

## Abandoning the Quest? High/Epic Fantasy and the Challenges of the Anthropocene

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The aim of this article is to determine why the prototypical form of high/epic fantasy cannot effectively address the present environmental, social and political problems gathered under the umbrella term of the Anthropocene. Drawing on Marek Oziewicz's concept of planetarianist fantasy and scholarship on the Anthropocene, as well as on examples of selected fantasy series (J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, Guy Gavriel Kay's *The Fionavar Tapestry*, and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*), this article investigates the sub-genre's most persistent components and juxtaposes them against issues related to ethnicity, species interconnectedness, non-human agency, sustained urban development and urban ethics which are raised by Anthropocene debates. This analysis will illustrate why the form of high/epic fantasy requires reconfiguration so that it can continue to evolve together with the needs of contemporary readers.

Keywords: high/epic fantasy; the Anthropocene; J.R.R. Tolkien; Stephen R. Donaldson; Guy Gavriel Kay; Robert Jordan

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## ¿Abandonar la búsqueda? La fantasía elevada/épica y los desafíos del antropoceno

El objetivo de este artículo es determinar por qué la forma prototípica de fantasía elevada/épica no puede abordar eficazmente los actuales problemas ambientales, sociales y políticos reunidos bajo el término general de Antropoceno. Basándose en el concepto de fantasía planetarianista y la erudición sobre el Antropoceno de Marek Oziewicz, así como en ejemplos

de series de fantasía seleccionadas (*The Lord of the Rings*, de J.R.R. Tolkien; *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, de Stephen R. Donaldson; *The Fionavar Tapestry*, de Guy Gavriel Kay; y *The Wheel of Time*, de Robert Jordan), este artículo investiga los componentes más persistentes del subgénero y los yuxtapone con cuestiones relacionadas con la etnicidad, la interconexión de especies, la agencia no humana, el desarrollo urbano sostenible y la ética urbana que surgen en los debates sobre el Antropoceno. Este análisis ilustrará por qué la forma de fantasía elevada/épica requiere una reconfiguración para poder continuar evolucionando junto con las necesidades de los lectores contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: fantasía elevada/épica; Antropoceno; J.R.R. Tolkien; Stephen R. Donaldson; Guy Gavriel Kay; Robert Jordan

## I. INTRODUCTION

While high/epic fantasy has remained a highly popular model of fantasy fiction since the genre's emergence at the hand of J.R.R. Tolkien in the middle of the twentieth century, in recent years scholars have begun to question its relevance for contemporary readers, debating its ability to interrogate the present environmental, social and political problems gathered under the umbrella term of the Anthropocene, and calling for the development of new critical approaches (Wise 2020, 1-25). One of the recent contributions to this debate is Marek Oziewicz's approach to fantasy through the lens of planetarianism, which he understands as "*a biocentric philosophical commitment to standing up for the planet and an applied hope articulated through stories*" (2022, 58; italics in the original). Oziewicz posits that certain fantastic narratives can help readers imagine "a biocentric future" which promotes the harmonious existence of humanity and non-human species (2022, 58-59). These hopeful "planetarianist fantasies," Oziewicz believes, can call into question the still widespread denial of the damage inflicted upon the planet and challenge the prevalent belief, embodied in scores of popular texts, that humanity is doomed to perish in an ecological apocalypse—attitudes which the scholar frames as "the ecocidal unconscious" (2022, 58-59) of modern people. Oziewicz's study of selected fantasy cartoons and books reveals that what is important is not whether a text engages with environmental issues at all, but rather what approaches to the non-human world it offers. As an example, he highlights a potentially disturbing passage from *The Hobbit*, which praises Bilbo's skill at stone-throwing, honed on small animals:

It codes that the value of nature is not intrinsic but based on human needs. It normalizes the anthropocentric bias, human supremacy, and expendability of small animals, which can be stoned on a whim. While Tolkien would likely be appalled by such meanings ascribed to his words, this is exactly how the ecocidal unconscious works. It replicates and perpetuates our habitual, unreflective ways of being in relation to the biosphere (Oziewicz 2022, 60).

Oziewicz's study invites critics to approach existing texts from a new perspective in order to assess how they might be reinforcing, even against the authors' best intentions, certain patterns of (narrative) thought that are now challenged by Anthropocene debates. Thus, the aim of this article is to examine a number of high/epic fantasy series in order to demonstrate why this sub-genre of fantasy fiction might require reconfiguration in order to successfully respond to the needs of contemporary readers. The series chosen for analysis are J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977-2013), Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-86), and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* (1990-2013), which share enough features to be able to offer insight into the structure of high/epic fantasy, yet differ in certain of their narrative solutions, which indicates the evolution of this form. To prepare the background for the analysis, this article first examines the definitions and roots of high/epic fantasy, introduces the series chosen for analysis, and briefly discusses the concept of the Anthropocene. It then juxtaposes the most persistent components of high/epic fantasy, identified in the series' depictions of their protagonists and antagonists, their relationship with non-human inhabitants of the fantastic world and the structure of that world, with selected recurring issues in Anthropocene debates. These include questions related to ethnicity, species interconnectedness, non-human agency, sustained urban development and urban ethics. While all arguments are illustrated with specific examples, rather than provide a close reading of each series, this article attempts to draw conclusions pertaining to high/epic fantasy as a whole and signal a direction for more detailed investigation in the future.

It is not the aim of this article to discredit in any way the works of Tolkien, Donaldson, Kay and Jordan. They have been selected for analysis because they feature intricate imaginary worlds and complex protagonists whose tales of loss and perseverance in the face of heavy odds have inspired generations of readers. Yet, while these works might not have been written with any specific socio-political or ecological agenda in mind, they speak differently to the twenty-first-century reader (entangled in the problems of the Anthropocene) than they spoke to readers of the previous century. Thus, it is vital to investigate the inherent patterns of high/epic fantasy embodied by these works so that the new generation of writers can look beyond them and continue to expand the boundaries of the sub-genre.

## 2. DEFINING HIGH/EPIC FANTASY

Early in the scholarship on fantasy fiction, the terms "high" and "epic" fantasy were often separated, even though scholars used them to describe the same narratives (Williamson 2015, 12). For instance, in *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (1980), Brian Attebery remarks that the fantasy convention developed by the works of George MacDonald, William Morris, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien might be defined as "high" (1980, 12). Noting how these writers were inspired by fairy stories and

folktales, Attebery argues that the most characteristic elements of their narratives are: the Other World, a structure indebted to that of a fairy tale (divided by Vladimir Propp into specific events and figures), an ordinary protagonist, extraordinary secondary characters and an emphasis on moral values (12-13). Attebery also posits that high fantasy shows “respect for the past, [a] love of simple things and simple language, delight in the hills and forests of the English countryside, an unorthodox but profound religious sense, and a fascination with the impossible” (14). C.W. Sullivan, in “High Fantasy” (1996), also highlights the importance of a believable secondary world as the setting for high fantasy and points to its roots in epic poetry, myths, legends and medieval romances, with Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as a prime example (1996, 300-310). In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), high fantasy and epic fantasy appear as separate entries, though both are defined rather similarly, that is, as stories that follow great conflicts affecting the destiny of their imaginary worlds (Clute and Grant 1997, 319; 466). High and epic fantasy still remain separated in Brian Stableford’s *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (2005): the former is defined in a vague manner and the latter is said to depict complex imaginary worlds (2005, 130-31). However, the categories of high and epic fantasy are combined in Lisa Tuttle’s *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2005), which contrasts high/epic fantasy with heroic fantasy, and declares that the former is longer and offers a larger cast of characters than the latter (2005, 10-13). Tuttle’s decision to combine the categories might have been prompted by her recognition of the blurred boundaries between these two forms, which stems from the on-going development and intersection of various forms of fantasy. For instance, in his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012), W.A. Senior decides to use the name “quest fantasies” for high/epic narratives which are commonly driven by a quest of some sort (2012, 190-99). Taking into consideration the available definitions, in *Fantasy Literature and Christianity* (2018) Weronika Łaszkievicz describes high/epic fantasy as:

a category of fantasy fiction, which typically revolves around a hero or group of heroes inhabiting or temporarily visiting a full-fledged secondary reality, i.e., an imaginary world, equipped with fantastic countries, languages, cultures, maps, creatures, and religions. The heroes of high/epic fantasy are usually involved in a cosmic battle against an evil force, with the safety and future of the imaginary realm at stake. The plot might consist of several minor quests and adventures, which ultimately lead the heroes to their final goal (2018, 12-13).

It is worth noting that even *The Lord of the Rings* has been classified differently by individual scholars. For instance, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* states that the category of “heroic fantasy” might be synonymous with “epic fantasy” (Clute and Grant 1997, 464), and Stableford in fact categorizes Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as heroic fantasy (2005, 197). Thomas Honegger (2010), on the other hand, calls the trilogy an example of epic fantasy, while C. Palmer-Patel sees it as a case of heroic epic fantasy (2020,

7). The categories of high, epic and heroic fantasy undoubtedly intersect at several points, so a total separation of these sub-genres might not be possible (or desirable). To avoid ambiguity, this article will use the definition of high/epic fantasy offered by Laszkiewicz, of which *The Lord of the Rings* is considered a key representative.

### 3. ROOTS OF HIGH/EPIC FANTASY

In order to determine the affordance of prototypical high/epic fantasy to tackle the challenges of the Anthropocene, it is also vital to examine its development. The influence which Tolkien exerted over it (Sullivan 1996, 308-309) is one reason that high/epic fantasy might be unable to properly address the current crises. Due to the originality and ensuing success of *The Lord of the Rings*, many following writers duly emulated the structure of Tolkien's world and the trilogy's narrative pattern. Even if they failed to grasp the complexity of Tolkien's creation and instead produced formulaic and predictable narratives (Attebery 1992, 9-10), they still reinforced the literary model offered by Tolkien. Moreover, Tolkien's trilogy—though inarguably original—did not appear out of a void: it was indebted, on the one hand, to his literary predecessors, whose involvement with elements of the fantastic prepared the foundations for the development of the modern fantasy genre in the nineteenth century, and, on the other, to his own specific interests and experiences. The list of Tolkien's most immediate literary predecessors includes such notable Victorian writers as William Morris and George MacDonald, whose narratives signaled the emergence of fantasy as a modern genre (Mathews 2002, 16). The works of Morris (e.g., *The Wood Beyond the World*, 1894; *The Well at the World's End*, 1896) are strongly inspired by myths and legends (in particular, the Arthurian tradition and Norse myths), whereas MacDonald's narratives (e.g., *Phantastes*, 1858; *The Princess and the Goblin*, 1872) are embedded in fairy stories and Christian morality. Tolkien's own interests revolved around the study of languages, myths and sagas (e.g., the *Völsunga* saga, the *Poetic Edda*, *Kalevala*), which heavily conditioned the mood and structure of his fiction (Drout 2007, 129, 205-207, 475; Sullivan 1996, 307). Apart from Tolkien's professional background, his private experiences of war as well as his disillusionment with the progress of industrialization also had an impact on his work (Drout 2007, 294; 712-17), as did his deep Catholicism (Wise 2020, 15). Since all of these personal interests and experiences coalesced into the form of *The Lord of the Rings*, it can be argued that the sub-genre of high/epic fantasy is strongly indebted to both the personal experiences and the professional interests of its founder, as well as to the reality of life in the twentieth century.

Moreover, as a literary form, high/epic fantasy tends to look to the past rather than the future. This nostalgic tendency is already visible in its literary roots, i.e., in the extensive borrowings from ancient heroic epics (Weiner 2017, 25-26), myths, fairy stories and folktales, as well as in its penchant for quasi-medieval European settings (Sullivan 1996, 303-04), which are also present in Tolkien's trilogy and the works

of subsequent fantasists (Selling 2004, 211-18). Sullivan states: “The future of high fantasy lies in the past. Because it is a form which draws so heavily on the past for virtually all of its context, content, and style, there can be little literary innovation in the genre” (1996, 309). Given the persistence of epic, mythic and fairytale borrowings within fantasy narratives as well as the ubiquity of medieval-like imaginary worlds, it is not surprising that Lev Grossman, echoing Sullivan, describes fantasy as “literature of longing, a longing for things that are lost”—lost from the postmodern world where humanity is surrounded by alienating high-tech equipment (Grossman 2012, n/p). Grossman’s diagnosis can be seen as the flipside of what has been called fantasy’s escapism. For Michael Moorcock (1987), the escape from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution into the pastoral idyll of *The Lord of the Rings* is something to be mocked; he chides the tone of high fantasy for being “sentimental, slightly distanced, often wistful, a trifle retrospective; it contains little wit and much whimsy” (1987, 122). Eric S. Rabkin (1979), on the other hand, sees the benefits of such an escape: “The real world is a messy place where dust accumulates and people die for no good reason and crime often pays and true love doesn’t conquer much. In one sense all art is fantastic simply because it offers us worlds in which some order, whatever that may be, prevails” (1979, 3). Tolkien believed that a temporary escape into the imaginary world can renew the reader’s awareness of their own reality and, as such, improve their understanding of their surroundings (1988, 59-61). However, since it takes the reader some considerable cognitive effort to transpose a literary experience set in a quasi-medieval fantasy world over their own surroundings, it is not surprising that the sub-genre might not be able to challenge the ailments of the Anthropocene.

#### 4. FROM *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* TO *THE WHEEL OF TIME*

As stated before, the four selected series share the key signature components of high/epic fantasy, yet they span several decades and are different enough to indicate the evolution of this sub-genre. The analysis will first focus on Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), since the trilogy determined the primary shape of high/epic fantasy and conditioned its development (e.g., George R.R. Martin has confirmed on several occasions that the gritty and violent world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a deliberate subversion of Tolkien’s unspoiled Middle-earth). Stephen R. Donaldson’s vast *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977-2013) features one of the most recognizable anti-heroes of fantasy fiction, also clearly fashioned as a response to the idealism of Tolkien’s protagonists (Slethaug 1993, 48). However, by transporting the protagonist from modern America to an imaginary land, the series complicates the relationship between the real world and the fantastic world. Guy Gavriel Kay’s *Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-86), which was strongly influenced by Tolkien’s Middle-earth, yet also features modern people transported to a magical realm (Senior 2012, 193), is a bridge between Tolkien’s and Donaldson’s approaches to fantasy. Finally, Robert Jordan’s multi-volume series

*The Wheel of Time* (1990–2013; finished by Brandon Sanderson after Jordan’s death), which describes Rand al’Thor’s rise to the status of a prophesied savior, is among the most extensive high/epic narratives after Tolkien.

## 5. THE ANTHROPOCENE

Initially used by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer to “emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” (2000, 17), the term “Anthropocene” has been gradually extended by critics to encompass various interrelated social, political, economic and environmental problems which affect the state of our planet and lead to possibly irreversible damage. Since the scope of this article does not allow for an investigation of all of the challenges identified with the period of the Anthropocene, this work examines only those which correspond to high/epic fantasy and—when transposed onto the sub-genre—offers insights into its affordances as a literary space within which to explore Anthropocene concerns.

First of all, critics indicate that the debate on the Anthropocene is replete with remnants of colonialism as it often fails to account for the indigenous experience of and contribution to the Anthropocene. Notions of humanity’s shared responsibility for the creation and resolution of the Anthropocene—as well as the idea that humanity can be regarded as a homogenous entity—are rightly contested in the face of the historically and industrially dominant position of Western nations (Chakrabarty 2009, 197–222; Comos and Rosenthal 2019, viii–xxii; Zapf 2019, 2–22). Thus, the call to decolonize the debate on the Anthropocene demands attempts at restorative justice, which would decrease the level of oppression still experienced by indigenous communities around the globe. It also entails the recognition and inclusion of indigenous perspectives of the Anthropocene and the interests of indigenous communities, which might significantly differ from those of the dominant groups (Davis and Todd 2017, 763).

The inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the discussion of the Anthropocene will be beneficial, as it will contest the dominant Western mindset, which is grounded in European traditions. Critics of the Anthropocene repeatedly highlight the distorted relationship between humankind and the living world, resulting from the capitalist pursuit of profit and a belief in human superiority over nature (Davis and Todd 2017, 769–70). The exploitation of natural resources, negligence towards wild life and overall wastefulness have led to pollution, species loss and global climate change, which will ultimately result in the deterioration of the conditions of human existence on Earth. It is therefore necessary to counter Western discourses of human dominance with indigenous wisdom, which recognizes the interconnectedness of all species and the agency of non-human species. This mental shift in the perception of the natural world can contribute to the successful coexistence of different forms of life in the future (Ansloos 2016, 70–73; Coulthard 2014, 13; Meijer 2016, 73–88).

Much of the discussion about the Anthropocene is also devoted to urbanity, which is identified, alongside industry, as one of the primary agents of exploitation, pollution and wastefulness (Pincetl 2017, 74-82). Jeffrey K.H. Chan (2019), estimating that by the year 2050 cities will have become home to two-thirds of the human population, indicates how vital it is to address the problems of urban life before they reach the tipping point of being beyond the possibility of solution (2019, 22). In order to counter the Anthropocene, it is necessary to implement solutions of sustainable urban development that will alleviate the terrible condition of the natural environment and, simultaneously, guarantee the establishment of healthy urban communities. These solutions might include the nurturing of citizens' ecological awareness, the creation of green areas, improvements in transportation, and the development of ethical urban communities based on cooperation and fair access to resources (Chan 2019, 1-24; Pincetl 2017, 74-82).

#### 6. THE HERO(ES) ON THE QUEST TO DEFEAT THE EVIL DARK LORD

High/epic fantasy's ability to address the problems of the Anthropocene is challenged, first of all, by its choice of characters. Largely inspired by the conventions of fairy stories and myths (Sullivan 1996, 302), the protagonist of high/epic fantasy is typically an average male who becomes involved in a cosmic conflict that forces him to embark on a perilous quest, during which he has to successfully face challenges that lead to his self-development. Through self-development, he can achieve victory and save the world, or even the entire universe, from destruction at the hands of an evil Dark Lord (Palmer-Patel 2020, 1; Senior 2012, 190).

One element of this pattern that does correspond to the concept of the Anthropocene is the fact that, in most cases, the threat posed by the Dark Lord results from humanity's own actions. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings* various characters repeatedly succumb to their desire for power (symbolized by the Ring), thus strengthening Morgoth's and then Sauron's reign. In *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, the malevolent Lord Foul is similarly strengthened by every act of human despite, and the final Apocalypse is triggered when one of the protagonists, Linden Avery, is blinded by her rage and arrogance. *The Fionavar Tapestry* suggests that the very existence of the evil Rakoth Maugrim is due to the crime of the first men, committed after the world was created from nothingness. Rakoth later breaks free from his prison with the help of humans and dwarves. Similarly, in *The Wheel of Time* the first destruction of the world happens because Shai'tan is freed from his divine imprisonment by overtly ambitious people, and the coming of the second Apocalypse is fueled by certain people's hunger for power. Thus, though in most high/epic fantasies the Dark Lord is presented as the primary threat to the imaginary world, he can be interpreted as a symbolic embodiment of humanity's destructive agency and self-destructive tendencies.

The one element of high/epic fantasy that contradicts the solutions offered as counter measures to the Anthropocene is the quest that lies at the heart of the sub-



genre. Though the protagonist is typically accompanied by a group of friends who contribute to the final victory over evil—while the (faceless) allied armies clash with the Dark Lord's minions in the background of the story—the quest that drives the plot essentially relies on the messianic figure of the protagonist, who must perform some form of self-sacrifice in order to defeat the satanic Dark Lord and ensure the preservation of the world. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo courageously volunteers to travel all the way to Mordor in a suicidal mission to destroy the One Ring. Even though Thomas Covenant is an anti-hero who refuses to believe in the existence of the imaginary world and do his duty in shouldering responsibility for its preservation, he does still repeatedly save it from the clutches of the evil deity at the expense of his own well-being and eventually manages to restore the world after the Apocalypse. The five protagonists of *The Fionavar Tapestry* are required to perform a number of sacrifices in order to defeat Rakoth; eventually, the world is saved because the prophesized child renounces his life to destroy the Dark Lord. In *The Wheel of Time*, the survival of the world depends on Rand al'Thor, the mythic Dragon Reborn, who will battle Shai'tan on mount Shayol Ghul, possibly sacrificing himself in the process. The formula of high/epic fantasy, then, seems in general to be focused on the exploits of a singular hero and thus leaves little space for considerations that widespread efforts to raise ecological awareness, alter consumerist mentality and curb wastefulness can save the world. Grounded in the conventions of myths and sagas, the apocalyptic destruction presented in high/epic fantasy results from a cosmic conflict between divine forces, and as such, it can only be resolved by a messianic self-sacrifice, not through socio-political changes.

Of course, each series provides certain variations on the pattern: Frodo eventually succumbs to the Ring's power and it is only thanks to Gollum that the object is destroyed, while Covenant is assisted in the act of re-creating the world by Linden and Jeremiah—his new family. Still, all of these works imply that the survival of the world depends on the actions of a single individual (or a small group) who, gifted with special powers, will sacrifice themselves for the greater good. The self-sacrifice of this exceptional hero will then end the threat of destruction embodied by the Dark Lord. When juxtaposed with the several interrelated challenges of the Anthropocene (complicated by the vested interests of various groups), this pattern of quest-sacrifice-victory seems of little relevance in terms of contemporary problems. Moreover, in many series the salvation of the world is only temporary since the cosmic conflict is actually a repetitive event that is inscribed into the very nature of divine creation and is apparently necessary to (morally) challenge humanity (Senior 2012, 190). Paired with the assumption that it is the Dark Lord, not humanity, who is responsible for the deliberate destruction of the world, this narrative pattern further reduces people's culpability with respect to the state of the planet and, as such, contradicts the premises of Anthropocene debates.

What is more, while these debates (Chakrabarty 2009, 197-222; Comos and Rosenthal 2019, viii-xxii; Zapf 2019, 2-22) call for the inclusion of a greater variety

of voices and experiences, it is evident that high/epic fantasy is predominantly focused on the white male hero, whose experiences are visibly modeled on the fate of mythic gods, ancient warriors and Jesus Christ. Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring has nine members, all of whom are white males. Though significant female characters do appear in *The Lord of the Rings* and in Tolkien's other works, their roles and attitudes are a mixture of empowerment and passivity; for example, Éowyn's victory over the Witch-king, Arwen's nobility, and Galadriel's rejection of the Ring are contested by their relegation to the margins of the main quest, exceptional social status and the overall patriarchal nature of Middle-earth. In addition, if Tolkien's representation of ethnicity is judged solely on the rather unfavorable portrayal of the dark-skinned Haradrim from *The Lord of the Rings* and contrasted with the prevailing whiteness of the allied armies of good, then the racial politics of his Middle-earth is quite troublesome. A similar problem appears in the other series, even in *The Wheel of Time*, which includes a range of ethnic communities who are united in their fight against the Dark Lord: the series all invariably bestow the role of the messianic savior on the white male. High/epic fantasy's problematic approach to race, framed by Helen Young as the genre's "habits of whiteness" (2016), has become particularly visible after Amazon's versions of *Rings of Power* and *Wheel of Time* introduced characters of color. The backlash the showrunners experienced for their decision to cast non-white actors to play fantastic characters who inhabit imaginary worlds revealed the perplexing resistance of some parts of the audience to portrayals of racial diversity (Hetzner 2022, n.p.; Todd 2019, n.p.).

While in other series female characters do receive more exposition and play more significant roles (e.g., in *The Chronicles*, Covenant's female partner, Linden, helps him rebuild the world; in *Fionavar*, Kim is a wise woman figure and Jennifer a reincarnation of Guinevere; and in *The Wheel of Time*, the armies are composed of power-wielding and combat-skilled women who fight against Shai'tan), overall, none of them is assigned a similar messianic status to that of the male protagonist. Ironically speaking, according to the rules of high/epic fantasy, women need not worry that they will have to become the savior of humankind—that is the job of men. Thus, the ambiguity of female empowerment and the lack of believable indigenous voices might not only render high/epic fantasy less appealing to women and readers from ethnic communities, but also limit the genre's ability to speak to contemporary concerns.

## 7. THE HERO(ES) AND NON-HUMAN SPECIES

A staple element of world building in high/epic fantasy is the presence of supernatural animals and (humanoid) plants. Their roles vary: in some works they are simply a decorative enrichment of the realm, while in others they become the protagonist's trusted companions and provide critical help in the fight against evil. By and large, it can be argued that high/epic fantasy supports contemporary environmental debates by featuring a wide array of sentient non-human species and directing the reader's

attention to the sublime character of the natural world and the mental and physical benefits derived from immersion in nature (Brawley 2014, 178-88; Colligs 2021, 77-83). Grossman states that fantasy's preoccupation with nature is, in fact, one of the reasons for its growing popularity since the preservation of ecosystems is nowadays close to the public's heart (2012, n.p.). Nonetheless, high/epic fantasy's approach to the concept of species interconnectedness also raises concerns. Though some interspecies relations are fostered due to the fact that all forms of life suffer from the actions of the Dark Lord, the balance of power is visibly tipped toward human dominance over other inhabitants of the imaginary world. This approach to non-human species questions the relevance of high/epic fantasy in contemporary debates.

This imbalance of power is clearly visible as early as in *The Lord of the Rings*. On the one hand, the trilogy has been praised for its strong ecocritical message: when the ents (sentient trees) destroy the forges of the evil Saruman, who had devastated nearby forests in pursuit of military progress, their revenge is rightfully applauded and seen as the embodiment of nature's wrathful agency. On the other hand, though, while readers applaud this expression of sovereignty, they often overlook the fact that none of the human heroes was there to support the ents in their fight (while the hobbits, Merry and Pippin, rally around the ents, it is not however because they are particularly concerned with the fate of the forests). In fact, although the protagonists do acknowledge the diminishment of nature's mythic beauty and its destruction due to Sauron's evil (his Mordor is a wasteland), it is impossible to discuss any environmental politics of the trilogy's quasi-medieval societies because these are not formulated beyond the assumption that the natural beauty created by the supreme deity deserves protection. Apart from the implicit message that industrial progress should not be achieved at the cost of environmental exploitation, Tolkien's trilogy does not—indeed cannot, because of its quasi-medieval and mythic premises—offer any practical solutions beyond the necessity of vanquishing the Dark Lord responsible for the spread of corruption.

Similar concerns inform the quasi-medieval worlds of *The Chronicles*, *Fionavar* and *The Wheel of Time*. Readers are offered images of corrupted landscapes, whose lost beauty is repeatedly lamented, and the protagonists are aided in its restoration by sentient non-human creatures. However, the preservation of the world ultimately depends on the actions of the male human savior, who will reinstate the proper order of things by winning the cosmic conflict. Typically, this proper order implies the human order, with humanity at the center of creation and other species defined by their relationships with humans. The Dark Lords of these series are embodiments of corruption and opposition to nature (represented by their own devastated territories: Ridjeck Thome, Starkadh and the Blight). Their malevolent schemes result in the further destruction of whole ecosystems along with unnatural weather conditions. In some cases, the Dark Lords manipulate people to further distort the balance of the natural world, e.g., in *The Chronicles*; High Lord Kevin performs the act of Desecration in the hope of vanquishing Foul, and in *Fionavar*, the evil wizard Metran uses a magical

ritual to prolong the winter. In all cases, the divine corruption of the natural world needs to be countered by the hero's powers, which are inaccessible to other characters. Thus, the series studied here (Tolkien's Saruman being a notable exception) depict climate change as the result of divine intervention rather than centuries of human exploitation and wastefulness and it is difficult to link such imagery to the demands of living responsibly in the Anthropocene in terms of frugality, intentional living and ecological awareness. Though these series generally espouse the importance of a connection between people and nature (e.g., in *The Chronicles*, inhabitants of the Land had previously lived attuned to the Earthpower that permeated their world), their quasi-medieval human-centered societies are not capable of fostering any lasting relationship of species interconnectedness or engaging in environmental debates about the challenges which the capitalist world poses to natural ecosystems.

Moreover, the series often display a rather utilitarian approach to non-human species, be they sentient or not. Animals are neatly divided into those serving good<sup>1</sup> and those allied with evil.<sup>2</sup> The former are usually beautiful and noble; yet, even if they possess terrifying powers, they are relegated to the role of helper (never the ultimate savior), who might be exploited or killed in the process of saving the world. The latter are vile and hideous, which justifies their killing without any consideration of their place in the ecosystems of the imaginary worlds—their existence is validated only by their alliance. Likewise, orcs, goblins, and other humanoid beings serving the evil Lords need to be removed for the safety of humanity. Since they exist merely as token characters that are deprived of individual traits—basically, an extension of the Dark Lord—and their primary role is to be an obstacle on the hero's path, the hero is not required to take into consideration their interests and right to life.

There are also other subtler ways in which the four series support the dominance of humankind. One example appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, where the victory over Sauron marks the beginning of the Fourth Age—the Age of Men—which entails the withdrawal of the realm's supernatural inhabitants. A similar concept underlies the other series. In addition, though all of the good non-human inhabitants of these worlds unite in the fight against the Dark Lord, ultimately their preservation would have been impossible without the powers and self-sacrifices of the (white, male) human protagonists. Even when some form of species interconnectedness does appear in these series, it is eventually either lost due to humanity's foolish actions or overshadowed by human dominance. For instance, people's relationship to Earthpower present in the

<sup>1</sup> Examples include the eagles that rescue Frodo and Sam, and Gandalf's extraordinary mount which is descended from the greatest horse of Middle-earth (*The Lord of the Rings*); the Ranyhyn, which are magnificent horses linked to the Earthpower (*The Chronicles*); the unicorn Imraith-Nimphais, the white swan Lauriel, and the crystal dragon (*Fionavar*); and Perrin's wolves (*The Wheel of Time*).

<sup>2</sup> Examples of these include the monstrous spider Shelob and the wolves that accompany the orcs (*The Lord of the Rings*); the wolves of Galadan, the black swan Avaia, and the black dragon (*Fionavar*); crows, ravens, and the darkhounds (*The Wheel of Time*). It is evident that high/epic fantasy stereotypically employs a few selected species, while the remaining wildlife is omitted.

first volumes of *The Chronicles* gradually becomes distorted and corrupted and is never fully restored. The Dalrei of *Fionavar* are linked to nature in a rather stereotypical manner in that they are a tribe of hunter-gatherers modeled on Native Americans. *Fionavar*'s Pendaran Wood, a sentient forest that despises people for their crimes, is overpowered by the protagonists because their mission is too important to be thwarted by the forest's (albeit just) wrath. The gentle chora trees, the humanoid Nym that tend plants and a number of other entities created to improve humanity's relationship with nature in the Age of Legends are, at the time of the story, lost to the characters of *The Wheel of Time* because of the evil that humans have released into the world. Of course, there are also some cases of a positive union between nature and humanity, e.g., the Forestals of *The Chronicles* are guardians of the forest that were created from mortal men, and their presence is a prerequisite for the well-being of the Land. Nonetheless, such examples are scarce. Overall, high/epic fantasy's models of humanity's interaction with non-human species are grounded in anthropocentric supremacy, and pay markedly less attention to the interests of the nonhuman. As such, the traditional quest-oriented high/epic fantasy, driven by a cosmic conflict between good and evil, does not seem to offer adequate templates for rethinking humanity's position in the Anthropocene.

## 8. THE HERO(ES) AND THE IMAGINARY WORLD

When discussing the worlds of high/epic fantasy in the context of the Anthropocene, it is necessary to consider their structure and relation to the primary world of the reader. Overall, high/epic fantasy has a preference for quasi-medieval—i.e., grounded in modern people's assumptions about life in the Middle Ages (Eco 1986, 61-72)—European-like worlds, which are dominated by feudal, agricultural societies, typically organized into a network of towns and villages, with a central capital city.<sup>3</sup> From Tolkien's Minas Tirith and Edoras, through Donaldson's Revelstone and Kay's Brennin, to Jordan's Caemlyn, Cairhien and Tar Valon, the cities of high/epic fantasy are presented as places of shelter and provisioning on the protagonist's journey, and a stronghold of human civilization. They might be anything from colorful and fascinating to intimidating (for protagonists drawn to them from rural areas), stifling (in comparison to the liberating wilderness) and filthy (if the writer aims at a semblance of "realism"). Typically, they are also completely detached from the primary world of the protagonists, who are transported to fantastic realms. Apart from the idea that the Dark Lord's corruption of the secondary world will affect the primary world as well (which raises the stakes for the modern-day protagonists of *The Chronicles* and *Fionavar*), there is no cultural diffusion, or indeed any other exchange, between the worlds. Separated as they are from modernity, the medieval-like cities of high/epic fantasy offer little to no

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<sup>3</sup> *The Wheel of Time* takes the protagonists to a number of densely populated cities with quite distinct cultures—the series' level of world building is quite exceptional.

suggestions concerning the problems of urban life in the Anthropocene. They might be threatened by invasion from the Dark Lord's hordes and apocalyptic destruction, yet they are seldom shown suffering from the ailments common to modern cities, such as overflowing waste, inadequate housing, gentrification, shortage of green areas and traffic congestion. Though some of these problems are signaled (e.g., the protagonists might need to endure insanitary conditions or deal with crime), they are presented as inherent elements of the hero's experience of the city rather than examples of failed urban management. The cities of high/epic fantasy are unable to investigate notions of sustainable development and urban ethics in the ways available to other sub-genres of speculative fiction, e.g., urban fantasy and dystopian fiction (the former frequently focuses on the fate of social outcasts, while the latter depicts what might happen to cities if global crises are not resolved).

Given the high/epic fantasy sub-genre's roots in epic poetry, myths and legends, it is not surprising that the city is not of particular interest to its writers. Instead, high/epic fantasy pays attention to the landscape in general (Senior 2012, 120) or to landmarks that are significant for the hero's messianic quest. These landmarks include sacred trees and mountains reminiscent of similar entities in myths and religions across the globe, such as the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Golgotha of Christ's crucifixion and the Norse Yggdrasil (Eliade 1996, 99; 268-99). The quests of high/epic heroes frequently lead to or end at a sacred tree/mountain where the protagonist is supposed to offer up their life in a reconstruction of well-known mythic tales. Cases in point include Paul's ordeal on the Summer Tree (*Fionavar*) and Mat's suffering on the tree Avendesora (*The Wheel of Time*), both of which combine the imagery of Odin's sacrifice on Yggdrasil and Christ's crucifixion; the mountains of Orodruin (*The Lord of the Rings*), Melekurion Skyweir (*The Chronicles*), Rangat (*Fionavar*) and Shayol Ghul (*The Wheel of Time*) are also linked to the cosmic conflict and the hero's sacrifice. The ubiquity of these motifs is partially indebted to Tolkien, an avid reader of ancient myths, who combined his narratives with mythic material. Since subsequent writers tended to rely on *The Lord of the Rings*, recognizing not only its popularity but also the potential locked into the form of high/epic fantasy, the presence of mythic elements was further reinforced. Nonetheless, it seems that this formula is not particularly suitable for addressing the problems of the twenty-first century.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration its reliance on quests driven by cosmic conflicts, (white, male) protagonists given a messianic role, (homogenous) quasi-medieval societies, and unquestioned anthropocentrism, the prototypical form of high/epic fantasy emerges as a literary form whose capacity to address the multiple demands of the Anthropocene is limited. Of course, its inarguably hopeful message that humanity will prevail and that everyone should contribute to the protection of their shared home is indeed relevant in times of global crises. Moreover, given its penchant for extensive world-building

spanning whole centuries—high/epic fantasy is able to present large-scale socio-political and environmental processes which go unnoticed by any individual person because they play out across generations—the complexity and length of high/epic fantasy allows the “slow violence” of the Anthropocene to be illustrated in a way that is inaccessible to other genres (Nixon 2011, 6-16). In this sense, the series chosen for consideration do correspond to Oziewicz’s notion of “planetarianist fantasy” since they, at least in part, draw the reader’s attention to the importance and beauty of the natural world and the detrimental effects of human actions on it, hence combating the “ecocidal unconscious.” Still, the rebirth of high/epic fantasy worlds typically means the restoration or reinforcement of the old order—specifically, the human order—which is hardly a viable solution for the world today. When regarded through the lens of planetarianism, the series become ambiguous, just like the passage on Bilbo’s stone-throwing skills. Thus, high/epic fantasy as developed by Tolkien and subsequent writers now requires some revision and reconfiguration so that it can speak in a new voice that will resonate with contemporary audiences.

Of course, the Anthropocene debates developed only after the series chosen for analysis had been written, so their limited relevance to contemporary challenges should not overshadow their literary value and overall contribution to the development of fantasy as a genre. However, the inherent patterns in these works should still be investigated so that the present generations of high/epic fantasy writers can consciously determine how their works reflect on the current problems and humanity’s relationship with the rest of the living world. Indeed, setting aside the unfinished works of George R.R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire*) and Patrick Rothfuss (*The Kingkiller Chronicle*)—which offer new approaches to high/epic fantasy, but escape a conclusive analysis since their ultimate message, fate of the protagonists, and shape of the imaginary world remain unknown—there are some series that demonstrate that it is possible to alter the patterns of high/epic fantasy. One early example is Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea Cycle* (1968-2001), which successfully reshapes the motif of a quest for an object into an intricate tale of discovering one’s identity and place in the world. A more recent example is Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn* series (2006-2008), which plays with the reader’s expectations regarding the patterns of high/epic fantasy, delivering a tale that subverts the trope of a white male savior on a quest to defeat the Dark Lord as well as adding an ecological catastrophe to the backdrop of the story. In addition, the works of N.K. Jemisin (e.g., *The Inheritance Trilogy*, 2010-2011) renounce high/epic fantasy’s penchant for realms inspired by medieval Europe in favor of more diverse societies that allow the author to introduce a variety of ethnic voices. Inarguably, the sub-genre of high/epic still has much to offer to twenty-first century readers, but only if contemporary fantasists are ready to part with the models created by their predecessors and experiment with well-known tropes, while also creatively addressing the challenges of the contemporary world.<sup>4</sup>

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