

In God, My Faithful God

Sigismund Weingärtner (unknown); tr. by Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)

In God, my faithful God,
I trust when dark my road;
Great woes may overtake me,
Yet He will not forsake me.
My troubles He can alter;
His hand lets nothing falter.

My sins fill me with care,
Yet I will not despair.
I build on Christ, who loves me;
From this rock nothing moves me.
To Him I will surrender,
To Him, my soul's defender.

If death my portion be,
It brings great gain to me;
It speeds my life's endeavor
To live with Christ forever.
He gives me joy in sorrow,
Come death now or tomorrow.

O Jesus Christ, my Lord,
So meek in deed and word,
You suffered death to save us
Because Your love would have us
Be heirs of heav'nly gladness
When ends this life of sadness.

"So be it," then, I say
With all my heart each day.
Dear Lord, we all adore You,
We sing for joy before You.
Guide us while here we wander
Until we praise You yonder.



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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 1: Definitions and Questions

Kevin T. Bauder

The year was 1971, and I was a junior in high school. I needed something to do in study hall, which happened to be held in the classroom where the English teacher kept a rack of paperback books. The cover of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* caught my eye. I picked it up, and within two pages I was gripped. Tolkien's story was like nothing that I had ever read. His work was my introduction to a genre of literature that I would later learn to call *fantasy*.

In those days, fantastic writing was generally limited to children's fairy tales. Few adults took any interest. The books were hard to find. Years passed before I met someone else who had read Tolkien. During the ensuing decades, however, fantasy in general and Tolkien in particular have become big sellers.

Some people do not appreciate fantasy. With most of them I have no argument: as the adage says, there is no disputing about tastes. For a few Christians, however, the rejection of fantastic literature is less about taste than about principle. They register moral objections against fantasy. These Christians are particularly vocal in their opposition to the best-known authors of fantastic fiction such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and especially J. K. Rowling. In their opinion, indulging in fantastic literature will harm the inner life of the believer.

At the time I write this essay, I am a Christian pastor and teacher. Consequently, I have deep concern about anything that affects my own spiritual life or the spiritual lives of those to whom I minister. If fantastic literature can be shown to harm the soul, then I want to be in the front rank of those who oppose it. If, on the other hand, it can be a harmless diversion or even a helpful instrument for teaching, then I want to be careful not to frighten the Lord's people with needless fulminations against one of God's good gifts.

In the following essays, I will examine the arguments against fantastic literature. Let me say a word about my method. To engage in this examination, I will first articulate a definition of fantasy. That definition will control the rest of this discussion. Next, I will ask whether distinctions should

be drawn between various categories of, purposes for, and approaches to fantasy. Then I will limit the question that I intend to discuss. Having taken these steps, I should be able to examine the merits and demerits of fantastic writing. Once I have examined the arguments and drawn conclusions about how fantastic literature should be evaluated, I will apply these criteria to specific works of fantasy.

Let us begin with the definition: *fantasy*, as I intend to use the term, is a genre of fictional literature or *belles lettres* in which an author creates an imaginative world by using one or more of the following devices. First, the author may attribute human properties to subhuman creatures (animals, plants, or even inanimate objects). Second, the author may attribute miraculous or marvelous powers to humans or other agents. Third, the author may invent creatures that do not exist in the real world. Any work of fiction that deliberately includes at least one of these elements can be classified as fantasy.

Examples of fantastic writing include the works of Homer (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), Aesop (the Fables), Virgil (the *Aeneid*), the German *Märchen* (exemplified first by the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers and later imitated by Hans Christian Andersen), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*), Rudyard Kipling (the *Jungle Books* and *Puck of Pook's Hill*), Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Tarzan of the Apes* and its sequels), C. S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia* and the space trilogy), and J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*). A specialized form of fantasy is found in science fiction, and it is no accident that retailers tend to market the two together.

Nothing in this definition equates fantasy with occult literature. The two, while related, are not the same thing. One reason is that occult literature may be either fictional or non-fictional. Another reason is that occult literature tries to do a different thing. The word *occult* means *hidden*, and occult literature tries to depict the hidden or unseen world that is or may be around us. Sometimes the depiction is direct and literal, while at other times it may be symbolic.

The expression *occult literature*, when it is used to describe a literary genre, is not necessarily connected to witchcraft or demonism, nor does it necessarily approve of those things. In the literary sense, several of the documents in the Bible could be classed as occult literature because they purport to give us a glimpse of the hidden work of God and of spirit beings in the world (the book of Job would be an example, as would some sections of Daniel). Other examples of occult literature include the works of John Milton (*Paradise Lost*), Robert Hugh Benson (*The Necromancers*) and Frank Peretti (the *Darkness* books). If the word *literature* is stretched to include writing that is not deliberately fictional, then occult literature also includes some theology, such as Michael Heiser's *The Unseen Realm*.

Fantasy and occult literature are not identical, but the two categories do overlap. Both kinds of literature can attempt to deal with the supernatural. Consequently, some works should be classed as both fantasy and occult literature. *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan rightly belongs in both categories. So do the fictional writings of Charles Williams (*Descent Into Hell*, *All Hallows Eve*, *The Greater Trumps*, etc.). C. S. Lewis's space trilogy also fits both categories (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*).

To this point, I have articulated a definition of fantastic literature. I have employed that definition to distinguish fantastic literature from an overlapping genre: occult literature. Before we can proceed with the discussion, a few other distinctions will be necessary.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
