
UNIT 2 FANTASY

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2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

When you have read through this Unit, you will know that fantasy is a human urge, particularly strong with children. Fantasy makes a deep and lasting impression on young minds and has, therefore, played a large and effective role in fiction for children throughout history. The growth of science and the dawn of the space age have opened up new possibilities for fantasy.

The aim of this Unit is to

- provide a definition of fantasy and trace its origin and development from folklore and fairy tales to present-day fantasies for children;
- note the various literary and other forms of fantasy;
- envisage the role of fantasy in children's literature today, and the avenues that science and the space age have opened up for it; and finally,
- suggest guidelines for those who wish to write fantasy tales for children

In the light of the suggestions offered here, you will learn to

- choose the form of fantasy that suits your way of writing;
- treat your chosen theme in simple yet lively language;
- avoid clichés;
- make your stories morally edifying;
- realise that children's films too offer an attractive field for a writer;
- select proper themes and cultivate the art of script-writing for such films.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit we talked about appropriate themes for children and how these themes should be handled. We shall here consider fantasy as a subject for children's stories. Children are attracted to fantasy. Not only do they live in a fantastic world of their own, they also find it easy to enter into other people's worlds of fantasy.

It is wrong to suppose, as some people do, that writing for children is easy or simple. Ask any writer of renown to write a children's story for a change, and see how he struggles to achieve it, and how seldom he succeeds. Writing for children needs special gifts. If you wish to write for a child, what you need above all is to know the child's mind. This applies to all children's literature, but especially to fantasy.

Children go on imagining things. A child's imagination is much more powerful than a grown-up person's. A grown-up need not lead a child into fantasy; more often the child will lead him into it. That is why you cannot write a good fantasy tale for children unless you are one with the child, unless you have luckily retained the childlike quality of imagination through the years of adult life.

2.2 WHAT IS FANTASY?

Fantasy is creating a world of fancy — a world in which unreal people and creatures roam about doing unexpected things and encountering unreal adventures. Sometimes the characters are real, but they are surrounded by an atmosphere of magic and unreality. A child, who has only lately entered the world, looks upon everything with curiosity and amazement. It not only marvels at things but wonders at their whys and wherefores and there can come a stage when he starts putting life into inanimate things.

2.3 ORIGIN OF FANTASY: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Fantasy has a long tradition, as it is embedded in the history of mankind. Man began to imagine things much before he started putting them into a coherent and logical form. He had to face different awe-inspiring forces of nature and he deified them. Since these forces seemed to be controlling his destiny, he thought they must be superior beings living in a supernatural world. Once this was taken for granted, he allowed his fancy to roam in this supernatural world. He gave names to the different deities and worshipped them. He imagined them performing feats of unbelievable strength. This gave rise to songs and stories woven round these superior beings. But the era of mythology is now over. Our aim is to write for today's child.

2.4 IMPACT OF FOLKLORE AND FAIRY TALES ON CHILDREN

In pre-historic times, fantasy took the form of anonymous folk and fairy tales which for long years, without ever being written down, were passed on from mouth to mouth. Such too have been 'grandma stories' in India, which have for centuries fascinated children and kept their imagination alive. The characters in these stories are Kings and Queens, heroes, wise men and fools, animals that talk and act like human beings, or normal human beings who meet with abnormal experiences and vice versa.

The **Katha-saritsagara** and **Jataka** stories have a variety of characters such as merchants and beggars, fools and wise men who are often confronted by giants, ogres and magicians. The influence of magic pervades through oriental stories just as much as through European folk tales of the Grimm Brothers and Anderson.

Most of these stories have one common feature: the construction of the plot is simple and the appeal is direct. There is generally a quest for some ideal in such stories.

Apart from stories or poems, fantasy can be given such audio-visual forms as drama or film. Small children take delight in seeing fanciful things actually happening on the stage or screen. Children, if a little grown-up, do not need in drama much 'property'; appropriate sound and simple miming in accordance with the author's instructions can be enough to reproduce a whole scene before their imaginative eyes. However, since a play or drama is nothing but a performable story, we will concentrate only on the story form in this Unit.

2.5 FORMS OF FANTASY

Children love fairy tales. These tales fascinate and ennoble them. Since they are innocent and fair-minded, the triumph of good over evil leaves a deep impression on their minds. As

2.5.2 The arrival of the space age

With the turn of the nineteenth century, a new vista was opened for us by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Science lured us towards the skies and then launched us into outer space. Many of the inventions foreseen by Wells and Verne, such as aeroplanes and rockets, are now everyday reality. The space age is upon us. Imagination has acquired new wings. The place of the rakshasas in the Puranas and the great heroes who overpowered them is taken by space monsters and supermen. Look particularly at the field of comics. Almost half of it has been invaded by space and interstellar flights and wars.

Damon Knight says in his introduction to **Worlds To Come**:

What science fiction has been doing for the last forty years is to shake up people's thinking, get them sceptical of dogma, get them used to the idea of change, let them dare to want new things.

2.5.3 Fantasy today (I)

Fantasy does not die. It lives. It is the most enchanting form of fiction, because it knows no limits of time or space. The magic wand still holds its sway. Many contemporary authors have written fairy tales with a new twist.

Jay Williams wrote two exciting fairy tales as recently as in 1969-73. This author adopts the old style and craft, but with some revolutionary changes. Why should a young man alone display bravery while the girl must sit idly in an ivory tower, waiting to be rescued by a hero on horseback? No. It is William's **Practical Princess** who slays the dragon and lets the Prince out, though in another of William's stories it is not before she has stubbornly insisted that the '**Good-for-Nothing Prince**' shed laziness and make a move.

Jane Yolen is another such author. She adopts the Chinese aura for her fairy tales—**The Emperor's Kite** and **The Seventh Mandarin**. Mandarins were wealthy noblemen of feudal times who, like the King, never left their big mansions to move about among the commoners. This Emperor had a kite which was supposed to be the carrier of his soul. It was the job of Mandarin no. 7 to guard it against mishap. But one day the kite was blown off far, far away and the Seventh Mandarin had to go in search of it. Thus began a quest. This Mandarin, like the great Buddha, witnesses many miserable scenes on the way and comes to know what life really means. And it is this kind of quest which is the backbone of every good fantasy.

2.5.4 Fantasy today (II)

The animal fantasy of modern times started with the **Jungle Book** and **Just-so Stories** of Rudyard Kipling. Kipling created a very attractive world of jungle and beasts. The animal world later acquired other dimensions at the hands of such imaginative writers as Beatrice Potter, Kenneth Grahame, Margery Sharp, C.S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander, Michael Bond, Robert Lawson and others.

In a Michael Bond story, a little bear is named Paddington because the Brown family found it in that railway station after it had lost its way in the city of London. The bear is brought up in their household. But when the grateful animal tries to do some good to his benefactors in his own queer way, he creates real problems. Little readers love his acrobatics. Beverly Cleary too has written a similar simple story about a mouse who rides on the toy bike of his boy-master, creating lots of fun.

In Kenneth Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows**, four animals—the Water Rat, the Mole, the Toad and the Badger—form a friendship. The kind-hearted Badger is the wisest of them all, while the Rat is practical and the Mole, though talkative, is appreciative of good things. The queerest character is the Toad, who because of his many fads, tumbles into trouble again and again and is rescued by his friends. There is a very detailed description of the dwelling of each of these animals—from the pompous palace on Toad Hill to the cosy little Rat-Hole on the river bank. It is an excellent story for reading aloud to children.

2.6 GUIDELINES FOR NEW WRITERS

Let us see now what guiding principles we can adopt as writers of fantasy. Consider the following:

- a) What is the fantastic element you are going to choose? Is it size (gigantic or minuscule) or is it sudden assumption of a different size through magic? Or is it the assumption of different shapes—like a man turning into an animal or vice versa?

- b) Do you want your characters to enter a fantastic world, or meet fantastic characters? (Like Alice in Wonderland or Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz)
- c) Do you want to describe happenings in an imaginary animal world?
- d) Do you choose the miraculous finding of a treasure?
or
- e) Are you going to show the reader miraculous things happening in thoroughly modern surroundings?

Select any one of such subjects and make it your central idea. Do not wander away from it too far and do not introduce too many fantasy elements. It will only create confusion in the mind of the reader. For instance, if you want to write science fiction, then select any one item, viz. space travel, the atomic world, the magic of flora and fauna, invisibility, or futuristic marvels. Remember that modern children hunger as much for fantasy as for scientific information. If you give them some stupid fantasy, they will laugh up their sleeves. Give full scope to your imagination, work out new scientific marvels; but at the same time do not let your pen go astray from basic scientific principles. According to Hugo Gernsback, 'there has to be reasonableness' in science fiction. Remember also that though the modern juvenile reader is quite sophisticated, his grasp has some limitations. It is worth noting here that many of the Asimov and Clarke stories will not interest children.

2.7 TREATMENT OF FANTASY

- a) Once you have chosen your fantasy aspect, you have to make it **believable**. The surprise element should not be exaggerated. The reader should follow the course of the story in a natural way. Alice meets funny people like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Humpty Dumpty etc., but she treats them as if they were normal gentlemen.
- b) A fantasy also must have a **logical framework**; not logical from our practical point of view, but adhering to some way of thinking which the characters themselves have evolved. Remember how, from the Duchess down to the Rabbit, everyone argues vehemently with Alice.
- c) Do not make your story too long. A read-aloud story for tiny tots should average 800-1000 words; and even a long-drawn fantasy should not exceed 2000 words.
- d) A fantasy is a literary piece too. Because you allow your fantasy to ramble, you have no right to write in a slipshod manner. Keep in mind the age group for which you want to write—or rather for which you are suited to write. Not all writers can cater to all age groups. There are very few Enid Blytons in this field. Your style should suit the subject; but you have got to have a style. Good characterisation and weaving of plot is as necessary in a fantasy as in any other form of literature. Children are more critical than we think they are. They will throw away a book that will not interest them. The plot should get 'curiouser and curiouser' as the story proceeds.

2.7.1 Introducing a moral: virtue to be extolled

It is important to remember that even in a fantasy there should be a moral. We must not, of course, make it too obvious, because entertaining the child is our first aim. At the same time, a streak of virtue must run through the story. Cruelty may appear here and there—it is necessary because even small children do gloat over a little violence. But it must not get the upper hand. Love and kindness towards animals as well as other human beings is an essential quality in every good story written for children.

Activity 2

- i) Mention some of the innovations in modern fantasy tales. (50 words)
- ii) What guidelines can be suggested for an aspiring writer of fantasies for children? (70 words)
- iii) What characteristics should a fantasy possess? (70 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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2.7.2 Guard against racial bias

In adhering to ethical values, we must also remember what the twentieth century and the two world-wars have taught us. We have now realised that human beings are the same all the world over, whether in India, in England or in Africa. There should be no ethnic discrimination in our writing; no encouragement, howsoever oblique, to apartheid or slavery. Do read the novel **The Secret Friends** by Nan Chancey. In this Australian story, a white girl Lexie meets Merrina, an aboriginal girl from Tasmania. Merrina is fascinated by Lexie's clothes, her zipper, and the fact that she can 'unpeel' her shoes and socks. Merrina wears no clothes. (Little children have no inhibition. Remember Anderson's fairy tale 'The Emperor's New Clothes'.) These two form a lasting friendship, and help each other out of their own people's ignorant and biased attitudes.

2.7.3 Concluding advice

Finally, I would repeat that you should turn to writing a fantasy for children, only if you have a natural inclination to do so; if you enjoy the company of children; if like them, you can imagine wonderful things happening to wonderful people.

The hilarious story 'Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang' (many of you must have seen the film) took children by storm. It was the only children's story written by the author. And do you know who the author was? The 'Adults Only' author, Ian Fleming of James Bond fame. With that one story he entered the hearts of children.

If you have that urge, then do write a fantasy for children. But then too, I would advise you to read as many tales of fantasy as have been enumerated here. That will suggest to your mind a variety of themes and train you to cultivate your style and vocabulary—and to exercise restraint in shaping your story.

2.8 SUMMING UP

To sum up, fantasy consists in creating an imaginary world in which real, or fanciful and unreal characters meet with impossible adventures that are made plausible and significant. Love of fantasy is embedded in human nature and specially in the child's mind, which is always open to wonder.

Coming down to us, through early folklore and fairy tales, fantasy plays a large role in children's writings even today. New possibilities have been opened for it by modern science and technology, and the birth of the space age.

If you have the capacity to identify yourself with children, and have a lively sense of wonder, you can think of writing children's fantasies.

If you do so, you should

- choose, out of a wide variety of forms, the one that suits your style best;
- give free range to your imagination in your writing;
- introduce in your story, however fanciful it might be, a logic of its own;
- write in a language which is picturesque but simple enough to be understood by a child of whatever age you have in mind;
- remember that fantasy should not only entertain but also instruct and edify; and
- guard against any racial or social bias.

Activity 3

- 'Three Little Pigs', 'Alddin and the Wonderful Lamp' and 'Sleeping Beauty' are three among the best-loved fairy tales. Which of these would you call the best, and why? (50 words)
- Select any one of these types and write an outline of a similar modern fantasy of your own. (100 words)

(Check your answers with the hints given at the end of the Unit)

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2.9 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- We have to forget being an adult. We should be able to enter the child's mind, to understand his peculiar sensibility, his imagination and his impressionable nature. This needs an effort of a special kind. We have also to write in a language which the child can understand and enjoy.
- The child has a natural capacity to create an imaginative world of his own. He often lives in it. He doesn't care for logic and reason as much as for enchantment and fancies. Fantasy is habitual for him. Being new to the world, he is full of curiosity and a sense of wonder. Marvels for him are real.
- The early forms of fantasy were folk tales and fairy tales, often orally narrated. The fable (animals talking like humans) has been a traditionally and universally popular form. The Panchatantra is a classic in this form. Then there are other forms like science fantasies, space fantasies, fantasies in the form of 'comics', etc. Some adult books have become children's fantasies (e.g. Gulliver's Travels).

- iv) The child, being highly sensitive and fond of inhabiting a fanciful world, absorbs a fantasy mentally. He retains the impression even when he grows up. The lessons contained in a fantasy become a part of his psychology.

Activity 2

- i) The place of fairies, rakshasas and apsaras is now taken by space monsters, supermen and robots. We now have technological fantasies. New values like international fellowship scientific logic, belief in reason, a new view of the girl in heroic 'masculine' roles, the child as a freer, more independent being are some of the innovative elements in modern fantasies.
- ii) Look up 2.10 and 2.10.2
- iii) a) A fantasy should be imaginatively inventive.
b) It should be full of surprises, but the element of surprise should not be overdone.
c) It should be logical in its own way.
d) It should be written in an interesting and simple style.
e) It should introduce moral and social values in an unobtrusive way.

Activity 3

- i) Keep the following in mind:
- a) inventiveness
b) element of surprise
c) liveliness
d) joy of triumph
e) human interest.