

Beyond the Human: Symbolism, Archetypes, and Empathy in Contemporary Fantasy Literature

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to decode the deep, intricate emotional, psychological and symbolic bonds and connections between humans and the fantastical magical creatures and their mystical world in contemporary fantasy literature. The theme of magic, fantasy and magical world have always mesmerized the readers, the paper therefore put forth the argument that fantastical beings such as talking animals, house-elves, daemons, dragons, and mythical companions are not merely decorative elements of imagined worlds; rather, they function as powerful symbols of identity, loyalty, transformation, innocence, power, and empathy. Drawing from the select works of J. K. Rowling, C. S. Lewis, Philip Pullman, and George R. R. Martin the paper tries to establish how these non-human creatures add hidden moral, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of character and story and function beyond mere fantastical elements. They emerge as moral, psychological and emotional anchors of human beings. By applying Carl Jung's theory of archetypes, the paper endeavors to discuss how these creatures embody universal patterns of the collective unconscious and deepen the emotional resonance of fantasy narratives and enrich the narrative by bridging human vulnerability with mythic resonance. The paper also delves into how these unseen deep bonds of non-human creatures—ranging from loyal animal companions to shape-shifting daemons—help navigate themes of identity, the loss of innocence, and emotional growth.

Keywords: *fantasy literature, Carl Jung, archetypal criticism, magical creatures, symbolism, non-human companions, psychological mirrors, collective unconscious.*

Fantasy literature creates imaginative context where the distinction between humans and non-humans is often blurred, and the fantastical/mythical becomes emotionally, psychologically and symbolically resonant. For, as Gates et al. note, “The fantasy is first of all a children's book, it must already have some sort of a character, a human character, or an adult character or any human-like character such as a talking animal or a toy who comes to life or some imaginary being, with which the child can readily identify (9)” Symbolically, he is important because he is not merely a decorative prop within the confines of a fictional story, but an embodiment of the internal qualities of characters. As C.S. Lewis notes, “Of course he isn't safe. But he's good” (Lewis 64). These images illustrate how fantasy allows for the exploration of human identity, morality, vulnerability, emotional development and the bad vs. good dichotomy through the help of non-human characters. Talking animals, house-elves, daemon and dragon and other mythic beings are thereby used as powerful mechanisms in

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modern fantasy literature, where they serve to explore the complexities of human experience, either as characters or as symbols. In the 'Introduction' to Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults, the authors have enumerated several core essential features in children and young adults fantasy fiction as:

Talking dogs, cats, mice, and pigs; sand fairies or, for that matter, fairies of any kind; objects that inexplicably transport people through time or over great distances; stuffed animals and toys, wind-up and otherwise, that can talk and walk; talismans that when rubbed or commanded grant wishes; potions that enlarge or shrink whoever drinks them; human beings normal in all respects except for being miniature or gigantic in size-all are examples of phenomena that do not and cannot exist in the world as it is physically constituted ... At least one character in the work should be explicitly rendered as human or human-like so that readers, identifying with him, her, or it, care about what happens to that character ... (Gates et al. 6-7)

Many authors include animals in their work to add realism. Animals have been playing a crucial part in stories ever since the time of fairy tales, fables and myths. Not just in fantasy literature but also in other genres of literature, animals are used by the authors to symbolize ideas and traits that reflect certain qualities of nature and mirror human beings.

Animal fantasy features talking intelligent animals living within realms of their own without any contact with humans, such as Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). Originating from fables and thus allowing vast possibilities for allegory and satire, such stories juxtapose human and animal traits in a fascinating manner. (Nikolajeva 56)

Life of Pi, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Metamorphosis*, *The Raven*, *The Jungle Book*, *Panchatantra*, *Moby Dick*, *Animal Farm*, *Little Red Ridding Hood*, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, *Bear called Paddington*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Winnie the Pooh* are some of the major examples of animal centered works of fiction. These well-known literary tales are popular among both children and young adults for they offer inspiration and moral messages that shape and influence their minds. The elements of fantasy create interest and wonder in young children to connect more to the other beings of nature.

Stories such as *Stuart Little* (1945) by E. B. White, or *A Bear Called Paddington* (1958) by Michael Bond, abound in comic situations and border on nonsense in their clash between reality and the absurd toy/animal figure. *Paddington* is an archetypal founding, while *Stuart* has in some inexplicable way been born into a human family. (Nikolajeva 55)

Symbolism & Archetypal Criticism

In literary analysis, symbols extend beyond mere literal meaning. As M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham explain, "In the broadest sense, a symbol is anything which signifies something else. In this sense, all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term symbol is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which, in its turn, signifies something or suggests a range of reference beyond itself" (393-394). In fantasy

literature, symbolic meanings represent the psychological, emotional, social challenges that are faced by the characters. It shows the moral dilemma and struggles the characters face in their journey and how these various aspects embody something meaningful to them. The addition of all these mythical and magical creatures works as symbols rather than being mere fantastical elements.

Archetypal criticism is a literary theory that studies text and draws out hidden myths, symbols, and primordial images. Carl Jung details this theory in his seminal text *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. In the book Jung argues, “The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its color from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear” (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 5). Archetypal criticism proposes that the primordial images, symbols, motifs, and characters present in the texts bring out similar responses in the minds of people. The collective unconscious archetypes appear mostly in dreams, fantasy, and other imaginary sources of a person. The key archetype figures that are usually found in fantasy are the child, the hero, the wise old man, the trickster, the self, the shadow, the mother and some others.

The key archetypes of the hero, the wise old man, the shadow, the anima animus and the spirit are often used by the fantasy writers to present the unconscious conflicts faced by the characters. The wise old man often appears in stories to play the role of a mentor and guide to the hero through magic and knowledge guiding him onto the right path forward., such as the character Dumbledore in *Harry Potter* and Gandalf in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The father is a strict, authoritative figure. The mother as a nurturer reflects warmth, love and acts as a protective figure. Jung at times expands on these archetypes and includes cows, hare and other helpful animals in the mother archetype. Jung posits, “In men, a positive father-complex very often produces a certain credulity with regard to authority and a distinct willingness to bow down before all spiritual dogmas and values; while in women, it induces the liveliest spiritual aspirations and interests” (214). The trickster would use mischief, chaos, and wits like Loki from Norse Mythology. Altogether these archetypal figures enrich fantasy literature by encapsulating these symbolic elements and adding depth to the narrative.

Animals have been used for symbolic representations for a very long time. If we see it in our religious texts, animals are often associated with some holy God as their symbolic representative or a form of God like Hindu God Ganesha has a face of an elephant, the lamb in Christianity represents the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, similarly other symbols like lion, lamb, mouse, serpent, dragon, cat, cow and many others represent and symbolize different and

divine meaning in their respective faiths. Authors include animals and mythical creatures in their works to strengthen their stories by engaging the readers and enhancing their empathetic and emotional side by sympathizing with the characters and creatures. The theriomorphic symbols in fairytales are “dragon, snake, elephant, lion, bear, and other powerful animals, or again the spider, crab, butterfly, beetle, worm, etc. Plant symbols are generally flowers (lotus and rose)” (Jung 187). Jung observes that in the spirit of the archetype, we find the motif of talking animals who “display a sagacity and a knowledge superior to man’s” (231).

Symbolism in Selected Fantasy Works

Harry Potter Series

J. K. Rowling’s popular fantasy oeuvre, the *Harry Potter* series, is immensely popular among young children and adults alike. Its fantastical elements, magical themes and mythical creatures have gained both the book and movie series vast fan following. The main highlight of the Harry Potter Series is the friendship shared between the “golden trio” (Harry Potter, Ron Weasley & Hermione Granger), the unity of Dumbledore’s army, their journey fighting the evil Dark Lord and his army throughout the series. Several significant creatures in the series like Hedwig, Pigwidgeon, Crookshanks, Fang, Dumbledore’s phoenix represent an emotional bond/connect between human and magical creatures. These creatures symbolize how faith, loyalty, empathy, kindness and generosity forge lasting companionships. Harry symbolizes the Hero archetype of Jung who embarks on an adventurous journey at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and faces life-threatening hurdles and challenges associated with the evil Dark Lord. Harry, as a young boy, matures with the relationship he shares with everybody at Hogwarts school, be he his friends, teachers, enemies or magical creatures. He learns valuable life lessons from all those relationships who stand firmly besides him throughout his journey and help him eradicate evil.

Obedience, Innocence and Loss of Innocence

Hedwig, a snowy owl gifted to Harry from Hagrid on his eleventh birthday, is an obedient owl and a trusted friend of Harry. She represents Harry’s innocence in the series. She was a pet, a friend and a companion to Harry at Privet Drive, Hogwarts or wherever Harry went she was his constant support and aid. She accompanied him everywhere like Privet Drive, Hogwarts or the Burrow. She was aware of the people and locations the letters were addressed to by Harry. She was Harry’s only friend at Privet Drive who was equally annoyed like Harry at Dursely’s for their ill treatment and lack of proper meals. There’s one such instance in *Harry*

Potter and the *Chamber of Secrets* where she expresses her anger at Harry on being served soggy food:

The soup was stone cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig's cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bottom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

'It's no good turning your beak up at it, that's all we've got,' said Harry grimly (Rowling 23).

Her death in the Deathly Hallows was heartbreaking for both the book readers and the movie fans. Hedwig represented Harry's childhood and with her death Harry lost his childhood innocence, and it represented the outcomes of the war that one must face by losing some of their loved ones in the battle against the evil. This was a turning event for Harry as well as the readers. Losing Hedwig was a symbol of losing his innocence and getting ready for the upcoming war that would require him to be ready to face all the challenges. The stakes of losing dear ones in the war of good versus evil and fighting evil forever are one of the integral parts of fantasy fiction. Hedwig's companionship overall played a crucial part in Harry's growing years. She has been his constant companion throughout his journey.

Empathy and kindness through House-elves Dobby and Kreacher

House elves are domestic helps in the wizarding families in the wizarding world. House-elves like Dobby, Kreacher, and Winky all serve different masters and are treated differently by each of them. They are highly devoted to the master they serve and are powerful magical creatures who, unlike the wizards, do not require wand to cast magic. They are tied to serve one master for life if the master does not present them with clothes for freedom. They are short and skinny, with "bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls" (Rowling 12). Dobby is a very kind house elf serving the cruel Malfoy family. He is mistreated by his master's and bound to serve them knowing they will never present him with clothes to free him. They are passed down through generations in a family like we see with Kreacher who the elf in the Black Family was and after the passing of his beloved masters had to serve Sirius and Harry unwillingly. Dobby appears in the second part of the series to warn Harry Potter of the danger that year at Hogwarts school. He takes the risk of going behind his master's back to come and warn Harry Potter. Dobby sabotages all the ways he could to prevent Harry from going to Hogwarts by sealing the platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ quarters or by sending him home by magically cursing the rogue bludger. Dobby meant no harm he proves to be an obedient friend and well-wisher throughout the series. Harry, in return for Dobby's help, frees him from his slavery by indirectly presenting him with shock through Lucius Malfoy's hand. In return for Harry's kind present Dobby proves to be of great help to Harry in his difficult times. He is present for Harry whenever Harry is in need or is in danger.

Kreacher on the hand proves to be just the opposite for Harry. Kreacher lived in a malicious environment of the Black Family. He was full of malice and curses because of the harshness and mistreatment he faced after losing his beloved masters. He disliked Sirius and other members of the order when they began to live there. He never really cared for Sirius as his master for he never showed him kindness or sympathy that resulted in the enemies plotting against them. He shows what happens when you are harsh and bitter towards others; it may lead to nasty circumstances for yourselves. Showing kindness and empathy can bring about a lot of change in the behavior of a person. When Harry shows kindness to Kreacher by giving him the fake locket of his dead master Regulus this brings a change in his behavior and he started obeying Harry and showed him and his Friends respect instead of harsh comments. In both cases with the elves, it is shown how the power of kindness and empathy lay lastingly an effect on the bond between humans and creatures.

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

The Chronicles of Narnia books by C. S. Lewis are full of rich imagery and symbolism. C. S. Lewis has given a vivid and classical description of all the magical and mythical elements in the novels. Narnia has talking animals, powerful mythological creatures from both good and evil sides and child figures who encounter the magic and help in liberating the Narnian creatures from the evil Witch. The phrase, “always winter and never Christmas” suggests dark times for the people of Narnia and Christmas reflects the hope of the end of tyranny. Winter in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* also symbolizes the similar theme. Winter often symbolizes cold, dark, and difficult times. Many authors use this to represent the difficult times people face under evil force.

There are many animal figures in the novels like beavers, lions, wolves, foxes, mice, birds etc. are talking animals. Aslan is symbolic of the guide in the novels like Dumbledore and Gandalf who guided the Pevensie children in defeating the White Witch. The Beavers serve as faithful creatures who provide shelter, help, and guidance to the children. They provide them comfort in new, tough and dangerous environment the innocent children find themselves in. They save the children from the White Witch spies and provide them comfortable home and food. They may be small, but they have perseverance to stand against evil. They are kind, wise, and courageous.

Aslan clearly represents the picture of Jesus Christ in the novels. While many notice the parallel between him and Jesus Christ’s belief on death and resurrection. He sacrifices himself before the White Witch on the stone table shows his selfless sacrifice for greater good. The breaking of the stone table for his resurrection and coming to life again shows rebirth and

restoration and a magical moment in the fight of good versus evil. Aslan comes out as a mighty protector and guard of the Pevensie children. He provides the children with motivation to move forward in their battle and helps them by sacrificing himself in saving Edmund and frees the innocent prisoners.

His Dark Materials

Daemons are shape-shifting magical creatures in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. They represent the personality of the human in its animal form, a manifestation of their nature and soul. Daemons are shape shifting creatures who change shapes till their counterparts are children; they can change to any form and they show the mood and need of their counter humans. But when they reach adolescence, they permanently change into one creature. This change shows transition from innocence to maturity in children. Mostly daemons are of the opposite of the sex of their counterpart like Panteleimon and Mrs. Coulter's golden-haired monkey.

Daemons present the emotions of the humans they serve to protect and help them in peril. They represent the internal conscience of humans. Mrs. Coulter's golden monkey is vicious like her. Lord Asriel's daemon is Stelmaria, a snow leopard who represents power. They are like mirrors who reflect the true nature and characteristics of their human half. The fixation or settling of the daemons in a single form shows the end of innocence and beginning of maturity in a human and the true acceptance of one's natural personality. The fixed shape of the daemon cannot be changed. They must be accepted as they are not as per the expectation of their human conscience. The Magisterium performs the intercession of daemons and humans and separates them from one another because the church believed that daemons attract Dust i.e. consciousness and free will and by cutting them apart, they would prevent the original sin. These daemons symbolize the true self of the human outside their bodies which can't be manipulated or faked. They will tell the true intentions of the person from their actions no matter what treacherous personality their human part carries. The daemons share deeper bonds only with their counter human parts, and no other human was allowed to touch them. The daemons are both visible and invisible in the novels.

Iorek Byrnison is another loyal friend, companion and protector of Lyra in the battle. He is the leader of panserbjørn. He is an intelligent armored bear who is tricked into exile after losing his armor. He plays a crucial role in Lyra's journey. He guards and guides Lyra on her journey and helps her repair the subtle knife.

A Song of Ice and Fire

George R. R. Martin in his novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has mentioned mythical creatures like dragons and dire wolves to portray the key features of the main characters of the novels. The dire wolves are first mentioned in the first book *A Game of Thrones*. Dire wolves had not been seen in south for over two hundred years before the Stark family a dead dire wolf mother with five pups of grey-black fur, only the straying sixth one found by Jon Snow was white represented Jon for being like an outcast straying alone different from the rest of the pups like it was for Jon who was no Stark and thus was adopted by Jon as his own. The children rebelled to keep the pups for themselves when Theon Greyjoy decided to end their lives. Jon announced the dire wolves as the sigil of the House Stark with each of the five pups representing the five children of Ned Stark. He does not include himself in the list because he is the bastard son. Ned reminds them of the dire wolf's nature before adopting them. He says, "These are not dogs to beg for treats and slink off at a kick. A dire wolf will rip a man's arm off his shoulder as easily as a dog will kill a rat" (Martin 18).

Each dire wolf accompanied a Stark child, and Jon carried the traits of their fellow human master. They represented their basic nature and characteristics. Grey wind, the dire wolf of Robb Stark portrays the fearsome, bold and faithful traits of his master. He accompanied Robb everywhere even in battles and court rooms. He is also killed off brutally like Robb in the red wedding scene where his ripped off head is placed on Robb headless body to mock them. Through the connection with their dire wolves Summer and Ghost their human companions Bran and Jon share the dream of blood and that something cruel has happened unaware of the brutality with their own Robb and family. This shows the magical connection between them. Sansa's dire wolf Lady adopted by her shared similar characteristics and mannerism like her. She is executed early in the novels portraying Sansa's early loss of her freedom and captivity and loss of connection with her family and her imprisonment as a hostage at King's Landing. Arya's Nymeria is a rogue, fierce and strong dire wolf named after a warrior Princess. Bran's dire wolf Summer foreshadows the light and hope after dark times and winter. Rickon's Shaggy dog after his own personality, taking his anger mostly.

The dragons in the books represent House Targaryen. Daenerys is the last of the Targaryen surviving members and she hatches the dragon eggs in husband's funeral pyre. The dragons symbolize the blood of Daenerys Targaryen herself. She possesses the blood of the dragon. She names the three dragons- Drogon named after her husband Khal Drogo, Rhaegal named after her brother Rhaegar Targaryen and Viserion named after her brother Viserys Targaryen. Dragons are considered the most powerful creatures in mythical lore and the novel *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The dragons are reborn after 150 years and they were merely considered a myth people, but Daenerys hatched them using blood magic and this marks the return of magic, power and rise of Targaryen with the rebirth of dragons to claim what belonged to them i.e.

the Iron Throne. The growth of dragons shows the growth of Daenerys in power from a shy, timid girl who faced physical and psychological abuse to a powerful queen and gained herself the title the Mother of Dragons. “The fire is mine. I am Daenerys Storm born, daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons, don’t you see! Don’t you SEE?” (Martin 779). She emerges as a natural and fierce leader admired by people for her courage and ruling.

Conclusion

Far from mere serving as exquisite or ornamental narrative the non-human and mythical companions in Contemporary Fantasy Literature also act as the archetypal mirrors of human soul/substance. That is why many writers use the device of symbolism to present the hidden meaning behind their characters and themes. The readers also understand the deeper meaning the authors wish to present to them by using empathy, symbolism, and archetypal figures. It changes the way they perceive them after interpreting the real meaning. Fantasy literature provided a wider scope for writers to explore this imagery and symbolism in their works. The authors use the tools of symbolism, imagery, and archetypes while creating a piece of literature with such vibrant, vivid and wide imagination that it attracts a lot of recognition and attention of the readers as well as critics. Fantasy literature has immensely provided a wider platform for writers as well as film makers to explore the magical and mythical concepts, themes and settings as these tools helped them to explore the inner self of humans. The relationships between animals/ magical creatures and humans provide a more sentimental touch to the fantastical story and gives it a little more realistic touch to the human emotions a person feels while reading them.

Through the prism of Carl Jung’s psychological framework, these theriomorphic being – many shaped daemons in Pullman, the snowy owl in Rowling, the Stark children’s dire wolves in Martin --- epitomizes the pristine contents of the collective unconscious, guiding human protagonists through the delicate process of individuation. We as readers witness that this non-human bond persistently marks the shift from innocence to psychological integration: the daemon’s settling, the owl’s fatal loss, and the wolves’ shared instinctual consciousness each signal a crucial inner transformation. Furthermore, by bringing these non-human entities at the centre of the narrative of the Fantasy literature making them significant moral and emotional anchors the genre tries to subvert the anthropocentric paradigms and endorsing the peaceful coexistence and dependence on each other. Ultimately these fantasy texts with their mythical characters/ creatures, imaginative narratives reflect the real journey of human soul, using universal archetypes to illuminate what it means to mature, endure, and relate.

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