

“On Fairy-Stories”

Excerpt of essay by J.R.R. Tolkien (1947)

Fairy-story

What is a fairy-story? In this case you will turn to the Oxford English Dictionary in vain. It contains no reference to the combination fairy-story, and is unhelpful on the subject of fairies generally. In the Supplement, fairy-tale is recorded since the year 1750, and its leading sense is said to be (a) a tale about fairies [elves], or generally a fairy legend; with developed senses, (b) an unreal or incredible story, and (c) a falsehood.

Stories that are actually concerned primarily with “fairies,” that is with creatures that might also in modern English be called “elves,” are relatively rare, and as a rule not very interesting. Most good “fairy-stories” are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches.

Children

The common opinion seems to be that there is a natural connexion between the minds of children and fairy-stories, of the same order as the connexion between children's bodies and milk. I think this is an error... Actually, the association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the “nursery,” as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused. It is not the choice of the children which decides this.

Children neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do... It is true that in recent times fairy-stories have usually been written or “adapted” for children. But so may music be, or verse, or novels, or history, or scientific manuals. It is a dangerous process, even when it is necessary. Fairy-stories banished in this way, cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined; indeed in so far as they have been so banished, they have been ruined.

Fantasy

The human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present. The faculty of conceiving the images is naturally called Imagination. Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.