

Summary of My Summer Internship

The purpose of my internship was to widen my knowledge of twentieth century fantasy literature on a scholarly level. I completed my internship over ten weeks at Sewanee this summer under the supervision of Dr. Alexander Bruce and Dr. James Peters, both of whom have a strong interest in the subject I was tackling. When I first sat down with Dr. Bruce and Dr. Peters to discuss the goals of the internship, our plan was to produce a lengthy paper that explored extensively the connections between fantasy fiction and medieval literature. However, part of the beauty of the collaborative project was its malleability, and it changed and grew as we began work on it.

I met with Dr. Bruce and Dr. Peters every week for an hour to discuss the direction of the internship and the ways that we wished to mold it as we moved forward. To begin with we created a reading list, which I would spend the majority of the first half of the summer working through. Every week I was to read a certain number of novels and then write a two to three page (or longer if need be) reflection on what I had read. These reflections would build up as the weeks passed until I had a body of writing with which to jump start my paper once I really got down to writing it over the last half of the summer. To begin with we had planned for me to spend a few weeks reading twentieth century fantasy, followed by a few weeks of medieval literature and then the last weeks writing the paper that was the final goal of the internship. However, as I began working through my reading list, we found that the direction of all our interests pointed toward further exploration of the nature of evil within fantasy fiction. This is a topic that has direct connections with medieval literature, but after discussing it we decided that I needed to strengthen my knowledge of fantasy literature before I tackled the greater task

of connecting it clearly to its medieval origins. Thus, we decided to focus completely on twentieth century fantasy literature. Ultimately, I produced a forty-three-page paper on six great fantasy authors of the twentieth century with only a few references to their medieval roots.

I began by reading C.S. Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, which consists of *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. I would wake up around eight every morning, hike out to a sunny place on the domain and read until lunch time. Usually after lunch I would continue reading somewhere on campus—the library, Stirlings, etc. I read the entire *Space Trilogy* in the first week, and wrote about five pages reflecting on what I had read. I repeated this process the second week, this time reading *Lylith*, by George MacDonald, and *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C.S. Lewis* (????), by Gilbert Meileander. Again, I wrote a significant amount on what I read at the end of the week, and it was at this point that Dr. Bruce and Dr. Peters and I decided to focus on the fantasy authors in order to give me a strong base for further exploration of their relationship with medieval works. The third and fourth week I spent reading Charles Williams, who was a member of the literary group called the Inklings, of which C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien were also members. I read Williams' novels *War in Heaven*, and *Descent Into Hell*, I finished the Meigleander book, and I began a biography of Lewis called *The Narnian*. The fifth and sixth week I spent reading Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, consisting of *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. I spent the last four weeks of the internship writing a paper on the works mentioned above as well as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Susan Cooper's youth series *The Dark is Rising*, and J.K. Rowling's well-known *Harry Potter* series.

Ultimately I produced a forty-two-page paper concerning works of six of the authors I had read (I did not include George MacDonald in the final paper). My paper is titled “The Straight and The Crooked; Undressing Theological Fantasy of the Twentieth Century.” In reference to *The Lord of the Rings*, Ralph Wood comments that J.R.R. Tolkien’s masterfully detailed world is one of “unprecedented evil—of extermination ovens and concentration camps, of terrorist attacks and ethnic cleansings, of epidemic disease and mass starvation and deadly material self-indulgence”. Though Tolkien expressly denied that his work was an allegory, there is no doubt that it mirrors the human struggle with evil. In my paper I discuss the ways in which all the authors I have read confront the problem of evil through fantasy. The benefit of fantasy is that it gives readers occasion to contemplate their human struggle, often without even being aware that they are doing so. In fact, Wood defends the virtues of *The Lord of the Rings* precisely because “Far from encouraging us to turn away from such evils, Tolkien’s book forces us to confront them. Rather than grinding our faces in these horrors, however, it suggests a cure for the ills of our age. This great work enables us to escape *into* reality” (Gospel 1). C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams clearly write their fantasies in the same vein, as do later authors Susan Cooper, Philip Pullman and J.K.Rowling. The true value of Fantasy is the opportunity it gives us to explore our own response to good and evil more easily than in our own world. Through the lens of Fantasy we are able to confront a fundamental human concern: what is good, and what is evil and how do we choose between the two? If there are indeed external moral constructs—and we are taught by most organized religions that there are—are they the same in our world as in those of the fantasies that we read? And if not, how does this affect the choice that must be made

between good and evil within each world? If the human struggle is similar to the epic battles of Tolkien's Middle Earth, or Lewis' Narnia, does this mean there is a need to choose sides in our own world?

I would argue that these questions can be answered through the works of the fantasy authors mentioned above. Despite the authors' differing perspectives, and contrary and conflicting theologies, or lack thereof, the importance of the individual's choice is promoted in each imaginary world. I venture to call the works of these authors "Theological Fantasies" for the qualities of their art that set them apart from the simple fairy tale or myth. In each of the works here discussed, the individual is faced with a choice between Good and Evil, and ultimately this choice ensures his or her ultimate destruction or triumph. And, despite the major theological differences apparent in the separate works, all have one thing in common with each other. In each of these worlds, the presence of Good and Evil requires those who inhabit them to make a choice, to stand freely on the side of one or the other. Yet the constructs of each fantastic world do not fundamentally change the nature of the choice. Though Good and Evil are defined differently in each theological fantasy, their readers are not required to believe in the theology inherent to the constructs of each world in order to appreciate the choice present in each, for the deepest reality of fantasy is not the author's but the characters' personal beliefs. In every imaginary world the reality is the totally subjective choice that every character is forced ultimately to make, and that choice is between Good and Evil; every time.

I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to complete this internship. It has given me a much deeper understanding of the literature that is foremost in my scholarly

interests as well as being closest to my heart. My in-depth study of these particular works of fantasy fiction has been preparing me to write an honors thesis, and perhaps eventually a dissertation, that incorporates the medieval texts that I believe to have strongly influenced authors such as Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, Pullman, Rowling and Cooper. I believe this is some of the best preparation I could have received for graduate school. My dream is to go to school for my PhD and teach literature to undergraduates. The authors that I studied this summer represent my area of interest, and I plan to use the paper I have written as a starting point for further research in the subject. I will be presenting the paper at Sewanee on September 10th this Fall, and I am also attending a literary conference in Savanna, GA, where I will be presenting short papers derived from the longer one that I wrote this summer. I have come away from this internship not only with a better understanding of the subject of my research, but also of myself.