

Practice in Context
Dissertation Proposal

Nature, Fantasy, and Folklore

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BA course Title: Illustration BA Hons

Word count: 2650

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Proposed question for Independent Inquiry: How important is nature in folklore and fantasy?

This essay will be looking into three keywords, Folklore, Nature, and Fantasy. For the keywords, three key thinkers will be considered: illustrator and artist Justin Gerard for nature, illustrator Brian Froud for fantasy, and writer Joseph Jacobs for folklore. As well as this, a minimum of three key images will be used to aid the research and exploration of these topics. Looking into the chosen keywords will lead to further research and the final question of 'How Important is Nature in Folklore and Fantasy?'

Folklore

Folklore, the "beliefs, and customs of a group of people" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019), has been present in storytelling for hundreds of years. Tales have been passed down in communities through "word of mouth" (Oxford, 2021), preserving distinctive characteristics, which solidified Folklore as an iconic genre of storytelling. Folklore is used to spread precautionary tales to warn children, and adults, of the dangers in life. Throughout history, Folklore has been the subject of discussion with different theorists commenting on the creation, and the sharing, of classic tales. These writings will be examined in this essay, with a particular focus on Folklorist Joseph Jacobs. The ways Folklore has become a conduit for sharing people's cultures will be explored, and how their surroundings mirror the natural world in which they originate. Finally, Folklore's influence on modern media using the genre's paradigms in a modern context will be assessed.

In the Victorian era, Folklore became centered around two theories arguing its origin. The theories were "Diffusion Theory" and "Invention Theory" (Alan Fine, 1987). Diffusion Theory was spearheaded by folklorist Joseph Jacobs (Alan Fine, 1987), whilst Invention Theory was championed by the "Great Team" (Alan Fine, 1987). The Theory of Diffusion suggested that societies shared their Folklore through "points of interpersonal contact" (Alan Fine, 1987). In contrast, Invention Theory proposed that the stories came from "psychological make-up" (Alan Fine, 1987), independent from exterior influence. If Jacob's theory about diffusion is true, it means that Folklore did not originate in one specific location. It could mean that most tales are a mix of different cultures' ideas, and the stories we know today are different from what they

originally were. However, if Invention Theory is true, it means that each Folklore story is direct from one area and gives modern society an insight into what societies were concerned about in the past.

Jacobs said that he viewed Folklore in an anthropological way as “he was not interested in the printed sources as literature” (Alan Fine, 1987), and instead wanted to just enjoy them as stories. This reflects his idea that tales were a tool of personal connection, and therefore he wanted to promote the emotive and personal aspects of the tales. Jacobs felt Folklore was integral to maintaining culture and was particularly passionate about keeping “Celtic folklore alive” (Fairytalez.com, 2019) due to its decline today. This highlights the importance of folklore in preserving the identity and history of a culture, and the role it can play in its continuation.

Folklore reflects its culture’s natural surroundings and utilises this to create emotion within the audience. In Little Red Riding Hood, a tale from Germany, the story is set in the Black Forest or “Schwarzwald” (Collins, 2021), which conveys the key, dark and foreboding ambience of the story. Reflecting how at the time, the unknown was a daunting prospect, and how venturing alone was dangerous. This literary device can also be seen in modern media, such as in The Witcher (The Witcher, 2019). This takes inspiration from “European mythology” (Allen Clark, 2019), and uses this idea when the protagonist, Geralt, takes on a Striga (The Witcher, 2019). In the fictional kingdom of Temeria, the setting is dark and gloomy, which alludes to the dangerous nature of the mission. It also shows how the people of medieval Europe, and people today, are both scared by the same things. Despite the medium changing over time, the themes and the devices used, appears to have remained consistent throughout history.

A Folktale that uses nature as its key subject, is the Greek Myth of Persephone and Hades. Hades wanted to marry Persephone but her mother, Demeter the Goddess of agriculture, would not allow it. Hades, angry about being denied marriage, kidnapped Persephone, and took her to the underworld. Demeter fell into a depression, and the “land grew barren” (Mueller, 2017). Later in the story, an agreement is made that Persephone must stay in the underworld for four months of the year, and the rest she can stay with her mother. Through this tale, the seasons have been personified as a reflection of Demeter’s emotions. In modern society, we know that the seasons are how the earth and sun move around each other, but in ancient Greece, it was a way of gods showing their powers, and how they were linked to nature.

Nature

Nature has always been prevalent within art and literature, as part of a setting, to convey a feeling, or the creative piece itself. Nature inspired art movements such as the Pre-Raphaelites, who were urged to “go to nature” (Chatfield, 2019) by John Ruskin. The use of Nature is an instrumental tool when creating emotion in paintings, and will be examined, with reference to Justin Gerard. Gerard uses nature to portray the mood and story in his paintings, creating emotion within the audience, whilst highlighting the significance of different aspects. Other artists use nature for portraying a mood or setting, whilst writers use nature as a descriptive tool. Nature has been personified in literature since its inception. To highlight how this contrasts the use of nature by Gerard, the personification utilised in the novel, ‘The Poetics of Space’ (Bachelard and R. Stilgoe, 2014) will be considered. In this, a hurricane is described to be “possessed by the spirits” (Bachelard and R. Stilgoe, 2014).

The Pre Raphaelite-Brotherhood (PRB) were a group of artists from Victorian London. They followed Ruskin’s theories about art by “scorning nothing” (Chatfield, 2019) when producing their work. Inspired by literature, Nature, and emotion, their work was a complete juxtaposition to the popular work at the time. Art in the Industrial era was about social commentary. The PRB’s art was never taken seriously, as they painted as a form of escapism, and purposefully “ignored the conventions of their day” (Windling, 2017).

Similarly, to Folklore and Fantasy, most of their paintings were based on myths, “Celtic legends and English folklore” (Windling, 2017). The PRB painting “Clytie with Sunflowers” (Chatfield, 2015) is based on a Greek myth. Clytie falls in love with Apollo, the god of the sun, who later pursues Clytie’s friend and, in her jealousy, tells her friend's father, who then buries his daughter alive. Apollo was so angry Clytie did this, he turned her into a sunflower. Clytie’s grief is personified through the sunflowers, watching the sun move across the sky and bowing their heads in sadness when it sets. This painting shows how when painting from myth, the PRB still uses Nature as an integral part of their identity and include it as a main feature in their paintings. Another painting that mixes Nature and myth is “Nymphs finding the head of Orpheus”. The contrast of beauty and the “grotesque” (Chatfield, 2013) in the painting gives the audience a false sense of security. The audience first sees the nymphs, who represent beauty, but then are shocked by the floating head. This flips the dynamic of the painting, making the audience more intrigued.



'Clytie', Evelyn De Morgan

“Clytie with Sunflowers” (De Morgan, 1885)



'Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus' (John William Waterhouse)

“Nymphs finding the head of Orpheus” (William Waterhouse, 1900)

Justin Gerard is inspired by Fantasy literature creating many paintings based on the imagery invoked. He uses Nature, with fantastical inspiration, to create mood within his pieces. For example, in “The Dangers of Christmas Shopping” (Gerard, 2017), the use of brambles, snow, and wolves creates an austere atmosphere that juxtaposes the feeling of the protagonists. This reflects the dwarf’s feelings and helps the audience relate to him, making them invested in the painting’s story. Another way of creating feeling in a painting is through its colour palette. The

dwarf and the bear are presented in warmer and brighter tones, to contrast the grey and brown faded palette. This makes the audience feel negative toward the 'enemies' in the painting. Similarly, in "There He Lay" (Gerard and Gerard, 2014), Gerard uses a dark, large cavern as his setting, amplifying the mystery created by the foreground and the dragon lying on top of the seas of gold treasures. The work gives the viewer the same feeling that Gerard had when he first read the novels.



"The Dangers of Christmas Shopping" (Gerard, 2017a)



“There He Lay” (Gerard, 2014)

Personification has been in literature for hundreds of years. Giving Nature human features is a device regularly used by authors. For example, the “Whomping Willow” (Rowling, 1998, pp.59, 60), from the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 1998a), was able to physically crush anything that went near it. Similarly, ‘The Poetics of Space’ (Bachelard and R. Stilgoe, 2014), describes a hurricane to have “elemental pride” (Bachelard and R. Stilgoe, 2014). Giving objects human attributes can help the audience visualise what the author is describing, and the impact it has. It makes the description interesting to think about, as having the hurricane move ‘like a hurricane’ is not as impactful as relating it to an emotion people recognise. This allows the power of the object to be conveyed clearly and convincingly.

Fantasy

Fantasy can be traced back to religion, Folklore, and Nature. Whilst artists have taken inspiration from Fantasy, it has not been taken seriously by critics. Despite this, Fantasy has been at the forefront of the media for the past few decades. With films like Lord of the Rings (Lord of the Rings, 2001) and Labyrinth (Labyrinth, 1986) receiving mass-market success, it appears as if the public has an appreciation for the genre. In Fantasy, the character’s appearance is often used to signpost if they are good or bad usually through contrasting beauty standards. For example, in Lord of the Rings (Lord of the Rings, 2001) the elves are made to be ethereal beings, and the Orcs are grotesque.

Fantasy was ‘born out of the literary world’ (Moffat, 2008) similar to Folklore, the genre spread through word of mouth. What is thought to be one of the oldest surviving stories is the

“Angelo-Saxon” (The British Library, 2014) tale of Beowulf. Today Beowulf has been turned into an animated feature film (Beowulf, 2007), showing how fantasy has progressed and remained relevant since its beginning. Today, people are still intrigued by Fantasy, and there are many modern popular films and TV shows, such as Dracula (Stoker, 2008), and The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 2018), which have been labelled “quintessential” (The American Statistician, 1961) to the genre.

The ambiguous nature of Fantasy, combined with its mystical elements, gives artists the freedom to create what they want. Brian Froud inspired the films Labyrinth (Labyrinth, 1986) and the Dark Crystal (The Dark Crystal, 1982) with his conceptual art. His work highlights how Fantasy is inspired by our surroundings creating a ‘mixture of imagination and reality (Moffat, 2008) Fantasy has always been inspired by Nature, and many creatures are derived from Folklore, which adds to the fantastical element of the genre. Many of Froud’s illustrations are inspired by nature, including “Cowslip Faery” (Froud, 2015) where the use of the colour yellow denotes a sense of “happiness and optimism” (Morton, 2019). His style of illustration is based on Victorian and Edwardian style of fantasy art, which has a whimsical aesthetic to it, adding to the fantasy theme.



Cowslip Faery (SOLD!)
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“Cowslip Faery” (Froud, 2015)

In a large majority of Fantasy films, the role characters play, is shown through their design. If a character is evil, they might have warts and wrinkles and they will be wearing darker dirtier clothes. In contrast, good characters will be presented in line with society’s standards of beauty. Their clothes will be brighter and more colourful, and they will carry themselves differently. A bad character could be hunched whilst a good character will be upright. An

example of this is in the film *Labyrinth* (*Labyrinth*, 1986). In the image from Brian Froud's concept art, it is easy to see that Toby, the baby, is a good character compared to the goblins around him. Toby's bright colour scheme and soft features juxtapose the wicked creatures around him, with their earth-tone palettes making them look dirty.



“Concept art” (Froud, 1980)

The *Shrek* films (*Shrek*, 2001) flip this trope. Shrek, an ogre who lives in a swamp, has always considered himself a monster, as the villagers, call him a “beast” (Elliott et al., 2001). However, the film develops him into the role of a hero. In the second film, the idea of bad and good characters is again challenged, as both the fairy godmother and Prince Charming are villains. Another film that has this subverted trope is *Narnia* (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, 2005). The White Witch had the characteristics of a good character, convincing a boy who ventured into the wardrobe that he would be king. However, soon after this encounter, the audience is shown that the White Witch is horrible. This shows how specific types of characters being bad and good is an easy way of recognising the balance of a story. The subversion of the Fantasy tropes in these films makes the audience more interested in the story, as it is presenting a new idea instead of something they have seen before.

Conclusion

Researching and exploring the three keywords of Folklore, Nature, and Fantasy has shown that they are interlinked and inspired by one another. The main connection between all three is the use of Nature. This is shown in many of the examples studied earlier in this essay such as the TV show *The Witcher* (*The Witcher*, 2019), the Pre Raphaelite painting “Clytie” (Chatfield, 2015), in many of Joseph Jacob’s art pieces, “The Dangers of Christmas Shopping” (Gerard, 2017a) and “There He Lay” (Gerard, 2014).

Folklore, which takes inspiration from Nature, and inspired Fantasy, has shown how different cultures together can create stories that are entertaining and popular today. With a debate on how Folklore became so widely spread around the world, the outcomes would have had a large impact on how the tales we know today came to be. The use of Nature in each tale shows how the environment impacted the people that lived in and around it. It informs today’s society that in the past, communities used to be inspired by Nature, and used it as inspiration when creating precautionary tales or stories for entertainment. Nature and Folklore being interwoven leads into how Fantasy has taken this and grown upon it. Fantasy, which is almost entirely based on Nature, has nearly always been inspired by Nature and Folklore. Shows like *The Witcher* (*The Witcher*, 2019) have taken Folklore tales from Europe and mixed them into a Fantastical, yet very dark, world.

The dissertation will explore the topics that have been introduced in this essay, nature in art and how it affects the mood and setting. Furthermore, how nature has inspired whole art movements, and how Nature is always prevalent in Fantasy and Folklore, will also be explored. Among the new topics it will explore, are Nature in Fantasy video games and religion within folklore. Nature is a huge part of making successful Fantasy Video games. How the surroundings fit into the theme and genre of the game is a key factor; in *Resident Evil 8* (CAPCOM, 2021), the village it takes place in is dark, snowy, and abandoned, which enhances what the horror genre is trying to achieve. Another area the essay will investigate is how Nature has inspired religions such as paganism or Wiccan. Despite them now being mostly considered fantasy or folklore, they are still being practiced in a large community of people.

Research has shown that Nature is a prominent factor in both Fantasy and Nature. The dissertation will therefore examine ‘How Important is Nature in Folklore and Fantasy?’ Its impact will be evaluated through the exploration of sub-questions relating to nature and its importance to media.

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