

**A Web of Words:
Pattern and Meaning in
Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time***

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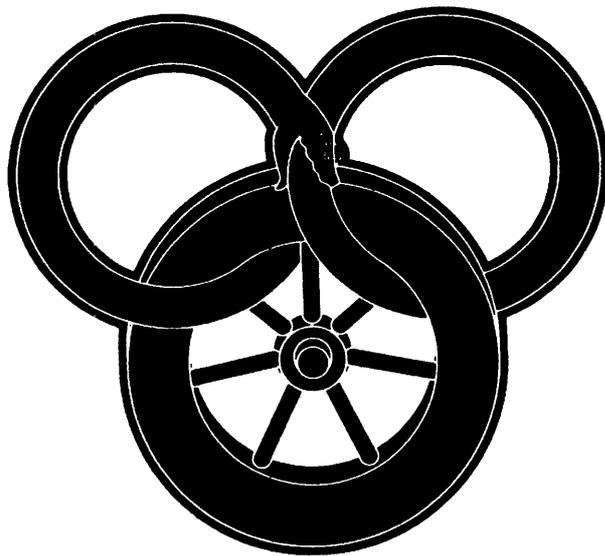
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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long 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, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning (EOTW 1).



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ABSTRACT

A characteristic of high fantasy literature of the latter part of the twentieth century has been the writing of multi-volume, complex series. To date such works have attracted only a limited amount of critical scrutiny. In this thesis I am using Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* sequence as the focus texts to explore the role and purpose of both the author of such epic-style high fantasy, and that of his online following of fans, as storytellers and pattern makers, and more specifically the motif of patterning in the novels.

This thesis focuses on the mediaeval technique of interlacing as the key structuring device of the *WOT* to unlock the intricate patterning of Jordan's narrative. This motif is a literary structural device in which several simultaneous themes are interwoven into one large narrative, akin to the intricate knot work so characteristic of early Anglo-Saxon art. I apply close reading of the Jordan texts and ask the following questions: What are the patterns in Jordan's texts? How do they feature in the work? What functions do they serve in the work in regard to narrative, meaning and in relationship to the reader?

I critically unravel the patterning and meaning of Jordan's world building and highlight the effect and purpose of his interlace narrative strategies, concentrating on the construction and mapping of the Secondary World; the roles of the magus and hero figures and their engagement in the heroic quest. In particular, I argue that Jordan extends the interlace narrative technique to a critical reworking of the characterisation of the hero, through the creation of an interconnected 'heroic triad'. The close reading of the Jordan texts is widened to an analysis of the function of fan-based internet sites as a coextensive network of emotional response, critical comment and complement to the Jordan texts. Such cyber-extensions of the written texts represent a type of never-ending story and are a new and fascinating aspect of literary work and of its fandom that has received little critical attention.

IN-TEXT ABBREVIATIONS

Robert Jordan

<i>EOTW</i>	<i>The Eye of the World</i>
<i>GH</i>	<i>The Great Hunt</i>
<i>DR</i>	<i>The Dragon Reborn</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>The Shadow Rising</i>
<i>FOH</i>	<i>The Fires of Heaven</i>
<i>LOC</i>	<i>Lord of Chaos</i>
<i>COS</i>	<i>A Crown of Swords</i>
<i>POD</i>	<i>A Path of Daggers</i>
<i>WH</i>	<i>Winter's Heart</i>
<i>COT</i>	<i>Crossroads of Twilight</i>
<i>KOD</i>	<i>Knife of Dreams</i>

Robert Jordan and Teresa Patterson

<i>Companion</i>	<i>The World of Robert Jordan's 'The Wheel' of Time'</i>
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J. R. R. Tolkien

<i>LOTR</i>	<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
<i>Fellowship</i>	<i>The Fellowship of the Rings</i>
<i>Towers</i>	<i>The Two Towers</i>
<i>King</i>	<i>The Return of the King</i>

Ursula K. Le Guin

<i>Wizard</i>	<i>The Wizard of Earthsea</i>
<i>Farthest</i>	<i>The Farthest Shore</i>
<i>Tales</i>	<i>Tales from Earthsea</i>
<i>Wind</i>	<i>The Other Wind</i>

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INTRODUCTION

A phenomenon characteristic of late twentieth-century high fantasy literature is the writing of sprawling ‘history rich’ and philosophically complex stories that span many volumes. Perhaps it is because of the sheer size of such works that, to date, a writer such as the American, Robert Jordan (b.1948) and his widely acclaimed and ongoing high fantasy series *The Wheel of Time*, have attracted only a limited amount of critical scrutiny. Yet, as was noted by Roz Kaveney and John Clute in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ‘when complete the sequence will almost certainly constitute one of the major epic narratives of modern fantasy’.¹ With over 11 million books in print in America and Canada alone and translations currently in 22 languages, by 2005 Jordan has obviously attracted enormous global appeal in little more than a decade.² Indeed, during the last ten years, his work has generated a trans-global following of fans who have spawned a burgeoning network of web sites, virtual-communities devoted to the *WOT* series. Such cyber-extensions of the written (as opposed to other media) texts represent a type of never-ending story and are a new and fascinating aspect of literary work and fandom that also, to-date, has received but little critical attention, although initial interest has increased in recent years, especially in pop-culture areas.

In this thesis I use Robert Jordan’s *WOT* sequence as the focus texts to explore the role of both the writer of fantasy, and the role of his online following of fans as storytellers and pattern makers, and the motif of patterning in the novels. Jordan’s epic *WOT* sequence is worthy of study, not only for the reasons outlined above, but also because he enacts the dilemmas and challenges of the contemporary ‘second-wave’ fantasists. I use this term, in

¹ Roz Kaveney and John Clute, ‘Jordan, Robert’, in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, edited by John Clute and John Grant, New York, 1999, p. 524.

² Robert Jordan, an email to the researcher Oct., 2004 (figures supplied to Jordan by his publisher Tor Books).

particular, to distinguish those authors who began to create their high fantasy cycles in the latter years of the twentieth century. Thus, they follow in the footsteps of earlier renowned fantasy authors such as Ursula Le Guin, Susan Cooper, Lloyd Alexander, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, Stephen Donaldson and many others. All of these, from the late 1950s on, were writing in the wake of C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* books and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and, in particular his benchmark fantasy text *The Lord of the Rings*.³ The sources for the intricately tangled 'web of story' are indeed vast. Tolkien, in his much quoted treatise *On Fairy-Stories* in which he sought to define fantasy, argued that the history of fairy stories (that form part of the matrix of modern fantasy) is:

probably more complex than the physical history of the human race, and as complex as the history of human language. [And that] three things: independent invention, inheritance, and diffusion, have evidently played their part in producing the intricate web of Story. It is now beyond all skill but that of the elves to unravel it.⁴

Tolkien's own trilogy drew on a wealth of earlier material, and also had influential precursors of complex antecedents such as the prose romances of George MacDonald and William Morris, or the works of E. R. Eddison and Lord Dunsany.

All writers, to some extent, reveal influences of earlier authors, but in the genre of fantasy Tolkien was the first to create a completely autonomous fictional world one that the reader could enter imaginatively and believe in fully. Thus, authors like Jordan are conscious that they are not pioneers in the creation of discrete and coherent Secondary World fantasies and that their writing is both informed by more recent and ancient conventions, narrative structures and motifs, which are drawn from an immense, traditional

³Lewis himself had a long association with Tolkien, and, it is clear that he took inspiration from Tolkien's ideas. Refer to Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their Friends*, London, 1978.

⁴J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf*, London, 1964, p. 24. This essay was originally composed as an Andrew Lang Lecture and delivered in a shorter form in the University of St. Andrews in 1938. See Tolkien's 'Introductory Note,' in *Tree and Leaf*.

story-board. Instances of the under-girding patterns that inform the narratives of high fantasy include the imaginary landscape; magical objects and powers; the binary struggle between the forces of good and evil; a world in crisis; and the heroic quest that can save it. Yet modern fantasy writers not only draw heavily from the literary past, they also utilise an increasingly eclectic array of cross-cultural material, gleaned largely from diverse myth, legend, fairy tale and history. They thus have complicated the (timeless) narrative structure and pattern of the quest paradigm as displayed by Tolkien. The challenge facing Jordan and his contemporaries is the need to find methods of writing within a well-mined, popular tradition while imparting some sense of originality to the patterning of their own work, and to do so in ways that will hold the attention of their postmodern readers. I argue that Robert Jordan achieves this through his application of an older narrative form, the intricate literary art of ‘interlacing’ – a mediaeval narrative technique that Tolkien had found particularly suitable to his purposes in his construction of *LOTR*. Yet interlacing, as a theoretical approach to modern fantasy, has received scant critical attention since the 1970s.

Thesis statement and overview

This thesis uses a close reading of the texts to interrogate both pattern and meaning in Robert Jordan’s *WOT*, and in particular stresses the conception of mediaeval interlacing as the key structuring device of his work. Therefore the larger critical questions addressed in this thesis are: What are the patterns? How do they feature in the work? What functions do they serve in the work in regard to narrative, meaning and in relationship to the reader?

While consideration will be given to the whole opus of Jordan’s *WOT* the intention is to focus on the author’s awareness of pattern making and world building in the footsteps of earlier fantasy writers. In order to critically unravel some of the patterning and meaning of Jordan’s world building and to highlight the effect and purpose of his interlaced

narrative strategies, my intention is to concentrate on the following elements of his work: the author's construction and mapping of a Secondary World that stands at a point of crisis, thus providing the impetus for what unfolds; the roles of the magus figures; and the roles of the hero figures and the heroic quest – the hero and the magus are both linked to the destiny of the imaginary world and provide the two key character types who operate within the pattern of high fantasy. Lastly, some reflection will be made on the enormous impact of the internet on fandom and storytelling in relation to Jordan's Wheel world.

Although the main body of my work is devoted to the close analysis of Jordan's *WOT*, the intention is to draw on elements of the work of a number of other fantasy writers where the inclusion of such material serves to illuminate a point or to provide contrast. Such a strategy will be helpful to situate Jordan's own work and his use of traditional material within the body of contemporary epic-style high fantasy literature. For these purposes I mean to refer in particular to J. R. R. Tolkien's *LOTR*, as it is regarded as the template or model structure for many contemporary fantasy writers. Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* sequence is useful as, like Jordan's *WOT*, her work is informed by the eastern-inspired philosophical concept of balance (*yin/yang*). Elements of Raymond Feist's *Magician*, and Robin Hobb's *Farseer* sequence, as variously referred to, will supply a useful counterbalance to points raised in relation to human interaction with non-human species, a common thread in fantasy.

Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* sequence

From the latter part of the twentieth century it has become common for authors of high fantasies to build a template world and to use this clearly delineated and fixed landscape as a setting for an on-going series of volumes. Clute and Grant have observed that these texts, generally speaking, belong to 'genre fantasy', the more 'formulaic' end of

the mode of fantasy, and that their Secondary Worlds can more accurately be described as ‘fantasyland’. It is a landscape that is ‘fixed in place; it is inherently *immobile*, it is a backdrop not an actor’. Therefore, it is not a setting wherein ‘landscape and story are inherently intertwined; one cannot exist without the other and each modifies the other’. Clute further suggests that normally, the stories set in ‘fantasyland’ are structured so as to ‘defer completion indefinitely, to lead readers into sequel after sequel’.⁵ Clear examples of this type of storytelling are David Eddings’s *Belgariad* series, Terry Brooks’s *Shannara* and *Landover* series, or Terry Goodkind’s *Sword of Truth*.

Thus the writers of high fantasy narratives may be accused of following a common pattern too slavishly, although Grant also observes that the ‘constraints of [the conventions] of genre fantasy can bring out the best in some authors’.⁶ Although there are some negative responses to Jordan’s *WOT*, Kaveney and Clute agree that he uses the conventions in a manner that is only ‘superficially a genre fantasy’ because of the way he builds his story. ‘The Wheel of Time is built from conventional fantasy sequences, but these sequences are assembled with notable architectonic skill into an epic fantasy whose momentum (despite longueurs) is very considerable.’⁷

Jordan’s *WOT* sequence is serial; the individual volumes are not discrete. To date it consists of ten books, each of which should be regarded as very substantial, interdependent chapters, and ‘despite longueurs’, the author is definitely weaving the narrative towards a final closure. During an interview in 2003 with Bill Thompson of *The Charleston Post and Courier* newspaper, Jordan made it clear that it would be a mistake to view the *WOT* cycle

⁵ Clute and Grant, ‘Fantasyland’; Clute, ‘Structure of Fantasy’, in Clute and Grant, *Fantasy*, pp. 341; 339.

⁶ Grant, ‘Genre Fantasy’, in Clute and Grant, *Fantasy*, p. 396. Indeed the setting up of a fixed template world does not exclude the writing of an original and interesting Secondary World. For instance, Terry Pratchett in his popular and numerous *Discworld* novels has added an original twist for he deliberately employs his created world and a myriad of fantasy conventions for the purposes of parody.

⁷ Kaveney and Clute, ‘Jordan, Robert’, in Clute & Grant, *Fantasy*, p. 524.

as a series, countering:

I'm doing something that hasn't been done, I guess since [English novelist Anthony] Trollope. I am writing a very long, multivolume novel. You can read the first book, *The Eye of the World*, and stop, and feel you've read something that has enough resolution that you don't feel you have to read more. But you still have to start there.⁸

The *EOTW* is the only volume in the series that possibly could stand alone, and the one that most clearly reflects the heroic quest paradigm of J. R. R. Tolkien's influential *LOTR*. The story-lines of each successive volume are increasingly dependent upon and interlaced with those that have gone before and purposely designed to be read and interpreted in sequence.

The titles for the *WOT* sequence, in order, are as follows: vol. i *The Eye of the World*; vol. ii *The Great Hunt*; vol. iii *The Dragon Reborn*; vol. iv *The Shadow Rising*; vol. v *The Fires of Heaven*; vol. vi *Lord of Chaos*; vol. vii *A Crown of Swords*; vol. viii *The Path of Daggers*; vol. ix *Winter's Heart*; vol. x *Crossroads of Twilight*. The first volume of the series was published in 1990 and the tenth in 2003. Jordan has recently stated that it will take two more books to complete the sequence, and the penultimate volume, *Knife of Dreams*, is due for release in October 2005.⁹ Although he intends to continue to write high fantasy, his landscape for future books will not be that of the Wheel world. The author insists that a future fantasy project, which he has 'already been pondering', will be set in a 'different world, a completely different universe with completely different characters. It will not in any way be a sequel, or even related to *The Wheel of Time*.'¹⁰

⁸ Bill Thompson, 'Local author's fantasy fiction as loved as Tolkien's', *The Charleston Post and Courier*, 9 February, 2003. http://www.charleston.net/stories/020903/art_09jordan.shtml (accessed 5 May, 2003).

⁹ Jason Denzel, 'Comiccon 2004 Wrap-up', <http://www.dragonmount.com/Community/Events/comicCon2004.php> (accessed August 3, 2004).

¹⁰ Thompson, 'Local author'.

Synopsis of *The Wheel of Time*

In traditional style the story is set at a time when survival of the Wheel world is at grave risk. Lands are now fragmented, the seven seals on the Dark One's prison are weakening, and as a consequence, some of the Forsaken (male and female) have escaped and the Shadow Lord can use them as surrogates to strengthen his own influence on the world. Human Darkfriends, traitors to their own peoples, are growing in numbers across the lands and it is once again prophesied that the Last Battle is approaching and that the Great Pattern needs a hero known as the Dragon Reborn. The background story reveals that, in this fictional world, for the past 3000 years women have largely been in control. Thus the reader does not actually get to see how well or otherwise a world dominated by females has functioned, although from fragments of history it is revealed that, since the tainting of the male side of the One Power, there has been the First War of the Trollocs and the One Hundred Years War.

The primary characters are in their late teens or early twenties at the opening of this vast tapestry epic. Five of them come from the tiny hamlet of Emond's Field in the Two Rivers, a quiet area where the Old Blood of the long forgotten Manetheren still runs strong. In the village itself – much like Tolkien's 'Shire' – the calendar of significant customs and traditional events still follows the orderly rhythm of the seasons. It is a tranquil place that has been largely forgotten by and uncorrupted from influences of the wider world. However, the Wheel world at large is at risk and as the young protagonists learn through Moiraine, their Aes Sedai mentor and guide, their village is no longer a safe haven.¹¹ The 'Web of Destiny' (in the Old Tongue *Ta'maral'ailen*) forms around the three youths, Rand, Mat and Perrin, who are known as *ta'veren*, as their life-threads have been spun out by the Cosmic Loom to bring change. The young village women Nynaeve and Egwene are

¹¹ The Aes Sedai is an order of female priestesses who have the ability to channel the magical 'One Power'.

also drawn into the web. Thus Jordan's story is concerned to show how ordinary young men and women from this small village can go out upon the world stage and how their engagement with it can be heroic and of universal significance. By the end of the first book Rand accepts that he must be the fearful Dragon Reborn, the one destined to face the Dark Lord at the Apocalyptic 'Last Battle' and that for him there can be no turning back. But as Richard West notes in regard to such interconnected narrative, 'any attempt to enumerate the interwoven thread of the narrative will end by giving a resumé of the entire book. In the interlace pattern, any one section of the work implies the other sections both earlier and later'.¹² Suffice to say that with each book that follows, Jordan's narrative becomes increasingly complex as his teeming and various world is revealed to the reader, and further complicated through a web of political nuances and political intrigues, as the repercussions of the background story are revealed and influence the behaviour of the main protagonists, and their dark adversaries.¹³

Constructing a story-shaped world

Eschatology

In the construction of his world Jordan draws on many and varied sources from the storied European past, and it is of interest that for an author who presents a society with no formal structure of religion he employs so much biblical allusion. The nemesis notion is provided by the movement towards a type of Armageddon – Jordan's representation of the mediaeval apocalyptic beliefs in a final cataclysmic battle between the forces of Light and Shadow. (A cyclic conceit in the Jordan texts is that in the ever-turning Wheel of Time,

¹² Richard C. West, 'The Interlace and Professor Tolkien: Medieval Narrative Technique in the *Lord of the Rings*', *Orcrest: Annual Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin J. R. R. Tolkien Society*, 1.1, 1966-67, p. 24.

¹³ The reader who is unfamiliar with the plot could refer to Karl-Johan Norén's web site at <http://hem3.passagen.se/kjoren/jordan/teotw.html> which provides extensive *WOT* plot summaries. My own article 'Lore, Myth and Meaning for Post-Moderns: An Introduction to the Story World of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* Sequence', in *Australian Folklore*, 18, 2003, pp. 37-76, is another useful source. (refer Appendix ii)

each of the seven repeating Ages faces the catastrophe of a Last Battle.) His use of a ‘War of Shadow’ and *Taimon Gai’don* (the Last Battle) parallel mediaeval prophecies foretelling Armageddon’.¹⁴ The continual appropriation of religious apocalyptic writings for apparently secular literary purposes would seem to indicate our persisting belief in, or desire for, a final reckoning between the powers of good and those of evil – between the polarities of the Light (service, selflessness and duty), and the Dark (power, greed and selfishness).

Jordan posits an alternative world picture strongly reminiscent of early Europe. The depicted society has no stated formalised religion and the polarities of Light and Dark have no overtly practised religious dimension, but they are believed in. In such a world, change is simply a pre-determined part of the mechanism and reincarnation is but an aspect of the cycle. However, through the development of the main protagonists, and the changes they wrought in the pattern of the Age, the author does put forward the notion of a measure of free-will and also the possibility of personal spiritual development.

The Wheel is a world in which the Creator, having set the Cosmic Loom in motion, appears to stand outside and to play no obviously active part. Jordan suggests that in his world the human inhabitants can expect no miracles or interventions; they must sort out their own dilemmas and take responsibility for their own actions. It is likely that Jordan is responding to the mindset of post ethical/post Christian Western society of the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries, a society that is sceptical about faith. Although he presents a secular society, it is one that stresses the paramount need for his characters to choose a moral code of conduct. Oath taking and binding, selflessness, honour, duty, service, order through societal hierarchy, regard for the environment, and like concepts are held in great store and are clearly needed if the Great Pattern is to be preserved.

¹⁴ Noreen Giffney, an email to the researcher 18 March, 2003. Noreen Giffney, a lecturer at University College, Dublin, is interested in ‘the proliferation and commercialisation of medieval apocalyptic beliefs and fears in modern culture, particularly fantasy fiction’.

The man turning the Wheel

Robert Jordan is the pseudonym of James Oliver Rigney Jr, an American writer who lives in Charleston, South Carolina. He is a decorated soldier (for service in Vietnam) with a degree in physics from The Citadel military school in South Carolina (1974), who worked as a nuclear engineer until 1978 when he became a freelance writer. He has a keen interest in both history and genealogy. He wrote his first novels, an historical family saga, *The Fallon Blood*, *The Fallon Pride* and *The Fallon Legacy* (1980-82), using the name Reagan O'Neal. His western *Cheyenne Raiders* (1982) appeared under the name Jackson O'Reilly. As Chang Lung he has written theatre criticism and dance reviews. During the 1980s, under the Robert Jordan pseudonym, he wrote a number of fantasy volumes, which were based on 'Conan' the barbarian – a character created by the American writer Robert Howard. The *WOT* sequence is his first independent fantasy series.

Jordan has stated that his use of the fantasy genre allows him to explore the great moral issues. He strongly believes that there is essential 'good and evil' in the world, and that although 'sometimes it's hard to tell the difference' it is worth trying to do so. He also feels that most people 'want to believe in something, [and to] have a set of rules in life or guidelines for life and behaviour'.¹⁵ As Jordan likens himself to an Old Testament God who has control of his characters, he therefore posits a pre-determined world. The Wheel weaves as he wills. However, while certain characters, known as *ta'veren*, are destined to have life-threads that can alter the pattern of an Age, whether such disruptions to the 'Age Lace' favour the Light or the Shadow will depend on how the *ta'veren* rise to the challenge. Thus, Jordan is able to create an impression of conditional determinism so crucial to narrative tension.

¹⁵ Ernest Lilley (2002), 'Robert Jordan Interview', *SFRevu*, <http://www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2003/0301/Feature%20Interview%20-%20Robert%20Jordan/Interview.htm> (accessed 19 March, 2003).

His production of a collaborative companion book, *The World of Robert Jordan's 'The Wheel of Time'* (1997), can be viewed as an exegesis to offer detailed guidance to his complex world and enormous cast of characters for the reader.¹⁶ Although the philosophical concept for Jordan's world is creatively brilliant, at times the sheer mass of work can partially obscure the underlying metaphysical level. Herodotus-like, and of course like Tolkien, he displays an almost antiquarian pleasure in giving extensive ethnographical detail of his various races, their societal mores, traditions, etiquette, clothing and such. Thus, he becomes an ethnographer for his peoples: the joy of reporting over and above the details of the plot is a hallmark of his style, which a number of readers and critics are beginning to question. Yet such elaborations are appropriate in their context and consistent with the literary art of interlace, and aid in the fleshing out of the characters and the landscape of an imaginary world that is remarkably convincing, richly nuanced and with a great depth of detail. For an enormous number of captive readers, although the Wheel world is clearly a place of the imagination, it is nevertheless quite remarkably real.

Jordan, as the author/creator of the *WOT* series, is clearly engrossed in weaving an extremely complex and colourful tapestry of words. From his initial book he has begun a careful threading of plot and sub-plot within the framework of a daily human struggle between Light and Shadow – a conflict that is revealed to have cosmic significance. And this is predicted to culminate in the long prophesised 'Last Battle', at which time the Dark Lord, if victorious, will recast the world of the Wheel in his own image, thereby creating a world in complete Shadow. Each of the books that follow the initial volume is interlaced with those that have gone before through the unfolding and increasingly diverse actions of the main characters and by means of their fate-determined links to each other. These links

¹⁶ Robert Jordan and Teresa Patterson, *The World of Robert Jordan's 'The Wheel of Time'*, London, 2000.

will determine the outcome of the Last Battle and the necessary balance and continuation of the Great Pattern.

The Jordan world is both encyclopaedic in its myriad of consistent details and diffuse in its sprawl, and it is richly textured and layered. Because of their reuse of traditional material, storytellers like him are continuously laying one version of story over what has gone before. Thus Jordan's work is like a transparency or overlay, one that is echoic of rich social and political history and tradition, but also reshaped to his own contemporary purposes. He has created an imaginary world where the previous Age fades into myth and legend as another comes about, and through his concept of a Wheel of Time and the continual repetition of seven Ages, it is temporally representative of what was, what is, and what may come. Janus-like, the world of the Wheel looks both back and forward. Jordan's world thus enacts many traditional fantasy conceits, while remaining consistent with itself.

Survey of critical materials to define key terms

Fantasy, high fantasy, Secondary World, and Secondary Belief

At this point it would be prudent to clarify my position on the definition of *fantasy*, and the key terms *high fantasy*, *Secondary World* and *Secondary Belief* that inform this thesis. The word 'fantasy' itself has a distinctly chameleon-like quality, for at both popular and academic level it has accrued many definitions, but has gained no universal consensus as to its meaning. Chris Seeman, in his discussion of Tolkien and the Romantic Tradition, traces the etymological history of the word 'fantasy' from the Greek *phantasia*, which carries the 'suggestion of creativity and play of mind, with the possible implication of licence and illusion as a by-product of that freedom'. He further observes how during the Romantic era it depreciates to *fancy*, an 'associative power' or aspect of the *imagination*

that merely functions to 'suppl[y] the mind or the inner eye with numerous images'.¹⁷ Thus, Romantic thought, and in particular Samuel Taylor Coleridge's much cited theory of imagination and fancy,¹⁸ repositions the earlier 'artistic process' associated with *phantasia* to imagination (from Latin *imaginatio*, image) which 'fuses, combines, transforms, and orders images so that they produce an artistic or aesthetic unity'.¹⁹

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his seminal essay *On Fairy-Stories*, reworks this Romantic theory and restores *fancy* to the more creative position in the mind of the literary artist, and limits imagination to its descriptive sense of image-making. He argues that while the 'human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present' this aspect of the 'mental power of image-making is one thing, or aspect; and should appropriately be called imagination'. But it is fantasy, a 'higher' mental faculty, that has 'freedom from the domination of observed fact' and thus can conceive of 'images of things that are not only not actually present, but which are indeed not to be found in our Primary World at all, or are generally believed not to be there'.²⁰ John Timmerman believes that Tolkien, in his development of this theory, is borrowing, and extending the neo-classical sense of 'fantasy':

The term was used by Addison, Johnson and others to denote an intellectual faculty of conceiving pictorial representations. Tolkien extends the concept by arguing that fantasy is that 'power of giving ideal creations the inner consistency of reality'. Fantasy arranges the image and the artist's vision and beliefs, into a perceptible form.²¹

In his analysis of Tolkien's definition of fantasy Timmerman underlines Seeman's concept of fantasy as consisting of two impulses, the 'artistic process itself and the finished

¹⁷ Chris Seeman, quoting James Engell in 'Tolkien's Revision of the Romantic Tradition', in *Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference 1992*, edited by Patricia Reynolds and Glen Goodknight, Altadena, 1995, pp. 75; 77.

¹⁸ Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, (2 vols.), Oxford, 1907.

¹⁹ Seeman, 'Romantic Tradition', p. 77.

²⁰ Tolkien, 'Fairy', pp. 43; 44.

²¹ John Timmerman, *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre*, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, pp. 51-52

product'.²² Tolkien states that he intends fantasy to embrace both the 'Sub-creative Art in itself' – the 'power of giving ideal creations the inner consistency of reality', and the 'quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression derived from the Image' – the element that awakens desire and invites both artist and reader participation. Yet he also makes it clear that it is the skill or 'art' of the writer that produces a literary manifestation of the imagining of the creative mind. Thus, for Tolkien 'art [is] the operative link between Imagination [the faculty of image-making] and the final result, Sub-creation'. It is the creative faculty of non-mimetic Fantasy in the writer's mind that facilitates the ability to sub-create.²³ In Tolkien's words:

The story-maker ... [creates] a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken, the magic, or rather art, has failed.²⁴

Should this art of sub-creation be successfully achieved it invokes an 'enchanted state' of mind that Tolkien refers to as 'Secondary Belief' – the reader's willing acceptance of and involvement in the imaginary world for the duration of the storytelling.²⁵ Tolkien strongly maintains that true literature 'works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive' than other forms of visual art such as drama or painting:

It is at once more universal and more poignantly particular. If it speaks of *bread* or *wine* or *stone* or *tree*, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give to them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination ... If a story says 'he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below', the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but especially

²² Seeman, 'Romantic Tradition', p. 76.

²³ Tolkien, 'Fairy', pp. 43-44.

²⁴ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 36.

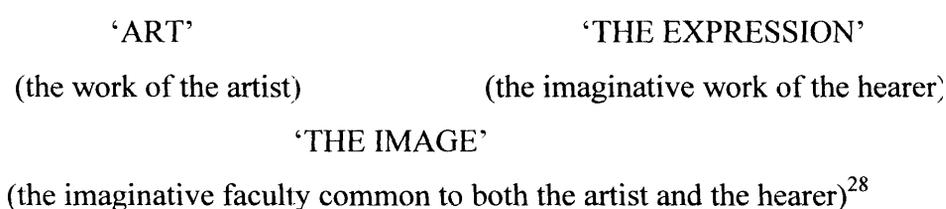
²⁵ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 37.

out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word.²⁶

Such narrative works to enhance the ability of the writer and hearer/reader to become 'partners in making and delight'.²⁷

Seeman refers to this unity in more simple terms as a 'collaboration between the work of the author and the work of the reader/hearer', and believes that Tolkien implies that the 'artistic product [is] unfinished until the hearer has actively "completed" it by way of imaginative effort'. Seeman's analysis of this relationship that works to induce Secondary Belief, the mental state on which the success of the fantasy story depends, is demonstrated by his following schema:

All forms of art, to use Tolkien's vocabulary, involve the possession and use of the imaginative faculty, the artistic process itself, and the artistic product; within this schema, the fantastic narrative is distinguished by the particular character of the relationship between the author and hearer (or alternately, between the two moments of artistic creation and reception): This can be illustrated by the following diagram:



The success of a writer's sub-creation depends on the reader/hearer's personal ability to imaginatively engage with and interpret the words on the page. With the advent of the internet this inter-dependent relationship between author and reader/hearer has developed a further dimension. Fantasy fans are now able to actively engage with each other in cyber-

²⁶ Tolkien, 'Fairy', note E., p. 67.

²⁷ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 49.

²⁸ Seeman, 'Romantic Tradition', p. 80.

space representations of their favourite authors' Secondary Worlds, and to participate imaginatively in the re-working of 'story'. Thus, fans have assumed the role of sub-creator for themselves, being no longer content to accept the author's tale as a finite product. Their actions reaffirm Tolkien's view that 'fantasy, this sub-creative art which plays strange tricks with the world and all that is in it, combining nouns and redistributing adjectives ... is a natural human activity'.²⁹ This active response is a mental impulse to escape for a time the confines of empirical reality, to continuously seek to confront the unknowable in life by imaginatively stretching the boundaries of what is held to be possible.

Tolkien identified fantasy literature with traditional fairy story mode, and for him a successful fantasy story had to evoke that same quality of 'strangeness and wonder', belief and longing in the reader. Brian Attebery has referred to this as 'a nostalgia for the never-was'.³⁰ In Tolkienian terminology fantasy is concerned with 'Faerie' and the 'adventures' of humans in that alluring but 'Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches'.³¹

Tolkien further asserts that a fantasy text has three profound effects on the reader. The first is 'Recovery ... a regaining of a clear view' of the mundane world, obtained by the sense of being 'freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity'. The second is 'Escape', the 'imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires', such as for immortality, release from the harsh realities of a modern existence, or from the mental bondage of our separation from other living creatures. The third, and most important, is the 'Consolation', a state gained through the story's resolution in 'eucatastrophe'. The term 'eucatastrophe' is one coined by Tolkien to describe the unexpected deliverance that orchestrates the morally right conclusion to a story, and 'denies ... universal final defeat'.³² But it also brings a joy

²⁹ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 49. Tolkien once heard someone describe this 'sub-creative art' as 'Breathing a lie through Silver', words which inadvertently captured the magical quality of imaginative storytelling.

³⁰ Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*, Bloomington, 1980, p. 12.

³¹ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 14.

³² Tolkien, 'Fairy', pp. 52-62.

tempered by some loss or hidden cost in the victory, and is therefore hauntingly both bitter and sweet:

It can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.³³

Tolkien's explication of the emotional response in the reader to the moment of eucatastrophe is explicitly Christian. The point of eucatastrophe is '*evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief'.³⁴ Although later critics have moved away from Tolkien's specifically religious definition of eucatastrophe, in the still-developing lexicon of critical terms for fantasy it remains an important term by which to describe the emotional reader response to the pivotal moment of deliverance that brings the correct resolution to a fantasy text. Yet because of the subjectivity of each reader's emotional response in terms of recovery, escape and consolation, these amorphous but crucial qualities of fantasy are difficult to pin down for critical analysis. Peter Schakel referred to fantasy as literature that must first be read 'with the sensitivity and receptivity of the heart'.³⁵ But, as Colin Manlove points out, so far there is 'no accurate Geiger counter for measuring the clicks on the human heart'.³⁶

In reference to Tolkien's *On Fairy-Stories*, the critic Gary Wolfe argues that 'modern academic scholarship of fantasy derives from [this] one essay'.³⁷ However, what marks out a literary work as a true fantasy is a matter far from settled, as the on-going study of the fantastic mode of narrative reveals. Brian Attebery suggests that fantasy may be more fruitfully approached as a 'fuzzy [set] ... defined not by boundaries but by a

³³ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 60.

³⁴ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 60.

³⁵ Peter J. Schakel, *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, p. 10.

³⁶ Colin Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Cambridge, 1975, p. 169.

³⁷ Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship*, Westport, CT., 1986, p. xix.

center'.³⁸ His suggestion is that texts contain varying degrees of core likenesses, so they can be thought of as radiating outward from a centre in overlapping circles and so can all be defined as fantasy. By this definition Clute suggests 'it may be that fantasy is *inherently* best described and defined through prescriptive and exploratory example'.³⁹ Yet for the present, critical definitions of fantasy comprise a somewhat fragmented critical vocabulary, many items of which are formed by attempting to isolate characteristic elements common to a range of texts by means of content, the effect the story arouses in the reader, the underpinning structure of the narrative, or the higher (authorial) purpose that underpins the story.

C. S. Lewis, a sympathiser with Tolkien, defined fantasy as 'any narrative that deals with impossibles and preternaturals'.⁴⁰ And there is general consensus among later critics that these criteria are useful in determining what Irwin dubs the 'literature' of the 'impossible'. Irwin defines fantasy as 'a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility'.⁴¹ In the same vein, Roger Schlobin suggests that fantasy is 'that corpus in which the impossible is primary in its quantity or centrality'.⁴² For Manlove, a fantasy text is 'a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms'.⁴³ Lin Carter classes fantasy as 'a narrative of marvels that belong to neither scientific nor the supernatural' and suggests that 'the essence of this sort of story can be summed up in one word: *magic*'.⁴⁴ Richard Mathews agrees that it 'is a [type of] fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or impossible', and

³⁸ Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 12.

³⁹ Clute, 'Fantasy', in Clute and Grant, *Fantasy*, p. 337.

⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge, 1965, p. 50.

⁴¹ W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, Chicago, 1976, p. 4.

⁴² Roger C. Schlobin, *The Literature of Fantasy: A Comprehensive, Annotated Bibliography of Modern Fantasy Fiction*, New York, 1979, p. xxvi.

⁴³ Colin N. Manlove, 'On the Nature of Fantasy', in *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, edited by Roger C. Schlobin, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1982, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁴ Lin Carter, *Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Fantasy*, New York, 1973, p. 6.

‘consciously breaks free from mundane reality’. He stresses, as did Tolkien, the close relationship between ‘modern fantasy’ and the ‘magical stories of myth, legend, fairy tale, and folklore from all over the world’.⁴⁵ Anne Swinfen, in her sympathetic work *In Defence of Fantasy*, also returns to Tolkien as the critical model. Overall, she finds ‘the essential ingredient of all fantasy [to be] the marvellous ... composed of what can never exist in the world of empirical reality’.⁴⁶

All of the above definitions place at the centre the otherworldly components of fantasy texts, and the sense of ‘wonder’ evoked in the reader, but, as noted by Jules Zanger, ‘fantasy ... always exists in a symbiotic relationship with reality’, and may even engage with issues related to the mundane world, thus commenting upon it, criticizing it, and illuminating it’.⁴⁷ For a sub-creation to have meaning for the author and reader there has to be some correlation with the Primary World, a point Tolkien had addressed when he wrote that:

fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give. By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed, by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory.⁴⁸

This concept was expanded by Kathryn Hume who posited the idea that all literature is governed by two equal creative impulses, ‘*mimesis*, felt as the desire to imitate ... and *fantasy*, the desire to change givens and alter reality’. She also maintained that in varying degrees these two impulses co-exist in all literature.⁴⁹ But Attebery further suggests that:

⁴⁵ Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of the Imagination*, London and New York, 2002, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶ Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945*, London, 1984, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Jules Zanger, ‘Heroic Fantasy and Social Reality: *ex nihilo nihil fit*’, in Schlobin, *Aesthetics*, p. 227.

⁴⁸ Tolkien, ‘Fairy’, p. 53.

⁴⁹ Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York and London, 1984, p. 20.

though they are contrasting modes, mimesis and fantasy are not opposites. They can and do coexist within any given work; there are no purely mimetic or fantastic works of fiction. Mimesis without fantasy would be nothing but reporting one's perceptions of actual events. Fantasy without mimesis would be a purely artificial invention, without recognizable objects or actions.⁵⁰

Hume's investigation is made into the *mode* of the fantastic, and for her any text in which the fantasy impulse is dominant fits into this form of telling stories. Thus for Hume, to borrow Attebery's concept of diffuse genres as 'fuzzy sets', 'fantasy edges into science fiction; science fiction impinges on mainstream fiction; mainstream fiction overlaps with fantasy'.⁵¹

In similar fashion the various definitions of fantasy, for many of which Tolkien's views provided a nourishing matrix, form another kind of over-lapping 'fuzzy set'. For they contain a mix of like elements but vary in the nature of their central focus. To add to the complexity there are another two elements which critics have given importance to in their attempts to define what it is that constitutes a fantasy text. One of these is the structure. Attebery well observes that the 'characteristic structure of fantasy is comic. It begins with a problem and ends with a resolution'.⁵² Clute describes this core narrative patterning as:

the story of an earned passage from bondage – via a central recognition of what has been revealed and of what is about to happen, and which may involve a profound metamorphosis of protagonist or world (or both) – into the eucatastrophe, where marriages may occur, just governance fertilize the barren land, and there is healing.⁵³

Clute further suggests that 'stories are traditionally transparent: they do not conceal the fact that something is being told, *and then* something else, *and then* we reach the end, and that

⁵⁰ Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 3.

⁵¹ Attebery, *Strategies*, pp. 12-13.

⁵² Attebery, *Strategies*, p. 15.

⁵³ Clute, 'Structure of Fantasy', in Clute and Grant, *Fantasy*, pp. 338-39.

this ‘transparency of Story ... is typical of fantasy.’⁵⁴ But the ‘connective tissue’ of this seemingly naïve linear story-pattern is complicated in Jordan’s *WOT* through his use of mediaeval interlacing, as will be discussed later. Perhaps many modern fantasy texts transcend the simplicity of the paradigm of traditional fairytale through the narrative layering or interlacing of story elements.

The other aspect that critics have considered closely in their definitions is the higher (authorial) purpose of fantasy texts. Frances Molson speaks of the ‘ethical’ quality that informs fantasy literature, drawing an interesting parallel between the Bible and many fantasy texts as providing humans with ethical patterns for living:

Biblical story attempts to create “root metaphors” which provide “unity and meaning” to the lives of its audience. So, too, ethical fantasy attempts to shape “root” story patterns that help give point to the lives of its readers by embodying and validating various key fantasies and dreams.⁵⁵

Thus, fantasy is defined as a serious form of narrative, and as Swinfen observes, is ‘like the realist’ novel, in that it ‘is about reality – about the human condition’. However, Swinfen points to a ‘major difference’ in the construction of a fantasy text:

[I]t takes account of areas of experience – imaginative, subconscious, visionary which free the human spirit to range beyond the world of empirical primary world reality. In a sense, then, fantasy provides the writer with greater scope to construct his own scheme of morality ... own time structure ... own political and social order. But at no time does this apparent freedom permit the author to escape from contemporary reality. Indeed the fundamental purpose of serious fantasy is to comment upon the real world and to explore moral, philosophical and other dilemmas posed by it.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Clute, ‘Story’, in Clute and Grant, *Fantasy*, p. 338.

⁵⁵ Francis, J. Molson, ‘Ethical Fantasy for Children’, in Schlobin, *Aesthetics*, pp. 99-100. Molson is drawing on John Shea’s ‘insights into the nature of biblical story’, and believes that both mediums of story speak ‘of the existence of evil, wrong, and dark as essential, virtually inexplicable components of all life. For further reference see John Shea, *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography*, Chicago, 1978, pp. 39; 56.

⁵⁶ Swinfen, *Defence*, p. 231.

The views of all these critics also link back to Tolkien's belief in the centrality of the restorative and enlightening quality of stories concerned with 'faerie'; stories that are constantly being re-formed from traditional materials, and yet never lose their potency in the retelling because they draw on perennial themes of the human condition. Thus, such narratives are constantly using many threads to create new patterns in the 'web of story'.

Like many of the critics mentioned here, Tolkien's theories on fantasy have become woven into the fabric of my own thoughts. I have been influenced both by his definitive essay *On Fairy-Stories* and his benchmark fantasy text *LOTR*. Therefore my definition of a fantasy narrative and the one that informs my critical responses in this thesis is as follows: a narrative that engages in real philosophical and moral issues but in an 'unreal' context, and in the process evokes a sense of wonder and Secondary Belief in the reader. The setting of a discrete, imaginary and endangered world is used to tell a story of a movement from a state of crisis that triggers the heroic quest, to a rebalancing and healing of the world – a point of eucatastrophic change that arouses an emotional response in the reader. Characteristically, it is a story in which the development of the hero figures and the fate of their world are interconnected.

This definition of fantasy privileges high fantasy, the type of narrative that forms the focus of this thesis. It is a type of popular literary fantasy that critics have found easier to identify, for it operates within a shared cluster of clearly recognised conventions, that is, an imaginary landscape, an imperilled world, and a heroic quest in which the hero's growth to maturity is tied to the fate of the imaginary world. The underpinning framework is formed by the polarities of Light and Dark. Generally speaking, such narratives reflect on and respond with varying degrees of success and originality to Tolkien's *LOTR*. The settings for high fantasy texts are discrete 'other' or Secondary Worlds and the narrative is

concerned with ‘matters affecting the destiny of those worlds’.⁵⁷ As the protagonists of such texts are faced with a world-changing crisis these stories are also often referred to as epic fantasy. Thus high (or epic) fantasy is the mode of the fantastic in which Robert Jordan’s *WOT* can most suitably be situated.

Attebery notes that high fantasy texts resemble *LOTR* in three fundamental ways – firstly in ‘content’ which offers a departure from consensus reality; secondly in the ‘comic structure’: that is, the story begins at a point of crisis and ends with a resolution that provides a satisfactory closure, and thirdly in ‘reader response’, the bitter-sweet joy aroused by the unexpected turn or eucatastrophe.⁵⁸ A further important characteristic of the functioning of many high fantasy texts addressed by Attebery is its interconnected nature, the way in which ‘acts ... are always meaningful, because everything connects with, or signifies, everything else. The least detail may be an omen of the future, and the smallest action may bring that future to pass’.⁵⁹ Manlove also addresses this point in regard to Tolkien’s world building, observing that *LOTR* is ‘founded on interconnections’, for Tolkien believed the more ‘internally consistent’ and ‘densely interwoven’ he could make his sub-creation the more ‘thoroughly realised’ it became for the reader.⁶⁰ Richard West picks up on this point as well and presents a convincing argument that in the construction of his Secondary World Tolkien had returned to an earlier form of narrative formation, ‘interlacing’. West further stresses that interlace, for all its ‘complexity’, is ‘a very natural literary form’ and one that offers ‘a direct reflection of the way life is lived’.⁶¹ Thus it is a useful technique to give a Secondary World the necessary sense of verisimilitude that gives rise to Secondary Belief in the reader.

⁵⁷ Clute, ‘High Fantasy’, in Clute and Grant, *Fantasy*, p. 466.

⁵⁸ Attebery, *Strategies*, pp. 14-16.

⁵⁹ Attebery, *Tradition*, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁰ Colin Manlove, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, London, 1999, p. 54.

⁶¹ West, ‘Medieval Narrative’, p. 22.

Interlacing: The patterning of a Secondary World

A central component of Jordan's storytelling technique and a useful tool by which to evaluate his work is the mediaeval motif of *entrelacement* or interlacement.⁶² This motif is a literary structural device in which several simultaneous themes are inter-woven into one large narrative, akin to the intricate knot work so characteristic of early Anglo-Saxon art. In its literary application this technique allows for separate but inter-related plot digressions and presents the writer with opportunities for the simultaneous development of a multiplicity of characters, a variety of viewpoints and themes, and a range of landscapes. In regard to *LOTR* it was George H. Thomson who pointed out that Tolkien's use of interlace allowed for a 'detailed yet panoramic view of a whole world in movement and turmoil', a structure also relied on by Jordan in the *WOT* sequence to similar effect.⁶³ West's own description of the effect of this mediaeval mode of working is worth quoting at length. He suggests that:

interlace ... seeks to mirror the perception of flux of events in the world around us, where everything is happening at once. Its narrative line is digressive and cluttered, dividing our attention among an indefinite number of events, characters and themes, any one of which may dominate at any given time, and is often indifferent to cause and effect relationships. The paths of the characters cross, diverge, and recross, and the story passes from one to another, and then another but does not follow a single line ... Yet the apparently casual effect of interlace is deceptive; it actually has a very subtle cohesion. No part of the narrative can be removed without damage to the whole, for within any given section there are echoes of previous parts and anticipations of later ones. The mediaeval memory ... delighted in following

⁶² The various terms interlacement, interlacing, and interlace are used throughout this thesis.

⁶³ Cited in West, 'Interlace', p. 78. Tom Shippey in his *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, London, 2000, raises the interesting theory that although Tolkien certainly knew the word *interlace* it is 'associated with the structure of French prose romance, in which he took little interest', and that Tolkien 'also knew that the Icelandic word for a short story is a *þáttir*, literally a thread. One could say that several *þáttir*, or threads, twisted round each other, make up a saga ... Tolkien may have felt that there had been all along a native version of the French technique of *entrelacement*, even if we no longer know the native word for it.' p.103.

repetitions and variations of themes, whether their different appearances were separated by scores or hundreds of pages ...

Moreover, though events are in flux there is a pattern underlying them. In the Old French *Queste del Saint Graal* we pursue not only the Holy Grail but the ideals of knighthood through the adventures of Gawain, Bors, Lancelot, Galahad, and others, our response to any one adventure being molded ... by comparison or contrast of that adventure with the others ... while “unified” narrative generally isolates a single cause of an event to achieve a frequently powerful and intense effect, interlaced narrative usually assigns numerous causes for any event thereby reflecting the complex interrelatedness we actually see in life.⁶⁴

The use of interlace enhances the complexity of the foreground story and imparts a multi-dimensional quality to the overall narrative adding depth and solidity to characters and events, all of which works to enmesh the reader more firmly within the imaginary world. Thus, interlace forms a bridge between the reader and the fictional world that helps in the evocation of Secondary Belief. In effect, the author’s shaping of words is taken up by the reader who imaginatively unfurls the narrative patterning and in so doing becomes enmeshed in the fictional world and so assists in bringing it to life. Through the technique of interlace the author draws the reader into a more intimate relationship with both the characters and the landscape itself. The sense of the Secondary World being a tangible place where the inhabitants exhibit real human joys and fears, and face real dangers is heightened and in turn evokes reader empathy and concern.

The use of interlace serves another purpose as it is one means by which successive generations of writers can braid traditional materials into their own patterns, to continuously reproduce story tapestries that, depending on the skill of the writer, can

⁶⁴ West, ‘Interlace’, pp. 78-80. He also notes that ‘variations of the form’ can be found ‘as early as the poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and at least as late as Spencer’s *Faerie Queen*’, p. 80. West’s work shows the earlier influence of Eugene Vinaver’s theories on interlace. For instance: *Form and Meaning in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge, 1966; *The Rise of Romance*, Oxford, 1971, in particular chap. 5, ‘The Poetry of Interlace’, p. 68ff.

appear both comfortingly familiar, yet strangely new. A meaningful symbiosis of reader and text is formed when the writer builds a Secondary World that the imaginative reader can readily enter and sustain belief in for the duration of the tale. The phenomenon of the world wide web has created a new dynamic to interlace and to literary criticism, as it has given reader/fans the autonomy to extend the finite words of the original text by creating an infinite cyber-realm of story, one framed by the author's imaginary landscape, a topic that forms the focus of my final chapter.

In examining Jordan's work my intention throughout is to use the metaphor of patterning, weaving and even patchwork, as it dovetails nicely with the mediaeval concept of interlacing. I am also indebted to Faye Ringel's thesis on the heroic quest, in which she observed the similarity of the motif of interlace between mediaeval verse romance and modern prose fantasy:

The working method known as *entrelacement* characterizes both the medieval verse romances and the modern prose fantasy novels. In both the interlaced narrative proceeds not in a flat and linear direction, but through separate, curving and intersecting paths. Stories of adventures are never interpolations or digressions; instead they are part of the narrative flow. Each is an essential curve in the Celtic knot work of the whole.⁶⁵

Examining the interconnected patterning is a compelling and interesting way of looking at contemporary high fantasy fiction, especially narratives such as Jordan's *WOT*, in which, like Tolkien's *LOTR*, the 'main story ... involves many other stories, all more or less independent yet linked at many points, and occurring simultaneously'.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Faye Ringel, *Patterns of the Hero and the Quest: Epic, Romance, Fantasy* (PhD Thesis Brown University, 1979), p. 4.

⁶⁶ West, 'Medieval Narrative', p. 22.

Robert Jordan, who once described his *WOT* as a ‘fantasy War and Peace’, is writing the ‘history of a world, as well as a story of people.’⁶⁷ He shows much knowledge of earlier literature and of European history, and through his use of the working method of interlacing draws consciously on material from the past to create his characters and his Secondary World. But what is vibrant and distinctively interesting about his work is the manner in which he arranges this inter-textual material into new and interesting patterns.

As Jane Mobley suggests:

Fantasy fiction is ... a formulaic kind of fiction, but a writer’s individual talent is revealed in his treatment of the formula, in his ability to tell the old tales so that the conventions are merely skeletal, supporting a work which has presence or vitality that sets it apart from other works of fantasy which still share the pattern. The critic’s role is to mark out not only the tradition but also how the individual writer has worked within and without the tradition to create his particular fantasy.⁶⁸

Thus, the metaphor or image of patterning itself offers a compelling way to look at the contemporary fantasist’s refashioning of traditional materials, which some critics still continue to dismiss. Yet part of the power of fantasy for readers is the ways in which it both reduplicates and adapts familiar conventions and motifs, so that the narratives become more complex in style and meaning. Although in its form and content high fantasy fiction such as Jordan’s *WOT* traces over similar ground as earlier writers it still has something original and worthy to offer.

⁶⁷ ‘Robert Jordan: The Name Behind the Wheel’, *Locus: The Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field*, issue 470, 44.3, March, 2000, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Jane Mobley, *Magic is Alive: A Study of Contemporary Fantasy Fiction* (PhD Thesis, University of Kansas, 1974), pp. 238-9.

Chapter summaries

This thesis is divided into five chapters, the first dealing with the author and the second with his representation of the magus figure. The two chapters that follow are centred on the hero and the heroic quest, and the final chapter turns to an exploration of *WOT* fandom and the fans' cyberspace representation of Jordan's imaginary world. Accordingly, my argument moves from the author as pattern maker, to the magus figure as pattern interpreter, then to the hero figure for whom a destined pattern has been spun by the Cosmic Loom. The final chapter brings the threads of the argument full circle as it explores the Jordan fans as pattern makers of their own cyberspace representations of the author's imaginary world.

(1) Revisiting the Art of Interlace: The Author as Storyteller and Pattern Maker

This first chapter discusses the role of the author as storyteller and universal pattern maker. The focus is on the author's interlaced construction of his imaginary world, his re-fashioning of traditional materials and of the quest paradigm, and the ways in which they are used to explore perennial philosophical concerns such as time, fate, immortality, good and evil, and the longing to produce order out of seeming chaos.

(2) Unravelling the Pattern: The Magus Figures in *The Wheel of Time*

The second chapter investigates Jordan's extension of the traditional magus figure to a multiple role that includes both males and females, and encompasses both protagonists and antagonists. It explores the ways in which Jordan portrays these figures as crucial interpreters of the 'Great Pattern of Existence' in his Wheel world, for those of the Light act as keepers of the pattern on which the survival of the fictional world as it is known must depend. These figures of the Light are pitted against those of the Dark who seek to

destroy the pattern and so to plunge the world into Shadow. Through analysis of the character of Thom, a magus-like minstrel who, in part, functions as a surrogate for Jordan, consideration is also given to the author's key role within his own story-shaped world. Thom is a character whose every action is used to privilege the art of the storyteller.

(3) The Patchwork Hero: Jordan's Patterning of Heroic Motifs in *The Wheel of Time*

The third chapter traces traditional types of motifs in regard to the hero figure; it then explores Jordan's manner of stitching together a number of different motifs or paradigms in the construction of his hero figures. This chapter also examines how Jordan finds room in this traditionally male role to accommodate strong female characters, empowering them to embark on their own meaningful, though ancillary quests. To describe the separate but interweaving stories of the range of hero figures, the manner in which the threads of their lives cross and recross, I use the metaphor of a 'heroic line' that runs through the narrative, along which the hero figures circle in and out of narrative focus in the plethora of enacted stories.

(4) Heroic Interlace: The Jordan Hero as Destroyer, Builder and Preserver

The fourth chapter is concerned with an analysis of Jordan's concept of three main male figures. It is a convention of fantasy for the hero to have close companions or helpers who contribute to the overall quest. However, the fated life-paths of Jordan's three main protagonists, Rand (the Dragon Reborn), and his childhood friends Mat and Perrin, are increasingly intertwined in such a fashion that they can be considered to constitute a 'triple hero' figure. Jordan has created an innovative adaptation of the traditional motif of the heroic triad that reflects the influence of several northern sagas. Furthermore, through their designated roles in the 'Great Pattern' this trio of heroic figures also forms a secular

variation on the classical Hindu trinity of gods, to present a theme of Destroyer–Builder–Preserver. Thus Jordan extends the notion of the narrative technique of interlacing into characterisation, through the interwoven figures of the hero.

(5) Virtual Storytelling: *The Wheel of Time* World Wide Weave

The final chapter offers an investigation into the phenomenal growth of internet fandom in relation to the Jordan texts, and the ways in which this forms an on-going extension of the author’s work. It focuses on the text-inspired creativity of the fans who, over the last decade, have constructed thousands of trans-global cyber-communities solely devoted to the *WOT*. These fans will be considered as ‘secondary’ pattern makers and storytellers in their own right. Through their online participation they actually write themselves into the Wheel world, and through activities such as role-playing games or the creation of personal fan-fiction they are enabled to participate in their own related form of heroic quest.

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To date very few critical works address multi-volume high fantasy sequences or the cyberspace fandom that some of them have inspired. Robert Jordan is one of the leading authors of this commercially successful style of fiction, who has thus far received little scholarly attention. This thesis brings critical analysis to Robert Jordan’s *WOT* to demonstrate how old motifs and story patterns, in particular, the mediaeval narrative technique of interlacing are reworked by this contemporary writer of popular fantasy texts.