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Moral Uncertainty and Contemporary Children’s Fantasy Fiction

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English At Massey University, Albany Campus, New Zealand.

Anne Lochead
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Abstract

This thesis studies the interplay between mythos (story) and ethos (ethical character) in contemporary children’s fantasy fiction. In recent decades, this relationship has been complicated by two contradictory, but related, ethical tendencies. Postmodernism characteristically resists unitary accounts of morality, celebrating pluralism. Within the last twenty years, however, there has been a groundswell of interest in rethinking ethics and retrieving values from endemic moral uncertainty, often referred to as an ethical turn. This thesis contends that children’s fantasy fiction has evolved into a literature that creatively engages with this contradiction, simultaneously refusing moral certainties and demanding unflinching ethical values.

This evolution is explored by comparing a selection of children’s fantasy fiction published from 1995 to 2012 with earlier exponents of this genre as well as other literary texts. The analysis is conducted through a framework of expanding ethical horizons, starting with a focus on personal contexts and then progressing to the social, political, and ideological. The thesis employs an inter-textual method. Ethical concepts are teased out by bringing literary texts into dialogue with each other and exploring links between them. Ideas from critical theory are then used to extend the trajectory of the ethical themes suggested by the fictions. Through this method, themes and texts are woven into an ethical narrative about children’s fantasy.

This thesis approaches storytelling as a portal into the imagination where writers, readers and protagonists actively forge moral meaning. Traditionally, stories rich in symbol not only entertained their audiences, but also encapsulated their societies’ moral values. When society is presented metaphorically, familiar assumptions are estranged, enabling readers to see the world anew and imaginatively reconstruct their worldviews. In recent children’s fantasies, both child protagonists and child readers are required to be moral thinkers. This demonstrates a shift, not only in how ethical dilemmas are contended with today, but, by addressing children as ethical subjects, in how much moral agency is attributed to children.

Children’s fantasy is a rich and layered genre particularly suited to engaging with contemporary ethical dilemmas and uncertainties. This thesis affirms its role in exploring ethical meaning and action and transmitting positive values in a climate of moral uncertainty. Emerging from this fiction, and incongruous to both postmodern consumerist society and postmodern suspicion of categorical moral imperatives, is an ethics of self-transcendent love.
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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT...................................................................................................................................................... III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS................................................................................................................................. V
TABLE OF CONTENTS .................................................................................................................................... VI

INTRODUCTION: MYTHOS MEETS ETHOS, THE ETHICAL CHARACTER OF FANTASY ..........1

CHAPTER I POSTMODERN UNCERTAINTIES AND NARRATIVE OTHER WORLDS..............8

The “Incredible Realities” of our Time ........................................................................................................ 11
A Comedy of Carnivals; a Tragedy of Tricksters .................................................................................... 15
A Moral Life of Continuous Uncertainty .............................................................................................. 19
Accounts of Good and Evil ...................................................................................................................... 21
Narrative: A Portal to Another World .................................................................................................... 25
In the Beginning, Once Upon a Time .................................................................................................... 25
The “Great Secret Space” Between the Pages ...................................................................................... 27
Near and Far: Creating Personal Meaning from a Distant Text ........................................................... 31
Metaphors and Meanings: Morality and Fantasy Fiction ................................................................... 35
Metaphors and Meanings: Understanding the Universe by Reading the Signs .................................. 35
Lies, Truth and Fantasy Tales: the Genre of the Unreal ................................................................... 37
“The great instrument of moral good” .................................................................................................... 41

CHAPTER II SHADOWS ON THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL: THE HAUNTING OF HAMLET TO THE HORCRUXES OF HARRY POTTER ...............48

The Shadow of the Past .......................................................................................................................... 49
A Moral Compass ..................................................................................................................................... 54
Sin to Psychopathology: the Problem of Evil ......................................................................................... 57
The Shadow of the Self ............................................................................................................................ 63
The Double .................................................................................................................................................. 67
The Shadow of Death ............................................................................................................................. 73
Narratives of Death .................................................................................................................................. 74
The Subterranean Labyrinth and the Valley of the Shadow of Death .................................................. 77
The Deathly Hallows of Desire ............................................................................................................... 79
“On the edge of the precipice”: Materialism, Meaninglessness and Madness ........................................ 81

CHAPTER III BEYOND THE MARGINS WHERE MORALITY MEETS THE MONSTROUS OTHER ..........86

Amoral Actors or Morally Developing Agents? .................................................................................... 88
Monstrous Scars ....................................................................................................................................... 88
Amoral Innocence to Morally Responsible Experience ....................................................................... 89
Memory Erasure: the Forgotten Story of the Past .................................................................................. 93
Moral Agents or Amoral Actors? ............................................................................................................ 97
Offering Introductions to Monsters ........................................................................................................ 103
Dangerous Encounters With Evil Monstrosities .................................................................................. 103
Defacing and Facing the Faceless, Voiceless, Nameless Monster .......................................................... 106
The Mirror of Identification .................................................................................................................... 110
A Monster in the Mirror: Benevolence, Malevolence and Moral Judgements ....................................... 112
Oneself as Alien Other ........................................................................................................................... 116
Crossing the Margin to the Other’s Side .................................................................................................. 117
Transcending the Monster in the Mirror: The Inside/ Outside Barrier Shattered ................................. 121

CHAPTER IV DREAMS OF A BETTER WORLD: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS AN ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY ................................................................................................................................. 125

“Evil Begets Evil”: A Personal Response to Injustice .......................................................................... 126
“Am I a Monster, or a Victim Myself?” .................................................................................................. 126
The Social Outcast and his Pound of Flesh ........................................................................................... 135
Building a Better World: A Political Response to Injustice ................................................................. 141
Dreams and Nightmares: Utopias and Dystopias ............................................................................... 141
Beyond The Imaginary and Symbolic: An Ethics of The Real in Fantasy ........................................ 146
Untangling the Personal and the Political ............................................................................................. 146
Desire, Death and a Dreamquake: Transcending the Personal and Political ......................................... 151

POSTMODERN UNCERTAINTIES AND NARRATIVE OTHER WORLDS

BEYOND THE MARGINS WHERE MORALITY MEETS THE MONSTROUS OTHER

DREAMS OF A BETTER WORLD: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS AN ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT...................................................................................................................................................... III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS................................................................................................................................. V
TABLE OF CONTENTS .................................................................................................................................... VI

INTRODUCTION: MYTHOS MEETS ETHOS, THE ETHICAL CHARACTER OF FANTASY ..........1

CHAPTER I POSTMODERN UNCERTAINTIES AND NARRATIVE OTHER WORLDS..............8

The “Incredible Realities” of our Time ........................................................................................................ 11
A Comedy of Carnivals; a Tragedy of Tricksters .................................................................................... 15
A Moral Life of Continuous Uncertainty .............................................................................................. 19
Accounts of Good and Evil ...................................................................................................................... 21
Narrative: A Portal to Another World .................................................................................................... 25
In the Beginning, Once Upon a Time .................................................................................................... 25
The “Great Secret Space” Between the Pages ...................................................................................... 27
Near and Far: Creating Personal Meaning from a Distant Text ........................................................... 31
Metaphors and Meanings: Morality and Fantasy Fiction ................................................................... 35
Metaphors and Meanings: Understanding the Universe by Reading the Signs .................................. 35
Lies, Truth and Fantasy Tales: the Genre of the Unreal ................................................................... 37
“The great instrument of moral good” .................................................................................................... 41

CHAPTER II SHADOWS ON THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL: THE HAUNTING OF HAMLET TO THE HORCRUXES OF HARRY POTTER ...............48

The Shadow of the Past .......................................................................................................................... 49
A Moral Compass ..................................................................................................................................... 54
Sin to Psychopathology: the Problem of Evil ......................................................................................... 57
The Shadow of the Self ............................................................................................................................ 63
The Double .................................................................................................................................................. 67
The Shadow of Death ............................................................................................................................. 73
Narratives of Death .................................................................................................................................. 74
The Subterranean Labyrinth and the Valley of the Shadow of Death .................................................. 77
The Deathly Hallows of Desire ............................................................................................................... 79
“On the edge of the precipice”: Materialism, Meaninglessness and Madness ........................................ 81

CHAPTER III BEYOND THE MARGINS WHERE MORALITY MEETS THE MONSTROUS OTHER ..........86

Amoral Actors or Morally Developing Agents? .................................................................................... 88
Monstrous Scars ....................................................................................................................................... 88
Amoral Innocence to Morally Responsible Experience ....................................................................... 89
Memory Erasure: the Forgotten Story of the Past .................................................................................. 93
Moral Agents or Amoral Actors? ............................................................................................................ 97
Offering Introductions to Monsters ........................................................................................................ 103
Dangerous Encounters With Evil Monstrosities .................................................................................. 103
Defacing and Facing the Faceless, Voiceless, Nameless Monster .......................................................... 106
The Mirror of Identification .................................................................................................................... 110
A Monster in the Mirror: Benevolence, Malevolence and Moral Judgements ....................................... 112
Oneself as Alien Other ........................................................................................................................... 116
Crossing the Margin to the Other’s Side .................................................................................................. 117
Transcending the Monster in the Mirror: The Inside/ Outside Barrier Shattered ................................. 121

CHAPTER IV DREAMS OF A BETTER WORLD: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS AN ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY ................................................................................................................................. 125

“Evil Begets Evil”: A Personal Response to Injustice .......................................................................... 126
“Am I a Monster, or a Victim Myself?” .................................................................................................. 126
The Social Outcast and his Pound of Flesh ........................................................................................... 135
Building a Better World: A Political Response to Injustice ................................................................. 141
Dreams and Nightmares: Utopias and Dystopias ............................................................................... 141
Beyond The Imaginary and Symbolic: An Ethics of The Real in Fantasy ........................................ 146
Untangling the Personal and the Political ............................................................................................. 146
Desire, Death and a Dreamquake: Transcending the Personal and Political ......................................... 151

- vi -
CHAPTER V WHEN THE STARS THREW DOWN THEIR SPEARS: GRAND NARRATIVES AND WAR IN HEAVEN .............................................................................................................................. 158

“Subtle Magic”: Enchanted Words and Deadly Serious Ideas .......................................................... 160
Epic Narratives in the Service of Ideology: Milton, Lewis and Pullman ........................................... 162
Worldviews in Conflict: The Kingdom, the Fall and the Devil ........................................................ 164
Kingdom or Republic of Heaven?: Authority and Tyranny ............................................................. 164
Eating Fateful Fruit: Sin and the Fall ................................................................................................ 171
The Angel of the Enlightenment: Romanticising the devil ................................................................ 182
The Ethical Hearts of Lucy and Lyra ............................................................................................... 190
The Importance of Not Being Too Earnest ...................................................................................... 196
Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time .................................................................................. 202

CHAPTER VI NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE CAPABILITIES: ETHICS OF UNCERTAINTY ..... 205
A Compass, A Knife and a Spyglass: Finding Moral Direction ........................................................ 205
The Paradox of Negative Capability ............................................................................................... 209
Enchantments and Disenchantments: The Uncertainty of Truth .................................................. 210
The Seed of Light: Tentative Certainty in the Dark ........................................................................ 216
Rewriting Narratives: Desire, Death and Redemption ..................................................................... 220

The Precipice of Moral Uncertainty .............................................................................................. 227
The Pool as a Portal to the Other World of Imagination ............................................................... 229
The End of the Story: A Paradox in a Pond .................................................................................... 232

ILLUSTRATION “DRAGON IN THE TEXT” ............................................................................... 236
ILLUSTRATION “ONCE UPON A TIME” .................................................................................. 237
WORKS CITED .............................................................................................................................. 238