

## **Make-belief and Dis-belief: Operations of Fantasy in Fairy Tales and Nonsense**

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### **Abstract:**

**The paper argues while the fairy tale is defined by the magical and the enchanted, a ‘make-belief’ world, a remaking of a wondrous reality, nonsense is characterized by dis-enchantment and disorder, by a continual playing with reality and breaking it. Starting with an examination of the ‘ground rules’ in the two genres, it analyzes the distinct ways in which the fantastic develops in relation to the real. The different narrative strategies enable the creation of different kinds of ‘secondary worlds in both, giving the two fantasy genres their distinctive effects.**

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The subject of the seminar conference lays down three distinct categories -- dream, imagination and reality. Thinking on their inter-relationships, it appeared to me that dream and reality seemed to be the mutually exclusive opposites, in that a dream would mean anything not existing in reality, ethereal, born of the spirit; and reality is that which excludes anything non-existent, the material and the factual. Imagination here appears to be a bridge category between the two, linking the dream and the real worlds – a spectral presence, which is at once existent and non-existent. It is very much a part of reality and the route to the world of dreams. Coleridge calls it ‘the soul’ and remarks on its singular potential in *Biographia Literaria*, “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; [...] to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.” (Coleridge 1987:161) Imagination is that unique capacity to ‘recreate’, to give birth to things beyond the real, to shape fantastic worlds and marvelous realms out of such stuffs as dreams are made of. Fantasy in literature being born of imagination, is distinct from the mimetic narrative that claims to imitate an external reality. A key distinguishing mark of the fantastic in literature is the creation of a secondary, imaginary world situated outside the borders of the real (Tolkien). The fantastic in literature employs such settings, characters, actions which are not possible under ordinary conditions or, in other words, within the precincts of the ‘real’. Fantasy as a mode, then is essentially defined by its ‘relationality’ to the real, and any fantasy, is created and situated vis-à-vis the real.

Fantasy is at once a state of mind, a genre, a structure, and a technique. In my paper, I consider Fantasy, as a technique, as a narrative device, that is essential and inevitable for the creation of an imaginary world. It is through the many varying relationships that fantasy can have with reality in a text, that we further have several types of fantasies in literature. The paper concentrates on two sub-genres of Fantasy, namely Fairy-tale and Nonsense, to investigate two different versions of the unreal and to illustrate the different strategies of the fantastic employed in the creation and sustenance of the ‘fantasy worlds’ in both. The primary focus of my presentation will be to probe into the various tropes of fantasy that the genres use to situate the reader in the realm of the fantastic.

The paper deals with the traditional fairy tales, tales which circulated in oral, popular cultures from ancient times, bearing elements of supernatural and magic; that were, by the 18<sup>th</sup> C, being abundantly transferred to print. I will be referring to a few of the best-known fairy tales like *Briar Rose*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Nonsense, defines itself as a genre which creates unique aesthetic pleasure by partaking of the impossible and the fantastic, the queer, bizarre and the weird. Apart from the *Alices* by Lewis Carroll, the paper cites

another short nonsensical work, written by Sukumar Ray (a Bengali nonsense-writer of the previous century), translated as *A Topsy-turvy Tale*.

First and foremost, fairy tale and nonsense are distinct in the ways they situate/locate their respective secondary worlds with respect to the real or the primary one. Whereas the fairy tale maintains a parallel secondary space, inviolate and intact in itself, the secondary space in nonsense is given a context in the real and therefore has a contact with it. If we examine the famous fairy tale beginnings of ‘once upon a time’, we realize that they are markers of an imaginary, secondary space, into which we are entering with the author or the teller. For example,

“There was once upon a time a King and a Queen, who were so sorry that they had no children, so sorry that it was beyond expression.” (Opie 1974) Or, “It was the middle of winter, when the broad flakes of snow were falling around, that a certain queen sat working at a window, the frame of which was made of fine black ebony [...]” (Opie 1974) These beginnings also lay down notions of a secondary time, independent of the real, so it does not matter where and exactly when the story is set – such temporal spatial specifications are deliberately shunned in the fairy tale-world. It is, from the beginning to the end, a closed world, a self-contained enchanted world without any contact with the linear time or with the primary world. Magical conversions, “wish-fulfillments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of inanimate objects” (Freud 1990:372) are all made credible within this setting of ‘poetic reality’ of the fairy tale world. Once in this enchanted land, beasts can change into princes, mice into footmen and pumpkins into grand carriages if the law of magic ordains so. The reader is here, inside the secondary world, ‘the Faerie realm, the Perilous realm itself’ with a willing suspension of disbelief, taking and believing to be true what the world of the text. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; and, as Tolkien remarks, the magic or rather the art then fails.

But the situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality, which is where the Nonsense fantasies start. Unlike a fairy tale, Nonsense begins from the armchair world, as in the *Alice in Wonderland*: “Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it.” (Carroll 1990:17) The situation begins to grow ‘contextually marvelous’ as there arises a feeling of disbelief or incredulity at what is apparently happening in the reality of the armchair world, and it involves a consequent dis-orientation of the reader’s categorization of the ‘real’ (Jackson 1981:20). So it happens with Alice,

So she was considering in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!’ (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet [...] (Carroll 1990:17)

or, in Sukumar Ray’s *A Topsy-Turvy Tale*:

It was terribly hot. I lay in the shade of a tree, feeling quite limp. I had put down my handkerchief on the grass: I reached out for it to fan myself, when suddenly it called out ‘Miaouw!’

Here was a pretty puzzle, I looked and found that it wasn’t a handkerchief any longer. It had become a plump ginger cat with bushy whiskers, staring at me in the boldest way. (Ray 1997:32)

This element of disbelief marks the invasion of the primary, armchair world by a secondary, fantastic one. Rosemary Jackson in her treatise on Fantasy, says that such a narrative first asserts that what it is telling is real, using the same conventions of realistic fiction; and then it proceeds to break that

assumption of realism by introducing— what within those terms is manifestly unreal. Eric Rabkin, in his *The Fantastic in Literature*, writes about the ability of art to create its own interior set of ‘ground rules’ that are fundamental to the aesthetic experience (Rabkin 1976:4). Hence, when the boy in *A Topsy-Turvy Tale* finds his handkerchief turned into a cat, his surprised remark ‘Here was a pretty puzzle.’ and his disbelief expressed in “Bother! My handkerchief has turned into a cat.”, tells us, according to the ground rules of the textual world, cats do not change into handkerchiefs and so this signals the fantastic. This is unlike the magical transformations of a fairy tale, where they are made credible by the ground rules of the text.

Secondly, the nature of the imaginary worlds of fairy tale and nonsense are fundamentally different – the fairy tale world is rigid, consistent, ordered and unified whereas, Nonsense is fluid, inconsistent, chaotic and incoherent. The fairy tale, constructed as a parallel to the real world, has to subsume a set of laws as consistently as the real world adheres to its own law and order. These laws, must be invented and set for the imaginary world, by which the new world will begin to take shape and exist, but once created, its laws must forever be obeyed. This world must have an inner consistency of reality. The magic law is omnipotent and holds true everywhere. So, Grimm’s *Briar Rose* or Perrault’s *Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* tells of a princess condemned by a malignant fairy, angered by the omission from her christening, to die at fifteen by pricking her finger with a spindle. The curse is lessened from death to a hundred years’ sleep by another fairy’s good magic. Once the magic is cast, nothing can avert it and so, the inevitable happens and for a hundred years the princess sleeps, with the whole court in deep trance, until, as the magic foretold, the prince arrives and the maiden is roused with a kiss. Similarly in *Beauty and the Beast* we find the father punished because he had plucked a branch full of roses, from the Beast’s garden – either he has to die or one of his daughters has willingly to come and remain with the Beast forever. And Beauty, who trusts, values and comes to love goodness and virtue above ugliness, breaks the magic spell which had transformed a handsome prince into the shape of an ugly beast. Punishments here are as severe as rewards are bountiful. In Perrault’s version of *Sleeping Beauty*, the step-mother’s monstrous cruelty meets with death penalty. All changes and transformations are given a rationale by the consistency of magic, - whether its Cinderella’s story from rags to riches, or the prince materializing from the beast: “[...] said the prince, a wicked fairy had condemned me to remain under that shape till a beautiful virgin should consent to marry me [...]" (Opie 1974) So in all fairy tales it is the law of magic that decides the plot of the story, the punishments and rewards: this enchanted world is finely structured and held together by these magical laws, forever consistent. Nothing, in the tale can over-power it. Tolkien points out a proviso, that though a fairy tale can be cautionary, moralistic, satirical, yet, in a fairy tale, one thing should never be made fun of – that of magic itself.

But in nonsense, there can be no consistencies – its characteristic absurdity lies in its skilled and controlled inconsistent nature. In the kingdom of Nonsense, there is simply no epistemological structure and the cause-effect chain runs crazy. The Alice texts are full of potential violence and mishaps – Alice gets nearly drowned in her pool of tears, she kicks Bill the lizard through the chimney and sends him flying to the garden hedge – but the accidents are never followed by the usual fatal consequences. The White Rabbit fears the Duchess will get him executed and the Queen is always ordering beheadings, but none of these threats are actually carried out. Transformations, though common in nonsense, are not made consistent by any rationale, but, as Alice realizes soon, are absolutely arbitrary. Once in the world of Wonderland, Looking-Glass Land or in that of Topsy-Turvy-dom, things start turning into other things: a handkerchief changes itself into a cat, a baby becomes a pig and the White Queen is transformed into an old sheep. Alice’s sense of her own identity is also diffused shortly after her physical identity becomes arbitrary: ‘What a curious feeling!’ said Alice; ‘I must be shutting up like a telescope.’ And so it was indeed: she was now only ten inches high [...]” (Carroll 1990:22). Penalties and punishments also become typically nonsensical. Court scenes are used both in *Wonderland* and *Topsy-turvy Tale*: complete with a judge, a jury, an accused, witnesses and plaintiffs, but in the ‘sentence first verdict afterwards’ nonsense world, they end in nothing more than a huge cacophony and a pandemonium.

‘What do you know about this business?’ the King said to Alice.

‘Nothing,’ said Alice.

‘Nothing *whatever?*’ persisted the King.

‘Nothing whatever,’ said Alice.

‘That’s very important,’ the King said, turning to the jury. They were just beginning to write this down on their slates, when the White Rabbit interrupted: ‘*Unimportant*, your Majesty means, of course,’ he said in a very respectful tone, but frowning and making faces at him as he spoke.

‘*Unimportant*, of course, I meant,’ the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, ‘important--unimportant-- unimportant--important—’ as if he were trying which word sounded best.

Some of the jury wrote it down ‘important,’ and some ‘unimportant.’ Alice could see this, as she was near enough to look over their slates; ‘but it doesn’t matter a bit,’ she thought to herself (Carroll 1990:107-8).

My third point relates to the different emotional environments in both the genres, the different kinds of emotional involvement and responses of characters and the reader in fairy tales and nonsense. The fairy tale is a sympathetic and an emotional world. Inside it, what it tells us we take as real, and therefore, like in any other realistic text we identify and sympathize with the central protagonists. In *Beauty and the Beast* the text aligns us mentally with Beauty, and also slowly with the Beast, and we share their sorrows and misfortunes and feel happy in their happiness. Emotions, both positive and negative, play crucial roles in fairy tales. Since the characters are mono-dimensional and symbolic, they often stand for or portray a single or a similar group of emotions which become emblematic of their personalities: “The youngest, as she was handsomer, was also better than her sisters...” or, “[...] Cinderella, notwithstanding her poor clothes, was a hundred times handsomer than her sisters, though they wore the most magnificent apparel [...]” (Opie 1974). For in the law of magic, good must win over evil, and this restoration of order and harmony, though helped by magic, is brought about with virtue, and, most importantly with love, so it is in *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast* or *Sleeping Beauty*. As Beauty realizes, “No, Dear Beast, said Beauty, you must not die; live to be my husband from this moment I give you my hand, and swear to be none but yours...the grief I now feel convinces me, that I cannot live without you” (Opie 1974).

Since nonsense is characterized by the incongruous, it naturally shuns anything that is unifying and harmonious. “Emotions, especially the tender kind, are supremely unifying and therefore have no place in nonsense” (Sewell 1952:n.pag). Love, be it of any kind and beauty, are either shunned or distorted to change their effects on the mind. The mind is taught, in a nonsense text, not to sympathize and so, not to respond emotionally. Thus, where the tender feelings disappear altogether, the rougher ones abound, but even those are used in such a way as not to call upon the mind to react sympathetically. For example, the Duchess sings a queer lullaby while nursing her baby (“giving it a violent shake at the end of each line”):

Speak roughly to your little boy,  
And beat him when he sneezes:  
He only does it to annoy,  
Because he knows it teases (Carroll 1990:60).

Though Carroll chooses the Queen of Hearts as one of the principal characters of Wonderland, he shifts the emphasis from “the unifying one of heart to the divisive one of anger”: she is always ordering beheadings. Likewise, Empson remarks in his essay on *Alice* that the Tigerlily is moved to one passion only, that of Fury (Empson 1935:286-7). The Nonsense artist fabricates the situations in such a manner, that the mind is not called upon to react with emotions. Thus, Nonsense eschews the softer emotions and plays against the mind’s tendency to oneness.

The fairy tale world is a beautiful world, so much so that it is common for us to label anything beautiful as coming out of a fairy tale. “Beauty invites the mind of the beholder to some kind of union with the beautiful object. This is a tendency towards fusion...” (Sewell 1952:n.pag) and this is precisely how beauty works in fairy tales. There is Snow-drop, who has a skin as white as snow, cheeks as rosy as blood and hair as black as ebony. Also beautiful is Sleeping Beauty, her chamber of silver and gold, the palace of the Beast, and later the Beast himself. But beauty, being unifying, spells danger for the discordant world of Nonsense. When describing any Nonsense character, frequently,

some distortion or deformity is used in order to shun beauty and to bring in the comic. Roses, endowed with an ancient tradition of love and beauty, needs special treatment in Nonsense, so Carroll presents them in the process of being hurriedly painted by three playing-card people. We need only to compare the Duchess or the Queen of nonsense with those in a fairy tale. Thus where the fairy tale world moves towards union of virtue and beauty, of renewal of life and faith with rebirth or marriage, in the realm of Nonsense, all unifying emotions and all tendencies towards synthesis are taboo: everything to do with beauty, fertility or love is kept at bay.

The last point, with which I conclude my paper, is about the closure of the secondary worlds in fairy tale and nonsense – in the different ways the fantasies end. The structured world of the fairy tale, following its own rules, ends with restoration of harmony and order, with a kind of poetic justice that rounds off and seals this enchanted space – “Immediately the fairy gave a stroke with her wand, and in a moment, all that were in the hall were transported into the prince’s dominions: his subjects served him with joy; he married Beauty, and lived with her many years and their happiness as it was founded on virtue was compleat.” (Opie 1974) And the reader, who had been in a state of willing suspension of disbelief, can now come back to the armchair world, with the characters and the tale itself, remaining intact as a parallel world in an imaginary space. Thus fairy tale uses its traditional formulae to assure the reader that the story has taken place.

For the wonderland of nonsense, however, the ending is significantly different. Since any kind of resolution or restoration is unifying, a resolution is not possible within the precincts of nonsense. Both the *Alices* and the *Topsy-Turvy Tale* dissolve in midst of raucous and the growing pandemonium rises till the world ruptures, like a bubble, and the central character, along with the reader, is once again in the real world. We remember that in the beginning, the nonsense world had apparently taken shape within everyday reality, and so, the text has to come back to it and the nonsense to be made sense of, the irrationality and incoherence to be given a credible space. Dream, that unique ability of human mind to shut out the real or to transform, reshape or to go beyond it, becomes the crucial strategy of nonsense fantasy, the narrative device bridging the imaginary and the armchair worlds:

‘Off with her head!’ the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.  
‘Who cares for you?’ said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) ‘You’re nothing but a pack of cards!’  
At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her: [...]  
‘Wake up, Alice dear!’ said her sister; ‘Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!’ (Carroll 1990:112)

The dream, in fantasy fiction is often seen as a ‘reduced variant’ of a passage from the primary to the secondary world – it questions the validity of the secondary world and suggests the whole story had been an illusion. However, in these classic nonsense texts the dream device is used only at the end, as a come back, at the beginning the ‘fantaseme’ (Nikolajeva) or the contact with the fantastic, and the passage to it, is brought about by the rabbit hole, the looking glass or the handkerchief. And, significantly at the end, after the awakening, the characteristic disbelief of nonsense, the feeling of the incredible, lingers, but now it is directed against the reality that dismisses the fantastic as a ‘silly dream’. The nature of dream and that of reality itself is questioned. *Through the Looking Glass* ends with ‘Who dreamt it?’: ‘Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all [...] it MUST have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course -- but then I was part of his dream, too [...]’ (Carroll 1990:233). And the fantaseme, the handkerchief, disorienting and diffusing the real and the unreal at the end of the *Topsy-turvy Tale*: “I was quite taken aback. Could I have been dreaming? But honestly, when I looked round for my handkerchief, I just couldn’t find it; and there on the wall sat a cat preening its whiskers [...]” (Ray 1997:38). Non-definitive as the world of nonsensical fantasy is, there can be no resolution of the real-unreal even at the end. Where the fairy tale generates a sense of solemn faith and make-belief, parallel to and as serious as the real world itself, nonsense is essentially all about a sense of disbelief which gives this form of fantasy its distinctive signature of the absurd.

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