Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# *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

2013

# *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.

# *Acknowledgements*

With thanks to my supervisor, Joe Grixti, and my co-supervisor, Jenny Lawn, for their encouragement, support and intellectual and academic guidance. Their considerable experience has been invaluable in helping me to channel my enthusiasm and transform my rough-hewn ideas into a crafted argument, reining me back or spurring me on as needed. I value their wisdom, generosity and sincerity and appreciate their understanding that life is much larger than a thesis.

I am deeply grateful for the support of my family. My husband, Wayne, has consistently encouraged me and helped me emotionally through sometimes turbulent times. He now knows far more about children's fantasy fiction and ethics than he previously felt any need to know. Elise, Hamish and Anton have shown remarkable tolerance towards a mother who was often working on the computer instead of being as attentive as they would have liked and have generously stepped into the gap of domestic chores when needed.

I am also very appreciative of friends who have patiently listened to me, shown enthusiasm for my topic and empathised with my struggles. Thank you. I particularly want to thank Graham Smith for carefully reading through several sections, challenging my assumptions, pointing out inconsistencies and providing sharp, astute and considered feedback.

I want to acknowledge the huge debt that I owe to my parents, Mel and Nancy Lochead, who have both died since I began working on this thesis. My mother in particular nurtured within me the attributes that made this thesis possible by introducing me to stories as a young child, and by sharing with me her love for literature and language, her passion for ideas and her conviction that living a moral life is of utmost importance. Without those values gnawing away at me this thesis would never have been written.

Finally, I am very grateful to Massey University for awarding me a Doctoral Scholarship and also to the North Shore branch of the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women for their generous scholarship.

# *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

**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*

**CONCLUSION: *THE PRECIPICE, THE POND AND THE PARADOX*..... 226**

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