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The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same, A Critical Investigation into

Contemporary Fantasy Literature

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Abstract

Fantasy literature has a long and storied history, but since the publication of works like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) the genre has enjoyed a steady growth in the last sixty years, and has spawned both numerous subgenres and a multitude of writers. This thesis is an investigation into the first published work of three contemporary authors chosen as representatives of three distinct forms of fantasy. Patrick Rothfuss' text *The Name of the Wind* (2007*)*, Peter V. Brett's *The Painted Man* (2008), and Joe Abercrombie's *The Blade Itself* (2006) will be utilized in a critical investigation into the position fantasy literature currently finds itself in, and to see how contemporary authors attempt truly original creativity. The ultimate belief acting as the motivation for this inquiry is that fantasy literature is the key to revitalizing the human imagination.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Introduction

The primary aim of this critical investigation is to examine how contemporary authors of the fantastic have constructed their narratives in order to most successfully create a complete and believable fantasy world. The motivation for this aim is to elucidate the craftsmanship and literary prowess, as well as imaginative force, required to build a convincing alternate world. For the duration of this investigation when titles or authors are referred to as 'contemporary' this will mean that their works have been published since the year 2000.

When one brings to mind fantasy, it is usually the series novel that is the first image conjured and while fantasy may be seen to cover a broad spectrum, the series is probably closest to being its' dominant form. Major theorists in the field agreed that "fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science-fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 1), but this definition is still rather ambiguous as far as an investigative inquiry would be concerned. It was proposed by Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) that fantasy be viewed as a group of texts that all share, to some degree or other, a knot of common tropes which might be objects but which may also be narrative techniques. This proposition has been built upon in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Mendlesohn, 2008) which proposes that there are essentially four categories within the fantastic; "the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive and the liminal," all of which are determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrative world. The portal-quest invites the reader through into the fantastic; in the case of the intrusive, the fantastic enters into the fictional world; in the liminal fantasy, the magic element dances in our peripheral vision, and in the immersive fantasy there is no way out.

It is with these generalised categories of fantasy in mind as a basic means of situating the forthcoming titles that this critical investigation shall proceed, applying these theories to

contemporary titles in the fantasy genre where appropriate. Each of the three titles being

used for this inquiry will be analysed in order to determine where they are situated in regards

to the four proposed categories within the fantasy genre, and what this means for the

construction of the narrative, while also locating any attempts made by the authors to break

with structural modes in the name of originality. There will be passing references to

established titles such as *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), which will serve to highlight how

archetypal tropes within the genre have previously been incorporated into the narrative in

order to successfully discover how new works have deviated from the theoretical schema's

for fantastical storytelling.

This critical work will be divided into three chapters, one chapter per contemporary

author, and followed by the conclusion. The primary methodology of this investigation is to

be close reading and comparison of texts with regards to their structure, categorization,

incorporation of tropes and narrative technique. Each chapter will analyse one of three

chosen contemporary authors and, where necessary, will also briefly discuss established titles

within a context of comparing narrative techniques, use of genre-specific tropes, and

underlying thematic concerns. The three contemporary authors who will have their works

under investigation in order to achieve the goals of this analytical work are Patrick Rothfuss,

Peter V. Brett, and Joe Abercrombie.

The first chapter will discuss *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss (2007),

which is the first in a trilogy called *The King Killer Chronicles*. This chapter will focus on

Rothfuss' storytelling technique, the reasons he may have for making certain stylistic choices,

and the emphasis on encouraging curiosity and the search for a wide knowledge. This

chapter will discuss how *The Name of The Wind*'s narrative style qualifies the title for the

category of the portal-quest fantasy, as well as the means by which Rothfuss establishes the

authority of the narrative voice. One important aspect of Rothfuss' narrative which will be

discussed in detail is his continuing of the storytelling tradition known as 'the club narrative' and the significant role this technique plays in solidifying the purity of the tale.

The second chapter will discuss *The Painted Man* by Peter V. Brett (2008) which is the first book in the quintet known as *The Demon-Cycle*. The series is based in a world where demons, also known as *Corelings,* rise from the earth's core every night to feast upon humanity. The narrative is divided among three core characters; Arlen, Leesha and Rojer, and follows these characters as they come of age in a world where people live in constant fear, their only means of protection being symbols, known as wards, which can be drawn, painted or etched to create protective barriers around human settlements. This chapter will discuss the narrative technique incorporated by Brett in the creation of his fantasy world, how the influence of western culture with regards to gender stereotyping might be interpreted in the text, and the danger of compromising the purity of the tale. The purity of a tale is that particular tale's level of believability, and this chapter will highlight how a tale's believability might become eroded at the discovery of a hidden meaning within a text, discovered through deviation from archetypes and structures typical of the genre. While deviation can create original, or at least new, works, it can also cause a text to collapse in upon itself if poorly executed.

The third chapter will discuss Joe Abercrombie's *The Blade Itself* (2006), the first title in *The First Law* trilogy. Written in a witty and fast paced style with memorable dialogue and efficient descriptions of action scenes, these characters may begin as simple archetypes, but they quickly gain greater depth as each has their own individual voice and way of looking at the world, and what this means for the assertion of the fantasy worlds' existence. This chapter will also discuss the effect of the authors' narrative technique, contrasting perspectives, and use of irony in presenting this world to the reader.

This investigation will analyze how the narrative has been structured and portrayed in the works of the chosen contemporary authors. However, the use of language is also of importance as the choices made by the author in his or her use of language when constructing a fantasy have a dramatic impact on not only the tone, but the form of story being told. It is also of vital importance that fantasy literature be regarded as universally open, and not merely relegated to children and young adults. Tolkien famously denied that fairy stories should be restricted to children; "indeed, it demeans the fairy story to think that it needs a child, with credulity based on a lack of experience, before the marvels of a fairy story can be appreciated" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 65), and he went on to argue that works of imaginative creation, fantasies, can express very real and equally as important truths. Truths that were deemed worthy of an adult audience in the Middle-Ages, and should still be today. For Tolkien, there were four essential elements to a fairy story; Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. What Tolkien meant by Recovery was "a cleansing of our eyes so that we may see our world more clearly" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 66), and by Consolation he meant "the consolation of the Happy Ending." The purpose to investigating how fantasy literature is structured today, is to see how contemporary fantasy writers attempt, in a variety of ways, to reinstate the potential of the human imagination. There are writers who chose to continue traditional modes of storytelling, there are writers who seek to reinvent modes of storytelling, and there are those who wish to create something new. This investigation will discover how the world has affected the realm of fantasy and how contemporary fantasy literature might allow people to imagine something new, and to better understand the environment we live in; "When a fiction offers us a world whose values basically agree with our own, we feel no pressure to review our assumptions about reality" (Hume, 1984, p. 84), but if an author succeeds in enticing the reader to explore and enjoy representations of

differences, despite any apparent strangeness, then we can compare this new reality with our own.

Chapter 1

The Authority on Storytelling in *The Name of the Wind*

The Name of the Wind (2007) begins at a point of security and stability before events beyond the immediate control of the protagonist call him forth on a journey to restore order to his life and avenge his family, which is essentially a trope in itself, that being the quest, would seem to take precedence over the realm of existence in which the fictional/fantastical world is deemed to be situated in its creation. While *The Name of the Wind* does not begin with the quest narrative structure in the timeline in which the reader is introduced to the fictional world, it does in the alternate timeline, where the story is being narrated by Kvothe himself. First, there is the issue of the introductory timeline, which begins with a prologue. It is within this timeline that another trope, the story teller, is utilized in what is known as the club narrative, "a cozy discourse which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and that profoundly shaped the portal quest fantasy" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 5) of the later twentieth century. It is this definition, that of the club narrative, that fits best and the use of language, particularly descriptive passages carefully constructed, give credence to Freud's view of the creative writer, whom he viewed as "acting no differently than the child at play: he creates a fantasy world, which he takes very seriously; that is to say, he invests large amounts of emotion in it, while marking it off sharply from reality" (Freud, 1919, p. 26). What this unreality means for the artistic technique, is that there are many things which could grant no enjoyment in reality, but can do so in the realm of fantasy.

At this point it is important to remember that fantasy, unlike science fiction, depends upon a moral universe; it is more a lecture on the way things should be, a belief that the powers of the cosmos should yield in the face of moral precepts, rather than an argument

with said universe. Mendlesohn (2008) views the club narrative as one of the most significant taproots, in regards to the reinforcement of fantasy's moral and rhetorical structure, and this structure is defined as twofold; "there is a tale told, and encompassing that a frame which introduces the teller of the tale. . . At all levels of sophistication, the club story form enforces our understanding that *a tale has been told*", the story made is recounted as though it happened in the past. It is clearly evident from the story-telling structure of *The Name of the Wind*, with the introduction to Kvothe in the prologue and subsequent chapters until the point where he agrees to recount his tale to The Chronicler that this title does indeed fall under the category of the club narrative, and so into the category of the portal quest while, like *The Lord of the Rings,* taking place in a secondary world. In the context of the club story, the story-teller possesses two qualities no matter his or her designation; he or she is irrefutable and uninterruptable, making the narrative, as it is absorbed, essentially closed.

The opening of the book, the prologue entitled *A Silence of Three Parts*, fittingly serves to start the process of establishing Kvothe as an indisputable figure of authority in regards to the story being told, and of course the club story narrative; "The Waystone Inn was his, just as the third silence was his. This was appropriate, as it was the greatest silence of the three, wrapping the others inside itself. It is deep and wide as autumn's ending. It was heavy as a great river smooth stone" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 1). This is alerting the reader that not only are they entering a tense environment in a fictional world, but they are entering Kvothe's environment, not only the world he calls home but *his* Inn, *his* silence, the greatest silence, the sheer vastness of which implies that the reader tread carefully in such an awesome presence. Kvothe "saw a thousand stars glittering in the deep velvet of a night with no moon. He knew them all, their stories and their names" (p. 10) "At the same time his eyes grew cold, and hard, and angry" (p. 44), "This is the face of a man who has killed an angel" (p. 46), and the effect of these descriptions is that they establish Kvothe as an authoritative force.

There is purpose to this, aside from developing an imposing character for the purposes of plot, it is also a necessity when writing in this form of closed narrative. The club story has been viewed as an imperialist writing style asserting a particular kind of "Victorian masculinity" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 6), a private setting unperturbed by domestic needs or even self-care as there are usually servants in the club (Bast), and this is combined with a "stature signalled by the single-voiced and impervious authority," in this case Kvothe. The relevance of this authority is connected to the fact that most modern portal-quest narratives can be seen to be hierarchical; some characters are presented as having greater authority than others and is often encoded in the choice to use direct or indirect speech, and other such speech patterns. This is especially evident in Kvothe's beginning his education at the University, when characters such as Master Hemme are introduced, often speaking over "steepled-fingers" (p. 231) and described as taking "delight in student's discomfort and did everything he could to badger and unsettle them" (p. 233).

This authority also maintains what is known as the "unquestionable purity" of the tale, the ability not only to hold the floor, but to convince. Either the entirety of the story is accepted, or the story is entirely vulnerable, and so in order to accomplish this the narrative voice must successfully establish itself as the sole source of truth. The approach taken by Rothfuss in order to establish the unequivocal voice is to emphasize the importance of not only hearing the story, but of the very telling of the story itself. There are numerous examples of where the particular use of descriptive language causes the text to feel heavy, close, and suffocating, and this is predominantly to be found in the first timeline, where Kvothe narrates his life story; "Kote himself seemed rather sickly. . . Like a plant that has been moved to the wrong sort of soil and, lacking something vital, has begun to wilt" (p. 20), and it is this descriptive language that alludes to the potency of the tale's events. It might be argued that the same prologue that serves to introduce the reader to the imposing presence of

the protagonist also serves to highlight this same underlying tone of deadening, not only

through the description of the three-part silence, but with the last line; "it was the patient, cut-

flower sound of a man waiting to die" (p. 01). This is reminiscent of a terminally ill patient,

it conjures images of eroding sickness, something eating away at the individual's being.

There are various other instances where similar use of language can be found, such as; "Kote

sat in front of the fire and ate his meal mechanically. . . After the last bite he sat staring into

nothing, not remembering what he had eaten or what it tasted like" (p. 30).

It becomes apparent that the act of not remembering is significant. In a discussion on

the creative writer and fantasy in *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud wrote that "fantasy, which has

its origin in present experience and the recollection of the past" (Freud, 1919, p. 29), and it is

Kvothe's refusal to acknowledge the past, that is causing his decay. However, this use of

language is also sprinkled with explosive bursts of a physical, almost manic description of

Kvothe; "all the scars were smooth and silver, streaking him like lightening" (p. 30), "his

smile widened, showing too many teeth for a friendly innkeepers smile." (p. 44), and all are

constructed with the intent of asserting the position of supreme narrative authority and

solidifying a basis of "unquestionable truth." The accumulation of detail is the primary

method of conviction incorporated into this particular form of fantasy narrative, and it is

through such descriptive devices that the story is given weight before it has been told. The

scarred body is evidence of past adventure, the protagonist's listlessness in a self-imposed

claustrophobic environment of non-remembrance, his eventual assertion that his is "the only

story worth telling" (p. 53), and the allusions to the need for secrecy, for he is renowned

master arcanist "Kvothe the Bloodless," serve to forge the private club of narrator, reader,

and the two fictional club members Bast and Chronicler, to whom the story is being told.

What this means for the narrative itself, is that while the reader enters the frame story

through the perspective of the third-person and so the tale within the frame story transports

the reader to a position drifting between first-person and omniscient narrative perspective. Therefore the narrative mode mediates between the reader and Kvothe, but the omniscient narrative voice is compromised as it can tell the reader only what Kvothe knows, allowing one to see into his mind but not, as in the first-person, inside his head. There is another consequence to the narrative form utilized by Rothfuss, and that is the narration of memory also affects the description of action as it is response that is of interest, as opposed to action. The action has to be 'seen' by the protagonist and the protagonist's view is limited in that he cannot perceive 'his' on physical body and movements. One example might be seen as Kvothe is telling of how he lost his lute to a gang of city children; "Before I could move or think, Pike grabbed me again. He bludgeoned me up against the wall once, twice. My head whipsawed back and forth, caroming off the wall. Then he grabbed me by the throat, spun me around, and threw me to the ground" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 135). This shows that a particularly use of language is crucial in this form in order to stabilize events for the reader, otherwise it would be virtually impossible to interpret feeling and expression. Similarly in describing the aftermath of the encounter, Kvothe's extremely broad and in depth home education grants him sufficient medical knowledge to assess damage inflicted upon his "invisible" body; "I had several painful ribs, although I couldn't tell if they were broken or the cartilage was torn. I was dizzy and nauseous when I moved my head too quickly, probably a concussion. My nose was broken and I had more bruises than I could conveniently count. I was also hungry" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 138).

There is also relevance to the choice in presentation of such descriptive passages, by saying that he had "more bruises than [Kvothe] could conveniently count" insinuates that the bruises could be counted, that they are not so overwhelming as to be beyond calculation as might be expected of an individual who has undergone a severe beating. This raises an interesting point in view of Kvothe as a constructed character. First consider Freud's

statement on the hero in fantasy literature; "a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the author seeks to win our sympathy by every possible means, and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special providence" (Freud, 1919, p. 30). Here Freud had been speaking in reference to character, protagonist or otherwise, as a constructed ego in the narrative, making reference to a phrase coined by German writer Ludwig Anzengruber; "Nothing can happen to you". Many authors, in an attempt to avoid using narrative devices like prophecy or providence, which essentially say "this is the story you are about to read," instead incorporate the use of narrative devices like coincidence. *The Name of the Wind* could be seen to operate under this basis. For example, Kvothe is able to analyse not only his own medical condition, but also that of other people, as the encounter with Trapis can highlight; "*Insufficient circulation*, a long-unused part of me thought. *Increased risk of infection and considerable discomfort. Feet and legs should be raised, massaged, and swabbed in a warm infusion of willow-bark, camphor, and arrow-root.*" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 141) It could be said that it is fortunate for Kvothe that he had such a broad and extensive home-education, and this accruement of knowledge becomes increasingly important as the novel progresses.

This leads back to another significant aspect of fantasy, that of its dependence on a moral universe, and its stance as lecturer as opposed to debater. *Strategies of Fantasy* discusses how "Plot can divert the audience from mere curiosity into a consideration of values" (Attebery, 1992, p. 52), and this is where there could be conflict as the structure of the club narrative might be seen to become ideological. While this in itself is a broad term and opens a veritable Pandora's Box of identifications, representations, and consequences for the narrative as a pure tale. Roland Barthes condemned a contemporary culture in which "the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it" (Barthes, 1967, p. 2), a statement which could be seen as consistent with Freud's view of the hero as ego.

As already stated, the accruement of knowledge on a broad scale covering various disciplines is not only close to being the core motivation behind Kvothe's journey, or personal quest, but is highlighted throughout the novel as being key to self-preservation, making it "a matter of life or death." This is coupled, practically from the beginning of the tale, with a suggestion towards liberal freedoms, with passages like; "My parents were never really married, by which I mean they never bothered making their relationship official with any church. I'm not embarrassed by the fact. They considered themselves married and didn't see much point in announcing it to any government or God. I respect that. In truth, they seemed more content and faithful than many officially married couples I have seen since" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 54), not only are the words "In truth" used as a tool to convince, but even the conversational tone serves to enforce it, further situating the reader into the position of listener. Being born of parents who were talented musicians and actors, and also head of a troupe of nomadic performers, Kvothe spends his early childhood in an everyday fairground. Surrounded by individuals of various skills in the realms of music, literature, theatre, and survivalist skills, before being introduced to Abenthy who promptly trains him in the various sciences required of arcanists. This places education in the frame of perpetual play, Kvothe's father would recite monologues and "encourage [Kvothe] to try particularly good sections [himself], and [he] learned to love the feel of good words" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 55) and similarly he would compose songs with his mother, serving to emphasize the benefits to a child growing in an environment rife with creativity and freedom from many social restraints.

This importance placed on the varied education could be seen as most highlighted in passages such as Kvothe's isolation after the massacre of his troupe; "My mind covered the fresh pain with the names of a hundred fruits and berries, fur ways to light a fire, nine snares made from nothing but a sapling and string, and where to find fresh water" (Rothfuss, 2007,

p. 125). The trauma induced by discovering the slaughtered troupe causes Kvothe's mind to conceal the images with memories of past lessons that are relevant to his current state of life threatening distress, being isolated in unknown land at the age of 12, and those lessons were given to him years before by a woodsman called Laclith. Perhaps the most potent example could be seen in Kvothe's application to the University, which entails a gauntlet of interview style questions being asked by the head arcanist in each field of 'science.' The significance of having a curious mind "with quick questions and eager to learn" (p. 55) could almost too easily be seen as a reflection on the author's own beliefs, having spent nine years as an undergraduate exploring various majors including Chemical Engineering and Clinical Psychology, among others.

The issue of gender, representations and roles, in the fantasy genre will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter in the discussion on Peter V. Brett's *The Painted Man*. While such creative decisions as having Kvothe born into a nomadic troupe might seem to be merely aesthetic in the implementation, but it also places impetus on the process of isolation in the aftermath of the troupe being wiped out. As previously discussed, one of the key characteristics of the portal-quest is the transition from a familiar environment into an unknown one, as part of a small nomadic group it could be said that both everywhere and nowhere are unfamiliar environments to Kvothe. The familiar position merely existed within the confines of the family unit, rather than a geographical location, and so the depth and reach of Kvothe's are amplified. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and his companions return to their home in the Shire after their quest has been concluded, but what is important is that there was a space to which they could return. Kvothe can remember what it was like to exist within this structure, he could buy a cart or wagon and begin his own troupe, but it would not be a return, it would instead be a new beginning. The use of a nomadic cultural aspect to the core family unit is relatively original, but the calling forth of the hero by an

external force is still present as it is due to Kvothe's father's quest for knowledge that summons the Chandrian, who then massacres the troupe, which in turn motivates Kvothe to seek out knowledge to find and defeat them.

The interview passage also contains a single question which brings to light another trait of many fantasy works; "Master Lorren's expression remained unchanged, but he nodded. 'Who was the greatest man alive?'' (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 231), this question underlines the absence of female presence in this particular world. The panel of masters are typical of the archetypal patriarchal hierarchy, while the University contains female students, there are no significant female authority figures. The attention to detail that this story, and the characters contained therein, may be constructed with little deviation from the archetypal club narrative, of which C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) could be seen as an example, and the engine may be the incorporation of a personal quest for enlightenment and vengeance, which in themselves are also not exactly original, but Rothfuss' technique presents the reader with this world through curious eyes. As Kvothe himself is driven by an insatiable curiosity since childhood, so too *The Name of the Wind* seeks to unleash from the reader a sense of this same curiosity. The allusions to an adventurous past and the protagonists decay through repression of his past deeds are the kindling used to set ablaze a curiosity that will fuel the reader's desire to follow Kvothe to his tale's conclusion.

Chapter 2

The Folly of Masked Intentions in *The Painted Man*

The Painted Man (2008) - also known as *The Warded Man* - is another example of the portal-quest fantasy, and introduces the reader to its world through the coming-of-age of three young individuals – Arlen, Leesha, and Rojer. While it may share the portal-quest categorization with *The Name of the Wind*, author of *The Painted Man*, Peter V. Brett, adopted the narrative approach typical of this type of fantasy, that which positions the reader as companion-audience. This means that the reader is tied to these three characters and dependant on them for explanation, the third-person omniscient narrative style representing the listener as though they were present at the telling of a tale. It is sufficient to say that despite the narrative's beginning in the wake of a Coreling attack, (Coreling being the name for various kinds of demon which rise from the earth's core at nightfall to prey on humans), it retains the structure of introduction through a realm of stability, as the reader is introduced to a small country village which is inhabited by the protagonist. The transition to the unknown is instigated by Arlen's realization that the world he knows may be on the brink of destruction, (in a process of Thinning) as the Corelings erode the human population, this knowledge, coupled with the events surrounding his mother's death, drive him into the world for the first time, on a quest for the long lost fighting wards, the only hope the human race has to defeat the demons.

There are two significant points which should be borne in mind about this particular category and its common adoption of the third-person omniscient narrative. Firstly, there are almost always two identifiable narrators – the narrator of the microcosm (the world within a world) commonly known as the point of view character; and the narrator of the macrocosm,

he/she who 'stories' the world for the reader - and making sense of the world through the downloaded histories often found in this form of fantasy, or in the pieces of prophecy that are dribbled through the text. This means that the narrative progresses under a 'what s/he sees we see' basis, the world is spread out in front of the reader through the eyes of the protagonist, and through his/her analysis of any given scene. Secondly, as earlier discussed, the concept of moral expectation – fantasy's reliance on a moral universe – means that some critics have come to view this mode of fantasy as also being in "denial of what history *is*" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 14), similarly to the club narrative, in the average portal-quest fantasy history is 'the past' and therefore inarguable. This is the point at which the structure of the narrative risks becoming ideological, as the portal-quest is usually seen to reconstruct history in the form of the scholastics. This in itself should not appear overly shocking, as the Tolkien-esque template for the fantasy world is the Middle-Ages, and scholasticism was the method of critical thought which dominated teaching by the academics of medieval universities throughout Europe. While this may be viewed as a consequence of culture, specifically western Christian culture, the result can be seen in examples like the works of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

Tolkien referred to his own fantasy as "a profoundly Catholic work" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 68), but the "specifically Christian was supressed, so also were the old gods," while *The Lord of the Rings* may be full of subtle references (such as the Elvish bread *leambas*, and its intention to recall the Eucharist), but *Middle-Earth* is itself surprisingly un-religious. Lewis, however, has been viewed far more critically. Tolkien's reaction to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, "It really won't do!" possibly alluding to what he perceived as haphazard word-building. Philip Pullman, author of *His Dark Materials*, also slammed Lewis, "Those of us who detest the supernaturalism, the reactionary sneering, the misogyny, the racism, and the sheer dishonesty of his narrative method will still be arguing

against him," (Pullman, 1998), but the aspect of Lewis' narrative which Pullman found most galling, was his treatment of Susan's transition from a child to a young woman, a concept at the core of Pullman's trilogy, and indeed the Fall itself. If the works of Tolkien and Lewis were ever to copulate the hypothetical result could very likely be *The Painted Man* - like *Middle-Earth,* Brett's world is not particularly religious, with the exception of occasional priest-like figures usually found in more rural settlements, and like Lewis' narrative, there is an equivalent to what has become known as "the Susan problem" (Mendlesohn & James, A Short History of Fantasy, 2009). This problem revolves around the exclusion of Susan from sharing the fate of her entire family (dying in a train crash and going to *Narnian* Heaven), left behind because she denies the existence of *Narnia* and has become entranced by the pleasures of the world, which are briefly mentioned as lipstick, boys and nylons. This information might be viewed as the soup of Brett's book, it is not an overly religious world, despite the rampant use of the word demon which then alludes to a world of superstition, and the presence of minor religious characters (priests known as *Tenders*), what is most obvious is the influence of the Christian ideology in the development of gender roles in *The Painted Man,* the representations of which will be the subject for thematic analysis.

As a rule the "fictive world is at least as important as the plot to the work's overall effect" (Hume, 1984, p. 83) for a complex story would distract from the comparison of visions of reality. When a fiction offers, as *The Painted Man* does, a world in which the values essentially agree with those of the reader, there is no pressure for the reader to review their assumptions about reality. In other words, when "values coincide, the reader and author agree on what parts of life are admirable, and which are too trivial to be mentioned" (Hume, 1984, p. 84) or which must not be discussed, on the grounds of moral decency or good taste. As was the case with *The Name of the Wind*, many of the individuals first introduced in *The Painted Man* are those in small, close-knit, rural communities – "We're God-fearing people

in these parts. We don't want any meddling with dark things better left alone" (Rothfuss, 2007, p. 60), with "God-fearing" often being synonymous with "superstitious," but what this accomplishes is to introduce the reader to a world that, more often than not, provides a strong sense of community, as can be seen in the opening pages of Brett's work;

"More and more villagers arrived as the morning wore on. Bringing their families and whatever provisions they could spare, they came from Fishing Hole and Town Square; they came from Boggin's Hill, and Soggy Marsh. Some even came all the way from Southwatch. And one by one, Selia greeted them with grim news and put them to work." (Brett, 2008, p. 7)

There are other techniques, such as the Jonguler's recitation of the history of the world in a performance for lead character Arlen Bale's village, which serve to provide the reader with a means of identification with a community which may be, in certain ways, reminiscent of their own, while also dispensing the downloaded history of the world. This is relevant with regards to the proposal that the text can be seen as influenced by traditional western Christian ideology in the development of gender roles, as rural areas are commonly viewed as being 'behind' the development of society in more urban areas, like cities, and so provides the perfect avenue by which to imbue the text with what can only be described, in our current 'P.C.' oriented technocratic society, as gender stereotypes. The following quotes are examples from both side of the spectrum;

"I know it sounds like madness, Arlen, but deep down, men *want* to fight, like they did in tales of old. They want to protect their women and children as men should." (Brett, 2008, p. 33)

"'What could be more important than motherhood?' she asked. It's every woman's duty to produce children to keep the city strong. . .Men are good for breaking and building,

but politics and papers are best left to women who have been to the Mother's School." (Brett, 2008, p. 190)

The first quote is taken from an interaction between young Arlen and the Messenger Ragen, the second is from the handmaiden of Ragen's wife Elissa, and both serve to display the views to gender inherent in *The Painted Man*. Men are builders, woodsmen, and soldiers, while women are healers (herb-gatherers), wives, mothers, or 'barren,' a feature that often becomes the characters identifying trait or namesake, "Selia the Barren" being a prime example. This, of course, might be viewed as a result of the Middle-Ages template, which also serves for 'post-apocalyptic' narrative scenarios, which, in adherence to the authoritative reconstruction of history, places the narrative in a point of history before the establishment of most forms of liberal freedoms. While it is not uncommon to find slavery in many titles of the fantasy genre (usually an aspect of a culture to which the protagonist does not belong), the lack of any kind of feminist revolution means that the female role is usually relegated to that of Mother, Wife, Healer, or Temptress. The above quotes also serve to highlight the way in which the people of this fictional world view their own gender identities, and the roles they feel assigned to as having such. There are, of course, a certain number of exceptions to the rule, but where these are not just further reproductions of stereotypical views, they might also be viewed as clichés wearing ill-fitting masks of originality. Two examples of the former can be found in Leesha's town of Cutter's Hollow - Leesha's father Erny, who works the town paper-mill, and Child Jona, who appears as the only adolescent boy in the village who is not a junior wood-cutter.

The typicality can be found in the fact that male characters are either "true masculine" – burly, bearded, woodsmen-types – or "runts" – wear glasses, small, thin-build, bookish – and both Erny and Child Jona fall into the latter category. The faux-originality is not only interwoven with the issue of gender stereotypes in the text, but can also be found to manifest

in two prime examples; Bruna, the herb-gatherer, and the fort-town of Miln. Bruna is the herb-gatherer of Cutter's Hollow, and as such is an exact fit to the description of this type of trope-character, which can be found in *The Tough Guide to Fantasy Land*; "the older she is the more likely she is to be an accomplished midwife. She will usually wear homespun robes . . . she will have received enormous amounts of lore from her predecessors, and anything to do with the natural world is an open book to her." (Jones, 1996, p. 96) Where the suggested 'faux-originality' lies with this character can be found in her personal history which has granted old Bruna one characteristic which is not common to this character type, and that is the concept of motherhood – "No one knew for sure how old Bruna was. . . . She had outlived her husband, children, and grandchildren, and had no family left in the world" (Brett, 2008, p. 92). This adherence to traditional social belief systems, such as the concept of marriage, is what might distinguish Bruna from the typical fantasy crone, but the fact that her bloodline ends with her grandchildren, whom she has outlived due to her position, negates the relevance of their ever truly having existed. Bruna is constructed and presented as an authoritative figure, and as such assumes the narrative position of deliverer of knowledge and history. This position is used to reinforce the believability of the fictional world, and its history, as fact and as such the reader, if the narrative is successful, will accept that Bruna's family did exist, and has been outlived. In reality, whether they existed or not is less relevant than their 'current' non-existence as this might be seen to erode the purity of the narrative.

In order to explain this point further, consider the relevance of the second example, Fort Miln. Upon Ragen's introduction to Arlen, after first meeting Selia 'the Barren,' their first conversation revolves around the role of women in society, particularly that of mothers;

"'That's just how things are in Miln. People make the world go, and Mothers make people, so they lead the dance.'

'It's not like that here,' Arlen said.

'It never is, in the small towns,' Ragen said. 'Not enough people to spare. But the free cities are different. Apart from Miln, none of the others give their women much voice at all.'

'That sounds just as dumb,' Arlen muttered.

'It is,' Ragen agreed." (Brett, 2008, p. 14)

While at first glance this may appear to be a modification to the reconstruction of history which might balance the scales with regards to gender equality, which would provide a level of equality unheard of in the Middle-Ages, it is an entirely superficial construct. It might be true that in Miln it is women who hold the majority of positions involved in the behind-the-scenes running of a city, but as Arlen's conversation with Elissa's handmaiden reveals "Why, it's Mothers that vote to choose a new duke when the old one passes" (Brett, 2008, p. 191), and this statement reveals the interwoven problem highlighted through this fictitious city and Bruna the herb-gatherer. There is a continuous repetition of the importance of motherhood, of being a mother, and the added imperative to have been wedded before pregnancy. Motherhood might be the attribute which makes Bruna more than a reclusive crone, but this addition, when coupled with the complete absence of any familial proof, only serves to illuminate the utilization of motherhood as a means of maintaining her authority. Similarly, while Miln is presented as a utopia of gender equality - if not a form of weak matriarchy – the emphasis is placed on motherhood as a requirement for the attainment of authority. Those women described as "barren" may never reach such positions because they will forever be viewed as Daughters, and this biological deficiency will forever make them social pariahs. This all leads to one inevitable conclusion, Bruna's motherhood might be considered a keystone, the removal of which might collapse the purity of the tale and reveal

the ugly perpetuation of, what some might consider, chauvinistic ideology. Bruna's

motherhood is necessary because the recurring theme throughout the narrative is the

importance of a woman's assuming the role of motherhood, if Bruna had been the chaste

recluse which usually denotes this form of character, her existence might have compromised

the integrity of the entire text as she would then represent the achievement of authority at the

expense of the "duty" implied by her gender.

In the case of Miln, while it might appear that women hold the reins of power, the

statement "it's Mothers that vote to choose a new duke when the old one passes" (Brett,

2008, p. 191), itself reveals much about this would-be matriarchal society, as it implies that

the public figure-head for the city is always a duke, never a duchess. This statement also

makes evident the prejudice represented against women who, for whatever reason, fail to

attain the status of mother. While the series itself might not be a coming of age tale, *The

Painted Man,* as the first instalment, might be viewed as dealing with many of the same

issues, and one of particular interest is the representation of rites of passage in the text. All

mythology revolves around coming of age and, like all rites of passage, it marks the passage

of the individual from one stage to another, in the case of the coming of age narrative it

marks the passage from childhood to adulthood, accompanied by a full participation in

society. In this case the title itself alludes to images of young tribal warriors, undergoing rites

of passage, their bodies adorned with war-paint, indeed there are many scenarios in the text

involving Arlen which might be viewed in this context; his entry into the night a flight from

home and his subsequent quest for knowledge, the tattooing of the war runes onto his body,

and his return under the new given identity of the Painted Man might all be seen to represent

masculine rites of passage. It is the study of Arnold van Gennep in 1908, *Les rites de

passage,* which informs most popular treatments of the subject and so has shaped the way it

is thought about, and that is essentially concerned with the masculine. This may be due to

van Gennep's on biases, or even those of the cultures which he studied, but nonetheless this bias is prevalent in western culture, in all forms of media, and in literature.

Van Gennep also proposed that there was a basic structure to all rites of passage, a three step process described as "separation of the candidate from the community, a period of ordeals and instruction, and the reincorporation into the community under a new identity" (Attebery, 1992, p. 90). When considering this schema in relation to *The Painted Man* it can immediately be seen to resonate with Arlen's journey through the narrative. It has also been suggested in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), that with regards to women's rituals, there appears to be a different sort of process at work and, in place of van Gennep's three stages, Attebery suggests three others; "enclosure, metamorphosis (or magnification), and emergence." This model typically sees the adolescent girl secluded, often either in her own home or in some isolated room, either at the time of, or during, her first menstruation. This model, when considered with regards to *The Painted Man*, is also a recognizable blueprint for Leesha's character development; she is introduced fretting over when her first menstruation will arrive, due to rumours about her virginal integrity she is isolated in Bruna's hut, where her sense of identity becomes magnified as she chooses to pursue the apprenticeship in herb-gathering, followed by her re-emergence back into the community as the new trainee town healer. While the role of herb-gatherer might mean a devotion to a life of chastity in other titles, it is already obvious that Leesha must become a mother, not merely due to the representation of both her and every other young female character's obsession with fulfilling this role, but because that seems to be one implied message within this particular text. A false utopia in the fort town of Miln, which seems to carry patronizing undertones with regards to the role of women in society despite its attempt to appear as a beacon of enlightenment in a medieval world, and one old woman's shoulders bearing the weight of appearing with enough authority to convince the reader not to look too close.

The danger with such practices as those outlined above lies precisely in the possibility, and likelihood, of this title being considered a coming of age text. Its reliance, as such, on didactic discourse will merely serve to perpetuate the narrow-minded societal beliefs with regard to gender roles that have led to persecution and discrimination of women and men alike. This piece merely aims to outline examples of where constructed narratives run the risk of compromising the purity of the tale - of losing believability - when a particular narrative style is incorporated, but attempts to convey a specific message, in this case with regards to gender roles and identity, are too blunt to pass the notice of close reading.

Chapter 3

A World of Uncharted Self-Awareness in *The Blade Itself*

The Blade Itself would be best viewed as an example of the immersive fantasy, which is a fantasy "set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 59), and in order to accomplish this, the fictional world must act as though it is impervious to any form of external influence, an immunity which is essential in the worlds' relationship with the reader. This is because the immersive fantasy must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as those whom s/he is reading about, "It reveals what is frequently hidden: that all literature builds worlds, but some genres are more honest about it than others." Mimesis is, of course, the art of persuading the reader to ignore the mediation of language, and while irony of mimesis does not mean that the reader is assumed to be *in* the world, it is expected that s/he must share the assumptions of the world. In this form of fantasy, the reader must sit in the heads of the protagonists, and accept what they know of the world, interpreting it through what is noticed by them, or through what they fail to notice. There must be an assertion that this world exists and is justified, and to accomplish this there must be an absence of exclamations as to how astounding the surroundings or situations may be, with characters making observations, and expressing interest rather than astonishment.

The approach taken by Abercrombie can be seen to reflect this model in many ways, taking the narrative voice and style as the first example. The opening chapter of *The Blade Itself* is entitled *The End* and proceeds to open as though the reader has chanced upon events already in progress;

"Logen plunged through the trees, bare feet slipping and sliding on the wet earth, the slush, the wet pine needles . . . He stumbled and sprawled onto his side, nearly cut his chest

28

open with his own axe . . . The Dogman had been with him until a moment before, he was sure, but there wasn't any sign of him now." (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 1)

Immediately there is a noticeable difference between this title and the two narratives discussed in the previous chapters. *The Name of The Wind* and *The Painted Man* both utilized the narrative of the portal-quest fantasy, establishing histories and core characters in a stable and familiar environment before embarking on an exploratory narrative structure, a model dependant on the ability of the narrative to explain events in a manner that shows the reader the characters world and allows it to be understood. *The Blade Itself*, however, opens in a manner that attempts to assert its existence outside of external influence, by dropping the reader in the middle of an active situation, it is implied that this is a living world where events transpire whether under the reader's gaze or not. The above quote is also an example of how the immersive fantasy's ability to show, rather than tell, is an ability which "depends in part on a consensus reality" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 60), and this means that the reader is expected to have experience in reading fantasy, in order for this style to work. For example, the first lines "Logen plunged through the trees, bare feet slipping and sliding on the wet earth, the slush, the wet pine needles," and "nearly cut his chest open with his own axe" (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 1) tell the reader who is running and what they are running through, but not really *who* is running. This is where the reader has to use their knowledge of pre-existing fantasies, "The more exposure we have to a fantasy tradition, the more easily it can work upon us" (Hume, 1984, p. 88), the description of Logen's "bare feet" as he runs, and the fact that he nearly eviscerates himself on his own weapon, an axe. When these images of a male figure, the bare feet and the axe, are coupled with the brief descriptions of pines and slush - and brief they must be if the sought for sense of urgency is to be achieved - for the experienced fantasy reader these descriptions allude to this character's being a 'Barbarian.' The risk with this approach is that, if poorly executed or too bizarre, the result would be to

shatter the consensus of reality, causing estrangement rather than the required state of ignorance as might be experienced by a protagonist at the beginning of a quest.

The ensuing use of language describing the fast-paced, semi-comedic, action scene which this brief chapter consists of, further serves to solidify this image of Logen, as he is made to appear more animalistic, or primal, than a character like *The Name of the Wind*'s Kvothe. While the reader may not know what a "Shanka" is, the descriptions given through the third-person omniscient narrative voice, floating between character's thoughts and the description of events as they occur from an 'outside' perspective, inform the reader that they use "cruel looking" spears and that "A man would rather save himself than kill his enemy. Trouble was that Shanka didn't think that way, and Logen knew it" (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 3). This serves to create the image of feral creatures which maintain enough intellectual prowess to craft weapons, yet lack any instincts towards self-preservation, and so are crucially inhuman. The conversational tone which is used in the narrative voice throughout the text serves to familiarize the characters, "No time to get out of the way. Logen's mouth opened, but there was no time to say anything. What do you say at a time like that?" (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 2), and create individuals who appear capable of conscious thoughts and judgements, while also giving the narrative voice an undertone of irony. This is an example of the fantasy of mimesis, by inserting the rhetorical "What do you say at a time like that?" adds a touch of ironic humour, in a chapter without dialogue (save for the word "shit") such rhetoric is comedic under the given circumstances.

Perhaps the best example of this mimetic irony, or the narratives "self-awareness" of its own artificial construction, would be the incorporation of the character known as Ferro. Similarly to Brett's character Bruna, a description of the character archetype can be found under the heading Female Mercenary in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996); "She is usually tall, thin and wiry, silent, and neurotic . . . she either came from a nunnery or was

raped as a child. Or both . . . can usually kill two people at once . . . you will come to grudgingly admire her" (Jones, 1996, p. 78). The similarity between the two characters is that they both represent archetypical female characters, where they differ is their incorporation into the narrative and their respective functions. Bruna's purpose was to act as an authoritative figure, in many ways crucial to the narrative - particularly with respect to Leesha - and her function was to maintain the tales believability through the deliverance of knowledge and the downloaded history of the land. The importance of this character's role is the key component contributing to the risks of compromising the narratives purity, and so the reader's acceptance of its illusion of reality. However, where Bruna deviated from her archetype in the aspect of motherhood, in *The Blade Itself* Ferro does not deviate from her original modal at all, and the crucial factor to be considered is that this is more than mere happenstance. Abercrombie's first trilogy is mostly intended as a form of satire of the quest fantasy series, and so the incorporation of Ferro is more a comment on the typical portrayal of women in fantasy.

Indeed, many of Abercrombie's characters adhere to certain basic character archetypes; Logen – barbarian, Jezal dan Luther – swordsman, Bayaz – magus, Major West – soldier, but Abercrombie introduces one character who might best be described as a pathetically intriguing mixture of mad scientists and monsters, Sand dan Glokta, or Inquisitor Glokta. This is the original creation that also allows the most access to his inner thoughts, crippled after five years of imprisonment and torture, the once prominent swordsman, now a torturer for the secret police, provides the means by which Abercrombie can offer a link between Logen Ninefingers, and Jezal dan Luther. First it is important to point out that while the portal-quest fantasy emphasizes recognition and healing, restoring the world to previous glory, the immersive fantasy is "a fantasy of thinning" and is "overwhelmingly concerned with the entropy of the world" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 61), and this is entirely relevant to how

the world is presented in *The Blade Itself*. While most of the characters find their origins in basic archetypes, this is merely superficial as the narrative style gives the majority of them a great depth. Logen is a berserker in battle, but he is surprisingly thoughtful out of it, and his repetition of such platitudes as "You have to be realistic" (Abercrombie, 2006) consistently nudge at his own creation, and how his actions must be justified. Logen and Glokta both have violent and bloody histories, and this can be seen in their views of the world, whether it be Logen's sloughing through bog in his search for Bayaz – "It was early morning and the dingy world was thick with mist. It was probably better that way. There was nothing to see but miles of mud, rock, and miserable brown gorse" (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 53) – or Glokta and his painful walk to the underground torture rooms of the Inquisition – "There was a seedy feel to the place and a smell of damp . . . The dirty monotony of the corridor was broken from time to time by a heavy door, bound and studded in pitted iron" (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 10). The characters themselves ironize the world around them, whether they are talking about the nature of politics or the nature of the world.

There is no character in the narrative who emphasizes this statement better than Jezal dan Luther, the Union's most beloved swordsman, favourite to win the annual tournament, and holding a high ranking military position purchased for him by his wealthy father. Each chapter, or section thereof, deals with an individual character, and so the narrative voice assumes a discourse appropriate to the character with whom it is concerned, so the introduction to Jezal is quite different to those of the others mentioned so far; "It was a beautiful Spring day in Adua, the sun shone pleasantly through the aromatic cedar . . . a pleasing breeze fluttered through the courtyard" (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 33) The juxtaposition of how Jezal perceives the world alongside the views of characters like Logen and Glokta, might be seen to serve as a criticism of not only the archetypical hero that Jezal represents, but might also recall themes similar to those of Siegfried Sasoon's poem *Base*

Details (1918). Abercrombie ensures that the comparison between Glokta and Jezal cannot escape the readers notice as Abercrombie utilizes many inventive, if sometimes disturbing, descriptive passages when dealing with particular characters with the intent of highlighting such comparisons and, of course, their inherent differences. An example can be seen in the following passages, shown in the chronological order they appear;

"A coin fell from the top of the pile, landed on its edge and rolled along the wood. It dropped to the flags beneath with the unmistakable sound of falling money. The head of the gardener on the other side of the lawn snapped up instinctively, before he returned to his clipping of the grass." (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 35)

"Bang! The cleaver took off the top of Teufel's ring finger, and a little disc out of his middle finger which rolled a short way and dropped off onto the floor. Frost's face was craved from marble." (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 49)

The first quote is taken from the card game which introduces the reader to Jezal, and the second is taken from Glokta's acquirement of Tuefel's confession. Glokta was once like Jezal, handsome, skilled, and rich, but now Glokta deals in a more precious currency, human lives and human flesh. Unlike Logen, Glokta, and his companion West, Jezal has no experience in battle, no experience in life, and yet holds a notable position with a generous salary, and exemptions from duty on the front lines. It is these contrivances which give credence to the proposal that "immersive fantasy potentially lays bare the operations of world building" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 107), as characters question particular aspects of their world, and their roles in it. Take for example the questioning of the concept of an all-powerful magus;

"The magi are an ancient and mysterious order, learned in the secrets of the world, practiced in the ways of magic, wise and powerful beyond the dreams of men. That was the

rumour. Such a one should have ways of finding a man, even a man alone in the wide barren North. If that was so, then he was taking his time about it." (Abercrombie, 2006, p. 50)

This passage perfectly displays not only the inherent cynicism which readers of more realist fiction might regard the concept of wizards, but also displays the lengths towards which the irony of the text reaches. To elucidate this point, there is also a key component found in most fantasy titles which was not included in the original paperback publication of *The Blade Itself*, and that is the incorporation of a map. The importance of the establishment of authority, particularly with regards to the concept of history, typically found in the portal-quest fantasy, also utilizes cartography to establish a fixed narrative. It was Tolkien who began the trend for the incorporation of maps and prehistory, and thus establishing a schema for the quest narrative in which the portal is not only to be found in "the travelogue discovery of what lies ahead, but in the insistence that there is past and place behind, and that what lies behind must be thoroughly known and unquestioned before the journey begins" (Mendlesohn, Rhetorics of Fantasy, 2008, p. 14). Since the 1970's, genre fantasy has therefore been seen as signalled by these two devices; maps - which list everywhere the reader will visit – and the fixed and narrated past, with many post-Tolkien portal-quest fantasies beginning with a download of legend. This returns to the point to be made with regards to the absence of a map in the original publication of *The Blade Itself*, and the degree to which the book is soaked in irony. The absence of a map alludes to this new immersive world's not having a fixed past, there is no one authoritative voice within the narrative text, save for the historical perspectives of the manipulative Bayaz. This is attributable to the immersive fantasy's need to assert itself as a fully existing reality, the reader is expected to explore this new world along with the protagonists, which once again puts the reader at the mercy of the characters and the way they view the world in which they live, the intent to place the reader in the same position of ignorance as experienced by the characters as they

embark on their respective journeys. This is where the irony of the text once again becomes apparent, without a map the reader may feel pressured at the prospect of remembering all the names of the wonderful and strange locations which fantasy narratives can offer. However, there is no need to fear as, while the trilogy only deals with one continent on Abercrombie's world, the three nations concerned are the appropriately named North – home to the self-named Northmen whom also refer to their home as "the North" - , the generically named Union – a lumbering giant of corruption and complacency, menaced by Northmen on one side and threatened on the other by – Ghurkul, a land known for its slavers and ruled by the cannibalistic sorcerer Khalul. All serve to satirize some of the most utilized ethnic tropes in the fantasy genre, but Abercrombie's style allows the reader to look past the superficial aspects and find conscious beings underneath.

One final important aspect to The Blade Itself is its portrayal of the protagonists, not as heroic paragons of integrity, but as almost too real to be real anti-heroes. The typical genre fantasy, particularly heroic literature, is known to mostly use subtraction, the exclusion of anything the author deems inessential, in their world building. This is due to the consensus that readers might lose belief in heroes if they were perceived to display daily habits, petty weaknesses, vanities, or feelings of inferiority to those around him, feeling that "we would not thank the author for reminding us that there would have been fleas and flies and dog droppings on the floor . . . Nor would we feel uplifted had the author reminded us that those who got drunk at the feast might not have made it outside to puke, and that drunken warriors were likely to be quarrelsome" (Hume, 1984, p. 91). This statement could be seen as perfectly descriptive of Tolkien's narrative technique, characters are divided up into good and bad, despite the rich variety of characters met with in real life; the good, represented as vibrant, colourful "helpers", and the bad, represented as desolate, gothic-like "hinderers" to the journey. *The Blade Itself* not only successfully asserts its existence as a "reality" separate

to the readers, but the narratives ability to pull the reader in, rather than causing estrangement and pushing them away, is interconnected with what can only be described as a deliberate attempt to shatter the previously existing expectations of the hero and his kind. There are many of the examples listed in the above quote which describe the everyday lifestyle of Logen's people, the Northmen, even Glokta's morning routine usually involves him waking up in a pool of his own excrement.

Abercrombie's style brings basic character archetypes to life, giving them a substance which only serves to solidify the purity of his self-aware narrative. While Tolkien and Lewis developed within the milieu of modernism, they, and other fantasy writers, all draw heavily on myth, history and fairy tale, the formal considerations of which helped shape the face of a genre, and while Tolkien and Lewis may not be postmodernists, fantasy by its very nature challenges dominant political and conceptual ideologies by a means similar to that of postmodernism. The Blade Itself might certainly be viewed as a postmodern work, but the one certainty is that as a work it is a call for change in the fantasy genre, now is the time for reinvention and evolution.

Conclusion

The ultimate aim of this critical investigation was to examine how contemporary authors of the fantastic have constructed their narratives in order to successfully create original, believable alternate worlds. In consideration of this aim, the evidence garnered from close reading revealed not only various different writing styles and techniques, but also how these approaches can compromise the purity of the text if improperly utilized.

Chapter 1 discussed *The Name of the Wind*, and outlined Rothfuss' construction of 'the club narrative,' a narrative approach in which the storyteller (Kvothe) is designated by two core qualities; they are inarguable and uninterruptable. The lengths to which the author goes to establish Kvothe as an authoritative narrative voice provide the keystone for the believability of the tale, a point of utmost significance as the tale is that of Kvothe's life told in his own words. The placing of this narrative's primary timeline in the empty front room of a tavern in an isolated hamlet in Rothfuss' fictitious countryside also serves to enforce the club narrative, and therefore the tale's believability. By creating an "It's just you and me" bond between the reader, narrator, and two other characters to whom the story is being told, further solidifying the club narrative, and enforcing the tale's purity.

Chapter 2 discussed Peter V. Brett's *The Painted Man* which followed a similar core narrative structure to *The Name of the Wind*, that of the portal-quest fantasy, the inherent difference is best considered as thematic in nature. Where the latter encourages development of a curious, inquisitive mind, and the pursuit of a wide variety of knowledge, the former perpetuates outdated views on the importance of segregated gender roles through both the constant representation of stereotypes, and the utilization of authoritative narrative figures in downloading these views.

In Chapter 3 *The Blade Itself* revealed an entirely different form of fantasy world, shown through the eyes of various individuals, with each seeing the world through their own tinted view. Where *The Name of the Wind* and *The Painted Man* are both portal-quest fantasy's, and so are structured in an exploratory fashion, *The Blade Itself* is an immersive fantasy, and it is constructed with an ironic sense of self-awareness. This is a good point to reiterate Tolkien's statement that "it demeans the fairy story to think that it needs a child, with credulity based on a lack of experience, before the marvels of a fairy story can be appreciated" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 65), as *The Blade Itself* expects a reader of experience in order to better understand the individuals who inhabit its' world, and the cruel humour by which their respective lives are played out. This is a world of Thinning, and in it Abercrombie gives genuine depth to some of the most common archetypes in the fantasy genre.

Where the portal-quest fantasy relies on cartography and the establishment of an authoritative narrative voice ensuring a fixed past, as is the case with both *The Name of the Wind* and *The Painted Man*, the immersive fantasy is different. As *The Blade Itself* allows the reader to view the world through a variety of characters, displaying the world as they perceive it, and hearing how it works as they believe how it works, it contains and reveals a truth that typical portal-quest narratives do not. It reveals that there are not only many ways in which the same world might be perceived by different individuals, but it also reveals that the same can be said for the past. However, Abercrombie's works are also different because they belong to a newly emerging genre in fantasy, loosely known as "The New Weird." New texts become so categorized "because of the tone and the polysemy of the structure, in which, rather than requiring the reader to seek out truth, the reader must accept that there are many truths, and all of them may be lies" (Mendlesohn & James, 2012, p. 187), in essence, it is a genre of both

content and style, and there can be no doubt that *The Blade Itself* fits snugly into this category.

Therefore Chapter 1 outlines in *The Name of the Wind* the continuation of a long standing storytelling tradition. Just as Bastion read *The Never Ending Story* (1984) alone under a blanket, with a flashlight, so too does the reader of Kvothe's tale feel the same sense of isolated intimacy. Once engaged with the text, the reader is a member of an exclusive club and this enhances the emotional investment in the tale. Chapter 2, then, displays the difference between a text which painstakingly maintains the purity of its' tale, as is the case in *The Name of the Wind*, and a text which hastily structures a narrative which might be most widely accepted in a given culture – best described as capitalist fantasy – causing the purity of its' tale to collapse. Both, however, continue a tradition which provides the perfect stage for the coming-of-age novel, or the heroic adventure quest novel. While this particular subgenre, the portal-quest, which has possibly become the most synonymous with fantasy literature as a whole, it is *The Blade Itself*, and the New Weird, that carves a new niche for original works.

The New Weird is, without doubt, a progeny of the postmodern society by which humankind has been engulfed. Both writers and critics of this ongoing age of postmodernity are understanding of the desire to experiment and the playfulness that has characterized some of the most celebrated fantasy titles. Through new works like Abercrombie's *First Law Trilogy*, and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), some have begun to realize that fantasy does not equate with escapism, but can provide alternative methods to dealing with, and explaining, reality. *The Blade Itself* is also like a mirror held up to contemporary society and the idea of mass produced culture, it is a world of Thinning, a dark, damp, world through which each character drudges every day of their now eternal lives. The most notable absence here is Tolkien's Eucatastrophe, the consolation of the happy ending. Fantasy contains the

potential to act as a catalyst, instigating titanic change in the ways in which literature is understood, and to also reignite the spark of creation inherent in all of humankind, but which has gradually been forgotten in an era of entertainment at the touch of a button. If people begin to realise that fantasy genre means just that, that literally anything can happen, and that in writing they can make anything happen, with no strict schemas to adhere to and no reason to exclude a literary trope of one category from another, then they may realise that change can be imagined and acted upon in reality.

The New Weird is a call for evolution within not only a literary genre, but the infinite landscape of the human imagination. There will always be room for traditional storytelling modes, and they are well suited to the fantasy genre, but now is the time to create something that nobody has ever thought of before. Fantasy Literature provides the perfect means of elasticising the imagination, especially now that we are entering an era of wild experimentation, and the optimum method to dealing with an unused muscle is to stretch it out, and then work it out. Through feeding our imaginations we can then envision a means of living that allows us the social freedom to move where we will, and a social conscience that allows us to live in a manner that heals our environment rather than further corrupting it. The human imagination is one of the most powerful natural engines in known to our world, and every effort should be made to nurture the bond between our imaginations, young or old, and fantasy.

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