

'DEATH'S OTHER KINGDOMS': DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN SOME RECENT FANTASIES FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Trites (2000:117) argues that death is a biological imperative that possibly operates even more powerfully on the human mind than sexuality. In this article it will be suggested that coming to terms with the inevitability of mortality is a key maturational task, but that popular young adult fantasies dealing with immortal vampires or decaying zombies usually offer little or no support to adolescents struggling to deal with this issue. By contrast, it will be suggested that novels such as those in Terry Pratchett's *Johnny Maxwell* series, JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series and Philip Pullman's *His dark materials* trilogy provide adolescent readers with safe spaces in which to explore not only the threat of death, but a range of social and religious approaches to the problem. In this way, young readers may be encouraged to accept themselves, in Heidegger's (1962 [1927]:304–307) terms, as 'Being-towards-death' and eventually even be empowered by such an acknowledgement.

KEYWORDS

death, zombies, young adult fantasy, C.S. Lewis, Terry Pratchett, Johnny Maxwell, Ursula Le Guin, *Earthsea*, Philip Pullman

1 INTRODUCTION

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long

(T.S. Eliot, 'The hollow men', ll. 72–82)

When T.S. Eliot (1969:85) writes of the omnipresent shadow at the end of 'The hollow men', he voices a quintessentially human dilemma. How is it possible to construct or find meaning in lives perpetually haunted by the shadow of death? The question is so important and so closely linked to processes of maturation that, as Eliade (1963:159) observes, initiation rites across almost all cultures generally involve 'a triple revelation: the revelation of the sacred, death, and sexuality'. Trites (2000:117), however, privileges death even further by arguing that it is a biological imperative that possibly operates even more powerfully on the human mind than sexuality when she says:

... for, although in theory some individuals can live asexually, no one avoids death. Moreover humans have created numerous institutions surrounding the biological reality of death to help them control its power: most religions, for example, have institutional investments in explaining death to people. For many adolescents, trying to understand death is as much of a rite of passage as experiencing sexuality is.

In this article it will be accepted that coming to terms with the inevitability of mortality is a key maturational task. It will also be suggested that popular young adult fantasies dealing with immortal vampires or decaying zombies usually offer little or no support to adolescents struggling to deal with this crucial issue. By contrast, it will be argued that the complex and sometimes unsettling novels making up Terry Pratchett's *Johnny Maxwell* series, JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series and Philip Pullman's *His dark materials* trilogy may actually provide adolescent readers with safe spaces in which to explore the dangers of failing to come to terms with what Heidegger (1962 [1927]:304–307) has termed the necessity of learning to accept oneself as 'Being-towards-death'.

2 THE LOSS OF PARADISE

The broken line against Eliot's right hand margin, 'For Thine is the Kingdom' is, of course, indicative of the traditional Christian panacea for the crisis of mortality, the suggestion that through grace, the soul may live on forever in Paradise. However, the line's liminal and fragmentary presence is equally suggestive of the poet's awareness that in an increasingly rational and secularised western world, traditional conceptions of the afterlife have indubitably had their authority undermined. The reasons for this are

multiple and too complex to be unpacked in an article of this nature, except to say that key factors probably include a dominant material culture, more widespread acceptance of postmodern concepts of cultural relativism and even direct attacks on conventional religion by popular science writers such as Richard Dawkins (1986).

What is undeniable is that the way the subject of death has been treated in fantasy novels for older children since the middle of the twentieth century reflects a general waning of confidence in standard religious rebuttals of its power. At the end of *The last battle*, the final volume of C.S. Lewis’s (1995 [1956]:171) *Chronicles of Narnia*, for instance, Aslan, the leonine Christ figure, is still able to welcome the children to his true country by neatly translating received Christian dogma into an instantly comforting idiom readily accessible to every schoolchild:

‘There *was* a real railway accident,’ said Aslan softly. ‘Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended. This is the morning.’

The vision of the ‘real Narnia’ as it exists in Aslan’s country mingles aspects of traditional Christian theology with Platonic idealism to affirm that death is not an encounter with danger but rather the ‘beginning of the real story’ (Lewis 1995 [1956]:172), a return home to the place of ultimate safety after a long exile. As the unicorn says:

I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this (Lewis 1995 [1956]:161).

Yet, even in this exultant vision of life eternal, ‘as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream’ (Lewis 1995 [1956]:160), the Lord Digory, the eldest of the party, sounds a note of warning as he stresses the gulf between his understanding of events and that of his young companions: ‘It’s all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me what *do* they teach them at these schools!’ (Lewis 1995 [1956]:160).

The growing estrangement from both Christian and classical attitudes to death and the afterlife that C.S. Lewis identifies has since become steadily more marked to the point where, as Ariès (1981:613) observes, we have created a materialistic society that attempts to behave ‘as if death did not exist’. This certainly seems to be the case in some contemporary popular fantasies, in which physical immortality has come to be presented as the ultimate accessory. In Derek Landy’s (2007:55, 62) *Skullduggery pleasant*, for instance, the eponymous hero, a witty skeleton drives a ‘1954 Bentley R-type Continental, one of only 208 ever made’ while evasively claiming to be only ‘technically’ not alive. Similarly, in Stephenie Meyer’s (2008:5) *Breaking dawn*, after becoming engaged to Edward Cullen, her quite literally glittering vampire boyfriend, Bella acquires the promise of immortality along with a new car and a ‘shiny black credit card that [feels] red-hot in [her] back pocket’.

3 THE ALLURE OF THE CORPSE

According to Bataille (1986), however, the drive to exclude the horrifying possibility of death simultaneously creates a need or desire to confront it. In this way, the obverse of the desirable, powerful and wealthy Cullen vampires can be found in the repulsive zombie hordes so prevalent in contemporary popular film, television and fiction. There has in recent years, been a quite astonishing proliferation of young adult books and films focused on the grotesque possibility of a zombie apocalypse; a recent search for zombie books on kindle, for instance, generated an astonishing 2 225 titles. This trend becomes more understandable when one remembers Moretti's (2005:83–84) claim that 'the literature of terror is born precisely out of the terror of a split society, and out of the desire to heal it' and that literary monsters function 'to displace the antagonisms and horrors evidenced *within* society *outside* society itself'. Thus, as Kristeva (1982:3–4) observes, the corpse, whether animate or not, does not simply signify death but instead 'all that is thrust aside in order to live'.

The shambling undead crowding against the fragile palisades constructed to protect the living in so many young adult novels rarely seem to have any individual identity, leading Moreman and Rushton (2011:21), for instance, to see zombies as indicative of an 'ideological preoccupation with capitalism' and an awareness of 'a society split between the capitalist and the worker, bourgeois and proletariat'. Such an interpretation is certainly supported by a close reading of Lily Herne's (2012) *Mall rats* series, for instance, in which disturbing parallels are drawn between life in the zombie-besieged enclaves and life in the privileged security villages that seem to have become such an essential part of the current South African urban landscape. This is made quite explicit when one of the characters, Megan, observes, 'Father's always saying that South Africa must be one of the best countries in the world for surviving a zombie apocalypse ... It's full of security estates and high fences' (Herne 2012:173).

Yet, while such socio-political readings of zombie novels are indubitably persuasive, I would argue that seeing zombie tales entirely as metaphors for social dispossession and marginalisation is to ignore the psychic division caused by what Ariès (1981:2) describes as the 'interdict laid upon death' in the twentieth century. If one accepts Trites's (2000:118) argument that death is the 'sine qua non of adolescent literature, the defining feature that separates it from both children's and adult literature', then it would be a mistake not to consider that the excision of death and the dead from the rituals of daily life may be a factor powering the fascinated horror that draws readers to works of zombie fiction. In these, corpses may be seen as escaping not only from their graves but from the repressed depths of the unconscious to become rampaging emblems of hunger, poised to destroy not merely individual life but all the comforts and institutions of a shared material culture.

At the end of Herne's (2011) *Deadlands*, for instance, the central character, Lele, discovers that her skin intriguingly hides a network of silvery fibres that allow her to

heal extremely quickly and which suggest that she may no longer be entirely mortal. Earlier in the novel, however, she finds herself surrounded by an undifferentiated mass of reanimated corpses. She describes the experience in a way that foregrounds the disgust most contemporary readers would be likely to feel at the notion of physical corruption which strips away not only speech, clothing, and even flesh but ultimately individuality itself:

I’d stumbled right into the middle of a mass of Rotters who were shambling along the top of the embankment. There were literally hundreds of them ... Several of them were nothing more than loosely-knitted-together skeletons, and I could see the ropey white tendrils of spaghetti stuff snaking around their bare bones (Herne 2011:134).

Lele’s disgust corresponds to what Kristeva (1982) defines as ‘abjection’, the almost visceral response we all feel when forced to acknowledge the improper or unclean aspects of corporeal existence, which are normally repressed by social taboos surrounding the handling of food, waste, signs of sexual difference, disease and death. In this way, as Bronfen (1992:x) suggests, representations of death and the dead operating as loci of fear and horror actually promote repression of ‘the knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs *at* someone else’s body and *as* an image’ (original emphasis).

A young adult novel which first exploits and then questions this ‘Othering’ of death and the dead is Pratchett’s (1994) *Johnny and the dead*, which opens in a cemetery. Initially, at least, Johnny’s friends seem to have no idea of death beyond what they have been able to glean from pop music and horror videos:

‘I bet,’ said Wobbler, looking around, ‘I bet ... I bet you wouldn’t dare knock on one of those doors. I bet you’d hear dead people lurchin’ about inside.’

‘Why do they lurch?’

Wobbler thought about this.

‘They always lurch,’ he said. ‘Dunno why. I’ve seen them in videos. And they can push their way through walls.’

‘Why?’ said Johnny.

‘Why what?’

‘Why push their way through walls? I mean ... living people can’t do that. Why should dead people do it?’

...

‘Don’t know,’ he said. ‘They’re usually very angry about something.’

‘Being dead you mean?’

‘Probably,’ said Wobbler. ‘It can’t be much of a life’ (Pratchett 1994:11–12).

For Wobbler, as the passage humorously indicates, the dead clearly have absolutely no connection to the living. Johnny initially attempts to resist Wobbler’s denial of mortality by drawing on his own admittedly limited contact with death to argue that the only thing his dead great-grandmother might have pushed her way through walls for would have

been ‘a television that she could watch without having to fight fifteen other old ladies for the remote control’ (Pratchett 1994:12). Nevertheless, when Alderman Thomas Bowler unexpectedly answers Johnny’s playful knock on the door of his mausoleum, popular culture in the form of Michael Jackson provides the only context within which Johnny is able to try to make sense of the event.

‘You’re no good at dancing, are you?’ he said.
‘I used to be able to waltz quite well,’ said the Alderman.
‘I meant ... sort of ... like this,’ said Johnny. He gave the best impression he could remember of Michael Jackson dancing. ‘Sort of with your feet,’ he said apologetically.
‘That looks grand,’ said Alderman Thomas Bowler.
‘Yes, and you have to have a glittery glove on one hand – ‘
‘That’s important, is it?’
‘Yes, and you have to say “Ow!”’
‘I should think anyone would, dancing like that,’ said the Alderman.
‘No, I mean like “Oooowwwweeeeah”, with ...’
Johnny stopped. He realized that he was getting a bit carried away (Pratchett 1994:18).

This realisation marks the beginning of a complex process of maturation for Johnny. As his conversations with the dead continue, he gradually begins to move beyond the crude stereotypes of a video-bound youth culture. After looking at a picture of 30 men, almost all of whom died in the battle of the Somme, he rounds fiercely on Wobbler for joking about them in a way that reduces them to horror film stereotypes:

‘Necropolis!’ said Wobbler, zooming his hands through the air. ‘By day, mild-mannered corpse – by night ... duh duh duhduh DAH ... ZombieMan!’
Johnny remembered the grinning young faces, not much older than Wobbler.
‘Wobbler,’ he said, ‘If you make another joke like that –’
‘What?’
‘... well ... just don’t. Right? I mean it’ (Pratchett 1994:65).

Ironically, just as Johnny begins to feel safe among the dead, seeing them as people like himself, so in a beautiful double movement, do the dead begin to free themselves from the psychological fetters binding them both to their previous physical existence and to their confinement in the cemetery where they have been buried. Thus, just as Johnny begins to see the dead as people like himself, so do the dead begin to free themselves from the self-made preconceptions linking them to their former lives.

‘I spent half my life being frightened of dying, and now I’m dead I’m going to stop being frightened,’ said the Alderman. *‘Besides ... I’m remembering things ...’*
There was a murmur from the rest of the dead ...
‘I think ve all are,’ said Solomon Einstein. *‘All the zings we forgot when we were alive.’*
‘That’s the trouble with life,’ said the Alderman. *‘It takes up your whole time. I mean I won’t say it wasn’t fun. Bits of it. Quite a lot of it, really. In its own way. But it wasn’t what you’d call living ...’*

‘We don’t have to be frightened of the morning,’ said Mr Vicenti. *‘We don’t have to be frightened of anything’* (Pratchett 1994:157 (italics original).

The dead eventually take flight in vehicles ranging from the ‘spirit of a dead Ford Capri’ (Pratchett 1994:180) to something that looks ‘partly like an electronic circuit diagram ... and partly like Mathematics would look if it was solid’ (Pratchett 1994:179–180). Their choices thus emphasise an individuality denied to most of their zombie counterparts.

As they depart, Johnny asks the Alderman if there are angels or devils involved in the afterlife. The Alderman replies wryly that that sort of thing is only for the living (Pratchett 1994:178). This cleverly allows Pratchett (1994:176) to remind his readers that supposedly comforting constructions of the afterlife may actually be dangerously limiting in that they encourage both the living and the dead to define the latter as ‘Other’ or, in ghostly Mrs Liberty’s words, by what ‘we’re not, without any Consideration of what we might *be*’. Pratchett’s conclusion thus requires readers to do more than simply enjoy the vicarious thrill inherent in blurring or violating the boundary between life and death. Instead, he leads them to understand that, as James (2009:20) observes, ‘representations of the “undead” (those who are technically dead but still animate) ... point to deep-seated cultural anxieties regarding death and difference’.

4 LEARNING TO COME TO TERMS WITH ONE’S OWN MORTALITY

Pratchett’s revelation that entrapment within socially accepted conventions of the afterlife may actually be more dangerous than death itself is also expressed in the young adult novels of Rowling, Le Guin and Pullman, all of whom question traditional conceptions of the survival of the self after death. In Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, for instance, Harry’s dark antagonist, Lord Voldemort, has a name that encapsulates ‘*mort*’ or death and he and his followers, the appropriately named Death Eaters, are prepared to go to any lengths to achieve physical immortality. The division between these dark wizards and their arch-opponent, Dumbledore, is sharply emphasised in a dramatic confrontation at the end of *Harry Potter and the order of the phoenix* in which Dumbledore directly contradicts Voldemort’s conviction that death is both abhorrent and avoidable:

‘There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!’ snarled Voldemort.

‘You are quite wrong,’ said Dumbledore, still closing in on Voldemort ... ‘Indeed your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness’ (Rowling 2003:718).

Certainly, Voldemort’s egotistical drive for self-preservation leaves him unable to love or even to understand a force so antithetical to that which drives his own desires. Harry’s mother’s love is thus able to save her infant son from destruction and, at the conclusion

of *Harry Potter and the order of the phoenix*, it is Harry's love for his godfather Sirius that enables him to drive Voldemort's invading presence from his mind. Rowling also regularly hints that death is not a final conclusion. Harry's protective 'patronus' is a silver stag, the animal incarnation used by his dead father and when Sirius dies, he disappears behind a billowing curtain hanging in an ancient archway. Significantly, we are told that faint whispering, murmuring noises can be heard 'coming from the other side of the veil' (Rowling 2003:683).

The gulf between the living and the dead in the series nevertheless remains unbridgeable. Apart from Voldemort and his Death Eaters, the only other characters to resist death in the series are the Hogwarts ghosts. Yet, as soon as they are allowed to be anything other than comic side-effects, the inadequacy of their reduced existence becomes heartbreakingly clear. When Harry asks the Gryffindor ghost, Nearly Headless Nick, why there are relatively few of his kind, the answer is suggestive and melancholy:

'I was afraid of death,' said Nick softly, 'I chose to remain behind. I sometimes wonder whether I oughtn't to have ... well, that is neither here nor there ... in fact, I am neither here nor there ...' He gave a small sad chuckle. 'I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead' (Rowling 2003:759).

Both Pratchett and Rowling thus imply that certain forms of the afterlife may be self-chosen and potentially more dangerous than trusting to the unknown. The idea is both reassuring in that it suggests that human beings may actually be creative collaborators in their own death experiences, but also disturbing in that it raises the possibility that instinctive fears may lead individuals to make unwise and potentially restrictive choices. Similar possibilities are also intriguingly explored in fantasies by Le Guin and Pullman, both of whom appear to present the drive to ensure the survival of the self after death in unequivocally negative terms.

The first three books of Le Guin's *Earthsea* series were published between 1967 and 1972. In the last of these, *Ged, Archmage of Earthsea*, pursues Cob, a renegade magician who has found a way to peddle a dubious form of immortality. His activities have rent the fabric of the world because, by seeking to destroy death, Cob denies change, which is essential for true life. The human desire for immortality, as exemplified by Cob, creates a dry kingdom not unlike Eliot's *Waste Land* (1969:59–80) as the following extract shows:

The country of the innumerable dead was empty. No tree or thorn or blade of grass grew in the stony earth under the unsetting stars ...

'I am thirsty,' Arren said, and his companion answered, 'Here they drink dust' (Le Guin 1993:457–458).

Ged and Arren, who is to become king, must find and confront Cob to save their world and all within it. In doing so, they have to face and come to terms with their own fear of

mortality, that which Ged describes as: “‘The traitor, the self, the self that cries *I want to live, let the world rot so long as I can live!* The little traitor soul in us, in the dark, like the spider in the box. He talks to all of us’” (Le Guin 1993:422).

Arren is strongly tempted by Cob’s bargain with death but learns to resist it by listening to Ged, who says simply that to refuse death is to refuse life and all that is best and most distinctive in our humanity:

‘I know that they will die ... That I will die. That you will die.’

The hard grip still held Arren.

‘And I prize that knowledge. It is a great gift. It is the gift of selfhood. For only that is ours which we are willing to lose. That selfhood, our torment and glory, our humanity, does not endure. It changes and it goes, a wave on the sea. Would you have the sea grow still and the tides cease to save one wave, to save yourself? Would you give up the craft of your hands, and the passion of your heart, and the hunger of your mind to buy safety?’ (Le Guin 1993:410–411).

At the end of *The farthest shore*, Ged again affirms his belief in the creative tension between life and death by sacrificing all his power to close the door Cob has opened, a door through which ‘was neither light nor dark, neither life nor death. It was nothing. It was a way that led nowhere’ (Le Guin 1993:465).

The story seems to have been concluded and Earthsea safely healed. However, in *The other wind*, Le Guin (2003) reveals that the land of the dead, into which Cob once opened his door, is itself the maimed creation of the human fear of mortality. Azver, the Patterner, explains to Arren, now known as King Lebannen, that the ancients of Earthsea envied the dragons their ability to fly outside time where the self might be forever and that they used their arts of naming to lay ‘a great net of spells upon all the western lands, so that when the people of the islands die, they ... come to the west beyond the west and live there in the spirit forever’ (Le Guin 2003:27–28). The consequences of this fearful negation are disastrous:

‘But as the wall was built and the spell laid, the wind ceased to blow, within the wall. The sea withdrew. The springs ceased to run. The mountains of sunrise became the mountains of the night. Those that died came to a dark land, a dry land.’

‘I have walked in that land,’ Lebannen said, low and unwillingly. ‘I do not fear death, but I fear it’ (Le Guin 2003:228).

Lebannen’s words echo the earlier observation by Seppel, the Pelnish wizard, that Alder, the mender who dreams nightly of the imprisoned dead, is simply responding to the ‘the desire of the dead to die’ (Le Guin 2003:167). Certainly, when the wall around the world of the dead is eventually breached, the grey hosts of the dead crowd forward and are gone: ‘a wisp of dust, a breath that shone an instant in the ever-brightening light’

(Le Guin 2003:239). In the Patterner's words, "What was built is broken. What was broken is made whole" (Le Guin 2003:240).

Le Guin (2002:87–88), who readily admits the influence of Taoism on her work, suggests strongly that death is followed by rebirth endorsing the view of the Kargad characters and of many Eastern faiths that when we die we return in a new body:

The lamp that guttered out flickering up again in the same instant elsewhere, in a woman's womb or the tiny egg of a minnow or a windborne seed of grass, coming back to be, forgetful of the old life, fresh for the new, life after life eternally.

Pullman resists the temptation of even this serial immortality. Lyra and Will, the central characters in the award-winning *His dark materials* trilogy, choose in the last volume, *The amber spyglass* (2001) to cross the dark water into the land of the dead in pursuit of Lyra's friend, Roger. Interestingly, they cannot make the crossing without abandoning their essential humanity, which, in Lyra's case at least, takes the form of an externalised soul or daemon, Pantalaimon. They discover there a realm as bare of change and growth as any described in *Earthsea*. It is filled with dispossessed wraiths who cram 'forward, light and lifeless, to warm themselves at the flowing blood and strong-beating hearts of the two travellers' (Pullman 2001:311). Lyra, in a symbolic reworking of the Christian harrowing of hell, then decides to lead the dead into the upper world, but significantly promises them no liberation beyond that inherent in dissolution:

'This is what will happen,' she said, 'and it's true, perfectly true. When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your daemons did. If you've seen people dying, you know what that looks like. But your daemons en't just *nothing* now; they're part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they've gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all living things. They'll never vanish. They're just part of everything' (Pullman 2001:335).

This is indeed what happens; yet, as the following extract shows, Pullman (2001:382) presents death not as a source of terror, but as a natural and joyous return to the constituent elements of life itself:

The first ghost to leave the world of the dead was Roger. He took a step forward and turned to look back at Lyra, and laughed in surprise as he found himself turning into the night, the starlight, the air ... and then he was gone, leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness that Will was reminded of the bubbles in a glass of champagne.

Pullman has been attacked for demolishing the Judeo-Christian structures of belief that have traditionally shaped western attitudes to life and the afterlife and thus potentially stripping his young adult readers of vitally necessary comfort and protection. Yet, Lyra's insistence on the *truth* of what she tells the dead may indicate that Pullman feels that many of his readers are already unconvinced by traditional cultural paradigms. Similarly, the joy with which Roger melts into the universe suggests that Pullman's eco-

friendly presentation of death as a simple reabsorption of life into itself may be quite as empowering as more conventional images of spiritual immortality.

5 CONCLUSION

It is thus evident that while Pratchett, Rowling, Le Guin and Pullman may explore paradigms of death, they also continuously affirm life and the power of human love. In doing so, they all challenge strong contemporary social pressures on writers for the young either to repress knowledge of the existence of death effectively, or to continue to propagate the glorification of stasis inherent in traditional religious views of the afterlife. Instead of fearing mutability or thrilling to violent encounters with comfortably ‘Othered’ representations of the dead, their characters invert traditional attitudes by embracing change as essential to life. By doing so they perhaps point the way to Ariès’s (1981:614) ideal world in which the individual can approach death as yet one more ‘biological transition, without significance, without pain or suffering, and ultimately without fear’.

By reading some of the works I have mentioned, I firmly believe that the questing adolescent may find that he or she enters a safe imaginative space in which it becomes possible to confront and control the fear of death that like Lebannen/Arren’s stone of pain lies always over the heart even when or, perhaps, especially when, repressed. As the young king himself describes it, ‘... it seemed to him now that the memory of that land, the darkness of it, the dust, was always in his mind just under the bright various play and movement of the days, although he always looked away from it’ (Le Guin 2002:79).

If the top-down structures of myth are no longer accessible to many adolescents growing up in a secular society then it would seem logical to hope that the bottom-up structures of romance and folktale, the means by which the creature rather than the creator has traditionally told his or her story may offer a viable alternative. For, as JRR Tolkien (1964:60) reminds readers, at the heart of these forms lies the *eucaastrophe*:

The sudden joyous ‘turn’... A sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

It is this search for joy that Le Guin (1979:199) too believes ultimately defines the human condition: ‘We’re here to enjoy ourselves, which means that we are practicing the most essentially human of all undertakings, the search for joy. Not the pursuit of pleasure – any hamster can do that – but the search for joy.’ Ironically, however, the revelation contained in all these fantasies suggests that the joy Le Guin believes that we

all seek is inseparable from the pain of mortality that Eliot (1969:201) hints at in *Four quartets*:

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth ('East Coker', III, ll. 31–33).

Trites (2000:119) claims that death in adolescent literature is the ultimate threat but that acceptance and awareness of this 'serve in the power/knowledge dynamic to render the adolescent both powerless in her fear of death and empowered by acknowledging its power'. Certainly, it seems that young adult fantasies like the ones discussed in this article often deliberately require their readers to confront the pain of mortality in order to reach such an enabling catharsis.

Le Guin (1979:25) claims that 'there have been great societies that didn't use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories'. Neither this view of stories nor the argument of this article is meant to endorse didacticism in the sense of proposing that stories for young readers should lay down prescriptive guidelines. Rather both suggest that narrative may be used to open up a ludic space in which questions of mortality and morality may be explored from a number of perspectives. This is made possible because, as Chambers (2010:275) observes, books 'propose meanings and possibilities, reasons and motives, better rather than worse ways of living, whether their authors mean them to or not'.

This understanding of fantasy's moral or spiritual dimension may point to a possible explanation of its popularity with contemporary teenagers living in cultures in which the young no longer undergo a period of withdrawal and ritual preparation for adulthood, but are generally left to negotiate a series of informal rites of passage, such as their first sexual encounter or first experience of bereavement, quite unaided. In this context it is also worth noting Crago's (1999:181) observation that in pre-literate cultures narrative seems to have various functions including 'preserving accumulated knowledge, articulating meaning, offering cathartic release and pleasure, and promoting "healing" in the broad sense of reassurance as to each listener's place in the scheme of things'. In much the same way, Eliade (1958) suggests that myths and fairy tales, which seem to have been the progenitors of modern fantasy, give symbolic expression to initiation rites designed to guide the young through their dangerous rebirth into adulthood. In an increasingly secular and materialistic world, creative support of this kind seems particularly vital if adolescents needing to come to terms with Being-towards-death are not to lose themselves in Eliot's dry cellar, finding there only dim apertures that, like Cob's fissure in the universe, ultimately lead nowhere.

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