

The Fantastic Literature Case Study: Beowulf, Swift, and Soyinka

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Abstract:

It is not commonly agreed on what the work of fantasy is; therefore there is not a precise definition for the 'fantastic work'. Because the concept "fantasy" is too "fuzzy", the focus has been on literature as it is the field where most advanced works of fantasy were produced and have been subject to much criticism. This is probably because literature has a longer history, a wide use and more productions of works connected to fantasy. The rigorous analysis of literary fantastic works has helped critics to highlight the elements that rendered this genre as a marvellous work, a work of science fiction or a work that blends both. This article tends to define the work of fantasy by getting back to what has been thought of as a "Western origin" since the time of the Anglo-Saxons in the 5th century. It is worth to examine the subject of the work of fantasy in the African literature, particularly, the Western African novel. This serves as refutation to the idea that the fantastic work is a Western type of literature.

Keywords: fantastic, supernatural, Beowulf, Gulliver, The Interpreters, magic realism

الملخص :

لم يتم الاتفاق بعد بين الأدبيين على ما هية الرواية العجائبية. وبالتالي ليس هناك تعريف دقيق لهذا النوع من العمل. مفهوم "العمل العجائبي" غامض، نظرا للتركيز على الأدب في ميدان العمل العجائبي كما جرت العادة، نجد بأن جل الأعمال في هذا الميدان من أدب الخيال كما أنها تتعرض لكثير من الانتقادات. ان الأدب لديه تاريخ طويل مما أتاح للأدباء استخدام واسع للأعمال المتصلة بالخيال والمزيد من إنتاج الفن العجائبي. وقد ساهم النقاد في التحليل الدقيق لهذا النوع من الأعمال الأدبية لتسليط الضوء على العناصر التي جعلت منها عمل رائع، من خلال هذا المقال المتواضع نعرف الأدب العجائبي وذلك بالعودة إلى نشأته أو ما يعتقد بأنه من أصل غربي إبان الغزو الأنكلو- ساكسوني للجزر البريطانية في القرن الخامس الميلادي. ومن الجدير بالذكر وجود الفن العجائبي في الأدب الإفريقي، وبالتحديد الرواية في غرب أفريقيا. وهذا بمثابة نفي لفكرة أن مصدر الرواية العجائبية هو الغرب (أوروبا) فقط.

كلمات مفتاحية: العمل العجائبي، خارق للعادة، بيولف، المترجمون، انبعثن، قى اليفر، الواقعية السحرية

Introduction

It has been agreed that one can talk of a fantastic work when there is the appearance of the supernatural in our world (i.e. the theme of disorder): the author's intention, here, is to create in the

reader / viewer a sense of uneasiness or fear when facing "disorder", and the work is presented with recognizable recurring technical processes.

The fantastic work reveals un-natural phenomena or presents supernatural beings. The author exploits the resulting fear that would have an impact on the reader. The latter confronts a given situation that is described as a not-everyday reality. The works of fantasy are generally supernatural in theme, presented in disorder, breaking out the daily routines by exposing the reader to fright, abnormal situations and mysteries. In the fiction with fantasy authors resort to the use of:

- _ spectres, _ phantoms
- _ vampires _ zombies
- _ mummies _ spirits of the dead
- _ monstrous animals
- _ half animal / half human beings

When the fantasy authors want to involve the dead, they use ghosts, and spirits. They use sorcerers and priests to stand for devils, as well as gods and Imaginary deities. They also employ monstrous animals, half-human and half-animal monsters beside to avengers with extraordinary intelligence, example the werewolves and dragons.

In general, such vicarious reading is not only a substitute for real life, but it can be used to prepare readers for an unusual situation. The reader breaks out and escapes to encounter unusual people and situations depicted in a given artistic work.

Nevertheless, disagreement exists as to what kind of fiction could be called legitimately fantasy; it is Obvious that there are three Variables in a story with fantasy:

- Subject matter: motives in the story without immediate explanation, we as readers can build a deduction throughout the story.
- Treatment is the author's method of developing his material.
- Orientation might be defined as the absence or presence of rationalisation for the fantastic material in a book. (Bleiler, 1948, p.4)

All of the three variables: subject matter, treatment, and orientation are important variables in the construction of a fantasy story. Subject matter, in general, includes the motives contained in the story, that are not considered in the light of previous or later explanations, but as they happen. The motives linked to subject matter in the fantastic work, specifically, are characterised by unreality, as they cannot occur, could not have occurred, or have not yet occurred.

A further difficulty arises from the fact that many persons who have accomplished a fairly satisfactory division of fantasy believe that they have thereby attained to a satisfactory definition. An author may make use of atmospheric devices to emphasize the fantastic nature of his subject matter, or may wittingly tone down the fantastic motives. Examples of such differences in intention can occur when the author's intention is to create an atmosphere of unreality and marvel. The connotations are minimized that some readers doubt whether the story is real or myth.

Fantasy literature consists of more than one kind of story. It comprises literary works that can be classified as: science fiction, weird fiction, and light fantasy, or "pure" fantasy, or "fantasy". Its stress is not on ordinary situations, but on strange situations that have not yet taken place. Weird fiction is differentiated from light fantasy by the emotional intention of the author; if the latter wishes to amuse the reader, the story is light fantasy, but if he wants to horrify or frighten him the story is weird. The best that can be said about such a multiple criterion classification is that it is sanctioned by long usage. Having considered the two most important definitions of fantasy, the literary and popular, there is the possibility to attempt a more logical definition based on an examination of materials considered fantastic by almost everyone. With such an ideal definition one might say that a fantastic story is a story in which the subject matter cannot take place with a strong emphasis on the story improbability or impossibility.

Pioneers of Fantasy in Literature

1. The early fantastic story of *Beowulf*

If one really wants to trace back the fantastic work, one needs to go back to the period of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes: the descendants of the Germanic tribes raiding the British Isles at the turn of the 5th century. Those people were bold and fearless, they loved fighting and adventures. Therefore, their early writing described their primitive yearnings. They wrote sagas (stories) in which the supernatural was blended with the real. These primitive adventure stories; the novel with occult powers and a fictionalized vision, later on, are known as fantasy literature. Others would consider the presence of a single ghost sufficient justification for calling the story *fantastic*.

It seems rather obvious to include early material like *Beowulf* or the classic *Gulliver's Travels*, by Jonathan Swift as works of fantasy. *Beowulf*, from the south of Sweden, crosses the sea to respond to the summon of King Hrothgar, the Danish king. The poem tells the story of Grendel, the monster, who terrorized Hrothgar and his people. *Beowulf*, who took the task of freeing the kingdom from the cannibal monster, was not only courageous but equipped with almost superhuman powers. *Beowulf*

defeated Grendel and brought a part of his limb to Hearot. Then Hrothgar's mother came to take revenge on Grendel's men. This time Beowulf chased and killed both the wounded Grendel and his mother in their underwater dwelling. After killing the dragon, Beowulf was rewarded and he returned to his homeland where he was offered land on which he ruled for fifty years. Beowulf with the help of Wiglaf, a younger warrior had to fight a dragon which attacked the Geats. Unfortunately Beowulf was mortally injured and died. Beowulf became ever since a mythical figure (Sikorska, 2002, p. 31).

2. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

Gulliver's Travels is a philosophical significant narrative symbolising everything that is crass and ignoble about the human body and man's existence in general showing that humans as physically, spiritually and mentally transcendent creatures (Henriksen, 2002, p. 22). Gulliver's size and enormous strength presents him among Lilliputians as in a unique position as a giant. Philosophers of Lilliput believed that Gulliver who had come from another planet was probably dropped from the moon or another star.

I heard a confused noise about me; but in the posture I lay, could see nothing except the sky. In a little time I felt something alive moving on my left leg, which advancing gently forward over my breast, came almost up to my chin; when bending my eyes downwards as much as I could, I perceived it to be a human creature not six inches high, with a bow and arrow in his hands and a quiver at his back. In the meantime, I felt at least forty more of the same kind (as I conjectured) following the first. I was in the utmost astonishment, and roared so loud, that they all ran back in a fright; and some of them, as I was afterwards told, were hurt with the falls they got by leaping from my sides upon the ground (Swift, p. 13).

In Book I, Lemuel Gulliver, the ship's surgeon who narrates the story, is shipwrecked on the island of Lilliput, where he is taken a prisoner by some of the inhabitants, who are only six inches tall. The Emperor

In Book II, Gulliver's next voyage takes him to Brobdingnag, a kingdom inhabited by gigantic inhabitants twelve times taller than himself, and where he is stranded.

Book III, a flying island where the nobles quite literally have their head in the clouds. There are "projectors" working on outlandish scientific schemes: breeding sheep with no wool and extracting sunbeams from cucumbers. Gulliver visits Glubbubrib, the Island of Sorcerers, where famous historical figures are summoned from the past.

Book IV Swift concludes that Gulliver eventually comes to conclude that in the words of the King of Brobdingnag, human beings are the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth. But everyone large or small, apes or horses, suffers from gross human defects. (Pishkar, p. 263)

For Sanchez, such work of fantasy as Swift's that combines between the real and the magic is close to the work of a Surrealist (p.5) that is a reaction against excessive rationality in the modern Western world. The character of imagery in Fantastic literature relates familiar objects in unfamiliar surroundings. This can be defined as a 'magic realism'. The characters act in different dimensions where reality is not visible. However, visible and tangible things are transformed into myth and legend. The difference between the Surrealist work and the Fantastic literature is that in the latter the author relies on the supernatural presenting what is magic as being real. The narrator in the Surrealist work employs magic realism. He does not go beyond what is natural; instead, the real is portrayed as magic (p.6).

Fantasy in West African Literature

The Yoruba were pagan and it was in their mythology that the supernatural beings were often located in natural environment such as the dense forests which cover large areas in West Africa. In the belief of the Yoruba, the spirits of the dead reincarnated and wandered through rivers, water, rocks, forests and so forth.

Many of the characters in *The Interpreters Came from the dead*:

1. *The Morgue*
2. *Barabbas, a young thief*
3. *Usaye, the daughter of the Faseyis' cook*

These people are 'Like a new-laid-egg,' (Soyinka, p. 49). They stand for the natives who became particularly receptive to the teaching of Europeans. After being 'brainwashed', European cultural values and Christianity made of them newborn natives with new spiritual security and social purpose.

The Morgue: this man has died and buried then comes back from the dead but has turned to an albino because he has been buried alive. Lazarus talks of his experience while walking through the valley of the shadow of death in an open field of cotton with a huge gate at the end; "*he could see the top of it, but the end? It was nowhere. Neither to the left nor to the right*" (Soyinka, p. 182). All around him has been cotton, there is total silence, he has been frightened and running from his pursuer, an old man with a white beard stuffed in cotton. He asks him whether he has got an idea of the land owner and if he has a permission to sleep there. Then Lazarus gets heavy blows of the man's stick and cannot

even flee for the old man keeps pace with Lazarus and shows no pity for him until Lazarus scrapes the walls like a blind to finally rest his eyes on an open door to sunlight.

Another picture is the transformation of the young thief Barabbas not only into a priest but into another person at all, which for Soyinka stands for the villains in the society who take important roles among their people instead of the good ones. *"The murderer is the future martyr... Few fools know that."* (Soyinka, p. 249). The young thief has been chased at Oyingbo. Barabbas' sins have been cleansed until there is little left of his previous face and the boy is now baptised in the hope that God bestows forgiveness on him. Barabbas is now called Noah. *"He looks submissive, not redeemed... There is no inner radiance in the boy."* Noah is seen as an apostate (*Judas type*) (Soyinka, p.191). Egbo is overtaken by darkness and cannot discern his whereabouts. There is a child's voice calling him from the distant. He can make out a framing canoe between two lines of flames. The glow shows Lazarus and Noah entrapped in the water. Lazarus gets in the canoe and stretches his hand for Noah, but Noah, being transfixed and unable to move his eyes from the fire, fails to join him and recedes in the fire.

Usaye, the daughter of the Faseyis' cook, comes near. She is an albino and a short-sighted girl. Usaye is described as a *new-laid egg* or newborn baby whose brain still pulsates in its head that needs much care.

As the Yoruba were pagan, it was in their mythology that the supernatural beings were often located in natural environment such as the dense forests which, in fact, cover large areas in West Africa. In the belief of the Yoruba, the spirits of the dead reincarnated and wandered through rivers, water, rocks, forests and so forth. While Egbo is lying on Oshun grove for hours, he recalls his parents' death and he is convinced that they would rise from the waters where they were drown. They would talk to him and give him guidance.

...I was in Oshogbo I loved Oshun grove and would lie there for hours listening at the edge of the waters. It has a quality of this part of the creeks peaceful and comforting. I would lie there , convinced that my parents would rise from the water and speak to me that they had turned into waterman and wife I had no doubt, so I expected they would appear wherever the conditions were right (Soyinka, p. 5).

Side by side to the belief in gods, there is the belief in witchcraft. This is typically performed by female witches who are believed to harm people or property through the use of their magic power. The reader understands that, because women felt helpless, they resorted to witchcraft, i.e., a supernatural force to keep Sagoe from the way of Dehinwa. Another scene illustrates the practice of witchcraft in

African societies is in chapter twelve when Barabbas transforms into Noah, the white-robed women started dancing and ringing bells in their hands which were the rituals to drive the witches away from the church.

Conclusion

Fantasy in western fiction and non-fiction differs from fantasy in the African literature. For the former, the authors are inspired by what they were taught or told when they were younger. Stories, as *The Lord of the Rings* can, be described as the fruits of a lifetime's work incorporated into the author. The author's interest in philology and theology together with his own vivid imagination and attitudes toward the world and the events happening around yielded such stories that can be classified as a work of fantasy. By turning to the old the Norse sagas when the Anglo-Saxons were lured by stories of a mixture between the real and the imaginary, they transform their experiences into fiction, such as in *Middle-earth* of J. R. R. Tolkien.

However a fantasy work in the African literature is much derived from the black traditions and customs and is in fact connected to the African identity rather than just depicting an author's response to the urgent growing need of his audiences. As African literature is not subsidiary to Western literature and is derived from the African oral tradition, being authentic is one of the reasons that make West African writing so widely read and accepted not only by Africans but by a large audience from all over the world. Henceforth fantasy that had been used in Western fantasy literature by strangely blending the supernatural with the real for entertainment is in African literature the mythology of the African natives. The sub-Saharan African author writes of his ancestors in fantasy literature. His departed beloved relatives do not vanish for good. It is believed that they only transform from humans to spectres because after death the spirits keep on wandering about. The belief in the power of these spirit, gods and semi-gods is part of the African identity. Moreover sorcery is widely practised by women, who in a society that is described as patriarchal, find it as a source of balance to equal man's power.

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