

Agata Zarzycka

University of Wrocław

## The More the Merrier: A Transcultural Aspect of Companionship in the Fantasy Genre

### 1. A transcultural quest

Multiple lands or coexisting parallel worlds are characteristic of the fantasy genre. The scenery, diversified in terms of both cultures and geography, becomes all the more important when combined with the motif of a quest-like journey, which often occurs in the fantastic literature. The above-mentioned kind of setting offers a broad variety of ethnic groups, races or species that may influence the composition of the main characters' team – a motif frequently present in fantasy novels, if not in the form of an officially announced “fellowship,” as in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, then as a result of informal interactions between protagonists. It is in the field of connections linking characters and the setting, as well as characters as a group that one may observe the growing importance of transcultural issues in the genre. This importance can be seen as following a gradual drift of the plot-fuelling polarity from the “good vs. evil” to the “familiar vs. different.” The said process affects both the internal relations within the heroic team and the characters' attitude to the surrounding world.

In this paper, I intend to argue that the gradual movement from the traditional moral discourse to the discourse of difference, which can be observed in the genre of fantasy, results in two phenomena. The first one is a shift from the monomythic hero-centredness towards a collective involvement of the characters' team in the accomplishment of the quest. The second phenomenon consists in the increasing tendency for the culturally diversified setting to be presented as multiform rather than polarized according to the juxtaposition of a familiar culture with “exotic” ones.

The good/evil, or rather hero/enemy polarization remains crucial for the plot in most fantasy novels underpinned with the monomyth and heroic quest inspiration (Attebery 2007: 209, 211, 216). Yet, this polarization can be handled in various ways. In classic high fantasy as originated from and inspired by the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, the division between lands and races of the good, and the realm

of the embodied evil tends to be quite clear and linked with a supernatural essence of the given place, especially the corrupted area where the arch-enemy dwells, e.g. Middle-earth vs. Mordor. Descriptions of the road leading to the terrifying Sauron's realm, as well as the place itself, tend to be laced with gloom and ominous atmosphere inherent in the landscape (Tolkien 1993: 627, 629, 651–652, 730, 952). The vegetation seems adapted to the overall viciousness of the area where it grows (731, 956). A contrast between the nature of Mordor and other lands of Middle-earth is also emphasized when Frodo and Sam, the two hobbits who dare enter Sauron's lair, seek solace in the memories of their homeland (974). The close connection of the image of the land and the evil essence of its ruler can also be observed in the changes which touch on Isengard while Saruman leans towards his corrupted ambitions (574, 577). In juxtaposition, a description of the realm of elves, the iconic positive characters, makes it clear that “[o]n the land of Lórien there was no stain” (369). A dominion of malicious supernatural powers, such as the one represented by Mordor, is often peopled by inherently vicious races or species, e.g. Tolkien's orcs.

Still, in other, usually younger fantasy worlds, the evil essence of a given place, race or nation is frequently replaced by a more subjective contrast of the friend vs. the enemy. The complexity of the political, social and historical setting becomes prominent, which mitigates the good/evil clash. For instance, in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, started in 1996 and continued to date, connections between particular parts of a multi-sided political conflict are so complex that it is hardly possible to point to the good and the evil at all. Also the great war of Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* saga, published in the years 1994–1999,<sup>1</sup> namely, the invasion of the Nilfgaard empire aimed at neighboring kingdoms, loses a simple black-and-white character with each subsequent volume of the cycle. Battles and battle-affected parts of the land are depicted in an impressive, often drastic way, and in the light of the war nightmare, Nilfgaard soldiers may easily be seen as an embodiment of evil (1996: 64–65, 70–71, 292–293). However, such an impression is modified by insights into the lives and minds of particular Nilfgaard representatives, e.g. a young knight Cahir, who becomes one of the key characters (1996: 189–192; 1997: 213–214, 220–225; 2001: 362–364); an ex-soldier and current outlaw Reef (1995: 312); or Lamarr Flaut – a Nilfgaard-army scout (2001: 287–289). Also occasional changes of the narrative focus disperse the immediacy of the war experience and allow the reader to see it as just an element of something bigger. Such an effect is produced, among others, by the outline of the invasion's economic background and consequences, carried out from the viewpoint of Evertsen, one of the Nilfgaard military logistic commanders (1995: 209–213). A similar impression is created by an episode in which the war – seen as a historical event – is discussed during a class at a military academia (2001: 281–282, 315).

In some novels, e.g. those of Sapkowski or Martin, the reader may find the exploration of complicated interdependency networks linking races, nations and

<sup>1</sup> The translation into English in progress.

states at least as attractive as tracing the leading thread of a heroic quest. A complex background of the plot does not necessarily mean an erasure of the true heroes and villains, though they tend to be pictured as individual cases rather than products or representatives of some broader good or evil force. For instance, one of the most spectacular black characters in Sapkowski's *Witcher* saga, Vilgefortz, develops qualities of a particularly nasty enemy not so much because of the goals he ruthlessly follows – he is not the only one to pursue them – as rather because of his uniquely arrogant and vicious manner in doing so (1995: 139–146, 191–192; 1996: 266–268; 1997: 403–407; 2001: 47–48, 335–341). Thus, as suggested by the above examples, contemporary fantasy writers are able to reconcile the hero/enemy opposition with a departure from the concept of an absolute, essentialized evil.

## 2. The same and the different

A complex setting is likely to draw the reader's attention to the question of interactions between races or kinds – an issue frequently depicted in terms of the familiar vs. different polarization. The focus of the plot on such interrelations results, among others, in the individualization of the members of the heroic team and their backgrounds which sometimes leads to an examination of conflicts based on cultural differences. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* reveals this motif in the bickering between Legolas, the elf, and Gimli, the dwarf (320, 569–571), or the politics- and history-based antagonism between Aragorn and Boromir (263–269, 356–357, 409–410). However, many subsequent fantasy authors give the question of background-connected differences and methods of handling them an even bigger prominence. For instance, the team of protagonists in Sapkowski's cycle discussed above is composed, among others, of: Geralt – a witcher, which means a professional monster slayer (1994: 10–11), Regis – a vampire and one of the said monsters (1996: 210–212), Cahir – a representative of the Nilfgaard aggressor, or Milva – a human woman who has been cooperating with elf and dryad rebels in slaying humans (1996: 21–22). The potentially explosive combination of characters constituting the company may be seen as a certain reinforcement of the significance of the quest's goal and a marker of its privilege over any divisions of views or interests.

While the above examples illustrate, first of all, the focus on the complexity and relativity of connections between characters, other fantasy stories frequently go even further in destabilizing fundamental polarities, such as the essential good vs. essential evil or the normal vs. the abnormal.<sup>2</sup> In his numerous short stories,

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<sup>2</sup> The novels of Martin and Sapkowski can be classified as representing high or epic fantasy, subversive as they may be, while the works of Gaiman belong rather to urban fantasy. Although possible connections between the processes discussed in this paper and particular fantasy subgenres may be worth investigating, I find this particular division coincidental.

novels and comic scenarios Neil Gaiman often plays with the normal/abnormal polarity, composing his heroic teams of social outcasts and freaks. For example, in Chapter 5 of *Endless Nights*, “Delirium: Going Inside” (n.p.), a rescue team is formed out of a girl who is catatonic because of a permanent shock of having been raped, a street paranoid madman who writes prophecies on the walls and is obsessed with theories of conspiracy, an insane prostitute, a New Age freak, and a schizophrenic janitor.

The coexistence of the growingly prominent transcultural diversity, and the traditional quest pattern based on the presence of the hero and the enemy to confront with seems to a certain extent foreshadowed by the analysis of the fantasy protagonist carried out in Brian Attebery’s *Strategies of Fantasy*. Attebery interprets the fantasy hero as a unique combination of a complex, yet narratively static, character typical of the realistic novel, and an action-oriented character derived from the traditional, myth- or folktale-based narrative. While the former plays the role of the Other for the reader to identify themselves against, the latter psychologically relies on archetypes reflecting particular elements of the self dispersed in the collective cultural heritage (1992: 70–72).

The transcultural potential of such a combination reveals itself when juxtaposed with Patrick D. Murphy’s concept of “otherness” as presented in “An-otherness and Inhabitation in Recent Multicultural American Literature.” Murphy says:

The concept of the ‘Other’ ... has been interpreted in various ways to provide stunning critiques of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, metaphysical linguistics and Freudianism. This absolute ‘Other,’ founded upon notions of permanent incompleteness and prematurity, communicative incommensurability and binary constructs, is, however, largely an illusion. And its continued acceptance is a dangerous reification that protects much of the Western dominant hierarchical power relations that its use has been designed to dismantle. (40)

Further, he argues that “it is time to move towards a relational model of ‘an-otherness’ and the reconceptualization of difference in terms of ‘I’ and ‘another,’ ‘one’ and ‘another,’ and ‘I-as-another’” (40). Keeping his essay in an ecocritical tone, Murphy emphasizes the importance of such a change of perspective for the “human–non-human” connections, by which he means the connections between the human kind and the natural world. Still, when referred to the fantasy convention, his argument may also be applied to interactions between various kinds of thinking creatures. As far as the direct inter-cultural relations are concerned, Murphy claims, “the notion of otherness calls for a cross-cultural comparative analysis rather than a comparative cultural analysis from the traditional center-margin orientation” (43).

A switch from the self/Other to the I/another seems to correspond with the uniqueness of the fantasy character as identified by Attebery. Namely, the balance between the psychological Other and the narrative archetype, which he points out as the forming principle of fantasy characters, can be perceived as illustrating

the postulate of “anotherness.” It neutralizes the sense of polarity – both between the reader and the character, and between characters themselves – by adding to the complex fictional identity an element of narrative predictability. This predictability is connected with the role of the particular hero or heroine in the plot and constitutes, to a certain extent, a shared background linking the reader with the characters, as well as the characters within the story. Attebery explains that “[the character] relates to interior experience, but she is also a social phenomenon – the product of generations of public performance” (1992: 71).

The interdependence which develops at the crossing point of the individual characterization and the narrative function personified by the given protagonist can easily be observed in some of the novels set in a role-playing-game universe. Role-playing games, both traditional and electronic, have to a large extent influenced the emergence of a characteristic model of the fantasy heroic team comprising a warrior, a ranger, a mage, a priest and a thief. In the first trilogy of the *Dragonlance* cycle, written in the years 1984–1985 by Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman, and set in the *Dungeons and Dragons*<sup>3</sup> universe, each member of the Heroes of the Lance fellowship not only represents a different personality, but also comes from a different racial and cultural background. Simultaneously, each protagonist fulfills one of the functions included in the holistic model team of adventurers. In this case the team is composed of three warriors: Sturm Brightblade – a noble knight (1994: 32–37), Caramon Majere – a heavily built mercenary (29–30) and Flint Fireforge – a dwarf (16–17, 25); a ranger: Tanis the Halfelven (18–19); a mage: Raistlin Majere (31–33); a priest: Goldmoon from a human barbarian tribe (37, 40, 43–43, 66–97, 213–215); and finally a thief: Tasslehoff Barefoot – a kender (21–23, 29). For all those characters the team membership is a common denominator, imposing on them the “I – another” relation. At the same time, the model of the fellowship reaches out towards the competence of the reader, replacing their sense of estrangement from the fictional characters with a sense of continuity between the story and the reader’s experience, especially as an RPG player, but also as a shareholder of the cultural heritage which generates particular narrative roles and archetypes.

### 3. The hero and the company

While the unique construction of a fantasy character, supported by the specific role of the heroic company in the plot, can be seen as typical of the genre in general, recent decades seem to have brought an additional emphasis on the change of hierarchy within the team – a change which can be related to the growing popularity of the “anotherness” principle. Even though many stories still feature a central

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<sup>3</sup> A classic fantasy role-playing game created by Gary Gygax and David L. Arneson and first published in 1974. It is generally acknowledged as a product giving the start to this type of entertainment.

character who faces the ultimate fight alone, it is possible to observe a turn from the focus on the hero surrounded by sidekicks to a more uniform distribution of particular protagonists' significance in the tale. For example, in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* cycle, based on three main plots and a number of subplots, it is virtually impossible to point the main hero or heroine. This "democracy" is reflected by the division of each novel into chapters whose titles – names of particular characters – tell the reader, which protagonist and thus which thread becomes the focal point of the plot in the given part of the book; e.g. in *A Storm of Swords* the sequence of chapter titles starts as follows: "Jaime," "Catelyn," "Arya," "Tyrion," "Davos," etc. Although some of the most important characters – such as Jon Snow (2005: 661–662, 664–669, 738–754, 873–882, 946–959, 1055–1061, 1091–1097) – are distinguished by their singular heroism, the reader remains aware of Martin's legendary brutal treatment of protagonists, none of whom is protected by their narrative status from a possibility of a quick and not always spectacular death.

While Martin modifies the monomythic pattern through the simultaneous coordination of several plotlines, Neil Gaiman in *Neverwhere*, published in 1996, plays with it by introducing subtle changes into the very model of the protagonist's development. Richard Mayhew, who leads a rather dull existence of a white-collar worker (11–16), passes from the mundane reality of London Above to the magical London Below – a realm of fantastic creatures and human outcasts of various kinds (68–69, 87–88, 112, 127). There, he becomes an initially unwanted member of an awkward rescue mission (119–120, 126–128, 131–133). Wandering through mysterious corridors and enchanted places of London Below, Richard undergoes a process of heroic initiation, concluded the moment he faces and kills the legendary Beast (309–315). This deed grants him the title of the greatest warrior and hunter in London Below (315). Still, rarely can he be seen as a hero without whom the quest is doomed to fail. Even his most prominent act of heroism, namely the killing of the Beast, is performed with a big cooperation of another member of the team – Hunter. Actually, it is the terminally wounded Hunter who summons the Beast, drives it right under Richard's weapon and takes on the impetus of the leaping creature so that all Richard has to do is push the spear and wait (313–314). While he definitely undergoes a heroic initiation – a fact confirmed by his new empowerment in running his life after the return from the strange adventure in London Below (356, 358–359) – he does it without excelling over his companions. Richard does not – at least not explicitly – turn out to be a chosen savior of the magical world, a long-awaited hero who, as the only one, can face the arch-evil, or a long-lost heir of a magical crown. He does not do anything spectacular during the final confrontation with the enemy, apart from hanging, screaming and being tortured (320–321, 325–326). The character most familiar to the reader proves to be barely an "another" for the representatives of the otherworld. Still, he manages to withdraw from the contact with the unknown a crucial personal profit in the form of individual development.

#### 4. The hero and the world

The above analysis of changing relations within the team of characters suggests that the specificity of the fantasy genre makes it possible to preserve the sense of narrative progress and the traditional quest model, simultaneously opening it to a new dimension of transcultural values, based on the coexistence in diversity rather than a victory of a specific quality or culture embodied by the central character.

This transformation of the protagonists' fellowship is often accompanied by a transformation of relations linking the characters with the external environment. The latter change may be explained in terms of an interplay between two contrary attitudes of the literary protagonist toward the world as formulated by Joseph W. Meeker, namely, the "pastoral" vs. the "picaresque" attitude. According to Meeker, the "pastoral" convention is a prescriptive one. It assumes the existence of a model whose practical realization could bring the reality to the level of ideal and ultimate happiness (1980: 100), though usually obstacles on the part of the imperfect human beings prevent the protagonist from achieving this goal and doom him or her to a final disappointment (87). Thus, the "pastoral" viewpoint depicts the world in terms of morally defined polarities of positive and negative values, and places the character above the standards of his or her fellow beings (100–102). While the major difference introduced to this model by the fantasy element is often connected with the fairytale-inspired empowerment to successfully complete the world-saving mission, it does not necessarily challenge other markers of the "pastoral," such as the special status of the protagonist or the good/evil polarization.

The more descriptive "picaresque" convention, according to Meeker, dismisses the polarized thinking by depicting the "world ... [as] a natural system in which mankind is one of the animal species" (87). As Meeker further explains, "within the picaresque world everything is tied to everything else according to complex interdependencies which defy simplification" (88). From the protagonist's perspective the "world is an eco-system and he is but one small organism within it" (88). Instead of totalizing ethical ideals that may encourage the one and only right vision of a perfect reality, a character with the "picaresque" attitude chooses a direct sympathy towards the particular individuals he or she comes across (101). From the viewpoint of the transcultural openness to the diversity of worldviews and interests, the "picaresque" attitude seems definitely more productive. Its equalizing incorporation of the protagonist into the network of relations that link him or her with a multiplicity of other individuals can be seen as a practical realization of Murphy's postulate of "anotherness." It should, however, be noted that Meeker recognizes limitations of the "picaresque" convention in that it virtually excludes the possibility for the protagonist to undertake any mission or follow any ideal which would exceed the basic purpose of a flexible, life-saving adjustment in the conditions created by the reality (103–104).

## 5. Conclusion

The genre of fantasy has found a way to provide the heroic quest motif, traditionally focused on a single character, with a respectful openness to the diversity of the fictional reality's inhabitants. This reconciling tendency may occur on both the micro-scale level of interpersonal relations between the characters, and the more general level of the relation between the protagonists and the surrounding world. As confirmed by works of such writers as Martin, Gaiman, or Sapkowski, the relativization of the good/evil polarity does not need to be followed by a sense of existential void. Similarly, the heroic struggle for a better world does not need to be based on the centralization of one system of values followed by the marginalization of others.

In this essay, I tried to identify the overall transculturally supportive conditions that have been developing within the broadly understood genre of fantasy. Nevertheless, an investigation of such qualities and their practical functioning may prove still more productive and conclusive with reference to particular narratives, especially those which intentionally touch on the issues of inter-racial or inter-cultural relations.

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