EPIC FANTASY IN THE MODERN WORLD

A FEW OBSERVATIONS BY

STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

EPIC FANTASY IN THE MODERN WORLD
A Few Observations
by
Stephen R. Donaldson

Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Libraries, 1986

Occasional Papers
Second Series
No. 2
Editor: Alex Gildzen
Cover: P. Craig Russell
Designers: Alex Gildzen &
P. Craig Russell
Published by
Kent State University Libraries
Don L. Tolliver
Director of Libraries

Never one to think small, I always want to answer the question, "Why?" Unfortunately, that goal is a little too grand to be useful. In this paper, therefore, I want to tackle a more specific **why**.

I have a fairly odd experience in the publishing world. My first book, *Lord Foul's Bane,* has now sold close to 5 million copies around the world. In 1983, I out sold every writer in the world except Wilbur Smith - in New Zealand. I was the best-selling author in Alice Springs, Australia, for six months, and in the U.S. my last "Covenant" novel, *White Gold Wielder,* was on the *N. Y. Times* bestseller list for 26 weeks, selling close to two hundred thousand copies.

I'd really like to know **why**.

My problem is a simple one: I didn't do this on purpose. It was never my intention to become a best-selling author. That was a goal I didn't pursue. My ambitions as a writer have always been intensely "serious" in the aesthetic and literary senses. And so the idea that my books would become popular just never crossed my mind.

The fact is that the kind of goals and purposes I have as a writer are the kind which usually produce books that sell six or eight copies to the author's relatives and then vanish. For that reason, my success seems **de trop** in some way, discontinuous with ordinary reality. Which probably explains the pressure I feel to explain it, find the why of it. Things that you can't explain are more frightening than things you can. Consequently, I have put a lot of thought into the question of what makes the particular books I write popular today.

And the best explanation I can give is that the **why** rests on the **what**. **What** I write is "epic fantasy," and I think it succeeds because it is both "epic" and "fantasy."

First, let's consider "fantasy."

I had the miserable experience in 1980 of doing an author tour. I was on the road for a month flogging *The Wounded Land,* although I felt that really I was the one being flogged. I got to talk to a lot of newspapers, and be interviewed on a lot of radios, and occasionally I got to be on television. What fun. The particular tv show that stands out in my mind was in Portland, Or., and it was what I call a "Mom and Pop" tv show. Two local celebrities, a man and a woman, did a local talk show every morning at 9 o'clock. Very local. Pop was a tall, heavy-set, bald man; Mom was delicate and pregnant. Their pattern day after day was that they would have a guest, they would do a daily feature, and then they would have another guest. This would fill up the hour. I happened to be scheduled to be on the show on a Wednesday, and this proved to be significant.

My fellow guest, a professor from the University of Oregon, was a scientist whose speciality was recombinant DNA - genetic engineering. He went first. He was an earnest and sincere man, and what he wanted to do was discuss all the enormous benefits which are available to humankind through this new science – manufacturing artificial insulin, for example, more cheaply and quickly than the real stuff. Mom and Pop, however, would have none of it. Mom and Pop wanted to discuss the moral implications of redesigning human beings to digest hay like horses.

I was in the audience while this was going on. The professor was a perfectly nice man, and I watched him slowly being reduced to tears. After a while, I became aware that I really wasn't looking forward to my turn on the show.

After the professor came the feature of the day. Because this was Wednesday, the feature was "household hints." Housewives in the Portland area mail in their favorite household hints to Mom and Pop,

and Mom and Pop act the hints out on the air. The best household hint is chosen with an audience applause meter. On this particular Wednesday, since Mom was pregnant, she read the household hint, and Pop acted it out.

To no one's surprise, the winning hint was a cure for sunburn. According to this hint, if you had a bad sunburn you were supposed to cut open a ripe tomato and smear it over the sore area. Gleefully getting into the spirit of the occasion, Pop said, "Well, of course, where I get sunburned is on my head," and promptly smeared tomato over his dome.

Uproarious applause. End of feature.

Then it was my turn.

The director put me down on a couch in an ersatz living room set, and I soon learned that I was to be interviewed by Pop. When he sat on the couch beside me, he still hadn't cleaned off the tomato. Seeds and juice still dripped from his head, and there were seeds stuck to his shirt. Of course, he didn't look at me for a moment. He just sat there with my book in his hand until the red light came on; then he turned to me and said, "So tell me, Mr. Donaldson. What **is** fantasy?"

Well, I thought this was one of those situations where the answer is implicit in the question.

Buddy, **this** is fantasy.

Or, more properly speaking, horror.

Unfortunately, my mother raised me to be nice to old people and cripples, so I tried to give him a serious answer.

Fortunately, I knew what the answer is.

Put simply, fantasy is a form of fiction in which the internal crises

or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external individuals or events. Crudely stated, this means that in fantasy the characters meet themselves - or parts of themselves, their own needs/problems/exigencies - as actors on the stage of the story, and so the internal struggle to deal with those needs/problems/exigencies is played out as an external struggle in the action of the story.

A somewhat oversimplified way to make the same point is by comparing fantasy to realistic, mainstream fiction. In realistic fiction, the characters are expressions of their world, whereas in fantasy the world is an expressions of the characters. Even if you argue that realistic fiction is about the characters, and that the world they live in is just one tool to express them, it remains true that the details which make up their world come from a recognized body of reality – tables, chairs, jobs, stresses which we all acknowledge as being external and real, forceful on their own terms. In fantasy, however, the ultimate justification for all the external details arises from the characters themselves. The characters confer reality on their surroundings.

This is obviously true in "The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant." The villain of the piece, Lord Foul, is a personified evil whose importance hinges explicitly on the fact that he is a part of Thomas Covenant. On some level, Covenant despises himself for his leprosy - so in the fantasy he meets that Despite from the outside; he meets Lord Foul and wrestles with him as an external enemy.

Critics who miss the point of fantasy take a figure like Lord Foul as proof that fantasy is over-simplified escapist fiction. Any personification of evil must over-simplify the nature of evil, if only by suggesting that evil is **out there** rather than **in here**. I argue, however, that in fantasy the entire **out there**, with all its levels and

complexities and dimensions, is an externalization - for dramatic purposes - of what is **in here.**

In any case, my definition of fantasy has the advantage that it accounts for two of the most commonly observed characteristics of fantasy. The first of these is that fantasy contains magic.

In fantasy, the outside is an externalization, a metaphor, of the internal. And magic is perhaps the most fruitful metaphor available to this kind of fiction. In good fantasy, it is an expression of the inner imaginative energy of the characters - an expression of their charisma, their force of personality - an expression of the part of being human that transcends physiology. Writers of fantasy use the metaphor of magic as a means of discussing the ways in which human beings are greater than the sum of their parts.

Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* is a good example. Of course, it is a vampire novel - easy to dismiss from serious literary consideration. Yet the book should be read seriously. It is fantasy, and in fantasy the external world acts out the inner reality of the characters. There is an enormous dramatic power embodied in King's vampire. The sucking away of life to feed a destructive impulse is not gratuitous in the lives of any of his people. Their vulnerability to this kind of abandonment of will and self is part of who they are - part of who we are - and the vampire only acts out that vulnerability for them. Confronting the vampire, each character in the story confronts a part of him/herself. That is the vampire's importance - not that he is supernatural, but that he is transcendent and destructive; and within each of King's characters - and within each of his readers - there lives a small piece of transcendent destructiveness.

The magic is a metaphor which expresses - in this case - the transcendent and destructive side of what it means to be human.

The second most commonly observed characteristic of fantasy is that it tends to appear allegorical.

This is unavoidable. Personification is **the** central communicative tool of allegory, and fantasy deals in personification by dramatizing internal forces and process as external characters and events. It doesn't mean, however, that all fantasy is allegorical. Tolkien argued passionately that *Lord of the Rings* isn't allegorical. Well, his passion is understandable: using the narrative tools of allegory, he was actually writing fiction far more complex than allegory. The essence of allegory is its one-to-one relationship between the metaphor and the meaning. This means that. But in *Lord of the Rings* the importance of Sauron, personified evil, resides in the fact that he is an expression of Frodo. Seduced by power, Frodo spends the novel in the process of **becoming** Sauron - and that is only possible because part of him **was** Sauron to begin with. Perhaps the most profound perception in the entire story is Tolkien's realization that darkness can come from even the most innocent, simplest, cutest characters.

That perception couldn't be dramatized so powerfully without the device of personification. Nevertheless Tolkien's use of personification is never as simple as allegory.

Now. A definition of fantasy brings us back to my first question. Why? Assuming that we've been able to agree on what fantasy is, why do people want to read it?

Recently I attended a couple of lectures that shed some light on the subject. The first was delivered by Professor Hamlin Hill, a Twain scholar, who found occasion during his talk to offer a description of American mainstream fiction by quoting James E. Miller (in *Quests Surd and Absurd).* Miller argued:

> that for the first time in our literature, after World War II, the world that dominated our fiction was sick, hostile, or treacherous, and that the recurring stance of the modern fictional hero reflected some mixture of horror, bewilderment, and sardonic humor - or, to use the popular term, alienation. The common pattern of action which recurred was the pattern of the quest, the quest absurd in a world gone insane or turned opaque and inexplicable, or become meaningless. . . . The nightmare world, alienation and nausea, the quest for identity, and the comic doomsday vision - these are the four elements that characterize recent American fiction.

Of course, this is a broad generalization, and as we all know broad generalizations are false. Nevertheless it contains quite a bit of truth. It describes a lot of what I read. I think of the kindly but ironic way John Cheever undercuts his characters so that they always end up looking a little silly. I think of John Barth's more obvious - and grotesque - black comedies. I think of Nabokov's and Burgess' literary games-playing, in which people only appear to exist so that puns can be made about them. I think of Beckett's assertion that every statement of meaning is a lie. Granted that broad generalizations can be misleading, I still find it accurate to say that the modern American mainstream novel seems dedicated to expressing Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of what it means to be human: "Man is a futile passion."

The other lecture I attended was given by Burne Hogarth, an artist who did the Tarzan comic strip in the forties and went on to become the dean of American illustrators. At his best, he was an erratic speaker: most of what he said was interesting, but few of his sentences bore much obvious relevance to each other. He did manage, however, to toss off one pertinent remark: he said that what makes great art great is that it "projects the artist's ultimate passion against the void."

If we can see "the void" as that which makes "man. . . a futile

passion" - or that which makes human passions futile - then we can easily see why modern fantasy is so popular. Contemporary fantasy writers don't take a mainstream attitude toward the void.

The exception, of course, is the "horror short story." In the horror short story, human beings are always swallowed by the void. And in that sense the horror short story is an example of mainstream fiction, despite the use of supernatural metaphors. Like mainstream fiction, the horror short story expresses, "The nightmare world, alienation and nausea, the quest for identity, and the comic doomsday vision. . . ."

In all the rest of modern fantasy, however, the movement is away from futility. The approach of modern fantasy is to externalize, to personify, to embody the void in order to confront it directly. The characters in fantasy novels actually meet their worst fears; they actually face the things that demean them; they actually walk into the dark. And they find answers.

Apparently, the techniques and resources of fantasy - magic and personification, for example - attract writers who want to challenge the void, defy the notion of futility. Searching as they do for ways to meet their own inner voids, they posit fictional situations which allow them to define answers, allow them to say that, "Man is an effective passion."

Naturally, it follows that the better the writer, the more convincing the answer. No one will ever persuade me that Robert E. Howard was a good writer. The answers which Conan finds to the void are usually effortless and often pointless. If the reply to futility were that easy, no one would bother worrying about it. On the other hand, a writer like Patricia A. McKillip knows what she's writing about, and she makes the reader believe it.

In her *Riddle-Master* trilogy, the protagonist, Morgon, faces an enemy who has the power to take his mind away, to empty him of everything that makes a human being until he is nothing more than a hollow skull - until the void is all that remains of his identity. And this loss of identity is described in such powerful and convincing terms that the reader is hard-pressed not to be terrified. Yet McKillip goes beyond the void to observe that nothing is ever truly empty. In the most profound chasms, the wind still blows. On that oasis, wind becomes a metaphor for Morgon's transcendent and unquenchable spirit: because he can never be truly empty, he can never be truly futile.

"Man is an effective passion."

This, I think, explains much of the popularity of modern fantasy. After reading all those mainstream novels since 1945, we need to hear affirmative things about being human. We're faced with accumulating future and culture shock. Our capacity to destroy ourselves as a race grows stronger. We hardly ever see any evidence that who we are, or what we care about matters to anyone else in the world. Under the circumstances, it's understandable that we've grown tired of being told how futile we are. Reasons for hope would be priceless at any time, but now they have become especially valuable because they are so rare. When we are farthest down in the void is when we most need to be reminded that, "Man is an effective passion."

The other aspect of what I write, of course, is the "epic" side.

As a subject, the epics of literature have been considerably better analysed than fantasy has been. Nevertheless it's important to observe right from the beginning that all epics are fantasy. Certainly all English epics are fantasy, in the sense that they all contain magic,

all present supernatural perceptions of reality. From *Beowulf, The Faerie Queene,* and *Paradise Lost* to *Idylls of the King* and *Lord of the Rings,* the English tradition of the epic is clear.

Well, what makes something "epic?" Length, of course. But nothing in literature is that simple. An epic is not "epic" merely because it is longer than anything else. As Marx observed, "Differences in degree become differences in kind." An epic is "epic" because it deals explicitly with the largest and most important questions of humankind: what is the meaning of life? why are we here? who is God and what is She doing? what is the religious and/or moral order of the universe? In fact, back in the days when epics were more commonly written, their acknowledged purpose was to tackle such questions. The "epic" was the highest form of literature, and was expected to say the highest things.

In effect, epics articulated the best religious and cultural, the best social and psychological self-perceptions of their times: they recorded the way humankind looked at itself.

It's interesting that throughout English literary history no writer has been able to write an enduring "epic" without using the metaphor of magic and the techniques of personification. Apparently, to be "epic" a work must not only be long and profound; it must almost be fantasy.

The reason for this is simple. Throughout English literary history, the writers of "epics" have wanted either to say something transcendent about what it means to be human, or to say something about the nature of transcendence itself. The tools and resources of fantasy were formed for just those subjects.

And in every case this desire to say something transcendent – or to say something about transcendence - involved the writer of the

"epic" in erecting a magical or supernatural superstructure to explain his perceptions of reality/truth/meaning. In every case except one: *Beowulf.* Alone in the history of the "epic," *Beowulf* takes place in the "real," tangible, recognizable world. Not in Heaven, Albion, or Middle Earth. That, in fact, is part of the point of *Beowulf.* Its author(s) want us to see its setting and characters and situations as real, as actually happening. And yet the magic is there - in Grendel, in Beowulf himself - in the capacity to find a redeeming reply to a superhuman evil, a transcendent answer to the void.

The point for us, however, is that in order to express the importance to them of what they were writing about, the creators of the *Beowulf* saga were forced to use the techniques of fantasy. No other use of language, no other communicative tool would convey the **size** of what they wanted to say. The saga had to be magical simply to tell the truth about how the people who put it together felt about it. To be Beowulf himself was considered so large and grand - so transcendent - that he could only be described by metaphors of magic.

The magic wasn't in the world, but in the people.

By the time we get to *The Faerie Queene,* things have changed. In fact, they've become more familiar from our perspective. For the first time, an imaginary world has been introduced, explicitly distinct from the real world in which the reader lives; an imaginary super-structure has been constructed to explain the meaning of life. The Red Crosse Knight and Una populate a landscape that Spenser never intended to be mistaken for the ordinary world. On one level or another, his intent was allegorical. In fact, it was educational: *The Faerie Queene* was written as a kind of religious textbook. Its purpose was to teach the reader the true meaning of Christianity, to

describe the Christian way of life. It examines the quest of a believer on the path to the truth, to an understanding of God and Christ. All the mystical events, the magical knights, the supernal horrors are acting out a religious perception of life, of humankind's relationship to God. Men and women are presented as actors in the fundamental drama of life.

When we reach *Paradise Lost,* the point of the "epic" has changed again. Suddenly, the drama of the story is taking place directly between God and Satan, and humankind is really nothing more than the proximate bone of contention. Adam and Eve are actually rather boring: they eat the apple, and who cares? Only God and Satan, apparently. Milton's enormous and powerful drama hardly engages mere human beings at all; instead, it takes place between purely archetypal forces, essential good and basic evil. In fact, Milton might agree that the same struggle would go on without significant change if humankind had never been invented. In his "epic," being human means a whole lot less than it did in Spenser's. The drama, the magic, the mystery, everything happens on a level we can't touch: our only role is to appreciate what is being done for us so that we can be redeemed.

What I'm getting at is probably obvious by now. The history of the "epic" is a history of the shrinking perception of what it means to be human. Century after century, as we become more sophisticated, and our communicative and technological and societal tools become more complex, our perception of ourselves becomes smaller and smaller. In *Beowulf's* time, people themselves had the capacity for "epic" achievements. By Milton's time, people had become virtually irrelevant to the "epic."

This process reached a literary apotheosis in Tennyson's *Idylls of*

the King. For the first time in the history of the epic, the content of the work became tragic. One way I've heard this expressed is that *Idylls of the King* is an epic about why we can no longer write epics. Put baldly, the view of what it means to be human expressed in *Idylls of the King* has fallen so far below *Beowulf's* perception that epic ideas can no longer function, no longer be taken seriously. *Idylls of the King* is the story of the failure to achieve epic status, epic meaning; and the work's central assertion is, "We don't have that in us any more."

Tennyson's technique is to take a genuine, honest-to-God "epic" character (Arthur) and surround him with normal, believable, real human beings who lie and cheat and love and hate and can't make decisions. So what happens? The normal, believable, real people destroy Arthur's epic dream. His grand vision can't endure in the face of recognized reality, in the face of how people really are. In essence, Tennyson conceived an anti-epic definition of what it means to be human. Perhaps he didn't go as far as, "Man is a futile passion" - but he came close. And this is tragic because what we can't have is so attractive, so beautiful, so desirable. Arthur's world would be infinitely better than our own - we know that because of the hold it has had on our hearts for the last ten centuries or so – but instead of following him we destroy him.

And after that no one wrote epics for quite a while. The kinds of things that an epic could say about what it means to be human weren't **real** enough to sustain a work of literature.

With all this in mind, I think it's easy to see both the importance and the rather odd ambivalence or ambiguity of Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings.* Remember, of course, that he was a *Beowulf* scholar himself: he was attracted to *Beowulf's* epic vision. On the other

hand, like all the rest of us he was a modern human being and could hardly have been blind to his own life, his own culture, his own religious and psychological milieu. Like all the rest of us, he was caught - tragically caught - between his ability to respond to epic perceptions and his inability to achieve them. And out of that conflict he forged a rather staggering achievement.

He restored the epic to English literature. Roughly a century after the epic became an impossible literary form, he made it possible to write epics again.

But - a crucial **but** - he did it by divorcing his work entirely from the real world, by insisting that there is no connection between the metaphors of fantasy and the facts of the modern reality, by rejecting allegory. He claimed that his work was pure fantasy, that it existed solely for itself. And the subtext of that assertion is that it is indeed possible for us to dream about heroism and transcendental love, about grandeur of identity in all its manifestations - *but only if we distinguish absolutely between the epic vision and who we actually are as human beings*. Tolkien restored our right to dream epic dreams - but only if we understand clearly that those dreams have no connection to the reality of who we are and what we do.

This accounts, I think, for the strange blend of beauty and sorrow in *Lord of the Rings*. The story is beautiful, the world is beautiful, the characters are beautiful, the magic and the mystery are beautiful – but they aren't us. And we respond to the story and the world, the characters and the magic and the mystery, because we haven't had things like that in our literature for a long time. At the same time, we can't help grieving, as Tolkien himself grieved. Even his own epic characters weren't able to sustain the vision.

Nevertheless *Lord of the Rings* is a vital step in the right

direction. By making it possible to write epics again, he opened the door for people like me.

Now that the door has been opened, what I want to do is to bring the epic back into contact with the real world. Putting it another way, I want to reclaim the epic vision as part of our sense of who we are, as part of what it means to be human.

For that reason, I chose to focus my epic on one "real" human being, Thomas Covenant, a man who personally exemplifies, as dramatically as possible, "The nightmare world, alienation and nausea, the quest for identity, and the [distinctly un-] comic doomsday vision." He is an "Unbeliever" precisely because I wanted to bridge the gap between reality and fantasy: I wanted to take a fantasy-rejecting modern human being and force him to confront all the implications of an epic vision. Epic vision is powerfully seductive - because it is powerfully human - and I wanted to consider the question of what might happen to a modern man who was seduced by such beauty.

(Clearly, proponents of the modern American novel would argue that seduction by epic vision can only lead to stupid destruction. That, of course, is precisely the attitude Lord FouI takes toward Thomas Covenant.)

Also because I wanted to bring the epic back into contact with the real world, I chose the technical device of reversing Tennyson's method. He took one epic character, Arthur, and surrounded him with "real," "modern" human beings. I took one real, modern human being, Thomas Covenant, and surrounded him with epic characters: the Giants, the Bloodguard, Lord Mhoram, the Ranyhyn, the **jheherrin:** characters or images which don't in any way pertain to our real experience of life, but which **do** pertain to the part of us

which dreams, the part of us which imagines, the part of us which aspires. And in Covenant's case those characters or images **do** seduce him - away from cynicism and bitterness and hatred; toward love, friendship, and loyalty, toward the willingness to risk himself for things larger than he is. If it is the responsibility of every human being to create the meaning of his/her life, then it is Covenant's capacity to respond to fantasy which leads him to create a meaning which is redemptive rather than ruinous.

An internal struggle dramatized as external events.

In "real" terms, of course, the only thing that really happens to Thomas Covenant - at least in the first three books - is that he gets knocked out a few times and wakes up willing to go on living. But for a modern man, a leper, the quintessential exemplar of "The nightmare world, alienation and nausea, the quest for identity, and the [distinctly un-] comic doomsday vision," Covenant's ultimate affirmation of life is not a trivial victory. Despite his own sick, stupid, painful, rejected, alienated existence, he learns to accept his life, affirm his spirit - to acknowledge the value of the things he loves and believes in, the things that seduce him, the epic vision.

To the extent that Covenant's victories are believable in context - to the extent that the readers of "The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant" experience his internal struggle and value the answer he finds to the void - to that extent I've succeeded in making epic fantasy relevant to modern literature, to contemporary perceptions of what it means to be human.

That, I hope, is why the "Covenant" books are popular.