

Chapter One

Revisiting Interlace: The Fantasy Author as Storyteller and Pattern Maker

‘Modern literature is an immensely variegated fabric: its themes have been ‘woven, and rewoven, in threads of illusion’.¹

Karl Kroeber suggests that ‘storytelling may be the best use to which we can put any language’, and that ‘all significant narratives are retold and meant to be retold – even though every retelling is a making anew.’ Thus story can ‘preserve ideas, beliefs and convictions without permitting them to harden into abstract dogma’ allowing us ‘to test our ethical principles in our imaginations where we can engage them in the uncertainties and confusion of contingent circumstance’.² Although he is not specifically referring to the genre of fantasy, his remarks are certainly pertinent to this increasingly popular form of literature. Clute suggests that, ‘in its purest form, the fantasy story resembles myth, which as C. S. Lewis has noted – in *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961) – retains its essential power despite the varying forms of its telling’.³

Writers such as Robert Jordan, who have been influenced by Tolkien’s form of epic heroic fantasy, as presented in the *LOTR*, can be described not only as storytellers in the vein of the mythic or oral tradition, to which Kroeber and Lewis allude, but also as pattern seekers and, perforce, as pattern makers. As such they are writers who display a sensitive awareness of the notion that it is in the realm of the imagination that our greatest fears and

¹ R. Rawdon Wilson, *In Palamedes’ Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game, and Narrative Theory*, Boston, 1990, p. 123.

² Karl Kroeber, *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times*, New Brunswick, NJ., 1992, pp. 193; 9.

³ John Clute, ‘Story’, in John Clute and John Grant (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, New York, 1997, p. 900.

greatest joys can be given satisfying and meaningful form. As in ‘diverse ways myth and ritual loosen the grip of the temporal world upon the human spirit’, so it is ‘under the spell of the storyteller’s art that the range of what is possible in this world is transcended’, and those intangible qualities of life or truth can be explored more freely through the power and freedom of the seemingly fantastic.⁴

Writers of fantasy traditionally construct imaginative Secondary Worlds that not only explore perennial, core philosophical concerns such as time, fate, the dualities of mortality/immortality, good/evil, and our place and meaning in the world, but, within the worlds of their fiction, bring an order to life and resolution of the kind of major societal and personal dilemmas that continue to plague the world of primary reality. Brian Attebery has written well that such resolution ‘as a deliberate choice of form in a manifestly unreal setting ... says more about the ways [in which] we seek for order than our expectations of finding it in the real world’.⁵ Robert Jordan himself is clearly aware of this literary tradition and he uses it to advantage in his world building and in his interpretation of time, space, traditional story material and form. As noted more generally by Henry Parkes, ‘the storyteller is forever drawing conventions into the human temporality of words and is thus obliged to remold and fit, [and] is forever renewing and thus forever joining a time’.⁶

Narratives such as Jordan’s *WOT* continually draw on the vast story base or word-hoard of the past, both oral and written, and follow a structure that is akin to the morphology of the traditional fairy tale described by Vladimir Propp: a circular quest into the unknown, testing of the hero, crossing of thresholds, supernatural intervention,

⁴ A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*, London, 1961, p. 342.

⁵ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992, p. 15.

⁶ Henry B. Parkes, ‘Critical Approach to Story’, in *Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives*, edited by Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, Kentucky, 1981, p. 145.

confrontation, flight and establishment of a new order at home.⁷ However, in the telling, the traditional elements are infused with the author's own self-knowledge and contemporary cultural and societal influences, so that traditional 'story lives on in the reader; becomes the reader's history and spiritual domain'.⁸ Attebery explains further:

The first fantastic literature was collective, its symbols shared by entire cultures. The motifs of traditional oral narratives, though probably the product of individual storytellers' imaginations, were selected, altered and recombined by generations of retellers, each of whom was faced with the necessity of pleasing a live audience. Thus the stories came to represent the desires and perceptions of the group, though the group may not have been consciously aware that it so perceived and desired. Myths, supernatural legends and ballads, magical folktales – all these express a group interaction ... Hence Jung speaks of the collective unconscious, as if human kind shared a single psyche.⁹

It is this rich heritage that provides the core paradigms for fantasy writers so that this ancient word-hoard is constantly being reworked into new stories and so brought forward in time, thereby retaining its relevance to the interests and concerns of the reader.

In this chapter I mean to explore the intricate patterning of Robert Jordan's *WOT* through the mediaeval literary working technique of interlacement, and to discuss the ways in which Jordan refashions a range of traditional materials, motifs and conventions as well as the effects achieved through this patterning. The chapter will include an exposition of the high fantasy writer's imaginative world building and storytelling. I will also consider elements of Le Guin's *Earthsea* texts as a counterpoint to Jordan's Wheel world, in regard to the similarities of their philosophy of balance and the practice of ethics that are needed to bring about the healing of their imaginary landscapes.

⁷ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. L. Scott, 2nd ed., revised and edited by L. A. Wagner, Austin, 1968.

⁸ John H. Timmerman, *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre*, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, p. 7.

⁹ Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 8.

A story-shaped world

The elements of story in high fantasy literature are characterised in order to situate Jordan's *WOT* in terms of his use of the conventions of fantasy, and thus, to demonstrate how he complicates the traditional heroic quest paradigm through his use of the mediaeval literary technique of interlacement. Richard West suggested that through the use of interlacement the imaginary world is given a greater sense of reality and he characterises some of the features by which this is achieved:

No single protagonist but a great many individual stories that cross one another; coherence among the interwoven stories; the appearance of a pattern behind the flux of events; recurring themes and motifs providing aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction; the events of the imaginary world gaining the illusion of depth and solidity by their mutual interaction and weight of detail ... The effect of what might be termed openendedness, whereby the reader has the impression that the story has an existence outside the confines of the book so that the author could have begun earlier or ended later, if he chose.¹⁰

The sense that there are many other stories to tell in connection with the imaginary world as presented is enhanced by constant reference to parts of a vast historical background story. For example, in Jordan's conceptualisation of a cosmology which forms a repeating cycling of seven Ages, the reader is aware that the events of the present Third Age not only look back to the past but are always endlessly weaving towards the future.

Jordan can be seen to be turning back to Tolkien's use of interlacing in the *LOTR*, as it is the form of narrative most able to accommodate the teeming and various elements of his imaginary world, in which the 'history, geography, and cultures' of many peoples 'cross one another which such complexity that we have the impression that the fantasy has

¹⁰ Richard West, 'The Interlace Structure of the *Lord of the Rings*', in *A Tolkien Compass*, edited by Jared Lobdell, La Salle, IL., 1975, p. 90.

life-like depth and solidity'.¹¹ Although in high fantasy, it is typical for the quest story of the hero to be interwoven into the lives and fates of other people and to be linked to the survival of the depicted world, the panoramic sweep of Jordan's epic-style work, and the eclectic nature of his carefully interwoven traditional material make it a particularly rich example of a contemporary application of an older narrative technique.

Pattern making in fantasy literature

Overall, the pattern in high fantasy concerns a quest for order and harmony in an imaginary world, which is pitted against the forces of dark that threaten to disrupt it. Typically, it depicts a dualistic conflict between the forces of Light and Dark and the story begins at a time when the balance is in jeopardy due to the shadow side of the world gaining in power. The catalyst that triggers the encroachment of this darker side of life is inevitably caused by some form of human folly, typically connected to greed, lust for power over others, arrogance, material gain and/or the persistent human desire for immortality on earth, and thus supplies the impetus for the hero's quest.

It is common for the events that initially brought about the imbalance to be revealed in a historical background story, thus distancing the blame for this catastrophe from the time frame of the current story and its protagonists. For instance, in the *LOTR*, Sauron's long-ago forging of the One Ring, that down the ages becomes a vehicle for unleashed human power and corruption. In Jordan's *WOT*, in the Age of Legends, a group of Aes Sedai heedlessly sought to enhance their channelling abilities and so brought about a dangerous thinning in a section of the Great Pattern. It is through their over-reaching for power that the Dark One's prison was weakened, and from that time on he once again began to influence the world.

¹¹ West, 'Interlace', p. 84.

By contrast, in Le Guin's original *Earthsea* trilogy it is the main protagonist, Ged, who upsets the equilibrium of the archipelago through pride and arrogance and chants an unlawful spell to summon the dead, inadvertently releasing his own Shadow self. But when Le Guin revisits Earthsea some twenty years later in *The Other Wind* (published 2001), the setting is at a time when the equilibrium so vital to the survival of the imaginary world is again endangered and to account for this she introduces a previously unknown background story. It is revealed that ancient wizards of the Archipelago in their desire to defeat death had, long before Ged's lifetime, built a spell-wrought stone wall beyond which they could 'live ... in the spirit forever'. (*Wind*, 228) Foolishly, their actions brought into being the stagnant Dry Land of the Dead, and so caused a dangerous schism between the human spirit and the natural world. In this shadowy, artificial realm the spirits of the dead are denied their proper dispersal within the natural world, creating a dire disruption to the necessary and integrative cycle of birth, life and death. Thus all of these authors posit stories in which cause and effect are linked across eons of time to provide an interweaving of past and present that is of cosmic significance in the depicted worlds.

In regard to immortality the consensus among the writers of fantasy is that the hunger for eternal life is far from desirable, and that the seeking of it involves an irreversible forfeiting of one's soul to the Shadow. Yet in these stories the forces of dark can never be totally vanquished since they are depicted as always being inherent in human nature, two sides of the same coin, for in an imaginary world that pivots on the notion of balance, there cannot be light without shadow, and this underpinning dualistic pattern of fantasy provides much of the possible and, indeed, necessary narrative tension.

Consistent with the emphasis on balance, the realm of high fantasy is one that privileges the natural world and places humanity, not above, but within the vast social and ecological web of life. As it is human action that causes the imbalance in nature, it is up to humanity to effect a solution, which seems to constitute a literary rejection of Divine Purpose or the trope of the *Deus ex Machina*. Indeed, the heroic quest to save the depicted world must be achieved through an earned journey and must display plausible cause and effect within the logic of the fictional world, throughout the narrative. For the reader an unexpected, convenient resolution wrought by an outside God figure (the author) would cheapen the worth of the heroic journey and undermine the integrity of the (imaginary) human world. Of his own sub-creation Jordan states firmly that the protagonists can expect no ‘miracles’ or intervention from the ‘Creator’ who ‘shaped the world and set the rules, but does not interfere’. Instead, as mentioned in the introduction, the human inhabitants of the Wheel world must fix their own mistakes.¹² (Similarly in Le Guin, Ged must right the wrongs he has committed.)

Some of the Wheel world inhabitants do appear to live within the prescripts of the Great Pattern, and so can be described as keepers of the word of the ‘Creator’, and perhaps they also provide a covert, persuasive textual voice for the authorial point of view. For example, in the world of the Wheel, the gentle gypsy-like and nomadic Travelling people (*Tuatha'an*) accept death as part of the fate of living and believe that all things have a cyclic pattern and must grow and fall like leaves. If attacked, they raise no hand in self-defence, nor do they bear weapons. Instead, they accept utterly the will of the Pattern. Their ancient and much-revered philosophical ideology is known as the ‘Way of the Leaf’ and is certainly in keeping with Jordan’s stated concept of reincarnation in their world:

¹² Karl-Johan Norén (1995), ‘Summary of the Robert Jordan Interview, made at the East of the Sun fantasy convention, Stockholm, 17 June 1995 by Helena Löfgren’, <http://hem.passagen.se/kjnorén/jordan/rj-talk1.html> (updated 9 Jan., 1999, accessed 19 March, 2003).

The leaf lives its appointed time, and does not struggle against the wind that carries it away. The leaf does no harm and finally falls to nourish new leaves. So it should be with all men. And women. (*EOTW*, 370)

Such philosophy is also akin to that of Le Guin's mystic Master Patterner of Earthsea, who intuits the future from the leaves, or from designs of twigs, sand and pebbles in the sacred grove on the island of Roke, a place where even the great and ancient trees that hold all knowledge of the pattern of life, live and die again and again, and will do so until the end of time. The Patterner explains that 'what goes too long unchanged destroys itself. The forest is forever because it dies and dies and so lives'. (*Tales from Earthsea*, 254) The philosophy of both these fantasy worlds suggests an acceptance of a fated pattern that weaves towards change, an allotted time span and a rejection of immortality. Yet in the Wheel world Jordan also uses the passivity of the *Tuatha'an*, which leaves them open to extortion and cold-blooded slaughter, to emphasise the fact that in a flawed world their idealistic 'Way of the Leaf' offers no (personal) solution to the encroachment of the Dark Lord. In this way the author suggests that, in a cosmic pattern that is woven from Light and Dark, the necessary change to heal the world cannot be achieved through inactive acceptance. Thus he reinforces the urgency of the fated quest of the three *ta'veren* youths, whose life-threads have been spun out (fated) by the Cosmic Loom specifically to bring necessary change to the pattern of the Age.

Weaving of threads is an old destiny motif going back to Greek, Roman and Germanic mythology and, despite the diversity and evolution of these cultures and languages, they have all retained basic ideas of fate as being personified by a trio of women (Wyrd, the Norns, the Parcae, or the Morai) who control the life-threads of all mortals, a concept of a destined pattern for existence that has survived many literary permutations without losing its potency. Jordan, with his concept of an inexorable Cosmic

Loom spinning a Great Pattern from the life-threads of all living creatures and a metaphor for time itself, is drawing on an age-old association with mortals' fate that is common to both fantasy and realist literary texts. In regard to the inhabitants of the Wheel world the frequently-voiced folk saying, 'the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills', reveals a popular belief in, and resignation to, the dictates of the Pattern or fate. (*EOTW*, 92) And even the powerful magus figures, despite their considerable knowledge of old prophecies, cannot totally read the pattern before it is spun, as shown by Moiraine Aes Sedai's frequent acceptance that an incident or a person has now become 'woven into the pattern', and not merely by chance, following an event she has not expected or foreseen. (*EOTW*, 140) An example of this occurs in the initial volume when Egwene and Thom unexpectedly join in the three *ta'veren* youths' departure from Emond's Field. (*EOTW*, 140-142) This recurring motif also allows Jordan (the pattern maker) another discreetly insistent and authoritarian voice within the text that works to instil in the reader's mind the sense of purpose or a higher design, behind the flux of events. Such a higher purpose or design is further strengthened by Jordan's use of an interconnected motif of game-playing within the texts.

The pattern of literary games

The ancient games played by characters within the world of the Wheel, and which form an analogy for the greater and cosmic 'game of life' between the forces of Light and Dark, perform a pivotal role at both a physical and a more metaphysical level in the Jordan texts. In this matter he is drawing on the earlier tradition of literary games, a narrative device employed in some mediaeval narrative literature. A good example is *Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is structured through a 'complex network of overlapping, interlocked games' to form 'an endless knot, like the pentangle design on Gawain's

shield', and that, despite comic moments, function to test Gawain's pride and his seemingly incorruptible code of honour and truth.¹³ Leyerle explains that:

the seeming paradox of serious play is widely encountered in the literature and culture of the Middle Ages. Examples are fortune's roulette wheel, the dance of death, tournaments, the mortal chess game, and the dance of the seven deadly sins.¹⁴

Jordan's interpretation of literary games presents a variation on the concept of the mortal chess game so that, while he is writing within a recognisable literary 'paradigmatic structure', he is able to tailor events and meaning within it to his own specific purposes, and so to engage in a form of word game:

Such literary games allow great scope for individual expression because they establish patterns that are widely understood and therefore allow great scope for individual variation. In this process of variation the paradigm of the game tends to be changed and developed ... because poetic play allows for great freedom with a given form and almost a limitless number of forms.¹⁵

Thus a theory of literature, one developed on the 'model of game-playing', is a fruitful means of textual analysis. It recognises that while a narrative paradigm is identifiable by the literary use of 'regularly-occurring elements' and rules, they are to be seen as 'descriptive, not prescriptive' and therefore, over time, a succession of writers are relatively free to rework them into individualistic but still recognisable traditional patterns.¹⁶

¹³ John Leyerle, 'The Game and Play of Hero', in *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Papers of the Fourth and Fifth Annual Conferences of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, edited by Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan, Albany 1975, p.57.

¹⁴ Leyerle, 'Game', p. 60. (He points out that the representation of fate as a 'function of a wheel of fortune' draws on 'an image made popular by Boethius in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* where the goddess Fortuna speaks of the play of her wheel'. See p. 70.)

¹⁵ Leyerle, 'Game', pp. 68-9.

¹⁶ Leyerle, 'Game', p. 68. (It is of interest to note that Leyerle suggests that 'creative criticism itself can be understood as a form of play'. See p. 78.)

A full analysis of game theory lies beyond the scope of this work as much of it is viewed through a sociological, not a literary lens. But it is pertinent to note that Johan Huizinga, in his influential study of play elements in culture, posited the hypothesis that the ‘great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play’, and suggested that one of the main characteristics of play is that it creates order by establishing ‘rules’ that are ‘absolutely binding’, so that if the rules are broken ‘it spoils the game’.¹⁷ In a literary application of his theory, a parallel can be drawn with the fantasy writers’ building of Secondary Worlds that are maintained through order and balance, worlds wherein the catalyst for the heroic quest is caused by a breaking of societal rules that plummets the depicted landscape into a state of disorder and chaos.

At the level of narrative construction Jordan as master patterner sometimes uses an entire volume in his sequence as a type of literary chess board, in order to set up moves for the major pieces to be played out in the following volume; in particular books eight and ten follow this format. In the latter, *COT*, he concentrates on chronicling social intrigues and transformations which, at least on the surface, appear to do little to advance the primary plot, and little of the action is brought to full completion. He characteristically leaves the reader with intriguing hints of future developments, as with Mat’s long-awaited entanglement with the Daughter of the Nine Moons, Egwene’s kidnapping by the sisters of the White Tower, when under siege by her army, and Rand’s negotiations with the Seanchan invaders. This authorial manipulation in turn is repeated by the actions of various protagonists and antagonists within the texts, and in the fashion of interlacement, linked to the higher purpose of the narrative as shown by the following examples.

¹⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, London, (1949) 1970 pp. 22; 29-30.

A commonly played Jordanesque board game is known as ‘Stones’ in which the major piece ‘The Fisher’ is analogous to the legend of the Fisher King and is in turn linked to Rand as the Dragon Reborn. Moridin, an ancient and powerful servant of the Dark, has played this game for centuries, and as he studies the pieces on the board he draws a distinct parallel between the central figure ‘The Fisher’ and Rand, musing that whilst ‘The Fisher’ piece awaits his move, in the ‘greater game’ al Thor [Rand] already moved to his wishes'.¹⁸ It is revealed that ‘The Fisher was always worked as a man, a bandage blinding his eyes and one hand pressed to his side, a few drops of blood dripping through his fingers’.¹⁹ (*POD*, 34) In a mirroring of this figure, Rand bears a half-healed and often bleeding wound in his side inflicted during an encounter with Ba’alzamon, one of the Forsaken. Furthermore, Perrin, in a prophetic dream has seen Rand dressed as a beggar with bandaged eyes, thus tying him even more closely to the figure of the board game. (*SR*, 898) His viewing also resonates with an earlier vision of Min’s where she saw a ‘beggar’s staff’ swirling around Rand’s head. (*EOTW*, 216) As will be discussed in the chapters on the hero figures, the prophecies of the Dragon further tie Rand to the legend of the Fisher King. The mysterious figure of Moridin, who slips in and out of the Great Pattern, and therefore in and out of Time, may be a surrogate for the Dark Lord. But he could also be representative of the shadow side of Jordan, who as author/creator stands outside the Pattern and firmly believes that he is in complete control of the lives of his characters.

Another popular children’s game in the Wheel world, known as ‘Snakes and Foxes’, particularly favoured by the orphan boy Olver, is analogous to human dealings

¹⁸ As of yet Jordan has not revealed Moridin’s motive in his game-playing in regard to Rand. Thus it is possible to speculate that the narrative may involve some kind of ‘godgame’, a term attributed to John Fowles in regard to his novel *The Magus*. ‘A godgame signifies a gamelike situation in which a *magister ludi* knows the rules (because he has invented them) and the character does not. A godgame occurs in literature when one or more characters creates an illusion, a mazelike sequence of false accounts, that entraps other characters.’ See Wilson, *Palamedes’ Shadow*, pp. 105-66.

¹⁹ This is a link to the great myth of the Wasteland and the Fisher King as expounded by Jessie L. Weston in *From Ritual to Romance*, New York, (1920) 1957, and much utilised by T. S. Eliot in ‘The Wasteland’.

with the slippery, fox-like *Aelfinn* and snake-like *Eelfinn*, who are encountered by stepping into their strange realms by means of twisted Redstone doorframe *ter'angreal*.²⁰ Their untrustworthy natures are suggested by their appearance, as both foxes and snakes bring to mind traits of great animal cunning and deviousness. As it seems highly likely that Olver will prove to be the reincarnation of the legendary hero, Gaidal Cain, he too, like Moridin, will have participated in this game in other lives, so there may come a moment when he discards the naïve belief that he can win by adhering to the stipulated rules.

Adults are well aware that it is a game that can never be won except by breaking the rules (which are never explained), and it is Birgitte Silverbow (a legendary hero) who supplies us with the formula for doing so. She cryptically explains that what is required to win the game is ‘courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to daze, iron to bind’—magical sounding words with the distinct ring of a chanted spell – and that the game itself is a ‘remembrance of old dealings’ with the *Aelfinn* and *Eelfinn*.²¹ (*SR*, 466) With the addition of light, fire, music and iron are all items forbidden to be carried when humans seek answers from these strange creatures. Yet their use, against the prescripts of the treaty (and the rules of the game), perhaps holds the key for the future rescue of Moiraine who to date is presumed to have died, but is more likely to be trapped in the realm of the *Aelfinn* and *Eelfinn*, and Gandalf-like may return in a more highly evolved state.

On a more worldly level, the various nations of Jordan’s land are depicted at a time of great political and social flux, highlighting the ever-changing patterns of the boundaries and ruling classes of the nation states. As the sequence unfolds he increasingly foregrounds the petty political intrigues that are rife throughout the various royal courts by demonstrating the political plotting, lies, half truths and manoeuvring for advantage

²⁰ For descriptions of the game, and of the *Aelfinn* and the *Eelfinn* refer to: *LOC*, pp. 654-55; *SR*, chaps. 15 and 24.

²¹ These words are ritually spoken by players at the commencement of each game.

between powerful families of the realms, activities which are deployed by means of the ‘Game of Houses’. Rand has the unenviable task of uniting the feuding and fragmented nations, as their aid is sorely needed in the lead-up to the Last Battle, and the political ‘Game of Houses’ dramatically foregrounds the difficulties he faces, and also the way in which ethics and loyalties, as in contemporary life, can become warped in the scrabble for individual gain and power.

Overarching it all is the cosmic game of life, the eternal conflict between the powers of Light and Dark which, in the world of the Wheel, is repeatedly enacted on a temporal level through the use of human surrogates. As Ishamael, one of the Forsaken, claims:

this struggle had gone on since the Creation, an endless war between the Great Lord and the Creator using human surrogates ... [and] in the past, the Creator's champion [had been] made a creature of the Shadow and raised up as the Shadow's champion. (*LOC*, 179)

Semirhage, another of the Forsaken, and a powerful servant of the Dark Lord, is aware that his ‘Chosen were no more than pieces on the board; they might be Counselors or Spies, but they were still pieces.’ (*LOC*, 194) Is this the final irony for humans in the world of the Wheel – a realisation that they are but pawns to be manipulated to play out the moves of an eternal conflict between the greater polarities of Light and Dark? Such a bleak, nihilistic outlook denies any true spark of life, of aspiration, or pathos and ecstasy, so it is far more plausible that the image of the board-game allows the author to give concrete form to the intangible, archetypal impulses of good and evil that appear to inform human nature. The interconnected strands of game-play also provide the author with a subtle means of reinforcing the concept of an underlying fated patterning to his depicted universe, one that is largely beyond the control of the human characters.

Telling tales: story and embedded story

Jordan's narrative is formed from a complex interlacing of stories.²² The focal narrative of the world-saving quest proceeds through a variety of interweaving stories (i.e. the journeys, actions, and the development of the primary and secondary characters), these often occurring simultaneously, so that the events gain lifelike depth and solidity by their mutual interaction. Rosemond Tuve explains:

events connected by *entrelacement* are not just juxtaposed; they are interlaced, and when we get back to the first character he is not where we left him as we finished the episode. [We return] not to precisely what we left, but to something we understand differently because of what we have seen since.²³

In other words, the reader's conception of the world and of the characters is built up by a close following of the many strands of the story, so that information gained from the events in one strand is woven continuously into and alters another, as they cross and recross. In turn, these stories are threaded through with a vast historical background story, and complicated even further by the addition of story-like prophecies, dreams and foretellings.

Storytelling is seen as an art both inside and outside of the texts. The reader is deeply engrossed in reading a story in which the characters often are listening to stories; together, they gradually piece together the history and legends of the Wheel world. Thus, on an imaginative level, the reader is drawn into the depicted world and shares in the inhabitants' emotional reactions. In a similar fashion as the main protagonists take up the quest and journey away from their known setting the reader, too, is exposed to the wider world of the Wheel through their eyes, and is similarly affected by the wonder they express as they traverse new landscapes, and meet an array of different peoples and creatures

²² This is where Jordan's genius lies, for his mastery of plot is what hooks his fans.

²³ Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and their Posterity*, Princeton, NJ., 1966, pp. 369; 370.

whom they had hitherto considered to be make-believe. Jordan has said that he wanted ‘his characters, like Candine, to see their world through fresh eyes’.²⁴ As the characters of the Secondary World are ‘captivated by the marvels of their own world … [so] their response … heightens and deepens our own’.²⁵ A good example occurs when the reader vicariously shares Rand’s sense of strangeness and wonder when he first encounters Ogier and Trollocs. Myddraael, and things from the dark corners of midnight tales … stories walking in the flesh’, and he realises that ‘all the stories are true’. (*GH*, 30) Similarly in Le Guin’s *Earthsea*, as Arren journeys to the far reaches with Ged, his ‘joy of fulfilment that was like pain’ at his sighting of the flight of ‘dragons on the wind of the morning’, is an emotional response to a marvel in his world that also catches at the heart of the reader (*Farthest*, 147)

Thus a connecting thread between the Primary and Secondary Worlds is formed by what William Senior refers to as a ‘yoking of the reader’s experience to that of the characters’. For their world is one of discovery as well so that as each character uncovers the new and the marvellous, his or her reaction is passed on to the reader. Senior further explains that an ‘appreciation of the marvellous world must be crafted through both external and internal expressions of wonder’, and stresses the importance that Tolkien had placed on this dual emotional response to the depicted world, and his belief that the ‘evocation of wonder’ provided one of the ‘operating principles of fantasy in connecting the primary and secondary worlds and thus involving the reader’s perceptions’.²⁶ It is the interweaving of internal and external responses to the unfolding of marvels in the

²⁴ Ernest Lilley (2002), ‘Robert Jordan: Interview’, *SFRev*, <http://www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2003/0301/Feature%20Interview%20-%20Robert%20Jordan/Interview.htm> (accessed 19 March, 2003).

²⁵ William Senior, ‘Oliphants in the Perilous Realm: The Function of Internal and External Wonder in Fantasy’, in *Functions of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Thirteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, edited by Joe Sanders, Westport, CT., 1995, pp. 118.

²⁶ Senior, ‘Oliphants’, pp. 120; 118; 115.

Secondary World that helps to sustain the reader's own sense of wonder and adds to his or her pleasure in the story.

Senior also points out that 'wonder, however, is a two-edged sword' and that not all fantasists wield it with enough caution. Internal wonder must be 'filigreed into the structure of things' within the Secondary World. It cannot be successfully achieved through an over-abundance of 'prodigies at which the characters ooh and ahh in bathetic reverence'. In the more formulaic end of the genre, the danger is that the use of 'preestablished or pre-approved conventions' render 'the things that produce wonder in other stories ... [to] windowdressings'. In other words, for the reader there is no sense of the characters engaging with their world on more than just a superficial level, or of exposure to unknown events and marvels that have relevance to, and underscore, the greater task at hand: the saving of their world. Instead, the landscape, despite a profusion of seemingly 'wondrous beings, objects and events' remains a playground of make-believe, for the writer has failed to inject any illusion of real life or to convince the reader of its validity.²⁷

Jordan sets up a field for fruitful contemplation of the interplay between story and life. He has said that he regards himself first and foremost as a storyteller:

When it gets down to the core of it, I still feel that connection with the wandering storyteller, the guy who strolls into town and sets up in the village common ... and he tells some stories. And if he tells entertaining stories, he gets dinner.²⁸

Various stories embedded throughout his own narrative highlight the importance of storytelling, especially since, within the texts, they provide one of the major tactics for plot advancement. Thus the ambiguity between the boundaries of 'story' and 'reality', already

²⁷ Senior, 'Oliphants', pp. 121; 122; 121; 122.

²⁸ 'Robert Jordan: The Name Behind the Wheel', *Locus, the Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field*, issue 470, 44.3, March, 2000, p. 76.

apparent in the sub-creation of the world of the Wheel, along with reader acceptance of and affinity to it, is repeated within the texts themselves. In the initial volume of the sequence (*EOTW*), Two Rivers folk, hobbit-like, delight in the boundless repertoire of stories of myth and legend, concerning romance, talismanic objects, battles and heroic deeds, which are usually recited by visiting gleemen. Thom, the gleeman who is a pivotal character in the texts and a surrogate for Jordan (as discussed in the next chapter), promises to regale them with ‘wondrous stories of strange people and strange lands, of the Green Man, of Warders and Trollocs, of Ogier and Aiel’. (*EOTW*, 51) The villagers, too, savour the news of the outside world, gleaned from the gossip of visiting pedlars and merchants’ guards:

Ghealdan. Tar Valon. The very names were strange and exciting ... Aes Sedai and wars and false Dragons: those were the stuff of stories told late at night in front of the fireplace, with one candle making strange shapes on the wall and the wind howling against the shutters. (*EOTW*, 39)

But when their small village of Emond’s Field is attacked by Trollocs and Fades and they discover an Aes Sedai priestess from the fabled White Tower in their midst, the age-old stories, and ‘made-up creatures’ from stories suddenly turn out to have an undreamed-of presence in real life. (*EOTW*, 49) Demonic creatures that generations of village children had believed only resided in the horror of nightmares are found to actually exist, and, like the monster Grendel, in *Beowulf*, to be abroad in the waking world. Furthermore, Moiraine Aes Sedai reminds them of their ancient blood ties to the long fallen kingdom of Manetheren, and of past heroic deeds performed by their people when they had fought beneath the ‘Red Eagle banner’. She thus scorns them now as being reduced to ‘little people squabbling for the right to hide like rabbits’. (*EOTW*, 132; 131) In a voice that holds the ‘sound of cold tears’, she recites the forgotten tale of their ancestors’ heroic last stand against the Trolloc hordes at Emond’s Field:

Trolloc dead and the corpses of human renegades piled up in mounds but always more scrambled over those charnel heaps in waves of death that had no end. There could be but one finish. No man or woman who had stood beneath the banner of the Red Eagle at that day's dawning still lived when night fell. The sword that could not be broken was shattered. (*EOTW*, 134)

This tale in its turn stirs old and buried memories, floating disturbing fragments of story to the surface of the villagers' minds. As a result they can no longer sustain the view of themselves as being just 'honest farmers and shepherds and craftsmen', simple 'Two Rivers folk.' (*EOTW*, 131) Ironically, the main protagonists, Rand (a farmer), Mat (son of a blacksmith), and Perrin (an apprentice blacksmith), repeatedly remark that their adventures are nothing like those of the ancient heroes in stories, and that they themselves are not heroes, while through their very actions and deeds, the reader is aware that they are actually growing to fit the 'traditional' heroic mould, and so to enter the realm of on-going story like the legendary adventurer Jain Farstrider. In this fashion, through the gleeman, Moiraine and later her fellow sisters of the White Tower, fragments of the vast background story are gradually revealed and interlaced into the present time frame as needed to progress the focal story, so that, together, the inhabitants of the imaginary world and the reader gain in knowledge and understanding of the Jordan world and of its complex and layered history.

Archaic prophecies, dreams and visions, snatches of legends and songs, and scraps of ancient manuscripts tell other pieces of story and can also provide tantalising clues to the pattern of the future – puzzles to be pieced together or unravelled, by both reader and protagonists alike. The cryptic prophecies of the Dragon (found in the Karentheon cycle, in particular) which are akin to the ancient motif of riddling, are open to a variety of interpretations, suggesting that there are different outcomes possible for the inhabitants of the Wheel world, depending on which set of interpretations are acted upon. Indeed, one of

the few known Shadow prophecies states boldly that the Dragon Reborn has two choices, one leading to eternal life, the other to eternal death:

The man who channels stands alone.
 He gives his friends for sacrifice.
 Two roads before him, one to death beyond dying,
 One to life eternal.
 Which will he choose? Which will he choose?
 (GH, 105)

The two roads refer to Rand's options of choosing to fight for or against the Dark Lord. Should he be persuaded to take the path to 'life eternal' (immortality) he will break the known Pattern of existence and, as a consequence, plunge the Wheel world into Shadow.

These words are scrawled in human blood by a Trolloc on a wall in the dungeons at Dal Farra Keep, following the cold-blooded slaughter of prisoners and guards, and are a dramatic and chilling reminder to the protagonists and the reader of the knife-edge on which humanity stands, and the heavy burden the Wheel weaves for its heroic figure, the Dragon Reborn. Already in the recent past several false dragons produced by the Great Pattern have taken the prophecies to relate to themselves, and their vanity has resulted in chaos and the loss of many lives. The people are increasingly afraid of any man proclaiming himself as the messiah, or true Dragon Reborn. And while the Aes Sedai of the White Tower are determined that the current Dragon incarnate shall be guided by their interpretations of the Karentheon cycle, and follow their path towards the much prophesied Last Battle, the hero Rand perversely evades such control and seeks to interpret destiny in his own way, increasing the sense of fear that he will take the wrong path. Through the scattering of such clues, the author constructs a pattern that guides the interpretation. The reader, too, is thus encouraged to construct meaning from the fragments, thereby to assist in the weaving-together of the pattern of the text, and so is emotionally drawn into the

world instead of remaining a detached, passive observer of events. Timmerman suggests that in this way the ‘story’ becomes the reader’s ‘own story to the extent that his imagination interpenetrates the framework of the story and lives for a time in the world of the story’.²⁹ So, in his or her response the reader vicariously participates in the quest of the protagonist.

Another important variation of embedded story is used by the author to anticipate events to come, providing further clues in the pattern to be unraveled. Rand’s young female companions, Min and Egwene, offer small windows into the future through aura readings and prophetic dreams, as do the infrequent and spontaneous foretellings of the Aes Sedai. All of these extra-sensory readings produce vivid flashes of envisioned stories that cannot always immediately be understood by the reader or the inhabitants of the Wheel world, but that fall into context as the narrative unfolds. In the depicted world they afford pre-knowledge of ‘pieces of the pattern’, both good and evil, that are set and cannot be altered. (*EOTW*, 215) By contrast, the Dreamwalkers of the Aiel tribes have dream-visions that function as precautionary warnings of events that the pattern is weaving towards which could be altered – providing segments of story that the protagonists appear to have the freewill to rewrite the outcome of or to erase from within the text. (*Companion*, 299-300) An example is their dream about ‘rain coming from a bowl’, and the ‘snares and pitfalls’ surrounding the finding of the legendary ‘Bowl of the Winds’, which reveals two possible outcomes, and offers a cryptic clue to aid in its recovery: ‘If the right hands pick it up, they will find a treasure perhaps as great as the bowl. In the wrong hands, the world is doomed. The key to finding the bowl is to find the one who is no longer there.’ (*LOC*, 448)

Jordan thus utilises the tension between the pattern of fate already woven and the choices offered that can sometimes alter the weave. Jordan’s narrative, like that of

²⁹ Timmerman, *Other Worlds*, p. 8.

Tolkien's *LOTR*, 'creates an infinite series of echoes and anticipations, [clues] by which the work gains coherence', which is one of the characteristics of interlacement.³⁰

The patterning of Light and Dark: Philosophical core

In the tightly patterned sub-creations of the fantasist, the basic framework is usually not so complex, although it does not follow that the narratives themselves are simplistic. As outlined earlier, they deal with large and perplexing philosophical questions about the human condition and have strong moral purpose. At its core the narrative typically is built around a never-ending battle between representations of the abstract dualities of good/evil; there is general consensus among high fantasy writers that both are inherent and indeed necessary components in the invented world. In the case of Jordan's world of the Wheel – and as also depicted in Le Guin's *Earthsea* – some equilibrium between the two is crucial if the pattern of existence is to be maintained. It is usually shown to be the responsibility of particular characters (i.e. Jordan's Aes Sedai, and Le Guin's wizards of Roke) to keep a balance between them.

Along the way the assumption of absolute good is often shown to be as dangerous as the evil it fights against. Jordan clearly reveals this through his portrayal of the sect of pseudo-religious zealots, the warrior-priests known as Whitecloaks, who in their pursuit of what they perceive to be absolute good, and due, too, to their narrow and blinkered approach to life, actually foster evil, and perform cruel and murderous acts in the name of the Light. They have attitudes similar to those of Reformation-period Protestants/Puritans, being moralistic, militaristic, heavy-handed, bigoted and fanatical. They must parallel for many readers the Puritans and other much later splinter groups such as the Klu Klux Klan or Hitler's early Brown Shirts. Thus Jordan, in looking at their 'excess', is inviting readers

³⁰ West, 'Interlace', p. 84.

to reflect on the Puritan inheritance in America, which has continued repercussions in contemporary society, although it is certainly not new for a society to do ‘evil’ in the name of good.

Even the main protagonist Rand, the Dragon Reborn and champion of the Light, in the lead up to his final battle with the Dark Lord must harden himself to use others against their will, and to hurt personal friends for his own purposes, as his focus is increasingly upon his destined role to save the world from the Shadow. At one point his friend and companion Egwene sadly observes that she has the ‘feeling he doesn’t see people anymore, only pieces on a Stones board’ to be manipulated.³¹ (*SR*, 577) (Rand himself is later referred to by Moridin, a minion of the Dark, as a piece on a cosmic games-board, a point to be enlarged on in a later section.) As often proves to be the case with Jordan, and other fantasy writers, the duality of Light/Dark becomes blurred by ambiguity, perhaps suggesting that both are also ever-present in the Primary World and that the continual task for us, like the hero figures of story, is to find not so much the right balance between them, as to somehow identify their core purposes.

Patterning the fantastic from the familiar

In the creation of a Secondary World a fantasy writer draws on the Primary World but will seek to change elements of our reality. Such a writer uses ‘the fantastic mode, to produce impossibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar’.³² Thus the ‘story itself is a window into another world with a quasi-existence of its own’,³³ and it is both like and unlike reality. In the words of Rosemary Jackson:

³¹ Similarly in Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* sequence, the Old Ones of the Light in their belief in the supremacy of ‘absolute good’ have no qualms over hurting individuals who inadvertently get in their way.

³² Attebery, *Strategies*, pp.16-17.

³³ Terry Pratchett, ‘Imaginary Worlds, Real Stories’, *Folklore*, 111, 2000, p. 159.

Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite.³⁴

The fantasy mode must have some recognisable point of reference to the Primary World in order to be understood. As these stories in fantastic guise actually mirror very real concerns of day-to-day human existence, although they are not perceived by the reader to be ‘real’, they are found paradoxically to be incredibly true to experience. Thus fantasy literature is not merely ‘escapist’ but rather through a braiding of the strange and the comfortingly familiar offers its readers illumination of the Primary World through releasing them from its confines. Fantasy is not so much an escape from reality as an escape to an imaginative realm from which the reader may emerge to view the mundane world with fresh vision.

As Tolkien wrote in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, ‘[the word] spell, means both a story told, and a formula of power over living men’, a combination which strongly suggests that a successfully constructed fantasy story has the ability to hold an audience spellbound. Moreover, in the use of traditional motifs and archetypes (i.e. the quest, the hero, the magus, legendary creatures, numinous objects and magical realms), he believed ‘it is the effect produced *now* by these old things in stories as they are ... [that is of importance as] they open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through ... we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe’.³⁵ In a similar vein of thought, Mircea Eliade had stated that performing acts which form a repetition of archetypes automatically removes us from the present time and into another sphere as ‘any repetition of an archetypal gesture, suspends duration, abolishes profane time and participates in mythical

³⁴ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London & New York, 1988, p.20.

³⁵ J. R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, in *Tree and Leaf*, London, 1964, pp. 32-33.

time.³⁶ In other words, we willingly enter the realm of ‘story-time’ and, if the writer succeeds, empirical disbelief in what we find there is overcome.

Tolkien believes that the skill of the writer ‘produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside’.³⁷ While it is the writer’s use of traditional motifs, formulae and archetypes that initially can help to trigger this state of mind, more importantly, it is the skills of the particular storyteller that must then work to keep us entranced for the duration of the narrative. The success of this will depend on how the writer utilises the traditional material and uniquely designs the narrative. For although in the wonderful realm of ‘story-time’ an enormous range of things become possible, and there is ‘freedom from the domination of observed fact’, these events must accord with the ground laws of the sub-creation, if some consistency of inner reality is to be sustained and if it is to command Secondary Belief.³⁸

Like other writers of this narrative mode Jordan utilises a synthesis, an eclectic selection of cross-cultural material and traditional motifs, in order to create resonance and a rich layering of meaning. But in his conceptualisation of a Secondary World he retains some physical relevance or points of reference to our own, and peoples it with figures who reflect a range of recognisably human emotions, morals and motivations. Otherwise the construct would be rendered meaningless, and the affairs of its inhabitants would evoke little or no reader empathy or concern. As was also observed by Ann Swinfen, while the Secondary World needs this similarity of structure, ‘physical laws of nature and vegetation need not be the same ... but they should have a reasonable cause-and-effect relationship’.

³⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or Cosmos and History*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series 46, Princeton, NJ., 1954, p. 36.

³⁷ Tolkien, ‘Fairy’, p. 48.

³⁸ Tolkien, ‘Fairy’, p. 44.

And that in a Secondary World the ‘fundamental physical laws of gravity, heat and cold, dark and light’, are usually observed.³⁹

Thus, having built an imaginary world from recognisable components of ours, so that the landscape, flora and fauna, despite exotic additions, appear reasonably familiar, and impart greater depth and resonance to our ‘collective unconscious’ through the mining of elements of traditional story, Jordan has added another layering to the structure. Within the sub-creation, he fabricates a seemingly ‘factual’ yet entirely imaginary though substantial history, along with elaborate traditions of valued societal mores and customs, and a wealth of colourful regional myths and legends for the several peoples. So there is an intricate interweaving, patterning within patterning, or of worlds within worlds, like the array of inter-related cogs and wheels in the back of an old clock, which together create a way of marking the intangible flow of time, and in the narrative create, alike, both a sense of time and place. The invention of such detail for the Secondary World further adds to its credibility and through its historical and mythological depth imparts a larger-than-life quality to the main protagonists.

The writing of ‘spin-off’ short tales that provide prequels to the existing sequence of texts further deepens and strengthens the internal framework of historic/mythical reference. In relation to his *WOT* sequence, Jordan has written a short piece titled, *The Strike at Shayol Ghul* (1996), which reports on the finding of long-lost historical manuscripts providing details of events prior to and during the ‘Breaking of the World’ that destroyed the Age of Legends some 3000 years before the depicted time-frame.⁴⁰ He has also written another short story titled *New Spring* (1998), which tells of Rand’s

³⁹ Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945*, London, 1984, p.77.

⁴⁰ Robert Jordan, (1996), *The Strike at Shayol Ghul*, <http://www.tor.com/shayol.html> (accessed 19 March, 2003).

mentor/guide Moiraine Aes Sedai's initial meeting and mental bonding with her warder Lan.⁴¹ As suggested by West, it is the 'digressive and cluttered' narrative line of the interlace technique, where 'the narrator implies that there are numerous events he has not had time to tell' that lends itself to threads of the story being taken up at a later date:

We feel that we have interrupted the chaotic activity of the world at a certain point and followed a selection from it for a time, and that after we leave, it continues on its own random path. The author, or someone else, may perhaps take up the threads of the story again later and add to it at beginning, middle or end.⁴²

Although Le Guin's original *Earthsea* trilogy – which she has described as 'a pattern in the form of a long spiral' – is not as intricately interlaced as the Jordan texts, the richness of her material has enabled her, Tolkien-like, to revisit her imaginary world, and to write both prequels and sequels to her original work (*Tales* and *Wind*).⁴³ There is also the sense that there is much more to discover about the Archipelago and its various peoples. In Jordan's Wheel world the teeming diversity of the depicted age with its enormous cast of characters and nations suggests that there are an infinity of things about the world that could be expanded upon. In the cyber-construction of Jordan's *WOT*, the fans' role-play gaming and their fan fiction writings based on the Wheel world demonstrate well just how they can take up the his narrative at different points of time and either expand a particular thread in his work or integrate new ones of their own invention into the original pattern (as is discussed in the chapter on cyber storytelling).

⁴¹ Robert Jordan, 'New Spring' in *Legends: Eleven New Works by the Masters of Modern Fantasy*, edited by Robert Silverberg, London, 1998. Jordan has since extended this story and published it as a separate novel, *New Spring: A Wheel of Time Novel*, London, Orbit, 2004. Like other writers of this type of epic-style fantasy, Jordan finds that readers have an insatiable appetite for more detail of his imaginary world and the individual lives of certain characters.

⁴² West, *Interlace*, p. 79.

⁴³ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Dreams Must Explain Themselves', in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Susan Wood, rev. ed., London, 1989, p. 41. The 'long spiral' is an image of progression that is suggestive of the constant cycle of birth, life and death, of spiritual growth, and also of a fluid continuity between past, present and future – as found in Jordan's *WOT* narrative.

In addition to the prequels mentioned, Jordan, in collaboration with Teresa Patterson, has also produced a series companion for his sequence, *The World of Robert Jordan's 'The Wheel of Time'*, thereby providing an extensive 'compilation of the world's [complex] geography, sociology, and history'.⁴⁴ As with Tolkien's embedded narrative in *LOTR*, 'The Red Book of Westmarch', Jordan's own companion volume is compiled from putative manuscripts and surviving fragments of writings that contain records of the world of the Wheel. Thus the reader is made more fully aware that the current *WOT* volumes concern but a small section of the stories that could be told about the history of the Wheel world. As well as this, the documented history of the depicted world is designed to impart such an air of context, of consistency and of authenticity that it might very well relate to some forgotten but real or actual historical epoch of the world in which we live. Moreover, in an unusual move for a high fantasy writer, Jordan's Secondary World is not named, and as at times the chronicler addresses the reader in a direct and intimate manner, it seems analogous with our own reality, some other and plausible echo of Earth's own history. Thus there is a continual blurring between 'story' and 'real life', by which means the author seeks to foster credibility and the reader's willingness to sustain Secondary Belief.

Not only does the use of earlier motifs and archetypes enrich such narratives by linking them firmly to our own vast storied European past, but they also provide significant sign-postings for the reader. For the reader who likes traditional patterning, there is also the pleasure of recognising these recurring elements. An excellent example is Jordan's character Thom Merriman, the gleeman who from his age, white hair, beard and name is strongly reminiscent of a Merlin figure. The use of this archetypal figure alerts the reader to the fact that his role of protector/wise advisor to Rand, Mat and Perrin must surely

⁴⁴ Robert Jordan and Teresa Patterson, *The World of Robert Jordan's 'Wheel of Time'*, London, 2000, Preface, p. xiii.

signify extraordinary changes in their lives that will thrust them from obscurity onto their world's greater stage. Yet it is the creation of imaginary myth, legend, and history for the peoples within the invented world that imparts a quality of great antiquity, and authenticity. It is not just an entertaining but fanciful nostalgic fabrication of faerie, carefully rewoven from significant traditional material, but a believable world with its own genuinely long, rich and traditional cultural and mythic past.

Wizardry with words

Attebery rightly asserts that storytelling of itself usually relies on the properties of language:

Language can refer to absent objects, designate different layers of time and represent transitions between them, evoke memories of sensory experience, and provoke emotional reactions. The fantastic strain of storytelling is particularly dependent upon the open-endedness of language: the fact that there are always more sentences available to the native speaker than there are situations to call for them. Thus we can, even with the most elementary vocabulary and grammar, name objects that we have never seen, like Tolkien's green sun.⁴⁵

In regard to language Tolkien has also written that the 'invention of the adjective' is as 'potent' as a 'spell or incantation in Faerie'.

We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such 'fantasy', as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 25.

This transcendent and creative power of words provides an intriguing conundrum that a language, which evolved in and is firmly rooted in our world and culture, can so easily be used to create imaginary worlds that break the ground-rules of what is perceived to be possible in our own, and can describe things or thoughts of non-existent cultures. On some imaginative level we can actually believe in their existence, although in the Primary World they only appear as cleverly constructed words on the page.

Because of the shifting, chameleon-like nature of word groupings, one constrained only by the framework of grammar, a skillful writer can use them to construct a sub-creation that is a compilation of the known and the exceedingly strange, producing a perceptible world of such substance, that, in our minds, it becomes as tangible as the world around us. If anything, it can appear to be more vibrant, and more desirable than our reality. For ‘story-time’ gives the author license to introduce many elements that evoke and help to sustain a great sense of ‘wonder’ in the reader – that is, supernatural powers, wizards, mythical beasts, talismanic objects, larger-than-life heroes, quests of cosmic importance and such-like, whilst retaining enough ties to our own world to impart meaning and credibility for the reader. The philosopher David Hume believed humanity to have a persisting propensity towards ‘wonder’, to believe in events and things for which science has no logical explanation. Ann Swinfen in her book of the 1980s that was written in defence of fantasy, a then far more marginalised genre, chooses in Tolkienian fashion to link this intangible, inherent yearning for wonderment to ‘primordial desires’:

Fantasy draws much of its strength from certain ‘primordial desires’ for the enrichment of life: the desire to survey vast depths of space and time, the desire to behold marvellous creatures, the desire to share the speech of

animals, the desire to escape from the ancient limitations of primary world condition.⁴⁷

It is in this overwhelming human desire for transcendence of the limitations of reality, and the quest for an order and meaning to the mysteries of life that the appeal of fantasy (for those who enjoy it) must in great part lie.

Patterning a Secondary World

In the Jordan world each of the seven recurring Ages has a separate and unique pattern, one which forms the substance of reality for that Age, and is referred to as the ‘Age Lace’. Because the pattern is woven from all lives and actions, ‘good and ill are the warp and the woof’, so that society’s behaviour is never wholly one or the other. (*DR*, 378) Therefore, the Secondary World of the Wheel is not portrayed as a place of perfection and the characters continuously reveal very human flaws, and this adds to our sense of affinity with them. As part of the patterning the fantasist presents a more obviously hierarchical world, one that Ringel notes is often based on ‘medieval ideals of kingship and class structure’. She further suggests that ‘on the page or on the Internet, neomedieval fantasy posits a great chain of being with everyone – human, hobbit, dwarf, or elf – in their proper place’.⁴⁸ Thus the imaginary world is one in which each of the various strata of society has a function and a defined place, that is, farmers, craft makers, merchant guilds, seafarers, warriors, nobles, royal rulers and wizards. Writers such as Jordan then draw on this ordered hierarchical framework of society to depict dramatically the imbalance and disorder that occurs in everyday life as a result of the Shadow’s tightening grip on the land. For instance, the growing poverty, squalour, and mistrust among the poorer sections of the

⁴⁷ Swinfin, *Defence*, p. 7. (She is of course, quoting Tolkien’s *Beowulf* essay of 1936.)

⁴⁸ Faye Ringel, ‘Women Fantasists: In the Shadow of the Ring’, in *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-earth*, edited by George Clark and Daniel Timmons, Westport, CT., 2000, p.166.

urban populations in his imaginary world, along with a loss of moral ethics across the social spectrum and an alarming increase in the number of Darkfriends abroad. (Similarly, in Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore* the danger of the imbalance between light and dark is dramatically depicted by the growing poverty, and mistrust among the peoples of the Archipelago, the increase in 'hazia' addicts, and the now shoddy goods produced by the dyers and weavers.)

In the prologue to the second volume, through the eyes of Bors, one of the Forsaken, the reader learns of the alarming global spread of those who follow the Dark. Bors prides himself on seeing beneath the disguises of those gathered to receive orders from their master:

He could read them all, to class and country. Merchant and warrior, commoner and noble. From Kandor and Cairhien, Saldaea and Ghealdan. From every nation and nearly every people. His nose wrinkled in sudden disgust. Even a Tinker, in bright green breeches and a virulent yellow coat.
(*GH*, prologue, xviii)

The black masks and cloaks, beneath which Bors catches glimpses of national dress or distinctive pieces of jewellery that lead to their wearers' unmasking are a metaphor for the greater Darkness that has enveloped them all. Jordan sets this against the portrayal of beautiful young servants at the gathering clothed in 'tight white breeches and flowing white shirts' to reflect their guilelessness, but their 'blank eyes ... eyes more dead than death' are a horrific reminder to both those present and to the reader of the cruel power to reduce to zombies that can be wielded by the Dark Lord who rules through paralysing fear.
(*GH*, prologue, xvi)

The use of disguise forms another recurring pattern in the texts that lends itself to critical analysis in the light of game theory. John Huizinga notes that another general characteristic of human play is, that ‘games often involve masks, disguises and costumes, aspects [of play] that shade off into deception, trickery and fraud’.⁴⁹ In a literary application of this characteristic of ‘human play’, disguise constitutes a form of play-acting that is frequently used for some sort of gain. In the cosmic game that is being played out in Jordan’s world, the Dark Lord seeks to win by destroying the Great Pattern and thus the cycle of Time itself. Disguise then, is a repeating motif that is threaded through the narrative and is taken up by protagonists and antagonists alike, and used by the author to highlight their opposing motives of selfless and self-seeking behaviour. Members of the Forsaken change their physical appearances or character to beguile those around them; for example, Queen Morgase is besotted by Rahvin (disguised as Lord Gaebrial) and so he gains control of her kingdom; Lanfear puts on the guise of a young, sensuous woman or that of an ugly, fat merchant in order to tempt or to spy on Rand; Asmodean puts on the distinctive trappings of a gleeman in an attempt to gain access to Rand in order to destroy him; and Padan Fain’s outward appearance is that of an innocuous travelling tinker, but it hides the true blackness of his soul as he is one of the Dark Lord’s most dangerous agents.

By contrast, the protagonists use a variety of innocent changes to their ordinary appearances and identities to gather information that will assist in the saving of the Great Pattern, and so the survival of their world. To this end Egwene and Elayne’s shape-changing abilities while in the World of Dreams give them the necessary anonymity to visit the White Tower and search for clues to the plans of the Black Ajah. By changing their hair colour and clothing in the waking world, they seek to evade discovery by Darkfriends as they search for long lost numinous objects to be used to foil the

⁴⁹ Cited in Leyerle, ‘Game’, pp. 60-61.

machinations of the Dark. Thom the gleeman, too, is something of a shape-shifting personality as will be discussed in the next chapter. This emphasis on play-acting and identity-change in the narrative highlights for the reader the illusionary nature of appearances and offers a warning that all may not be as it seems; it also presents another set of interconnected clues or patterning to be unravelled by the inhabitants of the world and the reader.

Following on from this, the inn, the innkeeper and the conventions of public hospitality form an important trope, for throughout, Jordan uses the inn as a barometer of the state of the surrounding society. Thus in the unspoiled Two Rivers region the inns are prosperous, warm and welcoming, places central to the social life of the whole community and places of sanctuary for the traveller. In a reflection of their establishments, the innkeepers are invariably plump, honest, good-natured and spotlessly clean. By contrast, in areas where the Dark is encroaching the inns become ill-kept, places of potential danger to honest wayfarers, while the innkeepers are thin, mean, dishonest and inhospitable, and their regular patrons are uncouth and menacing. Strangers are greeted with surly suspicion and their safety cannot be guaranteed. This trope is employed to similar effect by Le Guin in the third volume (*Farthest*) of her *Earthsea* series, to emphasise the disorder and madness that troubles the inhabitants of the Archipelago once the balance of life and death is disrupted, and also echoes the differing atmosphere of the early and late inns in *LOTR*.⁵⁰

The web of society in a Secondary World

The social structure and architecture in Jordan's world are largely drawn from elements of a recognisably European historical past – the author has said that if it

⁵⁰ Jordan has said that the 'Nine Rings Inn', in bk 2 (*GH*) is a homage to Tolkien.

resembles anything it is seventeenth-century Europe but without gunpowder.⁵¹ The depicted Third Age of the Wheel world also has similarities to the post-mediaeval time of great disturbance to philosophical thought and to the structures of society. But the author's words imply that if a reader is attempting to pin his world down to some point in the historical landscape of primary reality, it may have elements that seem mimetic of the seventeenth century, but not slavishly so. It is typical among fantasists to set 'Secondary Worlds in ages that flourished prior to those of great technological advances – usually somewhere between the Bronze Age and the late Middle Ages. Thus they depict societies that are aligned with the natural world and in which powers or creatures we term supernatural may not be seen as such but are accepted as natural by the inhabitants.⁵² Freed from the conventions and restrictions of our reality, the writer constructs a sub-creation in which an array of the 'other' is possible, including potent magical powers, along with legendary creatures, non-human races and the like, which form part of everyday reality within that realm. The power of magic is crucial to the framework of the world, and provides the matrix of the patterning of existence. As Attebery suggests magic is 'not merely codified: it is itself a code as old as language or older' and has ethics, and 'is as rule-bound as language'.⁵³ Certainly in the case of Le Guin's Earthsea Archipelago magic is intrinsically tied to language, as in that world it consists of the power of words and of naming, and is invoked by using the true name of each thing. Such knowledge carries heavy responsibilities, for misuse begets dire consequences for the world at large, as when Cob uses it to summon the dead and thereby ruptures the boundary between the living and the dead.

⁵¹ 'Robert Jordan: The Name Behind the Wheel', *Locus, the Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field*, issue 470, 44.3, March, 2000, p. 76.

⁵² The wonderment expressed by protagonists as they journey away from their known environs is of course another matter, as is seen in a later discussion.

⁵³ Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 55.

Earthsea, like the universe in *Genesis*, was created by the use of language.⁵⁴ The Earthsea myth of creation tells of the creator Sepoy who brought the islands up from the ocean by speaking the first word. He spoke the language of the Making and gave everything its true name. Therefore to utter words in the Old Speech is to be aware of the true essence of things. In a philosophical moment Ged explains to Yarrow, sister of his fellow mage Vetch, that:

all power is one source and end ... Years and distances, stars and candles, water and wind and wizardry, the craft in a man's hand and the wisdom in a tree's root: they all arise together. My name, and yours, and the true names of the sun, or a spring of water, or an unborn child, all are syllables of the great word that is very slowly spoken by the shining of the stars. There is no other power. No other name. (*Wizard*, 182)

In Le Guin's cosmology the speech of the Making gives a kind of freedom from (later) distorting semantic, cultural bias – it is a joyous reflecting glass of the natural forces in the universe and displays a complete openness to the super-human or to the Cosmos.

By contrast, in Jordan's world of the Wheel, magic is derived from the True Source from which the One Power may be drawn or channelled by both males and females who have the talent. It is not words that trigger a linking to the One Power, but a meditative process that involves a specific clearing and focusing of the inner recesses of the mind, which over time becomes, for adepts, as automatic as breathing. Thus the magical force deployed in the world of the Wheel has a more scientifically-defined basis, being the natural energy that perpetuates the turning of the wheel of time itself, although like 'the Force' in the Star Wars saga, it has no stated origin – one presumes it began with the creation of the Cosmic Loom, which is Time itself.

⁵⁴ Laura B. Comolatti and Michael D. C. Drout, 'How They do Things with Words: Language, Power, Gender, and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea Books*', *Children's Literature*, 29, 2001, p.116.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Jordan, who has a degree in physics, says he ‘look[s] at magic as though it were technology … as though it were science. The One Power and Channeling … follow specific rules’.⁵⁵ In keeping with the principle of balance in the world of the Wheel, the True Source or One Power consists of two conflicting yet complementary parts, *saidar* (female), *saidin* (male), which working together and against one another provide the driving force for the world. *Saidar* must be surrendered to, whilst *saidin* needs to be fought against, and it is their essential differences, working in tandem, that will create a sustaining whole – a mirroring of the cosmic power that drives the world of the Wheel itself. ‘*Saidar* is a calm ocean that will take you wherever you want to go so long as you know the currents and let them carry you.’ But *saidin* has to be wrestled with to maintain control as it is ‘an avalanche of burning stone, [c]ollapsing mountains of ice’.

(COT, 535)

The two components of this cosmic power draw attention to the fact that at a temporal level neither female nor male should be privileged over the other and point to the need for equilibrium between both facets of the power, as achieved in the long past Age of Legends. The ancient united sign of the Aes Sedai is illustratively presented as ‘a circle, half white and half black with the colors separated by a sinuous line’ – an image drawn from the eastern concept of *yin* and *yang*. (*Companion*, 6) The Age of Legends was an era of great societal/technological advances, and one in which the word ‘war’ had no meaning, as testified to by surviving manuscripts, architectural marvels and powerful artifacts used to enhance the use of the One Power. Moreover, during the preceding 3000 years of female control, after the tainting of the male side of the power, the Wheel world has suffered two major wars, and currently the Dark is rapidly gaining sway, while the world spirals towards

⁵⁵Ernest Lilley (2002), ‘Robert Jordan: Interview’, *SFRevu*, <http://www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2003/0301/Feature%Interview%20-%20Robert%20Jordan/Interview.htm> (accessed 19 March, 2003).

chaos and Armageddon. And this state of crisis forcefully illustrates for the inhabitants and the reader the urgency of regaining an equilibrium between the two, as had occurred in the Age of Legends.

A glimpse of the awesome potential of the One Power, and the infinite nature of its source, is given in the eighth book (*POD*) when the ancient crystal the ‘Bowl of the Winds’ is activated by a group of linked women (Aes Sedai and Sea Folk ‘Windfinders’) to form an intricate weave of power that climbs up into the sky and out of sight, and reverses the adverse weather forced on the world by the Shadow:

That ever-changing lacework of *saidar* bent itself around something else, something unseen that made the column solid ... the bowl was drawing *saidin* as well as *saidar* ... Lacey spokes ... spreading across the sky ... spinning across the heavens, vanishing into the distance, on and on and on. (*POD*, 127)

This powerful *ter'angreal*, a relic from the Age of Legends, automatically weaves itself around an invisible column of *saidin*, although no men are linked to the circle of channelling women, offering evidence to the inhabitants of the depicted world and to the reader that it is natural for one side of the power to entwine with the other; the restoration of normal weather patterns is also proof of the positive outcome to be achieved by such a balanced union. This is just one example in which Jordan associates weaving with power. In keeping with the inter-connected pattern of the interlacement technique, the delicate lacework of *saidar* and *saidin* at this point anticipates Rand and Nynaeve’s braiding of the threads of both sides of the power that will bring about the cleaning of *saidin* and the destruction of the evil city of Shadar Logoth.

Jordan’s use of the motif of weaving is repeated in the construction of The One Power, which consists of five threads, comprising the natural elements of earth, fire, air, water, and spirit; thus, like the words of the ‘Making’ in Le Guin, it is an integral part of

the depicted universe. Its use imparts powers of healing, weather-working, foretelling, bodily shifts in time and space, and the ability to destroy, although the Aes Sedai of the White Tower swear an oath not to use it as a weapon except against Shadowspawn, or to save the life of a fellow sister or that of a bonded warder. (*Companion*, 298) The ability to channel is an innate talent, but one that varies in quality and degree, and if a person is to safely develop their skills to full potential, correct training and supervision is required. The Aes Sedai at the White Tower play a role similar to that of Le Guin's wizards on the island of Roke, as the training and initiation of novices at both centres entail arduous and potentially dangerous forms of initiation, particularly designed to test the moral fibre of those who enter their doors. Thus, these authors make it clear that the acquisition of power to evoke changes within their imaginary worlds is not to be treated lightly. The control of power is of cosmic significance and pivotal to the maintaining of universal stability and order.

Weaving the pattern of place and time in a Secondary World

Jordan's interwoven narrative technique is extended into his concept of place and time. The World of the Wheel, with its seven repeating ages, takes the form of a great Cosmic Loom, and it represents the cycle of time itself, since time began with its creation. Reincarnation, too, is part of the cycle. The author has stated that the concept for his series 'comes out of Hindu mythology, where there is a belief that time is a wheel'; he has also observed that 'many older cultures' have believed the pattern and meaning of time to be 'cyclic'.⁵⁶ Cosmic time according to the *smriti* tradition is measured in great cycles (*kalpas*), which are themselves divided into four ages or *yugas* representing different

⁵⁶ CNN Interactive Chat Transcript, (2000), 'Robert Jordan Chats about His *Wheel of Time* series', <http://www.cnn.com/COMMUNITY/transcripts/2000/12/12/jordan/index.html> (accessed 19 Sept., 2003).

stages in human development, from a golden age to a slow decay followed by war and strife, in an ever repeating sequence. ‘Thus the Hindu computes time within the framework of endlessness.’⁵⁷ Jordan takes up this notion in his created world, one in which the Age of Legends ('golden age') that saw a peak in human advancement has long passed, and degenerated into an Age of chaos and strife, so that the world now stands on the brink of destruction. In this endless cycle of time, as already mentioned, it is a conceit that the Last Battle can occur in each successive Age.

In this seemingly deterministic world there is a widespread acceptance of a belief in the Great Pattern and a commonly held view that ‘The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills’.
(*EOTW*, 92) Perhaps the idea of a cosmic loom and an eternally repeating pattern of seven Ages is a way of avoiding the fear of death as an absolute, and so the human fear of death is neatly negated in Jordan’s world. Don Elgin suggests that in fantasy worlds ‘death and destruction’ are seen ‘as an inevitable part of the cycle’, and ‘the renewal of life and the continuance of that cycle as an ever-dynamic system’.⁵⁸ Certainly, no ending, even death, is absolute within the turning of the Wheel, which is Time itself.

Within the world of the Wheel, memory is an enormous resource that conflates time present and past and enriches one’s knowledge or feeling and awareness of what has been. The pattern of the past is repeated through or referred to through such things as folktales, popular songs, folk sayings, as well as the cyclic festivals of the peoples such as the universal Spring festival Bel Tine, which not only signify the turning of the seasons but are a continual celebration of the ebb and flow of life and nature. Other reference points include words of the Old Tongue, ancient talismanic objects, myth and legend and

⁵⁷ Troy Wilson, Organ, *Hinduism: Its Historical Development*, New York, 1974, pp. 184-186. (Organ’s explanation of the Hindu concept of ‘Time and Eternity’ is worth reading in full.)

⁵⁸ Don D. Elgin, *The Comedy of the Fantastic: Ecological Perspectives on the Fantasy Novel*, Westport, CT., 1985, p. 182.

prophecy. Furthermore, ruins, abandoned cities, Ogier Steddings, Portal Stones, Waygates and the talismanic objects from the Age of Legends all help to keep much of the physical past in the present, and in some instances also contain the key to the future. For instance, consider the crystal sword *Callandor*, which only the true Dragon can remove from the fortress known as the Stone of Tear:

And it was written that no hand but his should wield the Sword held in the Stone, but he did draw it out, like fire in his hand, and his glory did burn the world. Thus did it begin. Thus do we sing his Rebirth. (*DR*, epilogue, 675)

The central figure Rand and his taking of this sword are given deeper significance through resonance with the Matter of Arthur, thus setting up reader expectation that this young hero is destined to embark on an actual and also symbolic (kingly) quest, which will have enormous implications and consequences for the world around him. This also illustrates well how the reverberations of a myth from our tradition not only enlarge, but give a sense of authenticity to the invented myth within the narrative as one is threaded through the other.

Maps

The use of detailed prefatory maps to the volumes helps to make it a concrete place in time and space, an autonomous, coherent world of the imagination within a fixed set of boundaries, one that also comes from Jordan's extremely tactile presentation of diverse landscapes. The concept of 'otherworlds' is not new in literature but the more fluid landscapes of mediaeval romances and epic, which often existed as an allegorical backdrop for the protagonist (i.e. the forest as a symbol of the unknown and the dangerous, a place of testing) are more clearly delineated and substantial in modern fantasy. Swinfen notes that

the ‘precise geography’ of contemporary fantasy Secondary Worlds is quite unlike the ‘shadowy and imprecise journeying of Spenser’s Knights in the Realm of Gloriana’:

although modern secondary worlds share with traditional fairy-lands and enchanted forests a quality of otherness, of strangeness and wonder woven into their fabric, they also differ very widely from their literary predecessors. Strangeness and wonder are still present, but the modern concern with precision of detail and coherent scientific date has had its effect on the creation and depiction of the secondary world.⁵⁹

In Jordan’s Wheel world the reader experiences the varying textures, beauty and harshness of the landscape by following the often arduous travels of the main human protagonists, for this world is mostly seen through their eyes – and most often through the rural eyes of the Emond’s Fielders with whom the story first begins. Close patterning upon the landscape adds to the substance of the world of the Wheel – its roads, rivers, ruins of past civilisations, villages, farmlands, walled cities, forests and mountains. Jordan’s attention to such detail increases the realism of his world as it is extremely rich and interesting to read about. Secondary worlds, such as the Wheel, or those created by Tolkien, Le Guin and other contemporary high fantasists, all impart an air of ‘a reality that is not contingent upon everyday reality, but instead is self-sustaining’.⁶⁰ These writers have created landscapes which the reader is imaginatively encouraged to believe in and to co-inhabit for the duration of the tale.

Circular world – linear life span for humans

There is tension between Jordan’s concept of a circular world with its endlessly repeating cycle of seven Ages, and the necessary linear line of the narrative, which is one

⁵⁹ Swinfen, *Defence*, p. 75.

⁶⁰ Jane Mobley, ‘Towards a Definition of Fantasy Fiction’, *Extrapolation* 15, 1973-74, p. 118.

much attuned to the life-span of its human protagonists. However, this is complicated in a number of ways, which work to draw the two concepts together. From the opening prologue in the first volume, Jordan makes it very clear that the battle between the representatives of the Light and the Dark, which began at creation, will last until time dies. At the Breaking of the World, some three thousand years before the setting of the present tale, Lews Therin, an earlier reincarnation of the Dragon, is reminded by his dark opponent that they ‘have fought a thousand battles with the turning of the Wheel, a thousand times a thousand, and ... will fight until time dies and the Shadow is triumphant.’ (*EOTW*, prologue, xii) Through such reincarnation, which is the stated way of the Wheel, and the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, human lives actually form an endless spiralling circle, although, paradoxically, each span on earth can be drawn as a line from birth to death. The anticipation of the end of the narrative (the Last Battle) in the beginning, is also suggestive of a linking cycle. In turn, it mirrors the symbolic image for the World of the Wheel, the Cosmic Loom, featuring a sideways figure of eight in the form of a stylised serpent biting its tail, an ancient, pagan symbol of infinity.

Each volume of the series is linked by its formulaic, opening legend, which not only functions in a similar way to the traditional fairy tale phrase ‘once upon a time’ to release the reader from the confines of the present, but also insists on the circularity of time. As well as this it details how historical events can become imaginative stories that are themselves constantly evolving:

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past. (*EOTW*, 1)

The recurring legend reveals that the Age in question is both ‘an Age yet to come and an Age long passed’, so that it undercuts our conception of time as being linear and finite, and instead focuses upon its circularity. Through this poetic device, Jordan continually renews and strengthens the idea in the reader’s mind that within the narrative he or she is stepping beyond the restrictions of time, as conceived here and now, and into the freedom of the more open-ended ‘story-time’, a realm in which it is logical for time to operate on different systems. And there are to be expected encounters, events and creatures that have no place in the more limiting world of reality. Thus, fantasy writers are able to disrupt or complicate the pattern of linear time on which we structure our daily lives, and to open our minds to the possibility of other ways of perceiving time and order.

Although the narrative drive to reach closure pushes the protagonists forward in time, through the use of multi-stranded plots, and an interweaving of events back and forward across the texts – so that time can be retarded or advanced – their progress becomes more of an interlacing that creates an intricate pattern, with each thread contributing towards the finished piece. Jordan, as pattern maker, can be likened to a weaver working on a huge, colourful and intricate tapestry. He may pick up threads at will, unravel a piece if it does not suit his artistic eye or purpose, brightly colour a section here or there, leave puzzling gaps or produce areas of darkness. Each thread builds towards the completion of the whole, and although there is an overall template (the Great Pattern of the Wheel), such poetic licence allows the author some leeway.

Furthermore, as the narrative unfolds, the threads which are to be strengthened, or which are altered or discarded are shown to depend to some extent on the reactions of the main protagonists. In particular Rand, Mat and Perrin, the three *ta’veren* who are destined to bring change, are presented as having some freedom in their reactions to the situations and challenges that the Great Pattern has designed for them. In turn the suggestion is that

the final outcome will be governed, too, by how well they respond to any tests and trials and to the antagonists they may encounter. Although Jordan is writing within the conventions of the quest paradigm and the reader may anticipate a happy ending, by setting up elements of doubt, times when the heroic figures could make selfish or inappropriate choices, the author adds narrative tension which works to maintain suspense and reader interest.

Other threads, in the form of prophecy, foretellings, prophetic dreams or visions can be introduced into the pattern as a means of anticipating important events, for instance the prediction of the rebirth of the Dragon, destroyer and saviour of the world, or Mat's marriage to the Daughter of the Nine Moons, which will surely link the Seanchan invaders with the peoples of the Dragon and change the dynamics of the coming Last Battle. Such mechanisms allow Jordan to go back later and fill them in. They are not just surface additions to the narrative, introduced as a means of plot manipulation to advance the narrative, although they often achieve this effect, but for the reader seem to naturally grow out of the thoughts and actions of the protagonists. The use of cryptic foreshadowing of events also adds a layer of intrigue and anticipation to the narrative. Despite the vastness of his canvas Jordan insists that 'all major plot lines will be resolved ... [although] some minor plot lines would have to be left unresolved as a way to let the world continue to live and breathe'.⁶¹ This tactic adds to the feeling that there is always more to be known about the world, and that it could be re-entered at another time.

⁶¹ Norén, 'East of the Sun'.

The patterning of time and space

In this section I will discuss Jordan's conception of time and space in terms of his world and his characters. Jordan continually plays with the notion that time -- and even space – are human constructs and that the boundaries between dream/reality, past/present, what is, what could be and what will be are fluid. His world is multi-dimensional with mirroring worlds of the Wheel revealing the imprint of what was, or could be, depending on the path taken by his characters. This certainly suggests to the reader that, to some extent, within the Wheel world human choices can shape the outcome of events within the Pattern of any given Age, creating tension between the author's stated view that his world is totally 'pre-determined' and his depiction of characters who make their own free choices. For instance, there are 'mirror' and 'optional' realms that can be reached by use of Portal Stones (much like freestanding, ancient monoliths) which provide spatially located gateways to alternative realities and 'mirror' worlds that might have been. As they are empty of human life, or aberrations of nature such as Trollocs, perhaps, in keeping with the philosophy of the Wheel, they are representative of the possible reincarnation of apparently historical landscape, and alternative courses available to the brave.

The typography of the mirror worlds is identical to that of the primary world of the Wheel, but here the landscape is washed out and hazy, lacking true substance, rather like the ephemeral ring that sometimes encircles the solid disc of our moon. Mirror worlds exist outside the time of the primary Wheel world, for within them vast distances can be quickly covered. In the second volume, when Rand accidentally activates a Portal Stone and transports himself, Loial and Hurin to one of these realms, although they are traversing much the same terrain they quickly find themselves to be days ahead of the companions they had left behind in the real Wheel world. (*GH*, 268-9) They find themselves in a mirror

world empty of human life, with terrible scars upon the earth. Monuments raised to Trolloc triumph in battle, or desolate ruins of statues of legendary human kings or warriors offer the bleakest testimony to the frighteningly possible successes of the forces of the Dark. Such images give concrete form to the abstract concept of the horrific dangers facing the inhabitants of the Wheel world, should they, by passivity, allow the Shadow to continue to gain the upper hand.

A further dimension is added through the depiction of the inner spirit realm of the World of Dreams (*Tel'aran'rhoid*), one which mirrors the waking world. It is a place to which various characters of both sides can gain access, since even in the World of Dreams, there must be both dark and light. Twisted spiral-shaped *ter'angreal* rings can aid a sleeper to more easily reach this dimension. The one-edged, unbroken spiral that curves from the outside to the inside of the ring is symbolic of the inseparable link between the temporal world and the inner spirit world of dreaming. (*DR*, 240) Further, an injury taken in the dream realm will also exist upon waking, while to be mortally wounded in spirit brings instantaneous death to the body in the waking world. Several of Rand's major battles against the champions of the Dark are conducted simultaneously on a physical and a metaphysical level, thereby further tightening the connection between the two.

Moreover, much strengthening the link between humanity and animals of the wild who share the web of life at temporal and metaphysical level is the power of Perrin's shamanistic role. Through his ability to link with the minds of wolves in the waking world, he gains access to the inner spirit realm of the wolf-dreaming where he spontaneously takes on the form of a wolf. Le Guin draws on such a link, giving Ged the talent to shape-change to a sparrow hawk, and through her metaphysical linking of humans and dragons – creatures with the ability to 'dance on the other wind' – provides a mystical, metaphoric interface between the finite world of the flesh and the eternal world of the spirit. (Le Guin

repeats this motif in *Tehanu* where Tenar unfolds a silk fan on which one side is painted with human figures and the reverse with dragons. But when the fan is held up to the light, ‘the two sides, the two paintings, [are] made one by the light flowing through the silk’.
(*Tehanu*, 105)) There is a glimpse of eternity in Le Guin’s dragons’ spiralling dance, a dance without beginning and end. This concept is mirrored in the universal ‘long dance’, in which all peoples of Earthsea participate at the winter equinox. In the archipelago of Earthsea this dance symbolically integrates land and sea, life and death, as well as light and dark, for it is performed from sundown to sunrise – a celebration of the endless cycle to which all things must submit. Fantasy worlds are presented as realms where people are less separated from the landscape and other life forms and where spirituality forms a complex and delicate web between them.⁶²

Le Guin’s notion of a spiritual eternity is also glimpsed in Jordan’s metaphoric night sky of stars that reflect the immeasurable number of individual dreams. As they flicker in and out of an infinite realm that lies between that of the waking world and the inner spirit realm of *Tel’aran’roid*, they also provide a metaphysical interface between the two, a brief intermingling of the finite and the eternal – a time out of time (a moment of epiphany as evoked by Eliot’s *Four Quartets*). By implication they suggest the myriad of lives to be experienced by the Wheel world inhabitants as the Wheel of Time turns, and even the possibility that life itself is but a state of dreaming or illusion:⁶³

an ocean of stars, infinite points of light glimmering in an infinite sea of darkness, fireflies beyond counting flickering in an endless night ... dreams of everyone sleeping anywhere in the world, maybe of everyone in all

⁶² Such a philosophy resonates with C. S. Lewis’s concept of the cosmic ‘Great Dance’. Don Elgin notes that this is the ‘symbol that Lewis [repeatedly] uses to illustrate the complex interdependence of all things in the universe’. *Comedy*, pp. 87-88.

⁶³ Towards the end of bk 9 (*WH*) following Rand’s cleansing of the male side of the one power, a cryptic reference is made to this act fulfilling a prophecy and marking the end of the ‘Time of Illusions’, pp. 663; 668.

possible worlds ... A vast ever-changing array of sparkling beauty. (*COS*, 200)

This sense of infinity is further strengthened by Jordan's description of the infinite and vital nature of the force that drives the Wheel of Time. During Rand's attempt to cleanse the taint from the male side of the One Power, he mentally links with Nynaeve through a pair of small statues, one male, one female, known as *ter'angreal* access keys, which in turn link to a pair of powerful giant *sa'angreal* statues of the same form. Thus he is able to draw upon seemingly unlimited amounts of both *saidar* and *saidin*, since they form the core of the universe, an invisible force that permeates every atom:

The weave did not form at all as he expected ... [but] took on convolutions and spirals that made him think of a flower. There was nothing to see, no grand weaves sweeping down from the sky. The Source lay at the heart of creation. The Source was everywhere, even in Shadar Logoth. The conduit covered distance beyond his imagining and had no length at all. (*WH*, 659)

Clearly, the One Power is endless and boundless and knows neither good nor evil. It just is, so can be used by the Light or the Dark in the continually changing patterning of life-threads that occurs throughout the repeating cycle of Ages, yet without it the world of the Wheel would cease to exist. Thus Jordan uses the Platonic image of the cosmic weaving powerfully here to show the very purpose of Creation itself.

People and time

In regard to time, it is apparent that, rather than pretending to represent what we conceive of as being 'real' time, fantasy allows for a number of different conceptions of the nature and meaning of time. In his recent literary exploration of mythology, Bob Trubshaw draws attention to the abstract nature of our notion of time in this world as being 'equal segments, endlessly repeated'. His comparative research reveals that recent strands

of philosophical thought suggest that however ‘objective’ time may first appear, human perception and experience of time are always story-like. Indeed, it is from such narratives that the identities of individuals and groups emerge. He notes that:

Modern Western ideas about time seem so obvious, so scientific, that it is difficult to conceive of alternative ways of understanding time. Yet these modern ideas about time have only dominated Western thinking in the last 150 years. Non-western societies and traditional European cultures all display wider attitudes to time. And, above all, they do so in their myths.⁶⁴

Traditional narrative is thus a way of exploring time and of allowing people to gain imaginative control over it. (This sense of time as an ‘eternal now’ in which all tenses of time are held in ‘equilibrium’ lies at the ‘heart of Oriental philosophy’ where past, present and future ‘are simply names in an endless circle’).⁶⁵ In fantasy, for which myth and fairy tale have been the root paradigms, magical intervention naturally allows for temporal interruptions through time slips, pauses or a spiraling of time that allow the past, or what might yet be, to co-exist in the present. Further, as observed by Attebery in his discussion of Tolkien’s *LOTR*, the characters in fantasy texts can function to present alternate ways of relating to time.⁶⁶ For example, in the characters of Jordan’s three main heroes, Rand, Mat and Perrin, life patterns of the past come alive in the present, through a condensing of time that links their minds to old talents or memories of previously lived lives, in ways that enhance their abilities and contribute to their self-knowledge, maturity and status. In turn these personal experiences are linked to their fated paths that are being woven in the present and on which the success of the quest is reliant. In his conceptualisation of a pattern of time in which the mythical or historical past of his imaginary world re-occurs in the present, Jordan, like other fantasists, is drawing on Mircea Elaide’s concept of the

⁶⁴ Bob Trubshaw, *Explore Mythology*, Wymeswold, Loughborough, 2003, p. 30.

⁶⁵ Eleanor Cameron, *The Green and Burning Tree*, Boston, 1962, p. 72.

⁶⁶ Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 60.

'eternal return', whereby through archetypal events and motifs 'the past is but a prefiguration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation is final'.⁶⁷

Compounding this telescopic sense of time, in Jordan's work we also view the world through the eyes of inhabitants who are granted far longer life spans than those of his human characters. Ogier giants, within their Steddings (groves of ancient trees), are immune to the One Power that drives the world of the Wheel, so that for them time passes at a different rate than in the outside world, although they share the same spatial location. When relating a story, like Tolkien's Ents, they are extremely long-winded; and similarly when their Elders meet, they ponder questions at great length. They also retain memories of the past that extend well beyond those of human capability, thereby providing a living link to historical events long since lost to the recall of most humans in the Wheel world.

The Aes Sedai priestesses of the White Tower, too, have enhanced life spans that exceed those of normal humans by several hundred years, which not only gives them a great depth of knowledge of their world and its history, but also the time in which to perfect their arts in the use of the One Power, and to build a strong moral and political power base. The great ring that each woman wears, depicting a serpent biting its tail, is a metaphor for the infinity of the power they possess, as well as serving as a reminder that the repeating cycle of birth and death may be extended for them, as for the Ogier giants, but it can never be entirely circumvented. These women are easily identified by a quality of 'agelessness'. They seem to stand still as time flows by, an image symbolically reflected by the antiquity and unmarred beauty of the Ogier-built White Tower, the stronghold of their learning, as it stands on an island in the river, impervious to the constant ebb and flow of the tides around it.

⁶⁷ Eliade, *Eternal Return*, p. 89.

Moreover, legendary heroes in some extraterrestrial dimension are fixed to the great cosmic Wheel Pattern, destined to be spun out (reborn) again and again through the seven repeating Ages at times of need. Thus they are immortalised both at a temporal and at a spiritual level through their repeating cycle of famed and newly-enacted deeds. Because they are reborn throughout time, they are known not only on a metaphysical, mythical level through the old stories, but also within time to people of the various ages in which they reincarnate. When Birgitte Silverbow is torn from the Pattern and flung into the world as an adult – due to a fight with one of the Forsaken – she is a notable legendary figure who instantly brings heroic story to life. So, too, do the legendary warriors of the past who can be summoned by the call of the numinous Horn of Valere to aid in present day battles. But as they are compelled to fight for whoever first sounds the Horn, they can be summoned by either the Light or the Dark. Such disruptions of any patterning discernible in time add to the complex layering of the narrative and reinforce the validity of the circular nature of time itself.

With regard to such legendary figures, personality traits, proficiency with certain weapons, and even emotional or martial relationships are perpetuated from one reincarnation to another, so in a sense they are constantly re-enacting themselves or reinforcing their necessarily timeless heroic/legendary status. In our contemporary world popular heroes such as Superman and the Phantom share a similar role, as there is a general conception that they never age or alter in appearance as well as a public expectation that they can be relied upon to perform their super-hero roles for successive generations of readers.

The Seanchan invaders from across the Aryth ocean, descendants of the army of the legendary mainland king/warrior Artur Hawkwing, who in the past had invaded their shores, not only bring actions of the past to bear on the present, but through their

genealogy they are also representative of the past in the present. They refer to prophecies of the Dragon, which have become altered over time to encompass aspects of their own distinct culture, thereby showing the many-faceted nature of myth and legend and the instability of truth as an absolute in cultural memory. As the Seanchan view themselves not as invaders but as peoples with a right to return to what they regard as their homeland, their invasion and resettlement is a metaphor for the physical interweaving of cultures and nations and so another facet of interlacement.

On the Shadow side we see a number of interesting temporal disruptions to time. The mysterious figure, Moridin, who appears to have lived for thousands of years, has the ability to tear a hole in the Great Pattern and so step out of time, and to come back again at will. Mordeth, the ancient bane of the fallen city of Shadar Logoth, and one of many manifestations of evil, long ago through his own misdeeds became entrapped in a strange time warp, and although the city has naturally weathered and crumbled around him with the passing of time, he remains bound within its precincts, and is denied either true life or true death. Thus he exists in the temporal world of the Wheel, yet outside the true cycle of time. Similarly, the thirteen Aes Sedai of the Dark known as the ‘Forsaken’ did not age during their three thousand years of entrapment at the site of the Dark Lord’s prison at Shayol Ghul. The concept of escaping the ravages of time through sleep is an old literary motif (i.e. Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Rip Van Winkle) and as Jordan applies it only to his antagonists, by linking it to evil he brings to the fore the dangers inherent in seeking immortality.

Time and locations

To add to the complexities of Jordan’s vision of time, within the world of the Wheel the cycle of time can differ in a number of locations. In the hidden Aiel city of

Rhuidean, in the numinous forest of crystal spires initiates of the Aiel tribes can relive events of the past, while *ter'angreal* archways offer access to realms and events that stand beyond any known time. Various devices such as Portal Stones, the Ways, or travelling by opening gateways with the One Power, allow transport to other planes of existence, or the ability to step from one place to another without crossing the usual surfaces of the intervening space. Moreover, Ogier Steddings and the Green Man's enchanted grove alike symbolise the lost Paradise once accessible on earth. Ogier giants, akin to Tolkien's ents, a long-lived but dying breed are the gentle guardians of trees. And the Green Man (reminiscent of Tom Bombadil) represents the last of the race of Nym, constructed sentient beings from the Age of Legends, made from living plants which utilised the One Power for the benefit of all plants and growing things. The Green Man's enchanted grove is only to be found by the pure of heart. Although it is sought by many, few succeed in their quest, for unselfish need to serve others and not glory, is the key to its discovery. As it is not the grove that moves, but the necessary approach towards it of the person who needs it, this enchanted place, like the Garden of Eden, is both of but apart from the everyday world of the Wheel, both in and yet outside time. It holds the grail-like 'eye of the world', an untainted pool of *saidin*, hidden against contingent time of great human need. It also holds the legendary and talismanic Horn of Valere and the banner of the true Dragon - aids that will be needed at the Last Battle. A further parallel to the Christian loss of Paradise is that, as the Dark One's touch on the world strengthens, due to human over-reaching for power, one of his minions, serpent-like, gains entrance to the Grove, and so brings about its destruction and the death of the last of the Nym.

Ogier Steddings, much like the open temple groves of classical antiquity, are scattered across the landscape and can be easily found by all travellers and none are denied entry, although Darkfriends find even their proximity uncomfortable. They consist of

groves of the most ancient trees, lovingly tended by the remaining Ogiers, and they are both in but apart from the everyday world, since within them the One Power that drives the world of the Wheel cannot be accessed. Therefore, within the Steddings time also has a different meaning, which accounts for the longevity of the Ogier as a race. The grove of each Stedding stands as a sacred, primaeval but living cathedral of the natural world, one from which the human inhabitants of the Wheel world have turned aside, and so can only provide for their race a place of temporary sanctuary and healing. The reverse is true of the Ogier, almost the priests of the trees, who can spend only limited amounts of time in the world of humans without developing a wasting sickness. In his portrayal of the Ogier Steddings, as with the Green Man's grove, Jordan is drawing on the ancient and potent motif of groves as being places of sanctuary and sacredness, as does Le Guin with the grove of the Patterner on the Island of Roke.

A web of words

In summary, Jordan's construction of intricately tangled multi-stranded plots draws on the mediaeval literary techniques of interlacement and game-play. Landscape is vividly portrayed and also used as a metaphor/mirror for the encroachment of evil; for example, the deepening drought reflects the rise of darkness of spirit throughout the Wheel world, and perhaps also our current crisis of global warming. Different points of view are used – sometimes from the side of the Shadow – to provide a broader picture. His world is given concrete form and depth by the use of maps, historical records, ruins, legendary tales of the gleeman, folksongs, folk sayings and a cast of distinctly recognisable characters from numerous cultures. Prophecy, dreams, and visions foretell the future. Legendary, talismanic objects add to the sense of magic and wonder. Synthesising of an eclectic array

of cross-cultural material and traditional motifs (e.g. Arthurian Romance, Celtic and Norse myth, Greek myth, Christian myth, Buddhist concepts, Samurai swordplay, and Native American lore) imparts another rich layering of meaning. Evil is manifest not only in people but in places (the abandoned city of Shadar Logoth, Shayol Ghul site of the Dark One's prison, and the Tower of Ghenji) and in tainted objects, especially weapons (daggers and swords). Self-conscious protagonists are aware they are not like the heroes in 'stories' but that they are part of a greater pattern of life and so exhibit a strong sense of destiny and duty.

A plethora of skillfully manipulated sub-plots have allowed Jordan to embrace a great diversity of peoples, locations, dimensions and timeframes to flesh out his story and to give his world complex substance and so historical credibility. This structural tactic also enables the placement of the main protagonists in a variety of situations, which all aid in self-growth and so prepare them for the responsible tasks that lie ahead. Places of sanctuary, such as the Ogier Steddings, also bring important environmental issues to the fore. Rand's battles occur on both a temporal and a metaphysical level, which increases the depth of his character and elevates him to a larger than life and more symbolic heroic status.

Through the myriad of differing rumours and tales that spread about Rand's exploits, Jordan also highlights the constant creativity of language, and of mortal thought, there being many shadings of reality and truth, depending on how individuals experience events and interpret them to others. In his imaginary world he shows us how easily fiction can become part of the fabric of 'reality', and colour people's perception of life in a way that influences memory of the past and must influence the behaviour patterns for the future:

Across the nations the stories spread like spiderweb laid upon spiderweb, and the men and women planned the future, believing they knew the truth. They planned, and the Pattern absorbed their plans, weaving toward the future foretold. (*POD*, epilogue, 643)

As time passes, such stories turn to myth and legend and the weaving of them becomes so intricate that it is virtually impossible to separate the strands of truth from those of imaginative hearsay. Perhaps, it is on such history-like stories that the fabric or meaning of our own post-Christian world is to be creatively reconstructed and maintained through time and, in part, this may account for our receptiveness to earlier style worlds of the imagination. In the perceptive words of Peter Brooks:

Narrative is one of the ways in which we speak, one of the categories in which we think. Plot is the thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives.⁶⁸

Moreover, as Timmerman suggests, ‘fantasy relies upon the age-old tradition of story-telling’ and that ‘most properly fantasy is a kind of myth, a story which stands in opposition to the iron-clad pragmatism of the age and seeks to return [us] to a sense of origins and divine significance. It affirms a meaning which is the ground of reality for humankind’.⁶⁹ Indeed the thrust of this chapter has been to explore, through patterning and interlacement the ways in which writers of epic-style high fantasy, particularly writers like Robert Jordan, reweave traditional materials to build Secondary Worlds that disrupt our concept of time and space. Thus they are enabled to form an imaginative, literary coalescence of past, present and even future, and to use it as a means to explore the eternal human dilemma, and to create an alternative blueprint for existence which challenges the disorder and uncertainty of the Primary World. Within the world of the Wheel it is only a

⁶⁸ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Oxford, 1984 , p. 232.

⁶⁹ Timmerman, *Other Worlds*, p. 28.

special interpreter who can comprehend the whole meaning of the Great Pattern. Accordingly, the analysis must turn to the subtle presentation of the several magus figures in the pattern of the stories.