnets exist, Jose Arcadio Buendia and the rest of Macondo’s inhabitants are awestruck by the power of it. Thus, Jose Arcadio Buendia is seen as a realistic man, and Melaquiades is seen as a fantastic element. The importance of the two in tandem comes in identifying a key function of Tolkienian fantasy. Jose Arcadio Buendia and Melaquiades form a dependent pair within the reader’s mind, dependent because Jose Arcadio Buendia needs Melaquiades in order to satisfy his curiosity, and Melaquiades needs his counterpart in order to have an audience for his presentations. This pair serves to function as the separation between
magic and reality within *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In essence, the reader knows what is real because of Jose Arcadio Buendia and what is fantastic because of Melaquiades.

In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Wolfgang Iser explores the relationship between the reader and a literary text. Iser argues:

>[The] transfer of text to reader is often regarded as being brought about solely by the text. Any successful transfer however—though initiated by the text—depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader’s faculties of perceiving and processing.

(3)

In other words, the reader’s perception of the story is paramount to the text itself; a text cannot truly exist without the interpretation of the reader. Iser’s assertion that a text must activate a reader’s faculties ties in with Bechtel’s ideas regarding the production of wonder. While the interdependent relationship between Jose Arcadio Buendia and Melaquiades is important in establishing the existence of fantasy within *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it also satisfies one of the key elements of Tolkienian fantasy: the production of wonder. Greg Bechtel, in “‘There and Back Again’: Progress in the Discourse of Todorovian, Tolkienian, and Mystic Fantasy Theory”, discusses the importance of wonder within Tolkien’s fantasy. Bechtel explores this element—the production of wonder—from a rather broad vantage point; he connects the production of wonder with the idea of sub-creation. However, while the idea of sub-creation is valid and relevant to this argument, it needs to be slightly adjusted when viewing the text from a more personal standpoint, personal in the sense that the text is being directly connected to the reader. Bechtel believes that, in order for a fantasy story to be successful, a reader must be in the narrative; he argues that sub-creation is inherently tied to a reader being, “fully engaged in the narrative.”(Bechtel 151) Of course, wonder must be produced within the characters themselves.
A reader who is emotionally involved in the reactions of the characters will likely share the same sense of wonder. Because a literary text cannot exist without the participation of the reader, it is important to note that the relationship between characters now has a third party: the reader. In essence, the reader’s role as an active participant in the story is to actively create the characters in their mind. The reader is subconsciously creates a specific image for each character. Each decision they make is made on the basis of necessity. The reader does not create the text—that is the role of the writer—but the reader does choose what to do with the finished product; more specifically, the reader subconsciously chooses how to interpret the relationships between characters.

The next example that shows the theme of the relationship between characters and readers comes in One Hundred Years of Solitude; this is the relationship between Jose Arcadio Buendia and Melaquiades. When discussing Jose Arcadio Buendia’s feelings regarding Melaquiades’ experiments, Garcia Marquez writes:

Jose Arcadio Buendia himself considered that Melaquiades knowledge had reached unbearable extremes, but he felt a healthy excitement when the gypsy explained to him the workings of his false teeth. It seemed so simple and so prodigious at the same time that overnight he lost all interests in his experiments in alchemy. (8)

This quote typifies the relationship between the two; whenever Melaquiades brings a new invention to Jose Arcadio Buendia, Buendia seems to be completely in awe of what is in front of him. Thus, as Jose Arcadio Buendia becomes entranced with Melaquiades’ inventions, the reader becomes similarly entranced with the Melaquiades as a character. The reader, subconsciously, has reaped the benefits from the relationship between Jose Arcadio Buendia, and, in this case, the benefit of the relationship is wonder. This same wonder is produced within
The Hobbit. In the opening chapter, the reader is introduced to both Bilbo and Gandalf. Bilbo, as expressed by Tolkien, is a completely normal creature; he does not partake in any activities that are considered out of the ordinary. Thus, Bilbo is still a fantastic character, but he is given “realistic” attributes. Gandalf, on the other hand, is introduced in stark contrast. After a short, witty exchange, Bilbo realizes who Gandalf truly is:

Gandalf, Gandalf! Good gracious me! Not the wandering wizard that gave Old Took a pair of magic diamond studs that fastened themselves and never came undone until ordered? Not the fellow who used to tell such wonderful tales at parties, about dragons and goblins and giants and the rescue of princesses and the unexpected luck of widow’s sons? (Tolkien 9)

In this passage the relationship between Bilbo and Gandalf is clear. Bilbo remembers his youth as well as the tales that Gandalf would tell to him and his friends. Furthermore, this introduction to Gandalf establishes a sense of wonder that continues throughout the entire narrative. The relationship between Bilbo and Gandalf is similar to that of Jose Arcadio Buendia and Melaquides; they both serve to establish wonder within the mind of the reader. The description of Bilbo and Jose Arcadio Buendia is important in the reader’s mental process. By describing these characters in a realistic manner, the reader attaches themselves to these characters; thus, when these characters face wondrous circumstances, it results in a production of wonder in the mind of the reader.

The production of wonder is not always tied to the reader’s emotional relationship to the characters. The author of a text, by intentionally withholding information from the reader, is actively engaging the reader with the text through this process. Wolfgang Iser approaches this subject when he says:
There are, of course, limits to the reader’s willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game. (108)

In this case, Iser is using the word “game” to describe the interaction between a literary text and the reader. To view this relationship in such a jovial manner applies to the heart of the most fundamental levels of reading fiction; in other words, literary texts—in this case fantasy texts—are read to produce enjoyment in the mind of the reader. To objectively view a text, without accepting the reader as an integral part of the experience, is to deny the function of fictional stories. In the case of Tolkien and Garcia Marquez—as well as all fantasy literature—the measurement of a reader’s entertainment is wonder; the more wonder that can be produced by a text’s interaction with a story—while at the same time grounding it in the basic functions of an internal reality—the more enjoyment that a reader is able to find within a text. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories” attempts to come to a solid understanding of the relationship between the reader and the “magical” events of a story. Tolkien poses a defining characteristic of his fantasy when he says, “one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself… [magic] must be taken seriously, never laughed at or explained away.” (17) This defining characteristic of fantasy literature carries a number of important aspects that are essential to the reader’s relationship to a fantasy text. The first is the existence of brevity. Keeping with Tolkien’s belief that fantastic elements cannot be explained away, it is easy to interpret this as the necessity for shortness in the story. However, this rule is not necessarily tied to brevity; rather, it is tied to brevity in explanation. In terms of The Hobbit, the perfect example of this comes when Bilbo first realizes the power of the ring’s invisibility. The existence of the ring within the story is not altogether
unexpected; there a number of enchanted items—such as sting—that allow advantages to whoever possesses them, but, within the mind of the reader, the ring is an extraordinary object. The production of wonder, however, comes with Tolkien’s coolness when describing the attributes of the ring. Tolkien simply tells the reader that Bilbo slips the ring on and vanishes. The lack of explanation surrounding the power of the ring—although it is explored in later books—is at odds with the events that are taking place. Bilbo is in an incredibly difficult place and is saved by the power of the ring, which is entirely fantastic and wondrous in the mind of the reader. In the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the reader is given the same sort of events with no explanation; for example, when Jose Arcadio Buendía’s wife—Ursula—witnesses the movement of their daughter Amaranta’s basket (crib) around the room:

One day Amaranta’s basket began to move by itself and made a complete turn about the room, to the consternation of Aureliano, who hurried to stop it. But his father did not get upset. (Garcia Marquez 35)

In this example, the fantastic element is the movement of the basket, but it seems to not affect some of the characters. In fact, this brief explanation by Garcia Marquez seems to indicate that the element is not really fantastic at all. In essence, in both examples, the production of wonder comes as a result of a lack of explanation. This realization comes to point out a specific characteristic of Tolkienian fantasy; in the form of an equation, the production of wonder—without the emotional involvement of the characters—within Tolkienian fantasy looks as follows:

\[
\text{Wonder} = (\text{ Fantastical Element}) - (\text{Reaction of Characters}) - (\text{Authorial Explanation})
\]
Wonder, in this sense, applies to the reaction of the reader to a given text. This formula can be applied to any situation that does not directly involve the character’s reactions. Consider Garcia Marquez’s unusual description of Rebecca; he tells the reader that Rebecca’s skin was, “greenish” and that she wears the teeth of a carnivore on her wrist. (Garcia Marquez 41) While the reader knows that these elements of description are out of the ordinary, the characters do not seem to act negatively. Rather, the family chooses to keep Rebecca as one of their own. Garcia Marquez gives no explanation for Rebecca’s appearance, and little for the family’s decision to keep her. Thus, the example of Rebecca fits within the given formula.

In a very real sense, a story—as noted by Iser—is filled with blank spaces or “gaps”, and the reader’s function in interacting with a story is to fill in these spaces. (52) This characteristic is not specific to the fantasy genre or Tolkienian fantasy, but, rather, it applies to all fiction. Ernest Hemingway famously explained these spaces with what is now known as the “theory of omission” otherwise known as the “iceberg theory”. The theory of omission posits that what is omitted from, or left out of, a story only serves to strengthen it. However, the difference between fantasy literature and more realistic fiction comes with how the reader chooses to fill in these omissions. Again, in placing the reader at the forefront, it is important to note that the reader is aware of the magical elements of a text for one of two reasons. First, the reader may know a certain amount of background pertaining to the story; this comes as a result of dialogue with other readers. Second, the text highlights itself as fantastic; this is noted elsewhere through the narrative style. In the case of Tolkien and Garcia Marquez, the reader is given a similar situation; there are parts of the story that are intentionally omitted by the writer. However, given the setting of the stories, readers choose to fill in these omissions with a single response: magic. Take into account the scene in One Hundred Years of Solitude when Colonel Aureliano Buendia
attempts to take his life after signing the treaty that effectively ended the civil war. In the grand
scheme of the text, this scene appears as little more than a passing footnote; Garcia Marquez tells
the reader that the Colonel shot himself through the chest, but, miraculously the bullet, “came out
through his back without damaging any vital organ.” (103) If this scene were to be looked at
objectively, and without any context produced by the surrounding text, the incident would have
been chalked up to nothing more than sheer luck. However, the reader is unable to approach a
magical realism text in such a fashion. Thus, as a result, the reader attributes the omitted reason
for the bullet’s clean passing to magic.

In keeping with Wolfgang Iser’s assertion that any literary text is filled with gaps or
spaces that evoke a reaction from the reader, the next area of exploration is the specific instances
of deviation within the *The Hobbit* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A deviation, in the mind
of Iser, comes as a result of the violation of a norm or internal rule, and, as a result, this violation
calls the attention of the reader; it irritates the reader into attention. (89) To clarify, “irritation”
is not used in the sense of an annoyance; rather, it is used to signify a peak in the reader’s senses
within the story. Within *One Hundred Years of Solitude* these deviations are numerous, but they
present themselves in a few different fashions. One primary example of these deviations comes
with the return of Jose Arcadio, who had run away some years before with a gypsy woman.
Upon his return, Jose Arcadio is characterized completely differently than he was before; when
he first leaves Macondo, Jose Arcadio is just a boy, but, upon his return, he is shown as having a
“bison neck” and generally being a “huge man”. (88) Now, the natural inclination is to believe
that the boy simply underwent the normal changes of puberty, and, as a result, he became more
masculine, but the change is so great and abrupt that it produces irritation in the reader. Thus,
with the change that is undertaken by Jose Arcadio upon his return, the reader experiences a shift
in their attention. Furthermore, one could make the assumption that Jose Arcadio is used as one name to signify two completely different characters. The younger Jose Arcadio has tendencies that border on shy and timid; he is a small boy who is in the shadow of his own home. However, the returned Jose Arcadio is a large, brash man, a man who seeks to forcibly take what he desires. Furthermore, upon returning from his leave of absence, Jose Arcadio is able to perform near magical feats of strength. This deviation, in terms of character development, can also be found in *The Hobbit* when Bilbo escapes from Gollum and the Goblin hordes. Prior to his encounter with Gollum and the riddle game, Bilbo is repeatedly referenced in terms of meekness and his average nature. However, after Bilbo emerges from the depths of the mountain, he is presented in a different light; this is mostly due to his reception from his Dwarfish companions, but it shows a shift in character and a deviation from what the reader already knows about Bilbo. Thus, the reader is given the same character deviation in both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Hobbit*. Again, both of these examples of deviation play upon the relationships between characters. The reader does not know—for the large part—how much Bilbo and Jose Arcadio have changed without the clues given by other characters.

b. “The Axolotl”

Julio Cortázar, along with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, is one of the most prominent writers from the magical realism movement. Cortázar is widely-known for his short stories, but “The Axolotl” is one of his lesser-known works. Unlike many of his short stories, “The Axolotl” uses a clever first person point of view to negate the reader’s sense of humanity. First appearing in the magazine *Literaria* in 1952, “The Axolotl” is written from the first person point of view, which immediately creates an emotional bond between the reader and the narrator; it tells the story of a man who visits an aquarium on a daily basis because he has established a strong
fascination with the axolotls. The story is grounded in several realistic elements; the main element that grounds “The Axolotl” in reality is the story being set in Paris. Furthermore, the story is grounded in reality partly because axolotls are real; they are animals that can be found in a natural habitat. However, the reality soon fades to fantasy within the story. The opening paragraph of the story serves to establish the connection to the fantasy genre. Cortázar writes:

There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl. (Cortázar)

In essence, Cortázar is using the axolotls in the same manner as Tolkien uses Bilbo; they are a blend of both the real and the fantastic, which leads to both the narrator’s and the reader’s connection to them. This is the same opening—in terms of effect—that both Garcia Marquez and Tolkien use; however, within Cortázar’s example, the fantasy element is clear and direct; it comes within the last line, “Now I am an axolotl.” As Tolkien and Garcia Marquez do, Cortázar begins his story with a blended section—blended with elements from both fantasy and reality—that serves to both establish certain ground rules while, at the same time, establishing the most important outside element: fantasy. Within “The Axolotl”, the most important ground rule—in terms of fantasy—is that a transformation from man to animal is completely feasible. Like Garcia Marquez and Tolkien, Cortázar’s “The Axolotl” follows the aesthetic rule of brevity. The transformation from man to animal only takes place in one single line; thus, as a result, the reader is left to discern what has happened through the rest of the story. Now, seeing as there are only two main characters in “The Axolotl”, it is difficult to fit this example within the figure drawn above. However, on the basis that there is only one “speaking” character in the story, one can draw a number of conclusions about the narrator’s reaction to the magical element. The
narrator, in stating that he has transformed into an axolotl, does not show any sign of emotion or wonder. Rather, this wonder is left up to the reader, and it immediately engages the reader with the story⁴. Stanley Fish, who is one of the founders of aesthetic response theory along with Wolfgang Iser, approaches this element in his book—*Self Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature*—when he discusses the idea of the dialectic text. A dialectic text, according to Fish, forces the reader to discover truth in a text rather than having it given to them; in other words, a dialectic text forces the reader to work to discover meaning within a text. (Fish 78) While “The Axolotl” does not force a reader to try and ascertain meaning within the text, it does force the reader to journey deeper into the story in order to completely understand what the narrator means by the line, “Now I am an axolotl”. The result of this provocation is wonder; this is not only the case in Cortázar’s story, but rather it can also be found in *The Hobbit* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This form of provocation can be found in a slightly different manner in *The Hobbit*. Typically, within *The Hobbit*, provocation comes as a result of blunt narrative technique. Take into account the scene following the company’s stay in Rivendell. The text reads:

> [Gandalf] knew something unexpected might happen, and he hardly dared to hope that they would pass without fearful adventure over those great tall mountains with lonely peaks and valleys where no king ruled. (Tolkien 43)

Tolkien’s provocation differs slightly from the example used by Stanley Fish, meaning that he directly provokes—at least, in some cases—the reader into wanting to know the next part of the story. For the large part, Tolkienian fantasy employs the use of provocation as a narrative technique on the textual level. Rather than provoking the reader on a subconscious level, as

---

⁴ See Figure 2
some writers do, Tolkienian fantasy brings the provocation directly to the forefront of the narrative. In essence, Tolkien uses foreshadowing to directly provoke the reader. As shown above, the reader, in the case of Tolkienian fantasy, is partially forced to become an active participant in the story due to the writer’s narrative technique involving provocation. In the case of Julio Cortázar and “The Axolotl”, it seems that he is provoking the reader on a textual and a subconscious level.

The next element of “The Axolotl” that aligns it with the tradition of Tolkienian fantasy is the dependent relationship between the narrator, the axolotls, and the reader. In essence, the axolotls only exist because the narrator tells us they are there, and the narrator only exists to tell the story because he has become an axolotl himself. The pair in “The Axolotl” acts in the same manner as the relationship between Jose Arcadio Buendia and Melaquiades in One Hundred Years of Solitude and the relationship between Bilbo and Gandalf in the Hobbit; it introduces the magical element of the story. To the narrator, it would seem that the axolotls possess a magical power, and, by setting the story within the confines of the narrator’s first-person point of view, the reader is forced to share the narrator’s belief that the axolotls are indeed magical. This is exemplified when the narrator says:

It was their quietness that made me lean toward them fascinated the first time I saw the axolotls. Obscurely I seemed to understand their secret will, to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility. (Cortázar)

Due to the intimate relationship between characters and the reader, the reader accepts the character, in this case the narrator’s, view of reality. In the same manner that the reader accepts Gandalf’s power, as well as the ring’s power, the reader accepts the notion that the narrator in “The Axolotl” is completely capable of transforming from a human to an axolotl. On one level,
the reader is willing to accept the narrator’s transformation due to fantasy literature’s ability to manipulate both time and space. In “A Dialogue of Gazes: Metamorphosis and Epiphany in Julio Cortázar’s ‘Axolotl’”, Maurice Bennett discusses Cortázar’s ability to craft his stories in a manner that is able to blend both the real and the fantastic. The elements of realness in “The Axolotl”—the aquarium, the security guard, the axolotl tank glass—are extremely easy to recognize. However, the fantasy element, which largely surrounds the powers of the axolotls, is much harder to pin down. The axolotls, within the story, are both real and fantastic; they are both current and ancient. This same blending between real and fantastic within individual characters can be seen in The Hobbit. Bilbo is a hobbit, and, in the mind of the reader, hobbits do not exist. However, the reader is able to understand the human emotions that Bilbo displays, as well as the words that he speaks. Thus, in the same way that Tolkien is credited with painting real landscapes with fantasy characters, the characters themselves are a fantasy landscape painted with realistic emotions and speech. Although Cortázar shows this in the reverse of Tolkien—he gives real animals fantastic abilities—it has the same effect on the reader; this technique acts as a sort of bridge between the reader and the fantastic. This is the same technique, in its effect, that is created by the Tolkienian opening.

As is the case with both The Hobbit and One Hundred Years of Solitude, brevity plays an important role in the reader’s interaction with the text. While brevity exists in the previous two books in style rather than length (they are rather thick books), brevity, in “The Axolotl”, exists in both the length of the text and the style in which it is written. In terms of text length, “The Axolotl” hovers just above 2,000 words, which is short even by short story standards. Thus, one would expect the style and technique to be completely different than that of a much larger work such as The Hobbit; it would be safe to assume that the text would be more compact, and, by this
reason, less descriptive. Style, in this case, refers to the technique used by the author to deliver sentence and ideas. However, in terms of style, “The Axolotl” and *The Hobbit* are more similar than different. For example, the narrator of “The Axolotl”, upon his transition into an axolotl, says, “To realize that was, for the first moment, like the horror of a man buried alive awaking to his fate.” (Cortázar) The important aspect to note in this example is the narrator’s appeal to the reader’s emotion; in this case the emotion being played upon is fear. Looking at *The Hobbit*, a similar appeal can be found when the company is first entering Rivendell:

> The air grew warmer as they got lower, and the smell of the pine-trees made him drowsy, so that every now and again he nodded and nearly fell off, or bumped his nose on the pony’s neck. (Tolkien 37)

In this case, the text is not playing on one of the reader’s specific emotions, but, rather, the text is igniting the reader’s sense of nostalgia; this general sense of nostalgia, in effect, exemplifies and strengthens an emotional bond between the reader and the text. In both cases, the text uses an active modifier in order to evoke a particular sensation in the mind of the reader. The active modifier must be an element—a smell, feeling, place, etc.—that is easily recognized by the reader. While being buried alive is not something that most people endure, it is a common fear. Furthermore, it evokes the sensations of isolation, suffocation, and danger, and the reader will have, undoubtedly, experienced one of these or a similar sensation. The example from *The Hobbit* presents a much more common, sensory-related active modifier: the smell of pine trees. Even if the reader does not know the smell of pine trees, they still understand that “pine-trees” give off a strong, somewhat pleasant odor. If the reader is from an area of the globe populated by pine trees then they will directly connect the sensory information, but, even if the reader does not know the smell of pines, they will liken the sensory information to a tree smell that is more
common for them. While the specific emotions being evoked are different, both Tolkien and Cortázar use emotion in such a fashion that connects the reader with the story.

c. “A Village After Dark”

Published in 2001, Kazuo Ishiguro’s “A Village After Dark” seems to be a work of fiction that is floating between the traditional boundaries of genre definition. The story, while it seems to be “realistic” at times, is presented in an almost dream-like manner; there are small distortions—by way of skewed senses of time and space—that alert the reader to a deeper level of the story. In terms of a larger literary movement, Ishiguro’s writing seems to, often times, fall under the banner of British post-colonialism; he was born in Nagasaki, but moved to England with his family when he was five years old. Thus, by way of physical movement, Kazuo Ishiguro is often categorized as a post-colonial writer. However, his work often evades attempts to be further categorized into a specific genre. Ishiguro’s work—particularly “A Village After Dark”—represents the gray area in between genres; it functions as a dream does to the human mind, bridging the gap between the sense of human thought and the physical world. As is discussed in the previous sections, a literary text exists as a bridge between human thought and the literary text with human thought being closely tied to our sense of what is “realistic”. In other words, what a reader thinks is “real” is stimulated by the physical act of reading a piece of literature; the reader forms a picture of the realistic based on various textual provocations and cues.

In terms of an opening, “A Village After Dark” uses the same Tolkienian manner of blending the real and the fantastic, although Ishiguro’s blending appears to be more subtle than
that of Tolkien. In “A Village After Dark”, this blending between the real and the fantastic comes in as early as the final line of the first paragraph. The important line reads, “I could hardly believe I was in the same village in which not so long ago I had lived and come to exercise such influence.” (Ishiguro) On a subconscious level, the reader will pick up on a few important elements in this sentence. The first of these elements is the inclusion of time, and, by extension, the distortion of time. There is no direct reference to how much time has passed since Fletcher stepped foot in the town, but the text states, clearly, that not much time has passed. As a result, a disconnect forms in the mind of the reader; this disconnect is related to the Fletcher’s relationship to the village and his lack of knowledge and disorientation. Now, at this point in the story, the reader is not sure of the exact nature of the fantastic elements, but this opening serves to alert the reader of clues that are presented later in the story. In a similar manner to Garcia Marquez and One Hundred Years of Solitude, Ishiguro is distorting time in order to give the story both depth and further fantastic weight. Garcia Marquez uses, “prehistoric eggs” to lengthen time, but Ishiguro uses an undisclosed time, as well as confusion in Fletcher, to shrink time in the mind of the reader.

“A Village After Dark” exemplifies one of the most important attributes of Tolkienian fantasy through its ability to withhold information from the reader. This is tied with the text’s ability to create emotion in the mind of the reader. In the case of “A Village After Dark”, Ishiguro uses the main character to make the reader feel a sense of forgetfulness. This comes to light in examples such as:

I had chosen the cottage quite at random, but now I could see that it was none other than the very one in which I had spent my years in this village. My gaze moved immediately to the far corner—at this moment shrouded in darkness—to the spot that had been my
corner, where once my mattress had been and where I had spent many tranquil hours browsing through books or conversing with whoever happened to drift in. (Ishiguro)

In this example, the reader is able to engage with the main character in such a way that creates an uneasy feeling of forgetfulness. The reader, at this point in the story, is given several clues about the Fletcher’s exploits in the city, but has not directly affected Fletcher’s thoughts. Thus, Fletcher and the reader are venturing down similar paths; while the main character is trying to piece together his relationship with the village, the reader is attempting to come to grips with his/her interaction with the main character. In essence, this is the first example of Ishiguro’s deviation from Tolkienian fantasy; the reader is not able to form a complete picture of Fletcher, rather he/she is left at odds with the given picture; the reader is left with a series of questions about Fletcher that are not directly answered. To illustrate this point, one must simply look at Tolkien’s method for introducing new characters. Although these characters are fantastic, Tolkien describes them in a fashion that gives them complete reality; while hobbits may not exist, they are real and concrete within the text of *The Hobbit*. Ishiguro, on the other hand, creates Fletcher in a much more fluid manner; the reader is always as unsure about him as he is about himself. Tolkienian fantasy may create fantastic characters, but these characters are of a concrete nature within the text; conversely, Ishiguro shows the reader a real character (human) and makes his identity mysterious and fluid.

In essence, this brings about the answer as to whether or not Rabkin’s two rules for fantasy literature hold up in light of Tolkienian scrutiny. According to Rabkin, the two rules (extending experience and contradicting perspective) must simply be satisfied in some form in traditional fantasy literature. On the other hand, Tolkienian fantasy requires that both the main characters of the story as well as the reader must reach the two requirements. Comparing the
main characters of The Hobbit and “A Village After Dark” illustrates this point of contention. Starting with Bilbo, the two rules are satisfied rather easily; his experience is primarily what he has heard through legend and/or what he has read in books. Thus, by leaving the Shire and encountering the adventurous nature of Middle-Earth, Bilbo has satisfied these two rules. In the case of “A Village After Dark”, these two are not so easily satisfied, but, with some further analysis, it eventually comes to light. There are hints that Fletcher has, prior to the story, already undergone a shift towards a more extended experience, but it is imperative to note that the reader can only rely on the given information. Thus, at the beginning of “A Village After Dark”, Fletcher begins with a limited experience. In examples such as the quote shown above, the main character eventually begins to return to his previously extended experience, but this process of extending experience is pivotal in the structure of the story; therefore, “A Village After Dark” satisfies the first rule in regards to its application to the characters. In terms of a shift in the main character’s perspective, this is achieved in a number of places, but it is most easily identified through Fletcher’s first interaction with a girl on the street. The girl is adamant that David Maggis was important at the time of the Fletcher’s prior encounter with the village, but he is skeptical of Maggis’ importance. Through his interaction with the girl, the main character’s perception is challenged. In terms of the reader’s satisfaction of the two rules for fantasy literature, this comes to light when looking at the structural landscape of a fantasy story. As Gasque notes, Tolkien’s fiction uses a realistic background to paint fantastic characters. However, is this limit of Tolkien’s creative power? On one hand, it is true; one level of the reader’s extension of experience and challenged perspective comes in the fantasy landscape itself. The realistic landscapes, such as the Shire, use the natural landscape to represent the reader’s preexisting experience, and the characters who inhabit the landscape serve to extend the

\[\text{See “A Village After Dark” quote on page 31.}\]
reader’s experience. In the case of “A Village After Dark”, the characters are not physically fantastic; they are simply human beings, but it is their actions—with the exception of Fletcher—that allow them to become fantastic in the mind of the reader. For example, take into account the character named Roger Button; he drifts in and out of the narrative with relative ease, and he seems to constantly haunt Fletcher in the same way a ghost would haunt a character in a horror novel. This allows Button to transcend into the realm of the fantastic; he is human, but he possesses qualities of physical movement—drawn out through narrative technique—that make him seem to be floating at the edges of Fletcher’s perception. Roger Button acts, throughout “A Village After Dark”, in a manner that extends the reader’s experience, which is tied to the dream-like presentation of the narrative. Moving forward, the contradiction of perspective is a much more complicated process to grasp. In fact, Ishiguro’s contradiction of perspective is at odds with the tradition Tolkienian presentation. The reader’s perspective is not contradicted in the same manner that the other texts manage. By presenting the story in a dream-like sequence, Ishiguro negates the reader’s conscious perspective because, in a dream, perspective is already challenged. While this style is inventive and holds its own merit, it does not have its origins in Tolkien’s literary tradition. Rather, this lack of contradiction comes from another source of influence—more likely from a source more versed in realistic fiction.

III. Conclusions: Redefining Tolkienian Fantasy and the Role of the Reader

a. A New Definition

Much the same as the telephone game played by children—where a piece of information is passed from mouth to mouth, eventually making it unrecognizable from its origins—Tolkien’s influence on the fantasy genre will become unrecognizable over time. However, as a historian strives to highlight the causes and trends in recorded history, it is the job of the literary critic—in
some respects—to identify the pivotal trends and movements throughout the course of literary history. Much of the trouble in identifying influences of fantasy literature stems from a lack of a solid definition; the question of what meets the criteria for fantasy literature is not universally accepted. Thus, literary movements, such as magical realism, have not been associated with fantasy literature when, in fact, they draw their foundations from the genre. Fantasy literature does not always provide an inclusive story for the reader, but Tolkienian fantasy—by its very nature—must do this.

Fantasy literature operates on a completely different plane than more traditional “realistic” literature. In such an academic evaluation, Tolkien’s fantasy, and—by extension—Tolkienian fantasy, is governed by a set of rules. These rules are blended from a number of already existing critics, as well as the fruits of the previous sections. In order for a piece of literature to be considered Tolkienian fantasy, it must follow the following rules:

1. It must engage the reader through producing wonder.
2. It must allow the reader to “escape” from reality while still being based in the “real”.
3. It must use the characters of the story in a way that allows the reader to become an active character.

The new rules that have been outlined bear a resemblance to the other critical interpretations that have been explored, but they have been changed in such a way that accounts for the reader’s aesthetic response. As Bechtel notes in his work, the production of wonder is paramount to fantasy literature, but Tolkienian fantasy produces wonder in a beautifully separate fashion. (144) In Tolkienian fantasy, characters are faced with wondrous circumstances, but this alone is not capable of creating a lasting impression in the mind of the reader. In order to actively engage the reader, this sense of wonder must apply to both the reader and the character. This
engagement comes as a result of various narrative techniques such as deviation. This new
definition takes into account the relationship between reader and text.

In regard to the second outlined rule, escape is a rather ambiguous word to try to apply to
a story. The process of creating this escape is outlined by the physical process of a reader
interacting with a book. A key component of Tolkienian fantasy is the use of a blending
opening—blended between reality and the fantastic—to engage a reader with the text. However,
in the case a book such as The Hobbit with a length of over 300 pages, it is unlikely that the
reader will be able to finish the entire piece in one sitting. Thus, the text is charged with the task
of repeatedly signaling this blend throughout the text; in other words, the reader must constantly
be reminded of the escapist aspects of the work. Tolkienian fantasy is able to do this in a number
of ways such as “gaps” and realistic landscapes. Many critics, including Iser, have noted that it
is important for a reader to “get lost” in a work in order to feel an emotional attachment.
However, it is impossible for a reader to shake his/her physical attachments to the world they are
in while reading; they will always feel the temperature of the room or feel the fabric of the chair
they are sitting in. Rather, the importance of escape shows through emotional changes in the
reader; in essence, the reader is not leaving their arm chair, but, rather, they are leaving their
current emotional state. Therefore, emotional cues, such as Bilbo’s rejection and feeling of
isolation or his moral victories, are of the utmost importance in the mind of the reader. This
places the reader’s emotion at the forefront of the reading process; rather than engaging with a
text due to physical descriptions of places such as the Shire, the reader uses these landscapes as a
canvas to paint the emotional changes that take place within a story.

The third, and final, rule for Tolkienian fantasy can be closely tied with Wolfgang Iser’s
belief that a story is filled with a number of gaps that change the way the reader interacts with a
story. The major alteration of this belief comes with the assertion that one of these gaps comes in the form of characters. In essence, Tolkienian fantasy presents stories that are missing a character; that character is, in the best cases, the reader. As discussed, the reader is tasked, as an active participant in the story, with interpreting the other relationships between characters. Essentially, in Tolkienian fantasy, the reader becomes an invisible character—one who is tasked with making sense of the relationships of other characters as well as themselves. The invisible character, often times, is not a separate character, but, rather, it is a function of the mirrored relationship between the textually existing characters and the reader. What a character does and does not do within a fantasy text forces the reader to assume a role of empathy; in other words, readers—to use an often quoted colloquialism—puts themselves in the character’s shoes. Thus, in doing so, each reader manifests himself or herself as an individual character in the story. In essence, in any action or thought that takes place through a character, the reader is forced to ask: what would I do in this situation or how would I respond? Of course, this process takes place on a subconscious level, but that is the case with the large majority of the reading process as a whole.

b. The Question of Influence and Concluding Remarks

An entirely reasonable objection to the scope of this project would be to say that influence is impossible to measure; it is impossible to know whether or not the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien directly influenced the work of Latin American magical realists and Post-Colonial British writers, but this objection can be answered in terms of larger literary movements and trends. If a contemporary of Tolkien is under his influence—stylistically—then he/she goes on to influence another writer, the third is still indebted to Tolkien in terms of influence. This is not a new assertion; writers tend to follow the trends of large literary movements. However, what is
important is to pinpoint the beginnings of a particular literary movement. In the case of this particular brand of fantasy, Tolkien laid the foundation which was then passed down through the flow of literature and arrived in the minds of writers around the world. This is why critics, who often get caught in the toil of studying the exact nature of writer’s lives, often overlook stylistic elements in favor of biographical information. Thus, it is important to put the question of biographical influence to the side in favor of stylistic influence. Tolkien’s influence is among the most widespread in terms of modern literary movements.

Works Cited


