Mythopoetic Fantasy: In Search of Harmony with the World. Metatheoretical Considerations that use the Example of Tolkien's Arda

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Abstract: In the presented research, the author reflects on the prevalent opinion among literary critics regarding the escapism of mythopoetic fantasy. According to the article's thesis, considering the specificity of the contemporary understanding of reality against which the alleged escapism of fantasy is directed, as well as the character of the narrative worlds of mythopoetic fantasy, the primary aim is not escapism but rather a pursuit of harmony with the world. Investigating the validity of this claim, the issues conditioning our contemporary understanding of the world are analysed. This is followed by a presentation of the literary universe of fantasy (primarily in the mythopoeic subgenre) understood as a form of rebellion: a rebellion not against reality itself, but against the modern perception of the world. Embracing Eliade's concept of *homo religiosus*, the author concludes that mythopoeic fantasy seeks to enable contemporary humans to sacralise their perception of reality as a means of returning to the natural way of perceiving the universe inherent to the religious nature of humanity. The article concludes that the purpose of mythopoeic fantasy is to seek harmony with the world rather than escaping from it.

Key words: mythopoeic fantasy, homo religiosus, reductionism, materialism, mechanism

Fantasy mitopoetyckie czyli o poszukiwaniu harmonii ze światem. Metateoretyczne rozważania z użyciem przykładu Ardy Tolkiena

Abstrakt: W niniejszych dociekaniach autor poddaje namysłowi popularną w środowisku krytyków literackich opinię o eskapizmie mitopoetyckiej fantasy. Wedle tezy artykułu, jeżeli wziąć pod uwagę specyfikę współczesnego pojmowania rzeczywistości, przeciwko której rzekomy eskapizm fantasy jest skierowany, a także charakter światów narracyjnych mitopoetyckiej odmiany owego gatunku, to okaże się, że jej celem jest nie tyle ucieczka, co poszukiwanie harmonii ze światem. W celu potwierdzenia słuszności owego twierdzenia poddano tu analizie redukcjonistyczne i mechanicystyczne tendencje światopoglądowe warunkujące współczesne rozumienie świata, a następnie przedstawiono literackie uniwersum fantasy (przede wszystkim w mitopoetyckiej odmianie tego gatunku) jako swego rodzaju bunt, ale nie przeciwko samej rzeczywistości, a jej nowożytnemu sposobowi pojmowania. Do zilustrowania dyskutowanych kwestii użyto przykładu tolkienowskiej Ardy.

Przyjmując eliadowską koncepcję *homo religiosus*, autor dochodzi do wniosku, że fantasy mitopoetycka ma umożliwić człowiekowi współczesnemu sakralizację obrazu świata, co miałoby być powrotem na czas czytania do naturalnego dla człowieka religijnego sposobu postrzegania uniwersum. Konkluzją artykułu jest, że głównym celem fantasy mitopoetyckiej jest rzeczywiście poszukiwanie harmonii ze światem, a nie ucieczka od niego.

Słowa kluczowe: fantasy mitopoetycka, homo religiosus, redukcjonizm, materializm, mechanicyzm, Tolkien, Arda

One might be tempted to say that fantasy literature was created for the purpose of allowing the reader to forget reality, to escape its relentless demands, at least for a while. This view is prevalent in certain circles of literary criticism[1] and seems entirely reasonable, given that the plot of works in this genre is situated in a presented world, which has been deliberately portrayed as impossible to exist in reality[2]. When considered in this context, the mythopoetic variety of this genre may prove to be the most radical escape from the world.

Indeed, it can be argued that mythopoetic fantasy is escapist in a radical way for at least several reasons. Firstly, its plot is deliberately set in a narrative universe different from our own, which is meant to replace the real world for the reader. He or she is, as it were, provoked to believe in the realness of the fantasy universe and to forget about reality, at least for the duration of the reading. Secondly, this world (and especially its nature) is significantly permeated by a supernatural element, which may serve as an escape into a religious or even animistic worldview, far removed from the scientific one associated with a proper approach to reality. Thirdly, mythopoetic fantasy extensively employs mythological patterns and motifs in narration to intensely engage the reader in the plot and the fictional world, while myths have been criticised since antiquity as mere fabrications regarding the sphere of the divine (which people tend to believe to their detriment)[3]. In contemporary discourse, a popular understanding of myths emphasises the harmful nature of such narratives as emotionally suggestive stories that people believe in, mistaking fiction for reality. In a word, one may conclude that mythopoetic fantasy consciously takes the reader from the real world to a fictional one, unrealises that world by saturating it with the supernatural, and deliberately applies mythological patterns, further

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[1] This primarily concerns scholars associated by Oziewicz with reductionist criticism as regards to fantasy. Among its proponents, he includes, among others, Hume, Armitt, Jackson, Matthews, Manlove, Irwin, Brooke-Rose, Apter, Todorov, Prickett and Hunt. See M. Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle and Orson Scott Card*, McFarland, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 2008, p. 33.

[2] B. Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: from Irving to Le Guin*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1980, p. 2.

[3] The opinion described above can be attributed, for example, to Xenophanes of Colophon.

engaging the reader's mind to forget about reality and believe in the unreal (in the world and the story invented by the writer).

Nevertheless, contrary to the above suggestions, if one takes into account the essential features of the contemporary understanding of reality against which the alleged fantasy escapism is directed, as well as the specificity of the literary universes of the mythopoetic variety of the genre, one can surely conclude that what is at stake here is not so much a withdrawal from the world, but rather an attempt to find harmony with it. In order to confirm this thesis, the presented paper will examine matters that determine the contemporary image of the world and the accorded human place within it. Following this, the issue of the mythopoetic fantasy universe as a 'place' of supposed escape from reality will be explored in detail. Referring to Eliade's concept of *homo religiosus*, it will be demonstrated that the aim of fantasy is not so much an escape from the world but rather an attempt to counter the secularising tendencies of the modern way of understanding it and, as a consequence, retrieve the ability to experience one's existence in the world in a sacred way (at least for the time of the reading). The example of Tolkien's Arda will be used to demonstrate how mythopoetic fantasy seeks to sacralise reality and thereby restore harmony to the human relationship with the world[4].

What fantasy helps to escape from: the modern image of reality

If one examines the worlds presented in fantasy, one can discern a kind of rebellion or, at least, opposition to the universe in which contemporary humans operate. The prevalent definitions of fantasy indicate that its storyworlds break the rules of the empirical cosmos in a conscious and radical way[5]. This rebellion, however, seems to concern not so much the physically

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[4] The main focus of this article is not on particular works of fantasy literature or on the taxonomy of this genre. The paper mainly addresses the issue of the alleged escapism in the creation of mythopoeic fantasy worlds. Consequently, the discussion is more metatheoretical than literary-critical. More space is devoted to discussing the assumptions that supposedly lead to the (escapist or non-escapist) nature of mythopoeic literature rather than the content of the literature itself. Therefore, the examples drawn from literature should be as typical and representative of the essence of mythopoeic fantasy literature as possible; for this reason J.R.R. Tolkien's texts are mainly used here. It is not by chance that Attebery, when defining fantasy, considered *The Lord of the Rings* as the exemplary text of the entire genre. B. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1992, p. 17. When seeking a general answer concerning mythopoeic fantasy as a whole, it is useful to use an example that is representative of the entire genre. Tolkien's work and his Arda serve as such an example in the context of mythopoeic alternative worlds.

[5] Rabkin, for example, ascribes to fantasy a direct reversal of the underlying principles in relation to those familiar with everyday life, resulting in an alternative narrative world that is the "polar opposite" of reality. See Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature*, Princeton University

understood cosmos but the world in a cultural sense – the universe of modernity, along with its characteristic worldview tendencies, for it is no coincidence that scholars emphasise the anti-modern component of fantasy. Grzegorz Trębicki, for example, notes that the primary characteristics of the secondary world fantasy genre include the setting of the story in a quasi-medieval or quasi-ancient reality at a relatively low level of technological development[6], and Chris Brawley interprets fantasy as a literary response to the modern world paradigm[7].

What is it in the modern way of looking at the world that might lead somebody to rebel against it? It is easier to understand this question when one looks at it in relation to the image of reality that preceded it.

It is common to identify modern cosmological views with the revolution brought about by Nicolaus Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* and with the proponents of the views presented in that work, such as Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler. However, in the background of the dispute between advocates of the geocentric universe theory and heliocentrism, a much broader shift was taking place in understanding what the world is and what the place of humanity within it entails.

The pre-modern world offered people a stable, theocentric order in which humankind was assigned a specific place. Although the way human communities functioned has changed over the centuries, there was a fundamental continuity in how people perceived their place in the world from the Neolithic era until the beginning of modernity, as Mircea Eliade argues[8]. First and foremost, the physical world – visible, temporal – was treated as only a part of reality. Its existence depended on a fundamental, immortal, divine sphere of existence.

Press, Princeton, Guildford 1976, p. 156. Attebery describes this genre of literature as a narrative that contains a significant violation of what the author obviously believes to be a law of nature. See B. Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: from Irving to Le Guin*, op. cit., p. 17. Manlove, in turn, sees the specificity of fantasy in that it contains "(...) a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects". Colin N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1978, p. 1.

[6] See G. Trębicki, *Synkretyzm fantasy. Fantasy świata wtórnego: literatura, kultura, mit*, Wydawnictwo LIBRON - Filip Lohner, Kraków 2014, p. 16.

[7] See C. Brawley, *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson 2014, p. 120. A similar opinion by Attebery can also be added to the views referred to. See B. Attebery, *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. Oxford University Press, New York 2014, pp. 10-11.

[8] According to Eliade, the key breakthrough of the Neolithic era was the discovery of agriculture and the accompanying religious experience, which introduced humanity to the sacred context of the relationship connecting it with the natural environment, leading to the formation of the so-called cosmic religiosity. See M. Eliade, C. H. Rocquet, *L'épreuve du labyrinth: entretiens avec Claude-Henri Rocquet*, Belfond, Paris 1978, pp. 69-75. Of course, with the evolution of religious forms, and especially with the rise of Christianity to dominate the European spiritual world, the image of this connection evolved. However, until modern times, its fundamental characteristic remained unchanged: it was a human relationship with a world permeated by references to a divine, immortal sphere of existence.

The physical universe was not only perceived as rooted in the divine in a metaphysical and theological sense but also, crucially for these considerations, almost all aspects of human life were treated existentially as a representation of the order of cosmic and simultaneously godlike reality. Sacred references to the world in the pre-modern era can be found, for example, in the social hierarchy, where an individual's position was associated with reference to the divine world. Therefore, rulers were often perceived as gods, high priests, or divine chosen ones[9]. The supernatural world was also constantly manifested in nature, full of spirits and saturated with references to the divine sphere[10].

In such a worldview paradigm, it is by all means desirable to have the ability to discern how observed phenomena point to a universal order of things that stems from the realm of the sacred. Initially, myths served this purpose, linking the temporal world inextricably with the divine sphere. Although they were subject to rationalisation over the centuries, this religiously oriented worldview remained essentially unchanged until modern times. In ancient Greek culture, regional versions of the myths were first agreed upon to form a coherent mythology[11], and then, based on its intellectual interpretation, a philosophical vision of the world was created. Although philosophy differs from mythology in certain respects, both link into a single whole human, divine and cosmic reality. From the perspective of Presocratic philosophy, the sage is one who can understand the divine nature of the cosmos, since both an individual and society are treated here as a representation of the sacred cosmic order in miniature[12]. This organic and holistic perspective, combining the sacred sphere with the reality of human beings and their living environment, also functions in many other ancient and medieval models of

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[9] A remnant of this model can also be found in medieval Christianity, where one could only become king after being "anointed" by a high religious dignitary in a special church ceremony.

[10] In the pre-modern world, one may encounter views close to an animistic vision of nature as well as more nuanced perspectives. However, it was typically accepted then that nature is imbued with spirituality. Such a view seems obvious regarding the hylozoists, who recognised the godhood of the arche principle pervading the world. The notion of divinity manifesting through nature can also be attributed to Pythagoreans and Empedocles in connection with their doctrine of reincarnation. The godlike nature should also be attributed to the Stoic pneuma permeating nature, as well as the world soul taught by Neoplatonists. The fullest depiction of spiritualised nature, however, appears in traditional myths. In medieval Christian religion, the natural environment is somewhat deprived of its divine character, yet it still serves as a sign referring to the Creator.

[11] Homer and Hesiod were key figures in this regard.

[12] See M. Jastrzębski, *Wczesna filozofia grecka jako archeiczna droga do nieśmiertelności*, Niepaństwowa Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna w Białymstoku, Białystok 2014, pp. 180-181. The idea of the human being as a microcosm was used implicitly in pre-Socratic philosophy even before Democritus introduced the concept. Reale states directly that this idea is present throughout the entire history of ancient philosophy, from the early natural philosophers to the Neoplatonists. G. Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica*, vol. V, "Lessico, indici e bibliografia", Università Cattolica, Milan 1989, p. 174.

spiritual formation. Therefore, Eliade, describing a pre-modern person and his or her worldview, uses the term *homo religiosus*[13]. Such an individual operates in the earthly world, constantly seeking signs of divine presence (symbols referring to the sacred reality).

In the indicated worldview paradigm, scientific knowledge mainly served to locate and understand the human being's place in the world that continually referred back to the divine realm of existence. On the other hand, the modern worldview was constructed on the foundation of rejecting such a knowledge model. The pursuit of truth about the universe, in relation to its mysterious connection with the divine reality, was replaced here by an exploration of the mechanisms governing phenomena, with a focus on mastering the world and adapting it to human needs[14]. For this purpose, methodological reductionism, materialism, and mechanistic philosophy were adopted, resulting in the disenchantment of the world, to use the terminology of Max Weber[15].

Thus, the world was no longer a cosmos transparently referring back to the divine dimension of existence, nor, most importantly from the point of view of these considerations, was it permeated by diverse spiritual forces. Instead, a new world-mechanism was being born, increasingly free of divine causality and with less and less symbolic spiritual meaning. In it, the divine influence on reality was reduced to the role of a clockmaker who gave the world the laws of physics, but after this act was no longer necessary[16].

The way of investigating this world was also changing. Instead of seeking the purpose of the existence of natural phenomena or their symbolic meaning in the context of the divine sphere, mathematical models of relationships between mechanistically understood natural phenomena were built, and their adequacy was experimentally investigated. In Cartesian philosophy, even living beings (excluding humans) were reduced to mechanisms[17]. Thus, almost all the mysteries of nature could be studied by establishing immutable, mechanistically understood laws, which may also underlie the rapid development of modern natural sciences.

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[13] Eliade does not claim that the modern human being has completely lost their religiosity, but rather due to a shift in the paradigm of thinking, he or she is no longer capable of experiencing, for example, the sacred in the natural environment as the archaic *homo religiosus* once could. In the pre-modern worldview, the natural world is alive and open, and nearly every object, in addition to its material significance, can also function as a sign of the sacred sphere. See C. Olson, *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade,* Macmillan, London and Basingstoke 1992, p. 36.

[14] The crucial period in this matter was the seventeenth century, and figures such as Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler and René Descartes, among others.

[15] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Routledge, London and New York 2009, p. 139, 155.

[16] In later centuries, the role of the divine watchmaker became redundant, leaving only – as exemplified by the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes – a mechanically determined world in which the highest value was a comfortable earthly life. See T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, Cambridge 1994.

[17] See R. Descartes, *Treatise on Man*, translated by T.S. Hall, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1972.

As a result, the successes of science found their fruits in the development of modern medicine and technology beyond anything previously imagined, but for the first time in human history there was no longer any place in the world for the mysterious spiritual forces that people had commonly perceived in nature for centuries. Since then, spirituality has belonged only to that which is transcendent to the natural world, to God, angels and the thinking self of the human being, but not to nature itself.

With the development of modernity, further elements of what had previously eluded the mechanistic worldview of Western humans were gradually disenchanted. Eventually, even the Cartesian "cogito" as a research object did not escape a reductionist and naturalistic treatment. Thanks to the advancing knowledge of brain physiology, what had hitherto been perceived as spiritual in the human being was gradually explained as a construct, a superstructure on a foundation of blind mechanisms described by the equations of biochemistry. Nowadays, neuroscience increasingly questions human free will or even the existence of the self[18].

Such an approach means not only the instrumentalisation of knowledge about the world, or an instrumental approach to the world itself, but also determines the impossibility of *homo religiosus* functioning in such a universe. This is because in the cosmos of contemporary humans there is no room for anything that has timeless existence, for anything absolute, and thus the belief in the real existence of any divine reality may be only an atavism. In turn, nature appears to be nothing more than a blind mechanism. This reductionist, mechanistic worldview also questions human subjectivity. It is becoming increasingly common for the individual self and their life choices to be treated as illusory. Therefore, a person cannot easily find harmony in such a world and more and more frequently chooses to contest the modern reductionist, materialistic and mechanistic view of reality. Such is the worldview context in which the question of alternative fantasy universes arises, in which the 'reality' can be experienced again as filled with sacredness.

The narrative fantasy world as a return to the universe of *homo religiosus*

An indispensable, even defining element of the world depicted in fantasy is the presence of a supernatural element within it[19]. Therefore, it indeed opposes the "disenchanted universe" in which the modern human operates.

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[18] It should be noted that in neuroscience there are also theories far from materialism or reductionism. Besides, even materialistically and physicalistically oriented neuroscientists approach the issues of consciousness and free will differently. An interesting example is Dennett, who considers the mind and consciousness as products of the brain, yet in *Freedom Evolves* defends the idea of free will. See D. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, Penguin, London 2004.

[19] This fact is reflected in the definitions of the genre formulated by researchers of various methodological orientations, as cited in footnote 5.

This supernatural element, briefly referred to in this paper as "magic"[20], can be described as *novum*, transforming the narrative equivalent of the real world into the fantasy universe. Fantasy, in a sense, "re-enchants" the perception of reality, and the potency of this act grows when the magical component plays a more significant role in the depicted world of a given literary work, and when the reader believes in its realness more deeply during the reading experience.

A fantasy writer has the ability to make the recipient of their work detach from a world disenchanted by modernity, at least for a moment, and transport him or her into the universe of *homo religiosus*. However, he or she must make the reader temporarily believe in "magic" to such an extent that it becomes a credible "law of nature" in the presented world of the narrative. Various strategies can be used in this regard. A popular procedure is to set the story in archaic, ancient or medieval times when people had an unshakeable belief in supernatural forces and their influence on humans and nature[21]. One can also, like Robert Howard, create a fictional era in the distant past of the human community for this purpose[22]. Another way of enchanting the storyworld is to add a magical component to the description of industrialised modernity while suggesting that it has always been there, but somehow hidden from the eyes of the "uninitiated" (urban fantasy). Finally, one can place the fantasy story in a so-called "secondary world", a universe entirely invented by the author, and therefore, ontologically, in a completely alternative reality. Thanks to such a setting, the writer has much more freedom in creating the "physics principles" operating in the narrative world and can assign a more significant role to the supernatural element in that fictional universe[23]. Sometimes, the plot is constructed in such a way that the protagonist, in the course of the story, moves from the literary equivalent of reality (primary world) to the fantasy universe (secondary world), signalling the distinctiveness of the "laws of nature" applicable at a given stage of the narrative, as seen, for example, in Clive S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*[24] (portal fantasy).

In all these cases, fantasy can lead to a re-enchantment of reality, a return to the universe of *homo religiosus* for the duration of the read-

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[20] The aim here is not to equate the supernatural with the magical. Indeed, Tolkien, for instance – rightly dubbed the "father of fantasy" – precisely distinguishes between these realms. In his fantasy, what is mystical pertains to the realm of the supernatural, while what is magical pertains to nature. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, HarperCollins, London 2001, pp. 26-27. The terms "magic" and "supernatural" are used here interchangeably only in relation to fantasy narrative worlds having in mind that which neither fits into the naturalising world description of modern natural science nor can be rationalised (within this paradigm) as possible to exist.

[21] To the indicated type belongs, for example, fantasy referencing Arthurian legends.

[22] This refers to the "Hyborian Age" in the Conan saga. See R. E. Howard, *The Complete Chronicles of Conan*, Gollancz, London 2006, pp. 1-20.

[23] A classic example of this type of fantasy includes Tolkien's works set in Arda or Le Guin's tales taking place in Earthsea.

[24] See C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia,* HarperCollins, London 1998.

ing. However, more and more recent works in this genre, especially those inspired by postmodernism, emphasise socio-political issues, while the magic-filled world presented in them remains only a superficially applied fantasy convention[25]. Postmodern fantasy also employs this convention for other reasons[26]. To achieve "literary enchantment of reality", the creation of the text must also be accompanied by the appropriate intention, and this is usually the case with mythopoeic fantasy.

According to Marek Oziewicz, mythopoetic fantasy is not only a literary genre but also a cognitive strategy and, above all, a worldview assuming the existence of the supernatural[27]. He indicates that even when the term "fantasy" was not yet used as the name of a literary genre, authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis realised that they were creating texts with the aim of sacralising the world[28]. Oziewicz's definition also acknowledges the significant role of mythology in creating this type of fantasy, that is, an originally religious discourse, as it is through myth that the aforementioned worldview may impact readers[29].

Referring to Eliade's theory, myth, in its primary sense, is the narrative development of a religious symbol (a means of communicating it to the human being[30]). A cult member identifies with this kind of sacred story and, through it, experiences themselves, their identity, their place in the world, in the context of the divine reality, which then seems at least as real as themselves. Therefore, one can say that thanks to the narrative form, the religious symbolism of the myth reaches the person existentially, deeply touching his or her sense of being in the world.

Mythopoetics of fantasy, on the other hand, is the art of creating myth anew and in such a way that enables individuals of the modern era to experience a similar sense of connection with the divine realm as was previously enjoyed by pre-modern *homo religiosus*. Potentially, this sacralisation of reality may not only impact the recipient during their reading but also influence their perception of the world in everyday life[31]. For this purpose, a specific "expansion of the mythological worldview" is required, encompassing as many aspects of the reader's life as possible. Consequently, those

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[25] A good example of this are the so-called "retellings" utilising the fantasy convention to advocate feminist messages. See P. Stasiewicz, *Między światami. Intertekstualność i postmodernizm w literaturze fantasy.* Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok 2016, p. 366.

[26] See ibid., pp. 277-361.

[27] See M. Oziewicz, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

[28] See ibid., pp. 65-66.

[29] See ibid., pp. 83-84.

[30] See A. Rega, *Człowiek w świecie symboli. Antropologia filozoficzna Mircei Eliadego*, Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, Kraków 2001, p. 96.

[31] In considering this issue, it is worth noting that Oziewicz argues that mythopoeic fantasy is a holistic, soul-nurturing form of narrative capable of satisfying significant psychological, cultural, and aesthetic needs, and its works can be perceived as aids in shaping a new consciousness for a unified planet. See M. Oziewicz, op. cit., pp. 4-8.

subject to the "magic of myth" would be able to perceive in its light the symbolic-religious significance of various aspects of their lives (similarly to what the pre-modern *homo religiosus* was able to do), and ultimately create a new vision of a sacredly perceived universe[32].

In order to evoke the effect of "sacralising reality," myth in the examined subgenre of fantasy is utilised on various levels of the work's organisation: archetypes, plot structures, characters, events, and motifs. The story is also written in the spirit of the poetics of myth and using language typical of mythology. Furthermore, in this type of fantasy, myth – as in archaic myths – reveals a new dimension of what it means to be human, participate in a world of values, and fight for it[33]. In short, myth becomes a fundamental structural element of the fantasy text in this context.

Tolkien's Arda as an example of a mythopoetic fantasy world

The characteristics of mythopoetic fantasy worlds (which can be experienced in the imagination of the reader as realities permeated by the spirit of divinity) have been presented above. Now, Tolkien's Arda will be examined as an exemplary instance of such narrative universes[34].

The fictional world of Tolkien's mythopoetic works is filled with references to the reality of the sacred and, in this sense, it restores the worldview of the pre-modern *homo religiosus*. Although there are almost no religious practices in Tolkien's Arda, the religious spirit of the divine realm of reality pervades the entire narrative universe. The reader entering it experiences a kind of ontological transformation of reality. The whole world, in which the visitor dwells during the reading process, appears as a hierophany, a revelation of the sacred. This is most evident in *The Silmarillion*[35], where divine beings, led by the god-creator Eru Ilúvatar, play the primary, creative role in relation to Arda. The function of this book within the subcreated world of Tolkien can be compared to the mythologies which, in the real world, acted as collections of sacred texts of pre-modern peoples.

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[32] The aim is not for mythopoeic fantasy novels to replace religion. Notably, in the case of Tolkien or Lewis, fantasy literature complemented their engagement in religious life rather than replacing it. It is more about sacralisation at the level of culture and worldview, something that can serve as a counterbalance to the currently dominant mechanistic reductionism in world perception.

[33] See M. Oziewicz, op. cit., p. 84.

[34] Arda represents the equivalent of Earth in the fictional world of Tolkien's works. The cosmos is Eä, but even that is not the entirety of this narrative reality, as there is also a transcendent dimension where the Ainur and Eru Ilúvatar himself exist. In relation to Tolkien's fictional world, this first term is primarily used here.

[35] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, HarperCollins, London 2013.

As in archaic and ancient mythologies, so too in *The Silmarillion*, the reader learns that every element of the fictional world is not only a divine creation but also filled with the spirit of divinity. The cosmos (Eä) and Arda within it were created by Eru Ilúvatar from the music of the divine Ainur, who then descended into this world to complete the work of creation (thus becoming the Valar – the Powers of Arda). Each part of it is actively cared for by a god, either directly by one of the Valar or by one of their divine helpers (the Maiar)[36]. Because of this, even when the main gods of Arda cease to be directly involved in Middle-earth, their spirit remains present on the continent, repeatedly intervening in the history of elves, dwarves, and humans[37].

Elves also constitute a race that imbues Middle-earth with a distinctive enchantment like that of mythical tales. They are immortal, and many of them remember times from thousands of years ago when the Valar were more active in the world of the Children of Ilúvatar. Being ontologically tied to the fate of Arda, the elves can deeply penetrate the nature of its elements, creating works of beauty and perfection that nearly rival the creations of the gods, such as Fëanor's Silmarils[38]. Even just being in the company of elves causes a unique enchantment, such as Sam experiences in *The Fellowship of the Ring*[39].

The sacralising presence of the divine element of reality is constantly visible in the history of Tolkien's world. Even after the aforementioned cessation of direct activity by the Valar in Middle-earth, the fate of the Children of Ilúvatar remains intertwined with the divine dimension of existence. In the First Age, the gods actively guide the elves in their journey to Aman[40]. Melian, a Maia who chose the fate of an elf, remains in Middle-earth for a long time[41]. Eärendil, a half-human, half-elf, travels to Aman, the immortal realm of the Valar, where he pleads for help in the war against Morgoth. He then ascends to the heavenly regions, sailing the skies and becoming, along with the Silmaril, its brightest object (apart from the sun and moon). Finally, Eönwë, the herald of Manwë, arrives with divine hosts to assist the beings of Middle-earth in their war against Morgoth[42].

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[36] See ibid., pp. 3-24.

[37] Ulmo, for example, has never left Middle-earth and has not and will never cease to care for its inhabitants. See ibid., p. 34. One should not forget the divine provenance of Morgoth and Sauron, who, despite their corruption, also signify the presence of the supernatural element in Middle-earth.

[38] See ibid., pp. 68-75.

[39] Sam initially cannot wait to see elves as if they were magical beings from a fairy-tale, and his first encounter with them is a dream come true for him. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring. Being the First Part of The Lord of the Rings*, HarperCollins, London 2001, pp. 64-83.

[40] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, op. cit., pp. 49-53.

[41] See ibid., pp. 54-55.

[42] See ibid., pp. 295-306.

The presence of gods in the history of the Children of Ilúvatar is less visible in later ages, but it does not cease. In the Second Age, the Valar first create the island of Númenor for humans, then send warnings to its inhabitants who fall under Sauron's influence. Finally, they sink the island as punishment for breaking their covenant[43]. The most spectacular divine intervention in the history of the world in the Second Age is the separation of the divine abode of Aman from the rest of Arda[44]. Although the land of the Valar is irrevocably detached from the rest of the world, the divine influence on the history of its inhabitants is also evident in the Third Age. Here are a few examples: the Valar send divine Maiar (in the form of the wizards known as the Istari) to aid the Children of Ilúvatar[45]; Gandalf, after dying in battle with the Balrog, is resurrected (most likely by Eru Ilúvatar himself)[46]; and Tom Bombadil, a figure with an evidently divine status, though his origins are never explained, resides in Middle-earth[47]. The gods' returning to their full glory is also foretold in the prophecy concerning Dagor Dagorath and the end of Arda's history[48].

Elements of the re-enchantment of the world in Tolkien's universe can also be found in the portrayal of nature. Here, it is not merely a passive matter or a collection of mechanical forces (as accepted in the modern worldview), but a living, sentient organism and an active participant in the mythological history of reality, evident on both a macro and micro scale. In the former context, a good example is the sacred trees of Valinor (Telperion and Laurelin), which set the rhythm of life in all of Aman (in the so-called Age of the Trees), thus becoming a reference point in the entire subsequent history of Arda[49]. From their light, the Sun and Moon were created, and the magic of the Silmarils, whose history drives the events of the First Age in Tolkien's world, also came from preserving the power and life of Telperion and Laurelin[50]. Galathilion, the White Tree created as the successor to

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[43] See ibid., pp. 309-337.

[44] In fact, it was a change in the entire structure of the planet from flat to spherical. See ibid., pp. 337-338.

[45] See ibid., pp. 359-360.

[46] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers. Being the Second Part of The Lord of the Rings*, HarperCollins, London 2001, p. 491; J. R. R. Tolkien, H. Carpenter, C. Tolkien, *The letters of JRR Tolkien*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1981, p. 203.

[47] See Ch. Tolkien, *The History of Middle-earth. Volume VI. The Return of the Shadow. The history of the Lord of the Rings. Part One*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, New York 1988. pp. 117-124.

[48] The content of the original Second Prophecy of Mandos, describing the course of Dagor Dagorath, is not canonical - it does not agree with the published version of the *Silmarillion*, where, however, the constellation Menelmacar is mentioned as an augury sign of the Last Battle. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, op. cit., p. 45. The prophecies were published in the fifth volume of *The History of Middle-earth*. See Ch. Tolkien, *The History of Middle-earth. Volume V. The Lost Road and other Writings. Language and Legend before The Lord of the Rings*, Ballentine Books, New York 1996. pp. 367-368.

[49] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, op. cit., pp. 31-33.

[50] See ibid., pp. 68-74, 108-114.

Telperion, was the ancestor of the famous White Trees of Númenor and Gondor, the blooming or withering of which heralded significant changes in the history of the world[51].

On a micro-scale, we see that the nature of Arda can locally either actively support or oppose a particular endeavour of the protagonists as if it were a collective, intelligent being with feelings, will, and mind. This is evident, for example, in the case of forests. Legolas, for instance, states in *The Lord of the Rings* that Fangorn is not evil in itself but that he senses watchfulness and anger in it[52]. The Old Forest, in turn, behaves in an unfriendly manner towards the hobbits, hindering their movement, obscuring the path, and essentially forcing them to travel through the dangerous Withywindle valley[53]. Merry also mentions that the trees of this forest once attacked the Hedge, which separated the hobbits' settlements from it[54].

Another dimension of the re-enchantment of nature in Tolkien's universe is evident in its partial unification with both the divine realm and the Children of Ilúvatar. This is demonstrated by the existence of beings that seem to cross the boundaries between the divine, human, and animate nature. Examples include the tree shepherds (Ents), the Great Eagles, the dog Huan, and the Mearas. All these creatures either speak human language or at least understand it, and their intelligence far exceeds that of ordinary plants or animals. Derdziński speculates that they might be minor Ainur who, by Ilúvatar's will, were permanently embodied in forms within Arda[55].

Tolkien's narrative universe evidently creates an image of the world similar to that known from the pre-modern phase of civilisation before its disenchantment by modern science. *The Lord of the Rings*, which depicts the latest stage, historically, of Arda's development, portrays the struggle between the universe of *homo religious* – where nature is alive and imbued with mysticism – and the modern view of nature, which instrumentally reduces this mystical element to a resource to be exploited. Although Sauron and Saruman possess magical powers not recognised by contemporary physics, they represent the forces of modern industrialism in Arda's history, destroying the traditional approach to nature as the divine mother of all life[56]. In this context, Tolkien

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[51] See ibid., p. 59, 314; J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King. Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*, HarperCollins, London 2001, pp. 950-951.

[52] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers…*, op. cit., p. 480.

[53] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, op. cit., pp. 108-113.

[54] See ibid., p. 108.

[55] R. Derdziński, *Pasterze Drzew, czyli enty*, „Simbelmynë" no. 20, summer 2004, p. 45.

[56] The image of the divine mother of all life is used here as the traditional way of perceiving nature in the Eliadean sense, i.e., as the archetype of *Terra Mater*. See M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Translated by W. R. Trask, Harper & Brothers, New York 1961, pp. 138-147. The questioning of such a perception of nature is also a result of the modern disenchantment of the world. In Tolkien's Arda, the origin of life is somewhat more complex. The equivalent of *Terra Mater* here is the Vala Yavanna, but her agency does not encompass all living organisms.

contrasts the magic of Sauron and Saruman – described as the technology used for domination and control over nature – with the enchantment of the elves, which is based on respect and love for nature[57]. It is not coincidental that Treebeard speaks of Saruman in the following way: *He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment*[58]. However, except for these critically described precursors of modernity, Arda as a whole represents a world still untouched by the disenchantment brought about by modern science.

In Tolkien's universe, we find a whole array of magical characters, often rooted in religious beliefs, myths, legends, or folk tales. Foremost among these is Eru Ilúvatar, who somewhat resembles the Christian God-Creator[59]. The Ainur can be seen as equivalents to angels in Christian beliefs, and when they become the Valar, they are similar to Greek gods[60]. Elves and dwarves, on the other hand, are popular fairy-tale creatures modified by Tolkien[61]. Additionally, there is a multitude of other beings that enhance the magical nature of Arda, including dragons, Ents, Huorns (Ents in a more tree-like state), the skin-changer Beorn, Old Man Willow, and others[62].

The boundaries between the world of the gods and the Children of Ilúvatar, as well as between the living and the dead in Arda, exist but have not been definitively established; for example, the marriages of Melian (a Maia) and Thingol (the Elven King), and of Beren (a mortal) and Lúthien (an immortal elf). The marriage of the latter pair set a precedent, establishing that all half-human, half-elf beings could choose between the fate of a mortal or an elf. Concerning individual eschatology, the afterlife of elves is instructive, as they return to life through a form of reincarnation[63]. Gandalf was also brought back to life in Middle-earth after his death, as mentioned above. The notion of death as an insurmountable boundary is further contradicted by the fates of the Nazgûl, the Barrow-wights, and the Dead Men of Dunharrow who follow Aragorn in search of redemption[64].

The examples of the sacralisation of Arda provided above are not an exhaustive list on this matter, but they well illustrate how Tolkien enables the reader to enter a universe where the worldview of the pre-modern *homo religiosus* prevails. The setting of his works is a semi-mythical environment, so the magical-mystical dimension of being is easily perceived as an integral part of this reality. Arda's nature is imbued with magic, animated by spirit,

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[57] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, op. cit., pp. 52-54.

[58] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers...*, op. cit., p. 462.

[59] See *J.Rs.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia. Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, ed. M.D.C. Drout, Routledge, New York, London 2007, p. 171.

[60] See ibid., pp. 724-725.

[61] See ibid., pp. 134-135, 150-151.

[62] More information about these creatures can be found in a bestiary by Day. See D. Day, *A Guide to Tolkien's World. A Bestiary*, Bounty Books, London 2012.

[63] See *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., 154-155.

[64] See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King...*, op. cit., pp. 756-773.

and filled with sacred powers. Just as in the pre-modern reality of *homo religiosus*, humanity, nature, and the spiritual world are to some extent unified here. There is also the possibility of crossing between the divine realm, the underworld, and the mortal world, as if the boundaries between them have not yet been definitively established. Tolkien also introduced into Arda characters derived from myths, legends, and folk tales, which in the modern imagination are remnants of the pre-modern world. A reminiscence of the world of *homo religiosus* is also the continuous presence of the divine element in the history of Arda.

Given the intense sacralisation of Tolkien's literary universe, one might say that immersing oneself in it requires temporarily reversing nearly all the worldview transformations wrought by the modern disenchantment of the world. In this sense, the reader, upon entering Arda, experiences an ontological transformation of their existence in the world. He or she creates a 'secondary belief'[65], accepting, for the duration of reading, the transition from functioning in a clockwork universe to living in a world of *homo religiosus*. From this perspective, one could argue that mythopoeic fantasy functions similarly to traditional myths and appears as a hierophany, a sign of the presence of the immortal realm of divinity, a religious symbol clothed in the mythological language of narrative. However, the goal is not for the reader to believe in the reality of the fantasy world in the same way that Christians believe in the Gospel. The aim is to awaken a part of the pre-modern *homo religiosus* within ourselves, to restore that specific religious sensitivity that enables one to perceive their existence in the world as a reality imbued with divinity. In other words, the sense of the presence of the sacred in the narrative world of fantasy does not replace the need for participation in religious life but rather opens one up to a deeper experience of it[66].

Mythopoetic fantasy as a search for harmony with the world

Accepting the Eliadean idea of *homo religiosus* and recognising the sacred as not merely a stage in the history of consciousness but an element in its structure[67], one must also agree that the modern, disenchanted world is ambivalent for humans. On the one hand, as emphasised in these analyses, the transformation of a worldview in the dawn of modernity has

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[65] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

[66] In this sense, Tolkien writes that "eucatastrophe," the miraculous, positive ending typical of mythopoeic fantasy works (which he calls fairy-stories), is merely a foreshadowing of the Eucatastrophe fulfilled in the true story told in the Gospels. See ibid., p. 71.

[67] See M. Eliade, *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1984, preface.

indirectly contributed to the acceleration of the development of medicine and technology, making life in the world more comfortable in many ways. On the other hand, however, modern mechanistic reductionism has alienated humans from an intimate spiritual connection with the world of nature and, to some extent, from relationships with others and themselves[68]. There is still a yearning for a world filled with sacredness, and although life in the disenchanted reality is partially accepted (for the sake of convenience), a portion of the psyche desires its re-enchantment. Achieving harmony with a world that does not correspond to human nature is simply impossible.

For the above reasons, along with the ongoing disenchantment of the universe, one can observe in Western culture a simultaneous intensification of the quest for new ways to satisfy the need to experience the sacred in the world. One such way is the growing interest in the hidden powers of the human mind and mysterious, hitherto unknown forces of nature. Hypnosis, mediumism, esotericism, alleged paranormal occurrences, the renaissance of magical practices and even the emergence of psychoanalysis – all these phenomena, very popular, especially in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, should be associated with the aforementioned need for experiencing the sacred[69]. It can also be noted that in Western culture, after the radical disenchantment of the world, there has been a revival of interest in the magical realms of Eastern religions, which have always had an exceptionally 'spiritual' status[70]. A phenomenon associated with the quest to re-enchant the world is also the emergence of mythopoetic fantasy, creating fictional worlds that allow, if only for a moment, the experience of 'reality' as imbued with sacredness.

To conclude, then, the supposed escapism of fantasy is not directed against reality as such, but against a mechanistic and reductionist understanding of it within the modern worldview paradigm. Humans cannot live and effectively orient themselves existentially in a world devoid of reference to the spiritual realm (variously conceived). Thus, the 'natural' worldview

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[68] If all living beings (including humans) are perceived as 'complex biological automatons', humans lose their subjectivity. In such a paradigm, perceiving their relationships as subject-to-subject is impossible. It's not that the deprivation of human subjectivity directly stems from the findings of contemporary natural sciences or that such a conclusion must be drawn from views formulated within cognitive sciences. The problem is that certain assumptions, adopted in the natural sciences due to their usefulness in constructing theories or conducting empirical research (such as naturalism, determinism, materialism, reductionism, and mechanism), permeate into the sphere of everyday looking at the world (due to the practical success of these sciences), and therefore become a part of the worldview paradigm of modern humans.

[69] See M. Jastrzębski, *Shambhala: magiczny raj Wschodu w literaturze Zachodu. Wstępne rozpoznanie*, "Inskrypcje. Półrocznik" R. X 2022, z. 2 (19), pp. 15-16. Similarly, the popularity of the New Age movement in the second half of the twentieth century can also be interpreted in this way.

[70] See ibid., p. 16.

of human beings, if one may put it this way, perceives the sacred sphere as an integral component of reality. With each step towards disenchanting the image of the universe, a particle of *homo religiosus*, which humans cannot remove from their psyche, needs a counterbalance to allow it to experience its presence in the world in a religious manner. Without this, humans cannot make the world 'theirs'. As demonstrated in this paper, mythopoetic fantasy is one way of satisfying the natural need to fill reality with sacredness (at least for a while). Therefore, mythopoetic fantasy truly serves the pursuit of harmony with the world rather than escapism. The extraordinary popularity of this genre of literature, so unexpected for most literary critics[71], continues because it responds to a deep need for re-enchanting the world.

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[71] See T. A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien. Author of the Century*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York 2002, pp. VII-XXVI.

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