

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE CRITICAL UTOPIA OF HIGH FANTASY

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Abstract

The novels *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) and *The Well at the World's End* (1896) by William Morris are considered the formative works of the type of literature which has been labelled high fantasy. The latter is one of the commercially most successful genres of fantasy literature. The two novels are analysed from the perspective of critical utopianism as articulated through a distinctive type of aesthetic structure which was established in these works and has become characteristic of the high fantasy literature. The author of the article suggests that it is this complex of aesthetic structure and its inherent utopian impulse which may be one of the important factors in the perennial popularity of high fantasy.

The term fantasy is one of the more ambiguous, albeit quite frequently employed terms of modern literary criticism. Theoretical model established by Todorov and further developed by others proposes that fantasy should be comprehended not as a genre, but rather as a strategy (Olsen 2) or a mode of writing which has different generic realizations (Jackson 35). This type of approach defines fantasy as a literary mode situated “between the opposite modes of the marvellous and the mimetic” (Jackson 32). The position of fantasy at a collision point between modes of the mimetic and the marvellous is said to cause a textual instability through which fantasy texts hyper-reflexively examine their own status of a literary artefact. Consequently it functions subversively, re-examining the set extra-literary socio-political categories that constitute our consensus reality. Some critics point to the problematical differentiation between mimetic and fantastic modes of writing, since every literary representation of that which is in a certain historical moment considered as extra-literary reality is in essence always a coded representation or recreation based on a selective and arbitrary combining of information (Burcar 2). A mode of writing always enters into a dialog with the consensus reality, whether critically examining it and challenging the symbolic order upon which it is founded, or distancing itself from the problems of socio-political sphere and even serving as a fortifier of the mentioned order. In this context, some ascribe to the fantasy the function of subversion, while the marvellous is considered as conservative or even reactionary.

High fantasy, if observed through the optics of the threefold scheme of literary modes described above, can be considered a generic realization of the mode of the

marvellous. Its other literary realizations include fairy tale, romance, utopia, science fiction, satire and surrealist texts (Olsen 18). Thematically it is associated with magic and supernaturalism (Jackson 33). The narrative events of such texts are usually backed by a coherent ideology (Olsen 18) and the narrative situation is often set in a chronotopically distant and autonomous fictive universe. The characters in the marvellous texts are “larger-than-life, ideal, abstract, and in symbolic relationship to each other” (Olsen 21). Texts feature an impersonal, authoritative, confident and omniscient narrator. As a mode, the marvellous is said to be compensatory, having a passive relation to history (Jackson 33; Olsen 18) expressed in nostalgic longing for an idealized version of the past, its morals and hierarchy. Interestingly, this parallels the marvellous with the mimetic in the sense that both modes are internally stable, lacking the element of metafictional self-reflection.

The literary compound term ‘high fantasy’ was first used by Lloyd Alexander in a 1971 essay *High Fantasy and Heroic Romance* in which he presents the view of high fantasy as a modern literary form that draws heavily upon the mythology and establishes itself within the tradition and the conventions of the heroic romance. As its founders he mentions, among others, William Morris and J.R.R. Tolkien. In a somewhat sentimental manner he emphasizes, as its central characteristic, the power to touch “areas of feeling that no other form touches in quite the same way” (Alexander, “High Fantasy and Heroic Romance”, par. 26). He explicates this feature as being the result of appropriating the material of myth, legend and the Jungian collective unconscious.

The central characteristic of high fantasy, as it is defined today, is that it is a fiction whose narrative events are separated from empirical consensus reality and set entirely in a secondary world, dealing with matters that affect the destiny of that world (Clute 466). A secondary world is defined in this context as “an autonomous world or venue which is not bound to mundane reality ... which is impossible according to common sense and which is self-coherent as a venue for story” (Clute 847). High fantasy in this taxonomy is diametrically opposed by low fantasy, which is set in a simulacrum of consensus reality modified by elements of the fantastic (Stableford 198). The “heterocosmic” (Stableford li) or secondary world fantasies can also be positioned within the taxonomy developed by Farah Mendlesohn who established a trisection model for the application to the field of fantasy literature. One of its three principal categories is the immersive fantasy (Stableford 214). It consists of works in which the whole narrative is set in a secondary world. An important condition and consequence of this immersion is the fact that literary characters “accept the fantastic entities with which they are surrounded as aspects of their normality” (Stableford 214). The implied reader is to share the characters’ acceptance of the secondary world as a given coherent artefact and not to question its ontological status. This displacement from consensus reality, realized through literary construction of autonomous secondary worlds, is one of the main reasons behind the notion of escapism often associated with high fantasy literature.

While every literary text and its constructed fictive reality are intrinsically connected with consensus reality, there are structural differences in the relation to the latter. Rosemary Jackson parallels high fantasy with the tradition of Victorian romance fantasy, emphasising its conservative and repressive function in service of the ruling ideology

(155). Northrop Frye also acknowledges this characteristic of romance as a projection of ideals of the ruling social class, but at the same time suggests that, in any given historical period, romance also exhibits, what he calls, a “proletarian element” (186), a perennial internal impulse towards social change. A similar observation was made by Jack Zipes who, proceeding from the philosophy of E. Bloch and his theory of fairy tales, observes the emancipatory impulse of fantasy and fairy tales. He proposes that these “harbour unfulfilled wishes in figurative form and project the possibility for their fulfilment” (138) and suggests that, while they are not to be understood as substitutes for action, they nevertheless can serve as indicators. Fairy tale and fantasy can thus offer a corrective to the consensus reality, a utopian perspective critical of existing socio-political order. Jackson claims that the writing which employs the mode of marvellous actually moves away from this subversive impulse, expelling the emancipatory desire and channelling it into the creation of benevolent, religious universes and displaced nostalgia (9). In a similar manner, many critics dismiss the secondary worlds of fantasy as essentially escapist devices. Zipes, on the other hand, points to the fact that an escape into a secondary world of fairy tale or fantasy performs the function of estrangement or separation from the limitations of one’s mundane reality, inducing a feeling of possible liberation (141). This naturally does not imply that there exists a sort of universal transcendental category of a better reality. Since every text of literary fantasy is determined by the context within which it is produced, this critical utopia of fantasy texts is always a product of an individual author, placed in a historical, social, economic, political and psychological frame. That being said, it is also imminent that some of the impulses that feed into the utopian drive of these texts originate from the collective aspirations, values and desires of the social group that the author is associated with.

Although William Morris wrote quite a few works which can be considered prototypical works of modern fantasy, it is his novel *The Wood Beyond the World* that is considered to be the first example of high fantasy. The novel tells a story of Golden Walter who travels to the sea and arrives to an unknown land inhabited by an alien race of the Bear people. Here he meets a sorceress who is worshiped as a goddess by the mentioned people. She imprisons Walter, but he manages to escape with the help of her maid who also possesses some magic powers. After their escape Walter becomes a ruler of the world’s chief kingdom while his female companion initiates a social and cultural revolution of the Bear people.

Walter is lured to the sea by what seems as a longing for an unattainable idealised love, which rapidly concretizes into a bodily desire as he arrives to the Wood Beyond the World. Here he is entangled in a game of seduction with the evil Mistress. Although in love with her maid, he is nevertheless attracted by the Mistress and this culminates in a sexual intercourse. Walter’s succumbing to the Mistress is not regarded as a serious trespass neither by him, neither by his would-be true love. After the Mistress is dispensed with and the couple escapes the Wood, they are free to enjoy the consummation of their love.

These liberal views of love and sexuality also carry more profound underlying implications. As Walter travels from the lands of his home to the lands of the Wood Beyond the World, he also passes from patriarchal, male-oriented society into the land

ruled by an earth goddess. The gender roles are subverted here as Walter becomes a thrall to the Mistress. For a protagonist of the novel Walter is rather passive and women characters possess the initiative throughout the larger part of the novel. Gender roles are restored as the lovers descend from the Bear Mountains to the kingdom of Starkwall where Walter assumes the role of a king. Morris seems to parallel civilization with the male principle and technology, while the nature and pre-civilized way of life and social order are associated with the female principle and magic. He is also aware of the institutionalized status of male sexual domination in the civilized society. The Maid thus loses her magical powers as she engages in a sexual intercourse with Walter, symbolizing her subordination.

Described narrative events are played out on the fully fleshed framework of the secondary world. The latter is not a mere background to the events, but plays an important functional role in concretizing author's critical utopian vision. It is only in a fictional universe, imaginatively displaced from the consensus reality, that liberation from the chains of established social, sexual and psychological practices is possible for Morris. In a realm where magic is intrinsically woven into the fabric of the world, the female principle is able to assume equal position along its male counterpart. The beginning of the novel takes place in a medieval-like world, but as Walter travels to the Wood beyond the World, he also travels back in time as the Christian medieval society is replaced by the tribal society of the Bear people and the cult of mother Earth. The concrete utopian quality of the author's vision requires a secondary world which is cohesive and concrete, lest the utopianism recedes to the realm of allegorical and symbolic. This is achieved by providing the secondary world with a sense of spatial, temporal and socio-political depth. The former is achieved in the novel by deploying naturalistic descriptions of the physical aspects of the world. This is especially effective in mapping the surface of the world as Walter observes the unknown land from high viewpoints, mountains and ridges. It is also one of the formal techniques that were adopted by many following authors of fantasy and provides the fictional world with a concrete, physical quality. Other aspects of the secondary world are the historical, social and political dimension, established by depiction of the land's inhabitants and their customs. The old man who receives Walter and his crew in the new land is thus more of a narrative function than a character, providing newcomers (and the reader) with an extensive report of the Bear people. The novel concludes with a brief chronicle of events that occurred in the land after the death of Walter and his queen. *The Wood Beyond the World* is a prototypical work of high fantasy. In the form of a novel, it created a cohesive secondary world, estranged from consensus reality by the use of the marvellous.

The Well at the World's End builds on the elements established in *The Wood Beyond the World*. Expanding the range and depth of its predecessor, it stretches for over 400 pages, representing the longest work of modern literary fantasy before Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a story of Ralph, the youngest son of the king of an idyllic small kingdom of Upmeads, who sets out to explore the world. On his journey he encounters an assortment of other characters while travelling east in search of the elusive and mysterious Well at the World's End, which is rumoured to provide those who drink from it with immortality and eternal happiness.

The novel introduced a plot structure which has become essential of high fantasy; the narrative pattern of quest taken from magic tale or the *Märchen* (Sullivan III 305). Suggested simplicity of the brief synopsis is deceivable. The messages and implications of the story are multi-layered and highly complex. Richard Mathews, for example, points to the systematic reversal of the traditional Christian mythos in the novel, suggesting that Morris criticizes institutionalized Christianity; its repression and limitations imposed on humanity's imaginative, mythical and mystical options and the displacing of attention from the concrete and material world to the afterlife (48). The quest, which could at first be perceived as a version of the quest for the Holy Grail, symbolizing deliverance and eternal bliss in heaven, culminates in the physical act of drinking from the well, which improves tangible conditions of the concrete, material fictional world. Critical stance towards institutionalized Christianity is observable throughout the novel. First instance of it appears at the very beginning of the story, when Ralph receives an amulet from a woman who explicitly forbids him to have it blessed. As Ralph travels east, he gradually leaves behind the Christian society and passes into a world of customs and traditions that predate Christianity (Mathews 49).

The theme of relation between male and female principle, introduced already in *The Wood Beyond the World* reoccurs here. On his travels, Ralph encounters two female characters that have profound influence on him and the course of his quest. Each of these encounters marks a stage in hero's path, the process of his 'growing up'. The first character is Lady of Abundance, who is obviously superior to Ralph and is also the book's strongest female character. Though the narrative is focalized through the perspective of the main hero, she relates a story of her past which is narrated by a first person narrator, thus providing additional perspective on the narrative events, while also revealing her as emotionally and intellectually more complex character than Ralph. She initiates him into sexual experience and is responsible for his emotional development. Only after his experience with her, is Ralph prepared to encounter his female counterpart Ursula, who appears as his equal. Their union "symbolizes an integration of the male and female aspects of the psyche" (Mathews 50).

By introducing female characters who are equal or superior to the male hero, the novel expresses implicit criticism of established gender roles and reveals the existence of alternative possibilities. These cease to possess merely allegorical quality and acquire a more explicit and concrete utopian character when incorporated into the structure of an internally authentic and cohesive secondary world. This is shaped with an unprecedented detail and complexity, from its temporal and spatial features, to its historical and socio-political attributes. Ralph's journey traverses the lands from the homely west and all the way to the east most extremities of the fictive universe.

As the journey progresses, the spatial dimension and sensory impressions of the secondary world are conveyed with an unusual, almost naturalistic detail. The surface of the land is meticulously mapped; the device often employed to this end being the hero's view from different high vantage points; hills, mountains and ridges. Descriptions of the landscape and its features are not superficial or formulaic; different woods, hills, plains, rivers and wastes possess their own distinctive features. Geography and landscape on the whole change perceivably as the hero travels further east. Attention to detail is demonstrated in the descriptions of much of the secondary world's material

culture, from descriptions of weapons and richly adorned clothing, to minute details of buildings smelling “of the new-shaven oak (for the roof was not yet painted)” (Morris 1994: 155). The journey is recounted in detail by making extensive use of the cardinal directions, which increases spatial perception and orientation through the geography of the secondary world.

Another important facet of this world is the temporal dimension, both in the sense of the organization of narrative time, as well as in providing the internal historical frame of the secondary world. While the former is actually functionally connected with establishing the spatial aspect mentioned above, the latter puts the narrative events into a broader perspective and context. The main plot is interrupted by accounts of the history of different lands, kingdoms and places that the hero travels through. Lady of Abundance thus gives an account of her past life in which individual experience interweaves with political history. Gradually, these fragments combine to form a larger complex and furnish the richly crafted geography of the novel’s secondary world with a sense of historical depth. This is not only an aesthetic device, nor is it motivated by a desire to provide the fictive world with any kind of glorious or mythical prehistory. Its character is unmistakably political. The history of this secondary world a history of border skirmishes, occupation, colonisation, civil wars and political intrigue. The socio-political order of the fictive world in the moment of Ralph’s quest is a continuation of the historical development as chronicled by various characters of the novel. This is a world of politics whose lands, kingdoms and towns are not isolated sub-worlds but are a part of the global socio-political dynamics of the fictive universe. It is not a static background but a chessboard for the power play of world’s different figures. The Burgh of the Four Firths wages an exhausting and merciless war against the Brotherhood of the Dry Tree, while the kingdom of Goldburg maintains a delicate equilibrium with Lord of Utterboll. Even the idyllic little kingdom of Upmeads is involved in a neighbourly dispute over a patch of a no-man’s land with an evocative name The Wood Disputable. This political framework is firmly rooted in socio-economic foundations of the fictive world. The dynamics of political relations are not based on romantic ideals or notions of honour and nationality, but receive their main impetus from economic factors; struggle for land, workforce and natural resources.

Although essentially based on a medieval society and material culture, the secondary world of *The Well* is by no means uniform. It contains kingdoms of enlightened absolutism, towns led by the clergy or merchant guilds, militant and materialistic slaveholding civilizations, farming communities, tribal societies and barbaric kingdoms led by tyrannical warlords. Ralph visits churches, monasteries, castles, merchant manors, farms, tribal villages, slave markets and pagan shrines. The differences among various social groups, civilizations, cultures and their representatives which he encounters are graphically described, at moments colouring his travels with a kind of picaresque quality.

Described temporal, spatial and socio-political dimensions are not independent of each other, but are systematically intertwined to form a complex totality. This kind of interrelation and integration of various aspects of the alternative fictive universe and its logical organization provide the secondary world with a high degree of internal authenticity, cohesiveness and integrity. The structure could perhaps be observed through the

optics of the theoretical model developed by Darko Suvin although, strictly speaking, he applied it to the study of science fiction. He defines science fiction as “a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (qtd in Roberts 7). If we apply this to *The Well*, we can observe that its secondary world is estranged from the empirical or consensus reality of the reader/author. This estrangement is performed mainly through the elements of the marvellous and magical, which render the fictive world, at least in this aspect, radically different from consensus reality. Nevertheless, the imaginary world is presented as empirical in the sense of being constructed by following certain principles of cognitive logic. Though imaginatively displaced, the secondary world is organized around some of the basic postulates, along with the temporal and spatial order, which are not arbitrary and unstable but fixed and having the character of empirical laws and axioms of the consensus reality.

The secondary world in *The Well* proceeds from being merely a setting or a background for the plot, to being one of the central elements of the novel. This generates a shift from the individual character of Ralph to the community, or rather, communities of the secondary world. Ralph and his quest are still a central part of the novel, but they become linked to a greater communal project; the socio-political fate of the secondary world. As he travels east, Ralph observes the social and political structure of the world, often perceiving it as wrong and unjust. As the act of drinking from the restorative well is completed, the novel continues with an account of the long journey back to the Upmeads, during which Ralph and Ursula witness all the previous wrongs and evils of the world corrected. Though this may appear anticlimactic and unnecessary from the strictly narrative perspective, it has an important function in the broader utopian context of the book. Mathews writes that “Ralph and Ursula drink not for themselves but for the sake of the world and of life, and their quest is finally completed and meaningful only if it increases happiness and beauty beyond themselves” (52).

Utopianism of *The Well* is fundamentally dependent on and expressed through the aesthetic structure established in the novel. The plot structure is integrated with the structure of secondary world to form a larger unified complex. Critical utopia of *The Well at the World’s End*, “displaces the affairs of human culture from the superstructure” (Uedin qtd. in Zipes 140), severing them from the symbolic order of the consensus reality, and rearranges the elements of the mentioned reality in framework of an imagined fictive universe. Perhaps even more significant than the displacement of the mentioned elements, is the possibility of their dislocation and shifting through the activity of literary characters. In *The Well*, Ralph and Ursula thus cause a restructuration of the socio-political order by drinking from the magical well. The quest pattern is integrated into an elaborately and systematically realized construction of the imagined universe. By completing his journey, the hero not only grows up and experiences personal transformation, but also causes a shift and reorganization in the structure of the secondary world.

Though far from being programmatic or outlining “a graphic plan of what the future world will be like” (Zipes, 138), the utopianism of *The Well at the World’s End* is nevertheless substantive and concrete, critically commenting a tangible cultural and

socio-economical order. The structural relation of such secondary world to the real one is not symbolic or allegorical, but is in fact much closer to mimetic representation (Rosebury 10). Utopian impulse of *The Well at the World's End* is thus somewhat different from the one in another generic realization of the marvellous - the fairy tale, being less simplifying or encapsulating in the sense of allegory. It is articulated through estranged and marvellous, but structurally logical and coherent literary secondary world.

The latter is constructed upon models of medieval culture and society; the fact which can be attributed to Morris's literary influences, chief among which came from Malory and Icelandic sagas, as well as to his political views and philosophy. Morris was a socialist but thought feudalism superior to capitalism. He believed that society based on self-interest was not the only possible form of society. In feudal society he saw models of social organization in which an individual was not yet alienated from the products of his labour. This world, although having its many injustices and brutalities, did not incorporate the large scale social and economic evils of the industrial world (Wilmer xxiv). This peculiar character of Morris's political and philosophical beliefs is clearly demonstrated in *The Well*. The narrative situation is placed in a quasi-medieval world, but one which is, within its limitations, actually quite liberal and progressive. An ideal model of society as perceived by the protagonist of the book and concretized by the kingdom of Upmeads is indeed a medieval and a hierarchical one, but one in which lower classes also possess a high degree of personal freedom, are able to dispose with the products of their labour and are not marginalized on the basis of their social position. In fact, manual labour in this secondary world is highly regarded and even Ralph is described as "deft in all manner of sports and crafts, such as up-country folk follow, and though he were a king's son, he had made a doughty yeoman" (Morris 1994: 280).

While this could be, and often is, dismissed as a sentimental and nostalgic longing for past values and ideals realized through romantic escapism and mannerism, some critics here also detect a more profound expression of deep social discontent. According to Bloch, the socio-economic development brings about certain non-synchronization in the lives of people; a fracture between the material conditions of people and their consciousness (qtd in Zipes 139). This is a consequence of social development that does not fully resolve the contradictions of the past society as, for example, in transition from manual forms of labour to automation and complex technology (Zipes 140). In the process, the needs and wishes of certain social groups are not satisfactorily integrated into the new socio-economic order, which causes the mentioned non-synchronous longing for the past (Zipes 140).

Although not a representative of the lower classes that Bloch had in mind, as a socialist, Morris was without doubt acutely aware of the problems that were experienced by these social groups in the capitalist society. *The Well* may have also been used to voice these, as well as some of his own personal concerns and desires. In the same manner that the secondary world of Morris's fantasy is more than only an aesthetic or mannerist device and a means of escapism, the choice of the medieval template for the construction of the secondary world is probably not coincidental, but grounded in certain aspects of modern social conscience. The quasi-medieval secondary world of *The Well* is, for Morris, therefore not "a refuge from the present ... [but] helps him to understand the present and construct, in imagination, an alternative future" (Wilmer xxvii). Although

the reference point of his literary work is in the past, his concern is with the present and the future (Williams 159). This seeking of answers in the imaginatively reconstructed past of humankind is perhaps best encapsulated by the course of Ralph's quest. As he travels east, to the sunrise, to the beginning and to the origins, the society and culture that he encounters become increasingly primitive. Mathews interprets this as a message from Morris that "the future time is redeemed and reclaimed only by overcoming and finally transforming human history. The narrative is a repudiation of human history, fallen and corrupt, which can be redeemed only by looking beyond its source" (51). The well at the world's end is thus, paradoxically, located at its beginning.

The type of literary fantasy that Morris established with his works *The Wood Beyond the World* and *The Well at the World's End* has become one of the staples of modern fantasy literature. After the success of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which created a thriving popular market for fantasy writing that has lasted to this day, this kind of literature was retrospectively classified as high fantasy. It is defined by what Brian Rosebury suggests are two kinds of structure integrated into a single aesthetic complex (27), the type of which already appears with Morris. The first component is the "plot-based structure" (Rosebury 27), which repeats the quest pattern employed in *The Well*. The other is the "comprehensive structure of the invented world" (29), meaning the cohesive and internally authentic secondary world structure as established in *The Well*. Both of these are integrated in an overarching, all-inclusive structure (Rosebury 27). As in *The Well*, this does not possess only an aesthetic function, but is also an expression of a critical utopian impulse.

High fantasy maps the gap between the alienating forces of capitalism and the aspirations of an individual for a meaningful experience. It employs the structure of a secondary world to achieve imaginative liberation from the cultural and socio-political constraints and create a meaningful and coherent alternative universe in which an individual has not yet lost his power to influence the world through activity. The thematic grounding of the secondary world in a medieval-based template, as employed already by Morris, conveys criticism of contemporary socio-economic order and could be interpreted through the optics of Bloch's concept of non-synchronization, as described above.

Although one could speculate that the basic premise of the high fantasy utopianism is generally humanistic, this claim would require an extensive research. The task is rendered extremely difficult if not impossible by the sheer quantity of texts that emerged in the aftermath of the success of Tolkien's high fantasy trilogy. This created a set of reader expectations and contributed to the fact that a great majority of subsequent works have been more or less imitative, causing a lack of innovation and a production of formulaic fiction. A characteristic of the high fantasy literature is the existence of the so called mega-text; a common collection of special language conventions, narrative formulae, plots, icons and collective images (Luckhurst 7). Literature based on such a limited foundation is obviously subjected to repetition and exhaustion. It is therefore questionable to speak of high fantasy genre today as anything more than a commercial label promoting the sales of published material. At the same time, the perennial popularity of the high fantasy literature demonstrates its unyielding attraction for readers. And though the majority of commodified writing that is published under this label may be

relatively poor in literary and aesthetic value, it perhaps receives its main appeal from the fact that its characteristic aesthetic and narrative structure is nonetheless conveying a feeling of liberation and a certain kind of inherent utopian impulse, however exhausted this may be.

Jackson claims that this kind of utopianism does not actually engage with divisions inside human culture, since the secondary worlds like those of the two Morris's novels are autonomous and located outside human (154). They promote passive relation to history and encourage counter-productive sentimentalism and longing (Jackson 33, 155). The subversive and critical component of such utopianism, although commenting upon central problems of human society, is thus blunted by the very realization through the form of high fantasy. While not necessary reactionary, the high fantasy does seem to approach the criticism of the consensus reality somewhat tentatively.

Interestingly enough, it is perhaps exactly this pedestrian quality of the high fantasy critical utopia that accounts for its general social acceptance, dissemination and commercial success. The benign character of high fantasy utopianism is most evidently manifested by the fact that this literature was readily adopted and exploited by the very same system that is an implicit target of its criticism. It is ironical that literature which received one of its fundamental formative impulses from the resistance against the capitalist socio-economical order has turned into one of its most successful literary products. But, as Zipes writes, perhaps "The very strength of the system is also its weakness, and fantasy, even as it is being instrumentalized, demands a sensual and spiritual fulfilment which runs contrary to the exploitative goals of capitalism" (149).

The two analysed novels by Morris have introduced a type of aesthetic and narrative structure which has become inseparably associated with the kind of literature labelled high fantasy. The fictive universe in which the story is situated is detached from the reality of the reader. It is a realm of marvellous and magic, similar to those of fairy tales, but executed and realized with a much higher detail and complexity. Liberating the reader from the confinements of his or her mundane reality, the high fantasy offers an immersion into a world whose limits seem to be placed further, allowing the incorporation of magical and numinous. At the same time, this secondary world is structured around and governed by internal logic similar to the one of empirical reality, providing a comfortable degree of familiarity. In Morris's novels, this structure allows an explicit expression of criticism towards certain aspects of the extra-literary reality, while at the same time suggesting the existence of viable alternatives. Regardless of whether the utopian vision offered by these works is labelled as regressive or progressive, the fact remains that it suggests a corrective to perceived faults of consensus reality. The secondary world of these novels can be considered such a corrective; often being itself imperfect or faulty, but allowing the possibility of being corrected as in *The Well at the World's End*. Perhaps it is this underlying mechanics more than the thematic structure and content of the works, that which accounts for the perennial attraction of high fantasy writing. And while the latter, with its thematic reliance on preindustrial, semifeudal and hierarchical models of society may be perceived, and justly so, as regressive and sentimentalist, the underlying critical message it conveys is nevertheless again gaining significance. Finding itself in somewhat of a blind alley of capitalist economic development, humanity may yet be inclined to look upon the

warnings of the utopian visions articulated through works of high fantasy with a different disposition.

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