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A Common Language of Desire: "The Magicians", Narnia, and Contemporary Fantasy

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COMMON LANGUAGE OF DESIRE:  
*THE MAGICIANS*, NARNIA, AND  
CONTEMPORARY FANTASY

KELLY KRACDER

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE for fiction, writes about humanity: "We yearn. We are the yearning creatures of this planet. There are superficial yearnings, and there are truly deep ones always pulsing beneath, but every second we yearn for *something*. And fiction, inescapably, is the art form of human yearning" (40). He also writes that, while authors of highbrow, more head-focused literary fiction may have forgotten this fact, "Writers who aspire to a different kind of fiction—entertainment fiction, let's call it, genre fiction—have never forgotten this necessity of the character's yearning. [...] You name the genre. Every story has a character full of desire" (41). In literary circles, desire-driven entertainment fiction like fantasy, Romance, or westerns is treated critically. However, philosopher James K.A. Smith claims that "[o]ur identity is shaped by what we ultimately love or what we love *as* ultimate—what, at the end of the day, gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, understanding, and orientation to our being-in-the-world" (*Desiring* 26-27). If that is true, stories that shape the reader's desire are of ultimate importance.

Rosemary Jackson, a critic of fantasy, examines how fantasy is fundamentally "a literature of desire" (2). An excellent contemporary example of this definition is Lev Grossman's recent novel *The Magicians* (2009), which was well-received critically and popularly (Walker, "Hardcover"). George R.R. Martin, of *Game of Thrones* fame, described it as being "solidly rooted in the traditions of both fantasy and mainstream literary fiction," denying the conventional dichotomy between the two ("*Magicians*" front matter). *The Magicians*, with its subsequent two volumes that make up the *Magicians* trilogy, is a deeply fascinating and influential addition to the genre of contemporary fantasy. Grossman's novel reveals some of the major shifts that have occurred in the genre of fantasy as it departs further from its religious and mythic roots, while asking the same questions about desire that have motivated founding authors like C.S. Lewis.

Traditionally, the genre of fantasy has been understood as stemming from Medieval Romance and fairy tales, and, even further back, from myths and legends of the ancients. Dickerson and O'Hara argue that current fantasy writers are "part of a long tradition dating at least back to Homer," and that *The Lord of*

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*the Rings*, the ancestor of all later fantasy novels, shows “the influence (direct or indirect) of medieval Germanic legend and Romance on all of modern fantasy literature” (95, 112). If fantasy stories have common roots with myths, one would expect them to “show the world to be charged with meaning,” and to “convey the weight and wisdom of the ages to new generations” (105). However, many current fantasy novels actively disavow and reject the influence of myth and a mythic understanding of the world. Such writers may also reject the influence of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, recognized by most critics as the founders of the modern fantasy genre, and who certainly insist that fantasy is based on a medieval understanding of the world. Lev Grossman’s *Magicians*, along with works like Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Donaldson’s *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, belong in this category.

As a member of this set of deconstruction fantasies, *The Magicians* intends to deconstruct Narnia, borrowing from it for its source material but twisting it for Grossman’s own ends. Instead of acknowledging this, however, many critics and reviewers have been quick to emphasize *The Magicians*’s similarities to Harry Potter. Certainly Grossman’s books satirically reference Harry Potter, but the resemblance is not more than skin deep. When directly asked whether his books are more indebted to Harry Potter or Narnia, Grossman answers, “I read *Harry Potter* when I was 30 so I’m into it, but it’s not in my DNA. Narnia’s very much in my DNA, and I always knew they [my books] were going there” (qtd. in Schwartz). Grossman is so indebted to Lewis that his own fantasy series must pay homage to Narnia.

Perhaps the most obvious reference to Lewis’s *Narnia* in Grossman’s *The Magicians* is the metatextual *Fillory* series, a fantasy series that is beloved by several of the main characters in *Magicians*, and is eventually revealed to be a real world. With a matter-of-fact narration similar to Narnia, Grossman carefully introduces Fillory to demonstrate its similarities to Narnia:

Christopher Plover’s *Fillory and Further* is a series of five novels published in England in the 1930’s. They describe the adventures of the five Chatwin children in a magical land that they discover while on holiday in the countryside with their eccentric aunt and uncle. [...] [T]heir father is up to his hips in mud and blood at Passchendaele [...] which is why they’ve been hastily packed off to the country for safekeeping. [...] [T]hey find their way into the secret world of Fillory, where they have adventures and explore magical lands and defend the gentle creatures who live there against the various forces that menace them. (6)

Even if there was nothing else to go on, Fillory is clearly Lewis’s Narnia series, with the only discrepancies being a few numbers. For instance, there are actually seven Narnia books, not six, and the first was published in 1950 in England, after

the second world war rather than the first ("Life"). There are four Pevensie siblings, as opposed to the five Chatwins, but they do discover Narnia in the countryside, where they have been sent for safety "during the war because of the air-raids" during WWII (*Wardrobe* 3), similarly to the Chatwins' father, who is fighting at Passchendaele, a battlefield in WWI ("Battle"). The entrance to Fillory is through a grandfather clock, which is clearly the now-legendary wardrobe (*Magicians* 7). Even in the smallest details, Grossman reveals his debt to Narnia. Characters in Fillory refer to Quentin and his friends as "human children," a parallel to Narnia's "Human Child" (*Magicians* 292; *Chair* 29). If any further confirmation is needed of the deep relationship between Narnia and *The Magicians*, the final novel of the series, *The Magician's Land*, opens with the quote "Further up and further in!" from *The Last Battle*.

Therefore, the relationship between *The Magicians* and Narnia, and more particularly between Grossman and Lewis, lies at the heart of this novel. In one interview, Lev Grossman points to Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence* as describing the kind of relationship he has, or perhaps would like to have, with Lewis ("Depression"). Anxiety about originality as it relates to one's predecessors is part of any artistic endeavor; as Bloom writes, "the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform" (148). Bloom attempts to describe the kind of relationship between the slightly older and more popular Marlowe, and Shakespeare, "who defensively parodied his forerunner while resolving that the author of *The Jew of Malta* would become for him primarily the way *not* to go, whether in life or in art" (xxii). Bloom writes that "poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not necessarily better" (7). This is a high bar Grossman has set for himself: He intends to steal Lewis's coat, and wear it better.

How, then, does Grossman set out to surpass Lewis's creative vision in Narnia? All the differences between Lewis and Grossman flow from the fact that they have very different conceptions of what fantasy is. Lewis's background is firmly rooted in medieval literature, which he taught at both Oxford and Cambridge for decades, and in ancient myth and philosophy, which he loved and saw as the primary influence on the medieval period (Langford 577; James 63). To some extent, his whole career as an academic and fantasy writer hinged on his holistic relation to medieval literature and the medieval perspective; according to Attebery, Lewis saw himself as a "relic of an older world and defender of a vanished literature" (*Tradition* 9). His fiction is, in some sense, a result of Tolkien encouraging him to turn his studies in medieval art "into mythopoetic fiction, fantasy literature for a mass audience that communicated the sensibility of medieval epic and romance" (Cantor 208). Not only Lewis's

nonfiction, but also his fantasy novels, demonstrate his commitment to translating medieval ideas into story.

What precisely does this background in medieval thought do for Lewis as a fantasy writer? As philosopher Charles Taylor puts it, today's world has changed fundamentally since then, for the medieval saw "The natural world [...] as a cosmos that functioned semiotically, as a sign that pointed beyond itself, to what was *more* than nature. [...] [P]eople lived in an enchanted world, a world 'charged' with presences, that was open and vulnerable, not closed and self-sufficient" (qtd in Smith, *Secular* 27). In his review of his friend Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis writes that "in the history of Romance itself—a history which stretches back to the *Odyssey* and beyond—it makes an advance or revolution" (83). Lewis specifically says that fantasy is fantasy because it participates in Romance or myth as a way of life. According to Lewis, "one of the main things the author [of serious fantasy] wants to say is that the real life of men is of that mythical and heroic quality" (89). The writer of fantasy, drawing philosophically and literarily on myth and Romance, conveys the sensation that the world is charged with forces beyond human power, and has the real possibility for significance.

However, theories of fantasy have changed greatly since Lewis was writing. Writers like George R.R. Martin, Stephen R. Donaldson, or Lev Grossman do not fit neatly into this definition of fantasy. This means, then, that a better definition of fantasy is needed, to properly account for these other works. In current fantasy scholarship, the most frequently-cited definition is offered by Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy*. He writes, "Genres may be approached as 'fuzzy sets,' meaning they are defined not by boundaries but by a center" (12). This is not an attempt to avoid having to carefully define the genre; rather, Attebery surveyed a large group of university professors as to which works were "quintessential fantasy" and came up with the titles *Dracula*, *The Worm Ouroboros*, *Alice in Wonderland*, Ursula le Guin's Earthsea series, and, at the top of the list, *The Lord of the Rings* (14). Therefore, he concludes humbly, "One way to characterize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*" (14). Attebery pinpoints three essential aspects of fantasy present in *The Lord of the Rings* that characterize all works of the genre. First, in terms of the content, it is "the impossible," something that could never happen in the real world (14). Next, fantasy also requires comic structure, in the classical sense of comedy: Attebery writes, "Death, despair, horror, and betrayal may enter into a fantasy, but they must not be the final word" (15). Finally, fantasy must aim to evoke the response of wonder within readers (16). In a nutshell, Attebery defines the genre of fantasy as the group of texts that resemble *The Lord of the Rings* in a few key aspects.

Even though Grossman would probably disagree philosophically with much of the medieval underpinnings of *The Lord of the Rings*, his novel does match up with these three requirements established by Attebery. While *The Magicians* certainly rejects Tolkien's sense of eucatastrophe, with its religious overtones (Tolkien 153), it still tips its hat to a traditional comic ending, with the hero's re-integration into society. Unsurprisingly, it does not end conventionally with the heroes defeating the forces of evil, but rather with Quentin rejecting a dreary, mundane desk job and returning to magic. It is not a guaranteed happy ending, but it is the rejection of a certainly unhappy one. A common complaint among readers of this novel is anger at Quentin for losing his own sense of wonder due to too much exposure to magic. This frustration alone proves that wonder is a key aspect of this novel. The reader is certainly filled with a sense of wonder at the description of his weeks-long flight as a goose to the Antarctic, or his desperate chase for the Questing Beast. *The Magicians* reflects an ongoing paradigm shift in recent fantasy, even while continuing to participate in the genre.

In particular, Grossman's work departs from a traditional understanding of fantasy because it shows the influence of the novel, with its emphasis on realistic, ordinary characters and a real-world atmosphere. According to Grossman, the question of the relation between fantasy and the real world is one of his primary areas of concern. Grossman says in an interview, "as much as I was re-telling *Harry Potter* and Narnia, I was retelling *Brideshead Revisited*, the story of getting this idyllic, utopian education with hints of darkness and then going out in the world and being clobbered flat" (qtd. in Schwartz). Not of course, that fantasy is not about real trees and streams; but it is far removed from the literary movement of Realism, which rejects the idealism and transcendent meaning in Romance. However, Romance has fallen out of literary vogue, and has, as Brian Attebery puts it, been "relegated [...] to the margins: to children's books and Saturday matinees and, in rationalized form, to popular storytelling modes like the Western, the detective story, and the formula fantasy" (*Structures* xi). Much of what Grossman is doing in *The Magicians* is to bring a Realistic perspective on a genre which has been long dominated by Romance.

The most straightforward approach to seeing how Grossman deviates from Lewis's more romantic view of fantasy is in his structuring of his fantasy novel as a Portal Fantasy and an often overlapping form, a Quest Fantasy. These critical categories come from Farah Mendlesohn's descriptions of four kinds of fantasy outlined in her *Rhetorics of Fantasy*: The Portal-Quest Fantasy, the Immersive Fantasy, the Intrusion Fantasy, and the Liminal Fantasy. In part because this particular work was so influential that it set precedent for this form, Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* follows the basic conventions for this



form of fantasy: "The protagonist, generally an average person with hidden abilities, receives a call to action and reluctantly embarks on the first adventure" (Senior 190). In her description of the Quest Fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn describes the role of the human intruders as "straight-faced 'savior/stranger' politics"; they have a clear purpose which they have entered the world in order to accomplish (28).

In *The Magicians*, the narrative centers on Quentin Coldwater, a high schooler in New York who finds out that, just as he has always hoped, magic is real. He is invited to study at Brakebills, a school for magic, and with his classmates, eventually comes to realize that Fillory, the place he has grown up reading about in a children's fantasy series and longing for passionately, is real. He and his friends travel there, hoping to be the heroes of a quest, but are instead tricked into becoming pawns of rival supernatural powers. Although Quentin and his girlfriend, Alice, have recently had a vicious falling-out due to his infidelity, she sacrifices herself in order to defeat the apparent forces of evil. When Quentin returns to earth, he swears off magic forever, and gets a serious office job. In the end, his classmates convince him to give up on a normal life and return with them to Fillory, in attempt to become its fourth monarch.

*The Magicians* is a Portal-Quest Fantasy, because Quentin travels to magical places, such as Brakebills or Fillory, with help of magic buttons or literal magical portals. It is also an Intrusion Fantasy, because the magic breaks through into his world in unsettling, often disagreeable ways. *Narnia*, on the other hand, is for the most part a Portal-Quest Fantasy, with magical objects such as rings, wardrobes, or magic pictures serving as the portal into Narnia. Grossman certainly departs from Lewis by changing the type of fantasy which is prominent: particularly with Julia, Quentin's friend who learns that magic is real but is denied entrance to Brakebills, he shows the consequences of magic entering the mundane world. Mendlesohn writes that, for Intrusion Fantasies, "the fantastic is the bringer of chaos. [...] It takes us out of safety without taking us from our place" (xxi-xxii). Grossman's choice contains an implicit criticism of Lewis: while his magic stays safely behind in Narnia, Grossman is willing to wrestle with the consequences of magic unsettling everyday life.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the children are brought there specifically to combat the White Witch and fulfill the prophecy about "Adam's Flesh and Adam's Bone," and are sent home after they have fulfilled their duties of reigning as kings and queens (*Wardrobe* 87). In *The Magicians*, the book is halfway over before Quentin and his friends manage to find a way to let themselves into Fillory, and when they do, Alice, Quentin's love interest asserts, "We can't just go barging in without an invitation. [...] Ember and Umber are supposed to control the borders" (*Magicians* 259). Their quest is entirely self-created, and any resemblance it bears to mythical quests is because of a personal

choice to construct meaning in this way, not because the world is a place which actually has quests. This view is clearly a postmodern departure from the medieval or mythic view. As philosopher Charles Taylor would put it, "The status quo and ancien régime having been displaced, we now realize that if anything is going to fill the void, *we* need to come up with it—we will need to 'mobilize' new rituals, practices, institutions, and so forth" (qtd. in Smith, *Secular* 84). This is the first of many ways that *The Magicians* deconstructs traditional fantasy elements like quests, and reveals them for the fallible human creations they are.

After the climactic battle against the "Dark Lord," Quentin's victory in *The Magicians* is not the traditional ending to a Portal-Quest Fantasy either (Senior 190). Traditional Portal-Quest Fantasy demands that the hero save the fantasy world and return home, subtly changed for the better. Like the children in Narnia, Quentin hates the idea of leaving the fantasy world, saying that the main function of Ember and Umber, the Aslan-like deities of Fillory, is "to make sure the Chatwins didn't overstay their welcome" (*Magicians* 74). However, Quentin is not returned to his world; rather, he is left alone in Fillory to recover from his injuries for six months, and has to find his way home on his own (370). Instead of a healthy return to ordinary life, refreshed by his visit to Fillory, he takes a corporate job, rejects every aspect of magic, and decides that "to live out childhood fantasies as a grown-up was to court and wed and bed disaster" (397). Quentin saves the fantasy world only by accident, and when he returns home he is a wrecked man. Only the cycle of returning again to Fillory holds any hope for revitalizing his life. Even in a preliminary comparison of his work to traditional Portal and Quest Fantasy, Grossman proves to be intentionally rejecting the groundwork laid by authors like Lewis.

*The Magicians* is also interested in deconstructing the magic or wonder of magic. When Quentin is studying magic, he finds that "It turned out to be about as tedious as it was possible for the study of powerful and supernatural forces to be" (*Magicians* 55). Clearly, the chapters describing how much work it takes to master Old Slavonic and the precise hand gestures are meant to make the point of how a book can have literal magic, and still be lacking in the sense of magic, the impossible, or spine-tingling wonder the reader expects in a work of fantasy. For Tolkien, magic is not just the impossible, but associated with the air that comes from "*Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself," and derives from "setting, not character" (Tolkien 114, Williamson 21). Magic in contemporary fantasy, such as *Harry Potter*, often gets reduced to a complicated, rationalized system of technology which anyone can learn to control just like any other scientific system. *The Magicians* demonstrates that, followed to its logical conclusion, a scientific power source has little to do with fantasy. Fantasy has to do with the truly impossible or supernatural, such as when the Beast invades the school



from another dimension, and none of their carefully laid plans or spells can do anything against its otherworldly power. This uncontrollable, powerful being is much closer to the traditional sense of 'fairy'—a being "born of a sense of the danger and unknowableness of the world" (Attebery, *Tradition* 7). Grossman suggests that magic is not as easy, delightful, or unstoppable as many other works of fantasy would suggest.

In contrast to Narnia, where Aslan always calls the children out of the world for some purpose, Grossman also challenges whether it makes sense to believe that fantasy, whether lived or read, could offer a sense of purpose. Quentin observes, "In Brooklyn reality had been empty and meaningless—whatever inferior stuff it was made of, meaning had refused to adhere to it" (*Magicians* 44). When graduation from Brakebills rolls around, Quentin is frustrated by his own lack of meaning: "Why was he still waiting for some grand adventure to come and find him?" (211). What is the purpose of all the hard work if there was no purpose behind it? This quest for meaning in life is not solely limited to Quentin—even the villain Martin Chatwin ultimately decides to wait behind in Fillory because "he was a hero in Fillory and nothing at home" (*Magicians* 75). In a particularly Narnian twist, Quentin and his human friends are sent on a quest to become the kings and queens of Fillory. While his ego is flattered, Quentin is still curious to know why they have been selected for the throne. Doubtless, he is hoping that he has been chosen for some higher purpose, that maybe some deity has given his life meaning. However, Fen, their guide from Fillory tells him, "It makes perfect political sense. We have reached the point where ignorance and neglect are the best we can hope for in a ruler" (317). Grossman rejects a foundational idea of traditional fantasy: the significance of the quest.

Grossman also demonstrates that Quentin is searching for the ability to change and become a better person, and is frustrated that this process is not as quick and painless as fantasy has promised. After a few months at Brakebills, Quentin expects to have already risen above his childish, discontented self in high school. However, when it turns out that magic school is just as much work as ordinary school, "He recognized the irritable, unpleasant, unhappy person he was becoming; he looked strangely like the Quentin he thought he'd left behind in Brooklyn" (64). He hopes that Fillory will be able to satisfy these desires in him: "He would be picked up, cleaned off, and made to feel safe and happy and whole again here" (288). However, in the end he realizes "He was broken in a way that magic could never fix" (372). Grossman speaks for this human desire to be healed and made whole, and recognizes that there is something about fantasy that does this for us. Tolkien refers to this restorative effect of fantasy as Recovery, which is a "return and renewal of health," and results in "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them" (146). One senses

here an implicit critique of Lewis's characters like Eustace and Edmund, who are truly changed and revitalized because of some sort of transcendent experience they have in the fantasy world (*Voyage* 97-100). A change of location, Grossman seems to argue bitterly, is not enough to fix a broken, discontent person who hopes that fantasy will bring new life and renewal.

Ultimately, Quentin feels cynical and betrayed, because he was truly expecting magic and Fillory to meet these deep desires they awoke in him. In Fillory, a stand-in for all fantasy stories, but particularly Narnia, "you felt the appropriate emotions when things happened. Happiness was a real, actual, achievable possibility. It came when you called" (*Magicians* 7). After a few short months at Brakebills, Quentin observes that the joy of magic and attending a magic college "was just too good to be true. It was like Fillory that way" (106). This ultimately is the deep source of the discontentment within the novel: Quentin expects each stage in his life to satisfy the desires that Fillory awakes in him, but none of them even come close. Although he spends more or less the entire novel searching for it, "As soon as he seized happiness, it dispersed and reappeared somewhere else. Like Fillory, like everything good, it never lasted. [...] I got my heart's desire, he thought, and there my troubles began" (220). Getting what he wanted has never seemed so miserable. Quentin identifies every single failed desire of his life as being like Fillory, as being like this mystical fantasy experience that seemed to offer what he was looking for but never really contained it. Disillusionment is his primary quality.

The biggest source of rage that Grossman has toward Lewis's imagined world is that the benevolent deities, such as Aslan or Ember, are weak and apathetic toward the pain and suffering in the world. Even when thinking about the supposedly fictional deities of Fillory, Quentin observes, "they rarely showed up till after the Chatwins had already taken care of things for them. Their real function seemed to be to make sure the Chatwins didn't overstay their welcome" (*Magicians* 74). Before he even knows that they are real, these deities are revealed to be weak compared to humans, and primarily concerned with enforcing arbitrary rules. There is clearly a critique of Aslan, and God in general, here: human beings, not divine actions, are what shape history. Again, Quentin observes, "there was a slightly Orwellian quality to their [Ember and Umber's] oversight of Fillory: they knew everything that went on, and there was no obvious limit to their powers, but they rarely bestirred themselves to actively intervene on behalf of the creatures in their charge" (168). One can hear the clear frustration against a person, such as C.S. Lewis, who would claim that God is powerful and loving, even though the world is filled with such suffering.

In *The Magicians*, the reason that the world is a mess is because it is a closed system, with only the natural world and humans. When Richard, described as one of the few Christian magicians at school, tries to convince

Quentin and his friends that magic is God's leftover tools from creating the universe, they react with scorn. One says, "We do whatever we want, and that's all we do, and nobody stops us, and nobody cares" (235). That is, in essence, the theology of *Magicians*: Not particularly dogmatic about whether or not there is a God, but confident he is doing a horrible job if he is real. When they finally meet Ember in Fillory, Quentin's friend Penny asks him, "You are a god, and things are really falling apart up there. I mean, I think a lot of people are wondering where You've been all this time. That's all. Why would You let Your people suffer like that?" (348). Here, the reader can really hear Grossman's angst at looking at a dark world and wondering how anyone could invent an Aslan ("Why Narnia"). The problem stands: humans are miserable, and if God is real, then it is His fault. When it turns out that Ember himself cannot save them, and instead it is Alice's sacrificial death, Quentin reacts in despair. "The last dream was broken" (365). In some sense, that is the theme of the novel.

The question is, then, if Grossman and Lewis come from such disparate traditions, and agree on so little, why does Grossman even bother to write an entire novel about their relationship? In some sense, by saying that Harold Bloom describes their relationship, Grossman acknowledges a deep personal and literary debt to Lewis, which is further supported by his continual use of Lewis's images and words in his own writings, blog posts, interviews, and novels. At the same time, Grossman clearly distances himself from many aspects of Narnia. He modifies, combats, and parodies Lewis's vision. One even reviewer writes, "one senses a critique more moral than artistic underlying the parody here" (Nester). Why is *The Magicians* a novel of Grossman's simultaneous love for, and rejection of, Lewis?

Strangely enough, it comes back to the overwhelming point of *The Magicians*: Disillusioned desire. While Grossman cannot accept Lewis's answers, he is drawn to his compelling portrayal of the importance of desire in shaping one's life. When trying to explain the growing popularity of fantasy, Grossman writes in a blog post, "one place to start is with longing. It's something fantasy does especially well. Lewis and Tolkien were virtuosos of longing" ("What"). Interestingly, he locates the source of Lewis and Tolkien's longing, not in any sort of ideological reason, but on the time of great societal and historical change in which they lived, with such innovations as "automobiles, the electrification of cities, the rise of mass media, psychoanalysis, mechanized warfare" ("What"). He writes that longing is something that the modern day uniquely understands, whereas for people in Narnia, "People [...] don't long for some other world (except when they long for Aslan's Land, which I always found unsettling)" ("What"). If Grossman finds their longing for what is more properly known as "Aslan's country" disconcerting, it is only because he has clearly not understood Lewis's final conclusions about longing and theology (*Last Battle* 209). Grossman

also writes that fantasy points to and partly satisfies a “longing for a world to which we’re connected” (“What”). How Lewis talks about longing and desire closely maps onto what Grossman says on the issue, and provides clarity in understanding the strong link between them.

If *Magicians* can be said to have a unifying theme, it is in examining how the genre of fantasy affects, and should affect, the desires of readers. To that end, it introduces a depressed main character who is still living in a childish obsession with a series of fantasy novels, and uses that escapism to begin its dissection of the relationship between fantasy and desire. Lewis thinks that readers of fantasy do not desire magic or the fantasy world directly, but rather something more abstract and transcendent:

Does anyone suppose that he [a child reader of fairy-tales] really and prosaically longs for all the dangers and discomforts of a fairy tale?—really wants dragons in contemporary England? It is not so. It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. (“On Three Ways of Writing for Children” 38)

Grossman rewrites Lewis: what if someone really did prosaically long for dragons? Perhaps not in England or New York, but what if someone was convinced that their one chance for happiness was to make it into some secondary world? If someone like Quentin actually managed to get through the wardrobe, into Narnia, it would not neatly solve his moral problems, or grant him happiness. Quentin learns that Fillory is not, after all, what he truly desired. However, why do people still desire that? Why does fantasy make us so hungry, and then not offer satisfaction?

For Quentin, the big problem with his life is the lack of lasting happiness, which he knows fantasy hints at. While in terms of plot this novel seems to be about his adventures at a college for magic, and eventually the magic realm of Fillory, his real quest in this novel is the search for happiness through the fantasy world. When we first meet him, the narrator tells us, “Quentin knew he wasn’t happy. Why not? He had painstakingly assembled all the ingredients of happiness. He had performed all the necessary rituals, spoken the words, lit the candles, made the sacrifices. But happiness, like a disobedient spirit, refused to come” (*Magicians* 5). If this novel can be said to have an ideological core, it is the rejection of an easy way to find happiness. Specifically, Quentin believes that fantasy has, in some sense, promised him a roadmap to happiness, but through the process of trying to realize it, he becomes disillusioned. Is his realization just that of a child, who wished for a pet dragon

and was disappointed? As one of the earliest critics on this novel observes, "Quentin will learn that literature reflects more a desire for a perfect world than the existence, on some rarified plane, of such a place. It is in fact this dissatisfaction with what is that spurs one to create works of art—or, failing that skill, revolutions of other kinds" (Nester). Grossman is interested in exploring the kinds of desires that fantasy evokes in people, and if those desires are at all compatible with the real world.

Lewis understands Grossman's quandary. In his autobiography, Lewis writes that in some sense his life has been defined by "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy" (*Surprised* 17-18). Lewis also points to the fantasy world as that which first awakened this desire in him, even though fantasy was ultimately unsatisfying. During his first encounter with Norse myth, Lewis writes that he "was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described [...]. [I]n a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else" (17). This desire with "almost sickening intensity" is what Lewis calls Joy. It is not any sort of satisfaction; it is an enjoyment of the unsatisfied longing that fantasy awakens in him. Just as Grossman's Quentin spends the first book searching for that elusive happiness, both Lewis himself and Lewis's characters are defined by their search for joy. As Colin Manlove suggests, most fictional works Lewis wrote concern "joy and our various misinterpretations or refusals of it [...] and Heaven as solidity, 'joy,' and dance" (8). Grossman and Lewis speak the same language because of the central, intense, painful presence of longing in their works. Speaking of Lewis's approach to desire and fantasy literature, Manlove adds: "Our longings both join us to and show our separation from God" (10).

Grossman, however, cannot accept Lewis's answer about the root of all longings being found in God; apart from his personal writings, his treatment of the gods in *Fillory* are proof enough. However, he is compelled by Lewis's portrayal of art, and particularly fantasy, as that which is primarily connected to Joy. In writing about the difference between great art and bad art, Lewis writes, "What the patrons of bad art clearly desire—and get—is a pleasant background to life, a something that will fill up odd moments [...]. There is really no question of *joy*: of an experience with a razor's edge which re-makes the whole mind, which produces 'the holy spectral shiver'" ("Different Tastes" 121). For any lover of fantasy, this description rings true. Grossman can tell, even purely from Lewis's *Narnia* series, that they both have experienced "the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence" ("The Weight of Glory" 4). Grossman takes his own personal revenge by parodying it in *Fillory* and showing how *Narnia* itself or any

fantastical experience cannot satisfy the desires they awaken. As someone who recognizes how serious and weighty fantasy is, he finds an ally in Lewis, who believes that fantasy is art of the most serious kind. Lewis understands how fantasy provides the motivation and stamina to keep going in a bleak modern world, and says that only jailers would be "so ready with the charge of 'escape'" ("On Science Fiction" 63). They are allies in affirming the immense power and importance of fantasy, as the one thing that holds out the tantalizing specter of joy, and agree that the works of fantasy in themselves could never satisfy those desires which they awaken.

Ultimately, Grossman is not as distant from Lewis as one might expect. If he were truly closed off to a mythical view of the world, where some kind of transcendent meaning and Joy is possible, Narnia would offer no joy to him. For philosopher Charles Taylor, a good way of understanding the secular worldview, in contrast to the medieval, is "to say that many people are happy living for goals which are purely immanent; they live in a way that takes no account of the transcendent" (qtd. in Smith, *Secular* 44), even if those stories still draw upon medieval roots. One can be happy by ignoring any questions raised by medieval religion, and constructing one's own stories to give meaning. As the narrator of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* says, "When you've nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74). Grossman reveals his true affinity for Lewis by showing how fundamentally dissatisfied he is with that answer. Creating new myths and sources of happiness may be the only rational solution to his problem, but he at least is willing to tackle the question of how dissatisfied they leave him, and how appealing these ancient myths are. Given Grossman's previous statements of his antagonism toward Lewis's belief in a benevolent deity, the bitter disillusionment that characterizes *The Magicians* only exists because Grossman believes the real world can never reflect the transcendent joy and purpose that fantasy purports to offer.

The final question, then, is how successful is Grossman in realizing the process described by Harold Bloom? Does he really retell Narnia more strongly and affectingly than Lewis did? Does he find authorial independence, or is his work derivative? It is hard to imagine that, in a few hundred years, people will be reading Grossman, but they probably will still be reading Lewis. Grossman's strength is that he perfectly captures the dissatisfaction and ennui of a particular generation, unable to reconcile their beliefs with their love of fantasy. At least in the first novel, much of Grossman's originality is merely negating Lewis's ideas, rather than clearly advancing his own picture of the world. In contrast, Lewis writes of the fantasy experience confidently, originally, and compellingly enough to provoke admiration from those, a generation or two later, who still fundamentally disagree with him:



And suddenly there came a breeze from the east, tossing the top of the wave into foamy shapes and ruffling the smooth water all round them. It lasted only a second or so but what it brought them in that second none of those three children will ever forget. It brought both a smell and a sound, a musical sound. Edmund and Lucy would never talk about it afterward. Lucy could only say, "It would break your heart." "Why," said I, "was it so sad?" "Sad!! No," said Lucy. (*Voyage* 243)

Lewis's picture of the fantasy world is undeniably more universal, powerful, and original.

What then? Is *The Magicians* merely another young adult fantasy novel which will be popular today and forgotten tomorrow? In his discussion of *The Fantastic*, a genre related to but not synonymous with fantasy, Tzvetan Todorov writes that

We grant a text the right to figure in the history of literature or of science only insofar as it produces a change in our previous notion of the one activity or the other. Texts that do not fulfill this condition automatically pass into another category: that of the so-called "popular" or "mass" literature in the one case; in the other, that of the academic exercise or unoriginal experiment. (6)

Certainly, *The Magicians* does not occupy a genre-defining position to the extent that *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Lord of the Rings* do. Grossman takes Lewis's medieval picture of the world as a place with transcendent meaning, and rejects it. Beyond that, he takes Lewis's picture of the centrality of desire and transposes it, perfectly, for a generation like Quentin, which might be far away from Lewis philosophically, but is still strangely moved by his works. Quentin's view of the world really speaks to this college generation's experience: "He'd spent too long being disappointed by the world—he'd spent so many years pining for something like this [magic being real], some proof that the real world wasn't the only world" (*Magicians* 37). It captures this generation's adoration of fantasy, and its related ideas of beauty and significance. *The Magicians* also captures the difficulty, and often the disillusionment, that comes from trying to reconcile joy and desire with our everyday lives.

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