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Liminality in Popular Fiction

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LIMINALITY IN POPULAR FICTION

By

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B.A. University of Maine, 2001

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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LIMINALITY IN POPULAR FICTION

By Adam Crowley

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Burton Hatlen

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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Most popular narratives are composed of *segments*. A narrative segment is a sequence in which those narrative elements fundamental to the *immediate* progression of the narrative are resolved. These resolutions can be true resolutions, or they can be resolutions *in part*. If they are resolutions in part, the narrative elements in question must be sufficiently transformed so that their role becomes radically different, less fundamental. When narrative segments terminate, we become aware of that which is hidden by the logical progression of the segment itself: the author's authority to introduce new narrative elements without warning or apparent need. In short, we become aware of the author's ability to surprise us.

The surprise we experience between narrative segments is *quantifiable*. In popular literature, the termination of a narrative segment coincides with the appearance of an extra-textual element. Extra-textuality is a quality attributable to any event in a narrative not necessitated by any narrative segment prior to its appearance. If we are to be surprised rather than annoyed or confused by the appearance of an extra-textual element,

its appearance *must accomplish three specific tasks*. The extra-textual element must signify the resolution of all matters particular to the concluding narrative segment. It must inspire real change in us so the concluding of the narrative segment does not coincide with the termination of our interest in the narrative as a whole. And it must herald the arrival of a new narrative segment, one that has something to offer that the previous segment lacked. If the extra-textual element accomplishes these three tasks, both our surprise at its appearance and our continued interest in the narrative are all but assured.

Surely, there are countless ways an author can introduce extra-textual elements so that they accomplish the three tasks I've just mentioned. However, one method appears to be particularly good for surprising and pleasing contemporary readers of popular literature. This method is one that adheres to another threefold process: liminal transformation. In his work *Betwixt and Between* anthropologist Victor Turner defines the liminal as that which "is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (9). When the extra-textual is presented in such a way so that it simultaneously appears to be something other than the logical product of the narrative and also something highly conducive to the progression of the narrative, our surprise at its appearance fuels our continued interest in the text.

In this paper, I will examine how three enormously popular twentieth century authors have used liminal transformations as points of entry for extra-textuality. These authors are J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephen King, and Phillip Pullman. By examining the ways in which these authors join their narrative segments, I will not only illuminate *how* these texts were composed, but also provide an answer to the more general question of why the popular texts of the recent past were so very *popular*.

DEDICATION

For Steven

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: A HOUSE OF CANDY

Is there a narrative method that excels in retaining reader interest over the course of a long, involved work? The short answer is yes. The long answer, which I will attempt to set down in this paper, begins with the assertion that most popular narratives are comprised of independent *segments*, none of which forecast with perfect accuracy how any subsequent segments will unfold. The great myth of fiction is that any one narrative segment necessitates its successors. But this assumption remains plausible only as we comprehend narratives backwards. Only in hindsight can we see how certain narrative elements produced one another. To assume that this production could not have resulted in any other logical product than the narrative as we have it is to totally misunderstand the process of storytelling. For it is always the case that the narrative need not be as it is, and that authors could have produced something different if they had decided to.

In an effort to define a particular narrative method well suited to retain reader interest, this paper will begin with an examination of similar narrative techniques common to three popular twentieth century authors. An understanding of these authors' techniques will be useful to anyone who wishes to better understand what was intrinsic to popular storytelling in the second half of the twentieth-century. It is my hope that by shedding some light on the process of popular storytelling, I might illuminate why the popular fiction of the recent past was so very *popular*.

To begin, we must agree that narrative segments are bound together by *something*. Whatever this something is, if the narrative is to retain reader interest, each segment must

accomplish several tasks. First and foremost, each narrative segment must be a distinct unit. By the end of the segment immediate issues must become resolved in such a way that we become refocused on the fundamental matter of the story. Secondly, the segment must inspire some change in us, the reader, so that the termination of the segment does not coincide with the termination of our interest in the narrative as a whole. And, third, each new segment must offer something that the previous segment lacked. Without this threefold “something” to bind narrative segments together, a narrative cannot escape being one-dimensional and predictable, and it cannot retain our interest for very long.

If we can agree on the three tasks that must be accomplished as we move from one narrative segment to the next, then it will not be difficult for us to come to some agreement about what makes the accomplishment of these tasks possible. These tasks are dependant upon *extra-textuality*. By extra-textuality I mean a quality attributable to any event or object in a text that is not necessitated by the narrative up to this point. Lipstick discovered on the collar of an honest husband, the unforeseen inheritance from an unknown relative – these would be examples of extra-textual elements. Like doves from a magician’s pockets, they seem to appear out of nowhere.

A basic example of how narrative segments and extra-textuality function can be found in the narrative of “Hansel and Gretel.” It is possible to break this narrative into two segments. The first segment begins with the stepmother’s declaration that her husband must take his children into the woods, where he is to leave them to die. In the first segment, everything that follows the stepmother’s ultimatum carries us closer and closer to the moment when it will be fulfilled. When the abandonment comes to pass, we

fear for Hazel and Gretel. We fear for them because we have been lead to expect their death.

However, they do not die.

It is at the moment when we are most certain of what the fate of Hansel and Gretel will be, when we are positive in our assessment of what the narrative *must do*, that our narrative expectations are suddenly overthrown. Out of nowhere, a House of Candy appears. The appearance of this House undermines our ability to predict how the story of Hansel and Gretel will conclude. Why, we immediately ask ourselves, is this House of Candy in the middle of the woods? And how does it relate to all that has come before? We do not know. No explanation is provided by the authorial voice. Our ignorance undermines our ability to predict which direction the narrative will take next. The question immediately arises: If we were wrong about what was going to happen to poor Hansel and Gretel in the woods, then how certain can we be about anything that might happen *next* in the story?

The inaccuracy of the expectations we developed during the first narrative segment is again confirmed only a few moments later when the Old Witch emerges from the House of Candy. Until the Old Witch makes her cannibalistic intentions clear, her appearance is as mysterious as that of her House. Both the House of Candy and the Old Witch are extra-textual elements. Nothing in the text prior to their arrival necessitated their arrival. During this transitional period between narrative segments, we become very much aware that the story has taken a radical and unforeseen turn onto a strange and promising a new path. Pleasantly baffled by the House of Candy and the Old Witch, we all but forget the immediacy of Hansel and Gretel's predicament until the Old Witch

locks Hansel up in a cage and tells Gretel she plans to fatten him up and then eat him. When the Old Witch makes her intentions clear, we enter fully into the second narrative segment. Like the first, it begins with a statement that informs us about the immediate direction the narrative is going to take: now, it seems, things will become progressively more miserable for the children until the Old Witch murders them.

It is easy to slide from one narrative segment to the next without pausing to consider the importance of the “something” that binds them together. Something not necessary to the story as it was unfolding had to be *inserted* before the second segment could be possible. Extra-textual elements, the House of Candy and The Old Witch, had to be introduced. However, *it need not have been this way*. The author of “Hansel and Gretel” could have told us in an earlier section of the story that there was a House of Candy in the Woods, and that the House of Candy was the home of a baby-eating Old Witch. But the author did not do so. And the decision to withhold this information until the culmination of the first narrative segment is the reason for “Hansel and Gretel’s” popularity. Had the House of Candy and the Old Witch been introduced any earlier, this tale would have consisted of only one long narrative segment. If that had been the case, nothing in the story would have surprised us, upset our narrative expectations, OR suggested that there was something to be *gained* by reading on.

One of the reasons “Hansel and Gretel” has been retold for hundreds of years is because its narrative segments are joined with a surprising and delightful “something.” The extra-textual elements central to this “something” are wildly entertaining. The narrative technique that has made “Hansel and Gretel” a famous story is the same used by numerous twentieth century authors to organize works many times longer than “Hansel

and Gretel.” In the following chapters, I will examine three such authors, J. R. R Tolkien, Stephen King, and Phillip Pullman. The methods these three authors use to transition from one narrative sequence to the next are representative of the methods we find in the work of a great many post-World War II novelists, particularly novelists working in the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction.

I’ll begin with the text that arguably has been the most influential piece of popular fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century: *The Lord of The Rings*. Tolkien’s method of joining narrative segments has been *the* method for countless imitators, such as Terry Brooks, David Eddings, Piers Anthony, Robert Jordan, and numerous others. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will introduce anthropologist Victor Turner’s theory of the liminal, and I will argue that Tolkien’s method for managing narrative segments is also a method for the *management of liminality*. I will show that liminality has three specific effects on a narrative. The effects satisfy the threefold transformation necessary for joining narrative segments successfully. The threefold transformation consists of a partial or complete resolution of all issues particular to a narrative segment, an invitation for the reader to become reinvested in the text, and the promise of a new point of interest for the reader. The threefold transformation constitutes a moment of transition. In works like Tolkien’s, it is the liminal, or, rather, a particular management of the liminal, that brings about the threefold transformation. With several examples from *The Lord of The Rings* and Peter Jackson’s adaptation of this work, I will here argue that an awareness of the liminal is essential for anyone who wishes to understand not only how Tolkien’s narrative functions, but also how any works that sell themselves as being in the tradition of Tolkien function.

Few who have imitated the style of Tolkien either in whole or in part have managed to create anything more interesting than *The Lord of The Rings*. In one hundred years, few will be reading Terry Brook's *The Sword of Shannara* series. No one will be reading Piers Anthony. However, there *are* a few exceptions, and among those, Stephen King's *The Stand* looms alone on the horizon. In my second chapter I will attempt to elucidate the role of liminality in this novel. King, who currently enjoys more imitators than Tolkien ever had or ever will have, found a way to build upon Tolkien's management of narrative segments in his work *The Stand*. In *The Stand*, King puts forth a theological view not expressed in *The Lord of The Rings*. I will argue that this difference is responsible for King's successful deviations from Tolkien's narrative style. I will not be arguing that King's theological views are superior to Tolkien's, or visa versa, only that King's conception of the metaphysical leads him to manage liminality in way dissimilar from Tolkien. King will forever be indebted to Tolkien for the grace with which he manages the liminal, but it is equally true that King has mutated Tolkien's method sufficiently so that it would be ridiculous to say he merely apes it.

The third work I will examine in the paper is Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy. While the trilogy is only eight years old, it has the potential to become as influential a work as either *The Lord of The Rings* or *The Stand*. Like both Tolkien and King, Pullman writes with a keen awareness of narrative segmentation. However, unlike either Tolkien or King, Pullman appears to be an avowed Secular Humanist. As such, he has a markedly different relationship with liminality than either Tolkien or King. In my final chapter I will examine what these differences are, and why

they are responsible for the unique style of narrative segmentation we find in Pullman's trilogy.

Each of these authors understood how important it was to execute the threefold transformation when transitioning from one narrative segment to the next. Each of these authors successfully manages liminality to produce the threefold transformation. And each of these authors will enjoy an extended tenure in the bookstores of America and Europe. While it would be foolish to say that their success has been wholly dependent upon their management of the liminal, I believe that an elucidation of liminality in their work can help to explain why Tolkien, King, and Pullman have been so popular. Over the next sixty or so pages, I intend to offer such an analysis.

Chapter 2

LIMINALITY IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

In *Betwixt and Between*, Victor Turner characterizes “the particular unity of the liminal [as] that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (9). Turner uses the concept of the liminal to explore the crossing of boundaries in the sacred rites of a number of different cultures and groups: the Omaha, the Ndembu of Northern Rhodesia, and the Kuringals, to name only a few. The importance of these rites, Turner tells us, is that they “indicate and constitute transitions between states” (4). By “state” Turner means “a relatively fixed or stable condition, [that] would include in its meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree” (4).

In *Rites De Passage*, Turner’s predecessor, Arnold van Gennep, advanced the theory that all sacred rites of transition from one state to another have three primary phases: “separation, margin (or limin) and aggregation” (5). In the first and third phases of a transition, individuals have definable roles and labels in society. For example, in many cultures the label for a boy in the separation phase of a puberty rite would translate into “a boy becoming a man,” and the label for a girl in a similar rite would translate as “a girl becoming a woman.” In the aggregation phase, the same boy would be “a boy who is now a man,” and the girl would be “a girl who is now a woman.” Turner notes that in the second of the three phases, the margin phase, which Turner renames the liminal phase, individuals become, for many societies, *invisible* because there are no words to describe them without referring to the state they have just completed or a state they have yet to enter. An individual in the liminal phase is defined by what they are not: not-boy-

not-man or not-girl-not-woman. An example from our own culture would be the way in which Britney [sic] Spears was advertised by the tabloid press during the summer of 2002: no longer a girl but not yet a woman. Britney's tabloid description, and all such labels applied to individuals in transit between states, are consistent with Turner's notion that "individuals [in the liminal phase] are in a...state of suspension, separated from their previous condition, and not yet incorporated into their new one" (*On The Edge*, 159).

Some societies, according to Turner, have specific labels for individuals in the liminal phase. These societies openly acknowledge the existence of the "liminal persona." The Ndemdu of Northern Rhodesia label individuals in the liminal phase of a puberty rite "mwadyi." "Mwadyi" may mean various things: "it may stand for 'a boy novice in circumcision rites,' or a 'chief designate undergoing his installations rites', or, yet again, 'the first or ritual wife'" (*Betwixt*, 6). "Mwadyi" is an important label because it points to a state that is neither impermanent, like boy or girl, nor a state that is relatively permanent (in a world where gender can be altered) like man or woman. For the Ndemdu, "mwadyi" adequately conveys a particular state of existence: a state of being "in" a process, of undergoing a specific process. "Mwadyi" designates a state of being-in-movement.

The liminal, as characterized by Turner, can prove an effective tool in analyzing not only sacred rites of transformation, but also narrative. In one way or another, all narratives are dependent upon a sense of motion. To encourage reader interest, a writer must convey a sense that the narrative is moving towards some destination. Without this sense, there is little reason for a reader or listener to continue. Writers often accomplish this task by establishing certain *specific* narrative expectations and then staging scenes

that fulfill those expectations – but fulfill them only in part, for if expectations are fulfilled completely, then once again the reader or listener has no incentive to go on. We conventionally call the moment when all narrative expectations are fulfilled the “climax” of the story, and that moment must be delayed to near the end of the narration. We move towards the “climax” through a series of mini-or partial “climaxes,” in which some (but not all) of the reader’s expectation are fulfilled, or (depending on the skill of the narrator) resolved in surprising ways. The task of the writer, then, is to maintain a sense of forward momentum, while suspending the reader’s ability to envision how the narrative will arrive at its ultimate destination.

I will begin this chapter by briefly illustrating the primary method J.R.R. Tolkien uses in *The Lord of The Rings* to arouse reader expectations. This method is the same method we find in the writing of Stephen King and Phillip Pullman. Afterwards, I will define the role of the liminal in Tolkien’s writing. For now, let it be enough to say that liminality may have one of three possible effects on a narrative. First, as is the case in the “real world,” when characters in a text undergo a liminal experience, they may experience real change. They may become something so different from what they were before their liminal experience that we must reevaluate our general expectations of them. These sorts of transformations signal the resolution of any narrative segments in which the maturation of a given character to the point of transformation was of central import.

Second, Liminality also has the capacity to transform *us*. When liminal experiences are recounted in a text, what is often produced is a new point of interest: the transformed character. As we reevaluate our expectations of the transformed character, our general expectations of the text become modified. Particularly good authors like

Tolkien understand that the introduction of a new point of interest should engage our attention in a way that no previous point of interest has. What results from this practice is a narrative in which we change our expectations to keep pace with changing characters.

The third possible effect of liminality is the introduction of a new method of revelation. Liminality always calls for the articulation of that which has not yet existed. To bring a new point of interest into view, it is often necessary to employ a new narrative method. If the new narrative method is both surprising and interesting, it often serves as the promise that the next narrative segment will have something to offer that the preceding segment lacked. The three effects of liminality are all dependant upon one another. As a result, the three effects always come into being during what I am going to call a liminal moment. Master storytellers like J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephen King, and Phillip Pullman know how to manage liminal moments. They know how to place greater emphasis on any one of the liminal moment's three possible effects. Because they knew how to manage liminal moments, these authors are able to focus the reader on the effect that is most relevant to the immediate progression of their narratives. In *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkien places the greatest degree of emphasis on the effect liminality has on *characters*. As a result, character change appears to *drive* the other effects of liminality. As I shall argue in my later chapters, King and Pullman emphasize other effects of liminality.

The discovery of the One Ring in chapter two, Frodo's wounding on Weathertop in chapter eleven, and the crossing of the Ford of Bruinen in chapter twelve all constitute liminal moments. In a moment, I will examine exactly how Tolkien manages these moments so that they sustain and encourage reader interest in the narrative. Throughout, I

will contrast Tolkien's narrative practice with that of filmmaker Peter Jackson who, in his cinematic adaptation of Tolkien's epic, often experiments with Tolkien's narrative strategies in ways that illuminate Tolkien's narrative intent. However, it is necessary that we begin by noting the narrative practice fundamental to Tolkien's method of narrative revelation: arousing reader expectations.

The first line of Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* arouses at least one specific reader expectation:

When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton. (21)

Bilbo's announcement provides the reader with an immediate sense of direction: the narrative is going to move towards Bilbo's party. What, exactly, it is that is going to make Bilbo's party both special and magnificent is initially a mystery. But that mystery is quickly solved as, in the next few scenes, Tolkien provides the reader with a variety of details that suggest exactly how and why Bilbo's party is going to be exceptional. Strange carts begin to appear in Hobbiton (25), invitations to the party are mailed out to dozens of hobbits (26), and enormous tents are raised in a field near Bilbo's home (26). The appearance of carts and invitations and tents in the scenes preceding the birthday party continually confirm that the birthday party is going to take place while refining the reader's ability to conceptualize the event. This relatively simple method for creating a sense of narrative movement is central to Tolkien's work. Throughout the text, the authorial voice, Bilbo, Gandalf, or others announce that an event is soon to take place, and then the narrative moves towards the moment when the event does take place. It is

the same practice we find at the commencement of the first and second narrative segments in “Hansel and Gretel.”

However, continually undercutting the reader’s sense that the narrative is moving towards Bilbo’s birthday party, or toward other major events in the text, is a sense that something unpredictable will come to pass when the narrative reaches its announced destination. In chapter one, no sooner is Bilbo’s party confirmed by the arrival of carts and tents then the reader is made aware that Bilbo will have a surprise in store for his guests when they arrive. This information is parceled out during a conversation that Gandalf has with Bilbo on page twenty-five.

‘You mean to go on with your plan then?’ [Gandalf asked]
‘I do. I made up my mind months ago, and I haven’t changed it.’
‘Very well. It is no good saying any more. Stick with your plan – your whole plan, mind, – and I hope it will turn out for the best, for you, and for all of us.’
‘I hope so. Anyway I mean to enjoy myself on Thursday, and have my little joke.’ (25)

What, exactly, Gandalf and Bilbo are talking about is not clear to the reader on page twenty-five. The substance of their conversation is, one might say, *invisible* to the reader, and it remains so until the climax of Bilbo’s party. What plan does Bilbo have? What is this little trick going to be? And what effect will his plan and trick have on his “party of special magnificence”? An openness to the unexpected is fundamental to Tolkien’s process of establishing expectations. Movement alone is not enough to captivate readers; they must also be aroused to expect the unexpected. Without the threat of the unexpected, there is little that is “special” or “magnificent” about the movement of any narrative. It is only when movement is combined with an openness to the unexpected that a narrative becomes entertaining.

In Peter Jackson's film adaptation of Tolkien's work, the audience is informed before Bilbo's party about what Bilbo is plotting. The conversation between Gandalf and Bilbo is expanded to include the details of Bilbo's plan to leave Hobbiton and go live with the elves in Rivendell. The result is a more predictable narrative. The audience has a clear post-party expectation. As a result, the film audience can "see" farther into the future than Tolkien's reader can. Jackson reveals Bilbo's plot early on to convey a sense of certainty to the audience. Film audiences are, simply, less tolerant of uncertainty than are readers of novels. This sense of certainty, though it would prove deadly if overused, is absolutely necessary in Jackson's film, which tries to convey the first third of Tolkien's enormous, weird narrative to a mass audience in under three hours. Jackson, much more than Tolkien, must be cautious of how he balances a sense of motion with a sense of suspension. Too much emphasis in either direction could, and would, drive away his audience.

However, Jackson, like Tolkien, is an excellent storyteller, and as such knows that if the motion of the narrative is completely predictable, an audience cannot help but become bored. So, while Jackson makes the audience aware of Bilbo's plans to leave Hobbiton in his first conversation with Gandalf, he simultaneously establishes that Bilbo has an unnatural fondness for his ring. Tolkien does not present this information until later in the text. When he does, it is to infuse a sense of the unexpected into what would otherwise be a relatively ho-hum scene: Bilbo's departure from Hobbiton. Jackson can get away with establishing Bilbo's relationship with his ring early in the film because the filmgoer, thanks to an enormous prologue we do not find in Tolkien, can immediately infer why Bilbo has this unnatural obsession. The filmgoer already knows that the Dark

Lord Sauron forged Bilbo's ring, and that all who come in contact with it are eventually corrupted and destroyed. When Jackson shows the audience that Bilbo has fallen under the power of his "precious," Jackson is also suggesting that things might go very badly for Bilbo very soon. How, exactly, things might go badly remains, for the moment, unpredictable (invisible).

Any discussion of Tolkien's method of narrative revelation should take into consideration the Oxford Don's Catholicism. His theological assumptions are certainly reflected in his narrative style. Every time Tolkien arouses our expectations, he is in effect prophesying the future of his own world. While prophesying certainly isn't a practice exclusive to Catholicism, one does not need to read far in Tolkien to discover that Middle Earth shares numerous parallels with the world as determined by the Roman Catholic Church. The lazy happenings of the Shire aside, Middle Earth is world where Good and Evil are locked in immortal combat. When Tolkien arouses our expectations of how this conflict may or may not be resolved, his focus is usually on how the actions of *individuals* will determine the future of the world. This practice spills over into Tolkien's management of liminal moments, so that when liminal moments come to pass, our attention is inevitably drawn to the decisions and actions that characters make during moments of transformation. To call Tolkien's style of liminal management "Catholic" would miss the point and be ridiculously reductive. However, one can certainly see evidence of Tolkien's theological position in these moments. Tolkien's Catholicism is certainly in part responsible for his style of liminal management.

The first liminal moment in Tolkien's text and Jackson's film occurs when Gandalf tells Frodo what he has learned about Bilbo's ring. Both Frodo and the reader

have been expecting this revelation since Gandalf last left Hobbiton. “The time has come to speak,” Gandalf says. “Give me the ring for a moment” (48). Frodo complies, and, quite unexpectedly, Gandalf heaves the ring into Frodo’s roaring fireplace. After letting it sit for a moment, Gandalf removes the ring and hands it to Frodo. As he does, writing appears around the Ring.

“I can not read the fiery letters,” said Frodo in a quavering voice.
‘No,’ said Gandalf, ‘but I can. The letters are Elvish, of an ancient mode, but the language is that of Mordor, which I will not utter here. But this in the Common Tongue is what is said, close enough:

One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

It is only two lines of a verse long known in Elvin-lore:

*Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.’ (49)*

When Gandalf recites the Ring Poem, his words literally mix the “this” of Frodo’s world with the “that” of Ring Poem world, and the result is a mingling that obscures the boundaries between the two. For reasons unknown, the Mordor tongue is unspeakable in Hobbiton. This distinction alone instantly arouses certain expectations, which will not be fulfilled for hundreds of pages, when the reader learns that the Mordor tongue is capable of drawing the attention of Sauron to the speaker, no matter where on Middle Earth the speaker might be. The content of the poem itself is ominous, full of nouns that have no meaning in Hobbiton. Who is this Dark Lord? Where is Mordor? Who made these

Rings? Loaded with mystery, the Ring Poem acts as a type of fog, passing between the reader and the reader's sense of narrative direction.

After reciting the Ring Poem, Gandalf goes on to explain its meaning. His explication constitutes the first lecture on the history of Middle Earth delivered by a character in Tolkien's work. Through this lecture on the Ring, numerous new expectations are established for the reader. At the end of his lecture, Gandalf tells Frodo:

There is only one way [to destroy the Ring]: to find the cracks of Doom in the depths of Orodruin, The Fire-mountain, and cast the Ring in there, if you really wish to destroy it, to put it beyond the grasp of the Enemy for ever. (59-60)

Like Bilbo's announcement that he was going to be having a party of special magnificence, Gandalf's words establish a specific expectation for the reader. If Frodo wants to destroy the Ring, he will have to go to Orodruin to do so. That this expectation is established via dialog rather than through the narration of the authorial voice is important. As Frodo makes his journey towards Mt. Doom, there are numerous instances when other characters, such as Elrond, Strider, Gimli, or Galadriel, deliver long lectures on Middle Earth. While some of these lectures establish new expectations for the reader and others do not, the lecturer and lecture become central tools in Tolkien's process of narrative revelation from this moment onwards.

However, what is most memorable about the lecture isn't the lecture itself. It is Frodo's *reaction* to the lecture that we remember. Gandalf's lecture changes Frodo's character in a profound way. By telling Frodo about the Ring, Gandalf provides him with the theoretical knowledge he will need if he is going to carry the Ring to Mount Doom. Gandalf's lecture carries Frodo from a state of relative ignorance and innocence to a state of relative knowledge. His words are the liminal bridge that connects Frodo's prolonged

adolescence with his first moments of adulthood. But Gandalf's words are just that, words, and while we might remember the Ring Poem long after we have finished the text, the specifics of Gandalf's lecture *fade away*. How many people commit to memory the above passage about Orodruin? Few. What we remember about this moment is that Frodo listened to Gandalf's lecture and responded to Gandalf's charge *immediately*. Tolkien could have had inserted some length of time between Gandalf's lecture and Frodo's decision to carry the Ring, but he didn't. He chose to have Frodo respond immediately to emphasize the *importance* and *profundity* of Frodo's transformation.

Frodo's rapid transformation impels us to transform, too. The immediate effect of our transformation is that we develop a new interest in the fate of Middle Earth.

Gandalf's lecture on the One Ring suggests a near complete knowledge of a dazzling history. But Gandalf reveals *so very little* in Frodo's living room. Had he revealed more, our interest in the text might have been totally absorbed by the old wizards' speech. The effect would have been similar to any of the tales in *1001 Arabian Nights*. The function of each of those tales is to make you forget that you're reading *another* tale. But Gandalf does not divert our attention to the immediate plot of the story with his lecture on the One Ring. It is Frodo's reaction to his lecture that drives us to reconsider the text. Frodo's immediate response to the lecture *steals* the old wizard's thunder. It provides us with a new point of interest to consider, one that is knowable with greater immediacy than any of the points of interest Gandalf has been mentioning.

In Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien's film, the recitation of the Ring Poem coincides with a radical development in the way in which Jackson tells Tolkien's story. This technique, like Gandalf's lecture, unifies Frodo and audience and emphasizes

Frodo's rapid transformation. By the time the Ring Poem is introduced in Jackson's film, there has already been one long lecture delivered to the audience. This lecture came in the form of a prologue in which a narrator spells out the history of the One Ring for the viewer. When Gandalf tells Frodo about the One Ring, he is only confirming what the audience already knows. His lecture does not mark a new method of narrative revelation for Jackson. However, as soon as Frodo accepts the burden of bearing the One Ring out of the Shire, Jackson begins a sequence of quick shots that show Frodo racing about Bag End, packing to leave the Shire. These shots chronicle the *rapid* transformation of Frodo Baggins. Such short shots become a recurrent cinematic technique in later scenes, primarily battle scenes in which Jackson tries to connect the audience with a number of characters simultaneously fighting different foes over a large area of land. From this moment forward, all rapid transformations in Jackson's film are broadcast with sequences of quick shots. However, as was the case in Tolkien, Frodo's transformation is far more memorable than any technical modifications Jackson makes to his process of narrative revelation as the transformation is taking place.

There are a number of other liminal moments in Tolkien. In chapter eleven, entitled "A Knife in The Dark," Frodo is confronted by Sauron's Black Riders. The confrontation takes place on Weathertop, a collection of ruins on a hill between the town of Bree and Elrond's home at Rivendell. What makes the Weathertop confrontation so striking is that, as was the case when the Ring Poem was introduced, what passes on Weathertop is a liminal moment in which one particular effect appears to drive the other two.

When confronted by the Black Riders, Frodo has a

sudden temptation to put on the Ring. The desire to do this laid hold of him, and he could think of nothing else. He did not forget the Barrow, nor the message of Gandalf; but something seemed to be compelling him to disregard all warnings, and he longed to yield. (191)

A few lines later, Frodo *does* yield. As soon as he slips “the Ring on the forefinger of his left hand,” (191) he undergoes a liminal transformation. Frodo is forever changed by this moment, and because he is changed, we are changed. Frodo’s change occurs on at least two levels. First, there is the change in his relationship with the Ring. After this moment, it is no longer an alien device he is carrying around in his pocket. From this point on, the threat of the One Ring is not just that it will draw terrible pursuers to Frodo, but that it might itself come to dominate Frodo’s will. Because Frodo’s relationship with the Ring has changed, we are forced to change our relationship with the Ring. We can no longer think of it as a powerful but basically inert bauble. Our relationship with the Ring need not have been changed this way. Tolkien could have just as easily made us aware of the Ring’s horrible potential *in some other way*. But he didn’t.

The second and far more profound change to Frodo comes after he slips on the Ring. As soon as he places it on his forefinger, Frodo slips into another dimension, the Shadow world, in which he sees the Black Riders for what they really are:

Immediately, though everything else remains as before, dim and dark, the shapes became terribly clear. He was able to see beneath [the Black Riders’] black wrappings there were five tall figures: two standing on the lip of the dell, three advancing. In their white faces burned keen and merciless eyes; under their mantles were long grey robes; upon their grey hairs were helms of silver; in their haggard hands were swords of steel. Their eyes fell on [Frodo] and pierced him, as they rushed towards him...A third was taller than the others: his hair was long and gleaming and on his helm was a crown. In one hand he held a long sword, and in the other a knife; both the knife and the hand that held it glowed with a pale fire. He sprang forward and bore down on Frodo. (191)

This is a moment of great terror for Frodo. He is forever changed by what he sees. Because he is confronted with their true horrible forms, Frodo is forevermore rendered incapable of thinking of his enemies as abstractions. It is Frodo's knowledge of what the Black Riders truly are that, in part, leads him to abandon the rest of the fellowship at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. His leaving is incomprehensible to most of the fellowship, but not so for us. And the reason for that is because we went with Frodo into the Shadow world, we saw what he saw there, and as a result of his transformation, we changed too. To be fair, Frodo's relationship with his pursuers only *begins* to transform during the Weathertop sequence. But the commencement of that transformation is the driving force behind this liminal moment.

Frodo, trapped in the Shadow world, cannot be extracted by any narrative method of revelation that Tolkien has previously demonstrated. Under siege by the Black Riders, Frodo is not in a position to remove the Ring from his finger, nor is he in any position to defend himself from the Black Rider's swords. Things look very grim for Frodo, and he appears to be all but doomed. But before the Riders can exterminate Frodo, Strider jumps "out of the darkness with a flaming brand of wood in either hand" (191). Strider emerges not just out of the darkness, but, in a sense, out of the invisible seams that hold Tolkien's project together. Previous to Weathertop, Frodo has been in moments of extreme danger, but there was always an obvious way for him to escape. The best example is when the Barrow-Wights capture Frodo in chapter seven. The intention of the Barrow-Wights is clear. They will, if given enough time, murder Frodo and the other hobbits. However, before Frodo's encounter with the Barrow-Wights is revealed to the reader, the reader has

been told that, should Frodo get into any trouble, he should simply sing a song to Tom Bombadil:

*Ho! Tom Bombadil, Tom Bombadillo!
By water, wood, and hill, by the reed and willow,
By Fire, sun and moon, harken now and hear us!
Come, Tom Bombadil, for our need is near us! (138)*

The song will summon Tom Bombadil, who will set things right. However, on Weathertop, when the Black Riders begin to attack, the hobbits are far beyond Tom Bombadil's reach, and no other options for escape have been introduced. *What's important to note is that Tolkien places much more emphasis on Frodo's transformation than he does on the extra-textual device that he uses to rescue Frodo.* No sane person who reads the Weathertop confrontation comes away astounded by Strider's sudden appearance. We note his fortuitous arrival, but only from the periphery of our mind's eye. Throughout, we remain focused on Frodo's transformation and situation.

Though we pay little attention to it, Strider's sudden arrival on Weathertop is of great import. It marks the first moment in *The Lord of The Rings* when salvation arrives unannounced. Post-Weathertop, numerous other characters are thrust into situations from which no escape seems to be possible. Gandalf's fall in Moria would be an example of such a moment, as would Eowyn's confrontation with the Witch King during the battle of Pelennor Fields. In both situations characters with whom we identify evade certain death, and the way in which they do so is impossible to predict beforehand. This new way of narrating events has just as profound an effect upon the rest of the narrative as Gandalf's lecture in chapter two. However, like Gandalf's lecture, the significance of Strider's arrival is all but lost on us *because we're looking the other way*, at Frodo, who is transforming before our eyes.

The Weathertop confrontation also instigates a development in the way Jackson narrates his film. Jackson, like Tolkien, rescues the hobbits with the sudden appearance of Strider. However, when Strider shows up on Weathertop, the hobbits have already avoided certain death via an unexpected appearance. Early in the film, while the hobbits make their way to Bree, the Black Riders overtake them. The Black Riders could chase the hobbits down and, one assumes, murder them if not for Merry's sudden and unexpected observation regarding Bucklebury Ferry. The hobbits race for the Ferry and reach it moments before the Riders do so. The Riders are incapable of crossing the river to follow the hobbits, and are forced to ride twenty miles north to the nearest bridge to continue their pursuit. Thus, when Strider appears, the hobbits have already been rescued by an unexpected event. However, in Jackson's film, what is introduced on Weathertop is the notion that Frodo will, if he deems it necessary, put on the One Ring. In Tolkien, Frodo's decision to slip the Ring on while the Black Riders are attacking is motivated by a "sudden unreasoning desire" that Frodo cannot control. Jackson's Frodo, however, seems to be all too willing to wear the Ring. Jackson's film, for reasons that are understandable, does not trace Frodo's long, arduous psychological development as he sinks under the power of the Ring. By having Frodo use the Ring as a tool on Weathertop, Jackson sets the audience up to be more understanding of Frodo's use of the Ring near the end of the film, when he uses it as a tool to escape Boromir.

The liminal moment that transpires on Weathertop is another example of how Tolkien places particular emphasis on a single effect of the liminal. It is important to keep in mind that his manipulation of this moment could have been different. We didn't have to go into the Shadow world with Frodo. His transformation could have been observed

from any number of different frames of reference, such as Sam, Merry, Pippin, or even Strider. Had this been the case, then it is likely Frodo's transformation would have seemed more mysterious, less central to what transpires on Weathertop. But Tolkien *chose* to structure his scene so that its effect was dependant upon Frodo's transformation.

At the end of chapter 11, titled "Flight To The Ford," the reader is presented with yet another liminal moment. At the Ford of Bruinen, which marks the boundary of Rivendell, Frodo is once again cornered by the Black Riders. By this point in the narrative, Frodo has been so enervated by the wound he received on Weathertop that he is on the very edge of death. At the Ford, all that separates Frodo from the Black Riders is the Ford itself, which is neither wide nor deep. When the Riders begin to advance across the water, Frodo does not, as he has during every previous encounter, attempt to hide, nor does the One Ring seduce him. Instead, he draws his sword and defies the Riders, "'Go back!' he cried. 'Go back to the Land of Mordor, and follow me no more!'"(209).

Frodo's words to the Black Riders are the first openly defiant words Frodo speaks in the text. While Frodo displayed a great deal of courage when he offered to carry the One Ring to Mount Doom, his reaction to danger since leaving Hobbiton has been to run away, hide, collapse, or wear the One Ring. Frodo's words to the Black Rider establish a new dimension of Frodo's character. This dimension forces us to reevaluate our relationship with Frodo. From this moment onwards, we will expect Frodo to act differently in the face of danger. We no longer expect Frodo to be so very fearful of his pursuers. Because Frodo is changing, we are forced to change. The effect of this moment is not all that dissimilar from the effect of Jesus' confrontation with Satan in the Bible.

After Jesus rebuffs Satan's worldly offers, we come to expect more from Jesus than, perhaps, we did previous to that confrontation.

The events at the Ford of Bruinen change us as well. We change in reaction to Frodo's bravery. His actions instill us with a sense of hope. Previous to this moment, Frodo's situation has been entirely desperate. In confrontation after confrontation, we have been led to believe that he has undertaken an impossible quest. Nothing prior to his defiance at the Ford suggests Frodo has the qualities necessary to see the One Ring into the fires of Mount Doom. But when Frodo defies the Black Riders, we are asked to reevaluate our expectations of him. And while a simple defiance is certainly not proof that Frodo will be strong enough to destroy the One Ring, it does suggest that there is a great strength in Frodo's character that we have yet to witness. The possibility of this strength changes our relationship with both Frodo and the text. From this moment on, we believe that Frodo *might* be successful, should he continue to evade death.

So profound is Frodo's transformation at this moment, and so radically do our expectations of the text change, that it is easy not to see the new narrative method that is being introduced. Frodo's defiance of the Black Riders is the first instance in *The Lord of The Rings* when a character, separated from their friends, becomes courageous while facing possible death. It is certainly not the last moment. Gandalf's confrontation with the Balrog, Sam's confrontation with Shelob, Merry's confrontation with the Witch King: each of these moments turn on the "weaker" character defying what appears to be a unbeatable foe. Tolkien could have emphasized his new narrative method if he had drawn our mind's eye to the formidable appearance of the Black Riders or had dwelt for any length of time on Frodo's weakened state. However, he does neither of these things.

Because of Tolkien's style of liminal management, what appears to be most remarkable during this moment is Frodo's defiance, and not *the nature of the confrontation itself*. Again, here we see an example of how Tolkien *could* have emphasized a different aspect of a liminal confrontation but chose not to.

Jackson's treatment of the episode at the Ford of Bruinen is different from Tolkien's. In Jackson's film, when Frodo crosses the Ford, he is not alone. He is riding with Arwen, the beautiful and courageous daughter of Elrond. In Jackson's film, it is Arwen, not Frodo, who draws a sword and defies the Black Riders. What is missing from this moment is a change in Frodo or a change in the reader. As neither occurs, we cannot say that Jackson's version of the Ford of Burien constitutes a liminal moment.

In *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkien connects his narrative segments with moments of liminality. Liminal moments have a threefold effect on a narrative. When characters in a text undergo a liminal experience, they experience real change. They become something so different from what they were before their liminal experience that we must reevaluate our general expectations of them. Liminality also has the capacity to transform *us*, to change us as readers and as people. When liminal experiences are recounted in a text, what is often produced is a new point of interest that engages us in a way dissimilar from any other point of interest. Third, Liminality changes an author's established method of narrative revelation by adding a new dimension to it. Tolkien manages liminal moments by placing a great deal of emphasis on how liminality changes *characters*. As a result, the effect of changing characters appears to drive the other two effects of liminality. It is important we keep in mind that Tolkien could have emphasized any of

liminality's three effects, but that he consistently emphasized one effect over the other two. *He need not have told this story in way.*

Chapter 3

LIMINALITY IN THE STAND

Gandalf's lecture on the One Ring does more than establish specific narrative expectations for us. It also establishes the moral order of Middle Earth. This order consists of two primary forces: Evil, which radiates from a specific source, Sauron, and Good, which is immaterial and becomes manifest only in specific actions, specifically, those actions that seek to undermine the will of Evil. That Tolkien's moral order should be established during a liminal moment is fascinating, for it need not have been established in this way. King, who has an enormous gift for imagining how the works of other authors might be improved upon, must have noted Tolkien's predilection for preaching between narrative segments, for in his eleven hundred-page homage to Tolkien, King stakes out the horizon of his moral order exclusively during liminal moments. However, before we proceed much further, it will be necessary that we examine in some detail Tolkien's moral order, so that we might better understand how and why King went about responding to the Oxford Don's work.

Gandalf's description of Sauron leaves readers with a sense that all that is wrong with Middle Earth can be attributed to one character. In age after age, Sauron and Sauron alone has been *the* force responsible for fracturing the races of Middle Earth into numerous squabbling kingdoms. Though Sauron is physically trapped in Mordor, Gandalf tells us Sauron is capable of expressing his will through base creatures, such as orcs, men, and various monsters. What emerges from Gandalf's lecture is a concept of Evil akin to modern science's concept of a radioactive particle. It is constantly decaying,

releasing its energy into the world, and destroying the bonds of weaker molecules, i.e. kingdoms – or anything else – that would oppose Sauron. As is the case in the Bible, Tolkien's Evil comes from a real, quantifiable source.

Gandalf's description of Good is quite different from his description of Evil, and it is quite different from the Good of the Old and New Testaments. Goodness does not come from a specific source in Middle Earth. No single being is Sauron's equal and opposite. Good exists only in so far as individuals, working in open rebellion against Sauron's will, produce it. As Good is always dependent upon the actions of individuals, it is constantly in danger of *failing*. If Goodness is to be preserved, then, it is necessary for individuals to be reminded of why it is worthwhile to act in a Good way. Gandalfs and Elronds are necessary for Good to survive in a world like this. We can say that they are agents of Good, but not Goodness itself. Tolkien's Evil is a Noun, and his Good is a Verb.

The poles of Tolkien's moral order are established early on, and do not change as the story progresses. In one way or another, every liminal moment in the text argues for the moral order Gandalf explicates in chapter two. What emerges from this practice is an increasingly well-defined, if somewhat simple, moral order. King recognized that one could use liminal moments to stake out a far more complex moral order than Tolkien's. In *The Stand*, nearly all of King's liminal moments suggest that the moral order of the text is more complicated than the moral order expressed by the preceding liminal moment. After hundreds of pages and numerous liminal moments, what emerges from this practice is a complex theological system, stratified, and ultimately irreducible to warring poles.

King begins his story in a morally ambiguous “real world.” The “real world” of *The Stand* is a world where a security guard will leave his post to save his family, and thereby condemn all of civilization to destruction. It is a world where ex-cons will burst into a gas station, ready and willing to murder as many people as they need to in order to steal a few dollars, and a world where the Government will execute reporters, journalists, and anyone else who tries to thwart its will. In short, it is a world rotting from evil, with very little good. Before I proceed, I must make a distinction. When I use the word “evil” I am referring to natural evil, which is always reasonable. When I use the word “Evil,” I am referring to supernatural evil, which emanates from somewhere beyond mortal comprehension. Similarly, when I use the word “good,” I mean natural good, and when I use the word “Good,” I mean supernatural Good. In King, both Evil and Good are ultimately beyond human comprehension, though they can be known *in part*.

What are King’s theological assumptions? Unlike Tolkien, we cannot classify King as a member of any specific religious group. While it certainly would be possible to jerry-rig some sort of an answer to this question by scanning King’s body of work for consistent expressions of faith, for the purposes of this paper we will examine no other text than the one in question. In *The Stand*, we learn of an absolute force of Good and an absolute force of Evil, and while King lets us know these two forces appear to be in opposition to one another, the reason for the opposition is never made clear. Good has a life outside of its relationship with Evil, and Evil does not appear to need Good in order to thrive. In short, they do not appear to be codependent, as the moral poles of Tolkien’s universe are. Ultimately, the nature of their immortal relationship remains indeterminate.

However, King does go to great lengths to articulate what the human condition is under these two powers.

We can discover traces of King's ambiguous theology in his management of liminal moments. Unlike Tolkien, who placed the greatest degree of emphasis on the effect liminality has on *characters*, King places the greatest degree of emphasis on the effect liminality has on *us*. We do not change in response to the transformations in specific characters nearly as often as we change in reaction to the appearance of *new points of interest*. While King's characters are certainly transformed by liminal moments, their transformations are always driven by an event that is in itself more interesting – or emphasized – than the transformations that occur as a result of it. What's particular noteworthy about these moments is that we are never certain about *why* we are being asked to change in the first place. This practice is the total opposite of Tolkien's. We know in Tolkien that we are changing because a character has changed. King rarely offers a reason for why we must change before he *makes* us change. His intentions, like his theological assumptions, remain mysterious.

King begins his moral complication of the “real world” in chapter twenty-three. This chapter marks the introduction of Randal Flagg. Flagg enters alone, ambling down US 51, the pockets of his jean jacket stuffed with hatemongering propaganda. Flagg's reason for being is mysterious. Unlike any other character King has introduced previous to chapter twenty-three, Flagg's introduction does not coincide with several paragraphs that detail his life history. In this initial encounter we learn only that “the walking dude” is somehow *different* from the characters we have met previously. The degree to which Flagg is somehow different does not become apparent until midway through the chapter:

[Flagg] closed his eyes, his hot face turning up slightly to the dark sky, which was prepared to receive the dawn. He concentrated. Smiled. The dusty, rundown heels of his boots began to rise off the road. An inch. Two. Three inches. The smile broadened into a grin. Now he was a foot up. And two feet off the ground, he hung steady over the road with a little dust blowing beneath him. (184)

Flagg's ascension constitutes a liminal moment. As he takes to the air, Flagg undergoes real change. He becomes more than just a mysterious stranger; Flagg becomes a supernatural force. Flagg's flight impels us to reexamine our expectations of the text. This results in our undergoing real change, too. As Flagg takes to the air, we are forced to recognize that what was just a smart science fiction story is rapidly modulating into something fantastic. At this moment King introduces a new narrative method that allows him to speak of the supernatural world. Previously, the text has simply not had a supernatural dimension. Here, then, we see how Flagg's ascension qualifies as a liminal moment: Flagg undergoes real change, we undergo real change, and the narrative develops a new method of revelation. Like Gandalf's lecture on the One Ring, this moment suggests that the "real world" of the text is far more complicated than we first thought. Unlike Gandalf's lecture, this moment does not inspire a character to undergo a transformation that is *comprehensible*.

The change Flagg undergoes on US 51 is not, as is always the case in Tolkien, a change of *personality*, which would be quantifiable. Such a transformation simply would not be possible in the middle of chapter twenty-three, as readers have at this point no idea what Flagg's personality might *be*. We don't know whether he can or can't fly before he flies. However, when Flagg takes to the air, we see he is not bound by the same rational rules the other characters in King's "real world" have to abide by. The effects of this suspension of the narrative rules of realism on the text are the same as if Flagg had

undergone a real personality change: he demonstrates an ability to do more than we initially expected, and from this point onwards we will expect Flagg to “be” supernatural. As we would be disappointed if Frodo began to act like a coward after the Ford of Bruinen, we would be equally disappointed, or at the very least confused, if after chapter twenty-three Flagg never again demonstrated any supernatural qualities.

Our new expectations of Randal Flagg carry us into a new relationship with King’s text: one that exceeds the conceptual possibilities of the first twenty-two chapters, which constitute the work’s first narrative segment. Flagg’s ascension is a “point of no return” some readers do not get past – or forgive. Those who do get past this moment are willing to reinvest themselves in the progression of this monster narrative. When King thrusts a floating Flagg into the middle of things, what results is a mingling of generic expectations, science fiction with fantasy. We find similar moments in Tolkien, though they are not nearly as jarring or surprising. When Gandalf recites the Ring Poem, it is clear that the text is making a transition from children’s fairy tale into quest narrative. But when Tolkien transgresses our generic expectations, he does so in a relatively gentle way, for the fairy-tale and the quest narrative are like fraternal twins who share so many features they’re nearly identical. However, the genres of science fiction and fantasy are distinct from one another in several profound ways. In the former, what would be considered fantastic in the “real world” is always contingent upon some sort of explanation, no matter how lame or ill conceived – Evil and Good are alien concepts in science fiction. If the moon is going to crash into earth, or if a dimensional portal has opened up at the base of the Washington monument, readers need to know *why* – and it can’t be because God or the Devil has willed it to be (unless God or the Devil are aliens).

The explanation must be rational. On the other hand, in fantasy, Good and Evil are simply givens. Readers do not question the appearance of supernaturally creepy ghosts, supernaturally greedy dragons, or supernaturally sexy elves. They are expected and central to the genre. King's declaration in chapter twenty-three that he is, by God, going to make the two genres *one* changes the basic relationship we have with the text. The "real world," a rational empire contingent upon certain physical properties, begins to disintegrate under Flagg's floating feet. But it does not vanish, for in the very next chapter we find ourselves back in the ho-hum "real world." Yet once we have seen King's House of Candy, our return to the "real world" is marked by a new uneasiness, perhaps akin to that of the farm hand who returns from the war only to spend the rest of his nights dreaming of Paris. We have been made aware that there are more things in King's heaven and earth than we've made room for in our general expectations. By raising his Flagg, King demonstrated a willingness to break, rather than reaffirm, his own order. At this moment, he breaks with Tolkien and lights out for the territories. It is for this reason that King stands miles above the rest of Tolkien's imitators.

From Tolkien, we know that liminal moments are especially useful for providing a definite sense of narrative direction. Gandalf's lecture on the One Ring accomplishes a specific, plot-related goal. It gives order to a narrative rapidly losing steam and direction after Bilbo's departure. The same is true of the battle on Weathertop or the confrontation at the Ford of Buri. In general, Tolkien's liminal moments only clear the way for the next narrative segment. Chapter twenty-three of *The Stand* argues that liminal moments can be used not only to announce the arrival of the next narrative sequence, but also to *modify the atmosphere of all narrative sequences*, both previous and subsequent. When

King elevates Flagg into the Idaho atmosphere, he is quite literally altering the atmosphere of his novel. This undermines our previous conception of the text, and forces us to do nothing less than reevaluate our relationship with King's entire "real world." Had King not emphasized the liminal's effect on us during Flagg's levitation, this moment would not have been successful in altering the atmosphere of King's text in the same way. Because we are now aware that authors can place different degrees of emphasis on the effects of liminality, we know that King's *general alteration to the atmosphere of his text could have been accomplished in another way.*

During a speech at the University of Maine in 2001, King quoted Alfred Hitchcock on the difference between horror and terror. An audience, Hitchcock believed, was horrified if a bomb goes off in the middle of a scene without any forewarning. However, the same audience will not be horrified but rather terrified if they are allowed to see the bomb before it goes off and informed there is nothing that can be done to prevent its detonation. In chapter twenty-three, Flagg is the "bomb" that is being displayed for readers, and in response we feel an appropriate terror of him. What he might do – explode, or something worse – is not immediately clear. But, because of his pins and pamphlets and the precious few insights readers are given into Flagg's character, we know that Flagg will do bad and perhaps bomb-like things if given an opportunity. Here, the liminal serves less to galvanize the plot than to suggest that the plot might *at any point in the future* suddenly veer down any number of previously unforeseen paths, over which the terrifying specter of Randal Flagg looms large.

So far I spoken exclusively of how King places the most emphasis on this liminal moment's effect on us, but I've said nothing at all about why he would want to write this

way. By unsettling us with an instance of what was impossible prior to chapter twenty-three, the supernatural, King succeeds in complicating his moral order. We must remember that the initial world of *The Stand* is basically a-moral, though rotting from what we might conventionally call evil. We might conventionally call Flagg evil, too – that is, we might call him evil until he takes to the air. At that moment he becomes not only an emissary from fantastic realms, but also an *Evil* emissary from fantastic realms. As such, his Evil is different from the evil that gave birth to the Super-Flu or any of the other horrors we encounter before chapter twenty-three. What role Evil may play in the narrative is not clear in chapter twenty-three, but what is clear is that it has become a narrative *possibility*. King writes this way to expand the realm of what is *possible* in his story.

During the first instance of liminality in *The Stand*, King successfully redefines the role of evil in his text, significantly changes the atmosphere of his story, and prepares us for the moral order that is about to invade the “real world” of the narrative. While what results from this moment is far different from the change inspired by most liminal moments in Tolkien, we can say for certain of both King and Tolkien is that they initiate liminal moments with *extra-textuality*. Furthermore, we can say that for both authors the desire to insert extra-textuality comes from *one* particular source. In Tolkien, the source for extra-textuality is Tolkien’s desire to affirm the validity of the moral order he sets down in the early pages of his epic. For King the source is King’s desire to continually complicate his moral order. Almost every liminal moment that follows Flagg’s ascension furthers our insights into the novel’s supernatural and moral orders. With each liminal moment, King’s moral order becomes more and more complicated.

In the twenty-two chapters that separate *The Stand's* first liminal moment from its second, Evil remains a real but basically absurd force. We might say that this novel suffers from House of Candy Syndrome. Without a context for being, Randal Flagg is perhaps *weirder* than he is terrifying. He is a bomb sent by no one. Why he floats above US 51, why he vanishes before crooks and villains, and why he begins to appear in the dreams of major characters remains mysterious until chapter forty-five, in which King, during another liminal moment, exposes Randal Flagg's *apparent* reason for being.

In chapter forty-five, King introduces Mother Abigail. By the end of the chapter's first paragraph, we learn that Mother Abigail sees the Super-Flu as a judgment by God on humanity. While looking out over the devastated countryside, Mother Abigail thinks, "God has brought down a harsh judgment on the human race" (481). This thought is one that several characters have had previous to chapter forty-five. Stu, Larry, and Fran all wonder at different moments why God would let the Super-Flu happen. Implicit in their question is the assumption that God exists and that there is some sort of relationship between God and the flu. However, while wondering about God is something that many characters do from time to time, it is something Mother Abigail appears to do *all* the time, and not without good reason.

As surely as Mother Abigail knows that God had a hand in the Super-Flu, she knows that a great many guests will soon be showing up at her farm. To prepare for their arrival, she makes her way to a neighbor's house to gather up a few chickens. The neighbor, a victim of the Super-Flu, no longer needs the birds. The journey is long and hard, but Mother Abigail makes it to her the neighbor's farm and gathers up as many chickens as she can carry in a burlap sack. On her journey home, a weasel attacks her.

“‘Hi!’ she screamed at it. The weasel darted away, seeming to grin, a thread of the bag hanging from its chops” (503). Within moments, hundreds of weasels work their way out of the corn. And as they draw closer, Mother Abigail suddenly understands that these weasels are servants of the dark man, Randal Flagg. To save herself, Mother Abigail begins to pray. “*But whosoever believeth on Me, behold, he shall not perish...for I have put My sign on him and no thing shall touch him...he is Mine, saith the Lord.*” After praying, she stands up, “still terrified, but now sure of what she must do. ‘Get out!’ she cried. ‘It’s chicken, all right, but it’s for my company! Now you all git!’” (504)

And they do.

This moment is a liminal moment. During the confrontation, Mother Abigail undergoes real change. She transforms from a psychic old woman with brittle bones and a weak heart to a righteous instrument of God. We, as we were when Flagg ascended over US 51, are changed during this moment. We learn again that our generic expectations of the text need to be reevaluated. We must now make room for God. Furthermore, King’s method of narrative revelation is forever altered by this moment. From this point on, good becomes distinguished from Good, just as evil became distinguished from Evil when Flagg took to the air.

Mother Abigail’s transformation, like Flagg’s, is dependent upon our recognizing that there is far more to Mother Abigail than initially met the eye. Because of this, her transformation is secondary to our changing perceptions. King *sets us up* to be surprised by Mother Abigail’s spiritual strength by emphasizing Mother Abigail’s physical weakness prior to her transformation. King leads us to believe that Mother Abigail very well may drop dead from exhaustion before she completes her trip. King suggests this

possibility by continually foregrounding the effects the journey to and from the neighbor's barn is having on Mother Abigail's ancient body. As Mother Abigail's strength diminishes, her chances of survival begin to diminish. In the seconds before the weasels attack, we fear that unless something unexpected – i.e. extra-textual – comes to pass, Mother Abigail will not make it home. We expect Mother Abigail to become a victim of Mother Nature.

The second thing King does to ensure we are surprised is to make it obvious that there are simply too many weasels for Mother Abigail – or anyone else – to stave off. The weasels are an overwhelming force that cannot be overcome by any means currently available to Mother Abigail. However, Mother Abigail survives both the weasels and her trip home. She escapes because of the sudden arrival of an unexpected force: GOD. As Mother Abigail prays, she ceases to be the worn-out old woman with bad knees and is transformed into a powerful instrument of God, capable of expressing His Supreme Will. Had King not emphasized how decrepit Mother Abigail was prior to her divine transformation, her transformation would not have affected us nearly as strongly.

The triumph of Mother Abigail's God over Randal Flagg's weasels puts both Mother Abigail and Flagg into a certain context. What is exposed at this moment is the translucent heart of King's moral order, which has previously been hidden under a veil of absurd supernatural events. Confronted by this new reality, one that eclipses all our preconceived notions of the "real world," we are again impelled to reconsider our generic expectations of the text. God's appearance marks the end of the a-moral "real world" in *The Stand*. Like Gandalf's lecture to Frodo, Mother Abigail's defeat of the weasels articulates a moral paradigm that remains true until the completion of the text. Unlike the

system we find in Tolkien, this is one in which both Good and Evil radiate from specific sources. God is Good and Evil is Flagg. Note that we cannot say that Mother Abigail is Good. At best, we can say that she is good and capable of expressing the will of the Good. She attributes the source of all her supernatural ability to God. Our moral order, then, is somewhat complicated. Good emanates from a specific source, through the actions of good individuals, while Evil appears to be a supernatural power physically confined but not bound by the boundaries of the “real world.” The implications of this theological framework are many, and King does not work them out for us – ever.

Mother Abigail’s confrontation with the weasels introduces a new narrative method for King. This method is driven by our reaction to Mother Abigail’s transformation. Mother Abigail’s transformation forces us to begin to think of King’s “real world” as a playground for two immortal forces. This changes our basic concepts of good and evil. After chapter forty-five, we can no longer think of King’s characters as adventurers in an a-moral world. Their morality becomes a real issue. We begin to think of characters in terms of Good and Evil. At this same moment, King ceases to introduce new plot lines and instead finds ways to connect plotlines that have already been established. His primary method for joining plotlines is to consolidate the good and evil characters, so that they might become agents of his Good and Evil characters. This practice only reaffirms our conceptions of Good and Evil as articulated in chapter forty-five. That is to say, Stu, Fran, Nick and Larry all come together on their journey to Mother Abigail’s house, while characters like Lloyd or Trashcan Man fall in with Randal Flagg. From Mother Abigail’s confrontation with the weasels onwards, the text becomes less sprawling and more concentrated. The narrative becomes galvanized. Like Tolkien,

King understands that the fundamental function of the liminal moment is to galvanize the narrative. Fortunately, King also understood that there is much else that can be done with liminality.

Thus far, I have claimed that both Tolkien and King's styles of liminal management were driven by desires to introduce or reinforce specific theological notions. It would be a mistake to overlook *why* authors want to spell out their moral order in the first place. They do so because they believe that in doing so they will *attract or maintain our attention*. But there are other ways to attract and maintain our attention. In "Hansel and Gretel," our interest was reinvigorated by the surprise of the House of Candy, not by the author's theological revelations or affirmations. King understands the importance of surprise in a narrative, and we find in *The Stand* a liminal moment with no other designs than to surprise us. Like all of King's liminal moments, the emphasis here is on the liminal's effect on us.

In chapter forty-nine, Nick Andross tells the Boulder Free Zone Committee the following:

I had Stan give [Tom] a post-hypnotic suggestion...about five days ago now. The suggestion was that when Stan said, 'I sure would like to see an elephant,' Tom would feel a great urge to go into the corner and stand on his head. Stan sprang it on him about half an hour after he woke Tom up, and Tom hustled right over into the corner and stood on his head. All the toys and marbles fell out of his pants pockets. Then he set down and grinned at us and said, 'Now I wonder why Tom Cullen went and did that?' (712)

The moment is liminal, and it has no other function than to introduce an extra-textual element into the text. Like all of King's liminal moments, the emphasis here is placed on our transformation. Prior to Nick's revelation about Tom, the authorial voice has not made any mention about the scene Nick describes to the Council. That this

information does not appear until this very moment bears scrutiny, for it is surely the case that had King wanted to include this event somewhere in his mammoth narrative, he could have done so. But he didn't. Like the mysterious author of "Hansel and Gretel," King knows that he will get a charge out of us if he postpones introducing certain narrative elements until the moment when we are least likely to anticipate them. Nick's revelation about Tom provides the Council with the one thing they need but do not have: the resources to send a Spy to Las Vegas. The spy is necessary because the Free Zone must collect data on Flagg's clandestine activities if it is going to survive. Nick's revelation that the least likely man in Boulder should be the best suited to carry out this task is surprising. Nick's knowledge of Tom's susceptibility to hypnotism usurps the authority of the both the authorial voice and *our* authority as witnesses to the narrative as it has unfolded up to this point.

It is of no small consequence that this liminal moment is narrated not by the authorial voice, but by a character in the text. No other moment I have examined thus far has come to pass in this way. When the authorial voice narrates a liminal moment, we understand that we are being shown something for some purpose: namely, to prepare us for a subsequent narrative segment. But characters, especially characters in narratives told in the third person, are rarely motivated by such concerns. Certainly, Nick is not. Nick reveals Tom's susceptibility to hypnotism long after the Council has begun debating who should go west. He waits until his peers have exhausted the list of potential spies, and then he surprises them with his own candidate. He need not have done so. It could have been otherwise. Like an authorial voice, Nick reveals his surprise at the moment when it will be the most surprising for *us*. King's innovation is remarkable. He endows a

specific character with a power traditionally attributed only to an authorial voice. For the perceptive reader, the surprise here is twofold. We are surprised by Nick's revelation, and we are surprised by King's employment of Nick to articulate this surprise.

Some might cry foul at my praise for this moment. Some may claim that Gandalf does exactly the same thing when he tells Frodo of the One Ring. But this argument misses the point. When Gandalf tells Frodo of the Ring, we already see Gandalf as an enormously mysterious figure percolating with forbidden knowledge. The history of the One Ring is something that a character like Gandalf *should* know. When Nick speaks at the Council meeting, he is far from mysterious. We have been traveling with him for hundreds of page. More importantly, *we traveled with him during the time in which he claims Tom was hypnotized*. The authorial voice made no mention of this event during the supposed time of its occurrence.

Tom's transformation during this moment is minor, and the new narrative method revealed at this moment, while unique, never makes another appearance in *The Stand*. What we take away from this moment is a sense of surprise generated by King's introduction of a new point of interest. This new point of interest engages us in a way that no narrative element previous to its arrival has. We are surprised by Nick's knowledge of Tom. Our surprise translates into our continued interest in the text. If the least likely man in Boulder truly is the best suited to infiltrate Flagg's desert fortress, we want to see *proof*. Just as Hansel and Gretel are drawn to the House of Candy to test its validity, we are drawn deeper into the narrative to see if Tom will prove to be the spy Nick thinks he will be.

In *The Stand*, King modifies the method of liminal management typified by Tolkien in *The Lord of The Rings*. By emphasizing the liminal's effect on us, King has created a text wherein we can rarely be certain of which natural and supernatural powers will ultimately decide the fate of the work's central characters. King executes liminal moments with no other purpose than to surprise us into a new relationship with the text. Numerous popular authors have copied these moves in their respective genres: Dean Koontz, Robin Cook, as well as John Grisham. It can be our fervent hope that King's imitators understand what King understands so well: King's style of liminal management in *The Stand* could have been different. He could have placed his emphasis elsewhere while attempting to reach his narrative goals. There are many roads to Las Vegas.

Chapter 4

LIMINALITY IN THE **HIS DARK MATERIALS** TRILOGY

The opening line of Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy reads, "Lyra and her daemon moved through the darkening hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen" (1). What's interesting about this line is that it could have read "Lyra and Pantalaimon [the proper name of Lyra's daemon] moved through the darkening hall." As it is written, the line contains a noun, daemon, that is basically meaningless, or, for the purposes of this paper, *invisible*. We do not know what Lyra's daemon is until several paragraphs later when we learn that "[Lyra's] daemon's name was Pantalaimon, and he was currently in the shape of a moth" (1). When we learn that Lyra's daemon has a name, sex, and momentary shape, we begin to develop a conception of what Lyra's daemon *is like*. Prior to the arrival of this information, Lyra's daemon is as mysterious as a "not-boy-not-man." Her daemon is essentially a transparent noun, a jabberwocky.

While we do learn more about this jabberwocky in short order, it is interesting to note that an explication of Lyra's daemon is not an immediate priority for Pullman. After the first line, Pullman runs on for eight more sentences to describe Lyra's current situation and location:

The three great tables that ran the length of the hall were laid already, the silver and the glass catching what little light there was, and the long benches were pulled out ready for the guests. Portraits of former Masters hung high up in the gloom along the walls. Lyra reached the dais and looked back at the open kitchen door. The places here were laid with gold, not silver, and the fourteen seats were not oak benches but mahogany chairs with velvet cushions.

Lyra stopped beside the Master's chair and flicked the biggest glass gently with a fingernail. The sound rang clearly through the hall. (1)

Each of these eight sentences give us a more precise sense of Lyra's immediate surroundings than its predecessor. We start with a brief mention of "great tables," move to a description of how those tables are set, then on to how the seats are arranged around the tables, and then into other details that fill out the image of the dining hall. By the time Lyra flicks the glass, we can not only *see* but also *hear* the place she is standing in.

However, throughout this description, Lyra's daemon remains as invisible as it was at the end of the first sentence.

By the end of the first two paragraphs, we should be aware that Pullman has spent much more time introducing things that do *not* seem strange to us than he has explicating the one thing that is actually *strange*. Why Pullman should write this way is an interesting question. We might agree that the primary accomplishment of these two paragraphs is the establishment of a *particular setting*, upon which the immediate narrative will rest. We might also agree that Pullman constructs his setting quite *quickly*, decorating his hall with a list of images that are *easy* to conceptualize, so easy that they require *zero* elaboration by Pullman for us to envision them. A "great table" is easy enough to imagine, as are the "long benches" and "kitchen door." Pullman can forgo elaboration because he is decorating his hall with a cluster of familiar images. Any reader who has encountered the dining hall of an English college in real life, in a work of literature, or in a film or television show will be able to envision Pullman's hall without difficulty. Because these images are part of a well-known archetypical setting, Pullman does not need to stop and smell the roses for us. He is assuming that we will be able to imagine the smell on our own.

Pullman elaborates as much on those things that are easy for us to envision as he elaborates on the one thing it is impossible for us to envision. The *effect* of this practice is that the invisible and visible appear to have a similar narrative value, which, of course, they don't. The invisible, because its surroundings are so banal, sticks *out*, becomes a mote in our mind's eye, upsetting any sense of stability that we might feel as Pullman describes the "great table" and "long benches." And so, from the first, we are aware of a ruse that Pullman is playing. The authorial voice appears to be ignorant of our ignorance. As readers who recognize and understand the importance of the invisible in narrative, we recognize Pullman's ruse for what it really is: an announcement that we will not, at least for the moment, be given the special insight we need to come to terms with the invisible. We are estranged and anticipate the arrival of a method of narrative revelation that will render the invisible visible.

But let's return to that first sentence for a moment, because the first clause holds secrets indicative of Pullman's general narrative technique, which we must understand if we are to appreciate his style of liminal management. Lyra, unlike her daemon, emerges from this first clause with two definitive characteristics; she is no jabberwocky. The third word in the first clause, "her," defines the sex of Lyra. Because she is a *she*, Lyra is not totally beyond the scope of our mind's eye as she walks down the darkling hall. That Lyra's sex is definite is very important, not because it tells us a great deal about who and what Lyra is, but because it tells us exactly what she is not: male. For those who would argue that knowing Lyra's sex is of little consequence, consider how our original conception of Lyra's daemon would be different if we knew *its* sex. True, such knowledge would tell us very little about the daemon that would be useful, but it would

provide us with some notion of what the daemon might be like. To put it another way, *it would allow us to access our preconceived notions of what it means to be female.*

Regardless of whether or not these notions are correct, it would provide a point of reference from which we could judge the daemon. Most methods of narrative revelation are simply techniques that allow us to access our preconceived notions and project them into the world of the text.

The second and no less important fact we learn about Lyra in the first clause is that she is a possessor. That Lyra possesses something beyond the scope of our mind's eye is of great import. Because what she possesses is strange, we become hyper-aware of her relationship with the daemon in a way we would not if Lyra were the possessor of something as pedestrian as, say, a dog. If "Lyra and Lyra's dog moved through the darkening hall," we would not *question* the importance of Lyra's possession. Because Lyra is the possessor of a mysterious subject, any preconceived notions we bring to the text cannot adequately summarize *her*. Her status as a possessor of a daemon marks her as different from *any* possessors we can conceive of. And so Lyra emerges from the first clause as a visible character with ties to the invisible realm. Lyra's relationship with her daemon typifies the basic relationship in Pullman between the visible and the invisible: our awareness of the invisible is always dependent upon our awareness of a visible subject. The two can share a relationship, *but they are never the same thing*. As we shall see, this disjunction has profound implications for the role of liminality in Pullman.

There are many degrees of visibility in Pullman, and these degrees form the foundation of Pullman's project. Randomly flipping through the first book of Pullman's trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, I put my finger on this passage:

Endless streets of little identical brick houses, with gardens only big enough for a dustbin; great gaunt factories behind wire fences, with one anbaric light glowing bleakly high up on a wall, and a night watchman snoozing by his brazier; occasionally a dismal oratory, only distinguished from a warehouse by the crucifix outside. Once [Lyra] tried the door of one of these places, only to hear a groan from the bench a foot away in the darkness. (101)

Anyone who has read anything by Charles Dickens or George Orwell will have little difficulty envisioning the “identical black houses, with gardens only big enough for a dustbin.” Yet the same reader will balk and be slightly confused by the phrase “occasionally a dismal oratory.” A dismal oratory would fit better in a medieval landscape than it does in this Dickensian/Orwellian landscape. What’s important here is that the “oratory” does not impede our reading. Rather, it adds an air of mystery to the landscape. What cultural modifications would be needed for medieval oratories to be “occasionally” seen along the streets of London? The answer not only escapes us, it is invisible to us. Neither the authorial voice nor Lyra drops any hints for us so that we might be able to see why these oratories are here.

While we may not know what Lyra is seeing when she notices a “dismal oratory,” we can, thanks to the adjective “dismal” and to the medieval Catholic association of the word itself, imagine the “oratory” with something like the exactitude with which we see the “identical black houses.” But when we are told of the “anbaric light glowing bleakly,” an opaque spot develops in our vision. The mention of an anbaric light in this passage is not the first mention of an anbaric light in *The Golden Compass*. However, prior to this moment, Pullman has not conveyed a sense to the reader of what an anbaric light actually is. Like Lyra’s daemon, the anbaric light is essentially an invisible object, set against visible objects as if it were the same. Lacking any authorial commentary to clarify what

an anbaric light is, we can choose to infer that the anbaric light is any number of things: from the ho-hum electric lights of our world, to fantastic *anythings*. However, what we are not free to do is imagine what an anbaric light is with any exactitude. Our awareness of the anbaric light's strangeness curtails our imaginative freedom, because we know that whatever we choose to imagine the light as, there is a very good possibility that we will be getting it wrong. Pullman's style, then, can be said not only to make us aware of our separation from the invisible, but also to usurp our ability to project accurate conceptions into his invisible spaces. Liminality is central to this process. Indeed, *our willingness to accept the failure of our own imagination and celebrate Pullman's imagination is the primary form that liminality takes in the trilogy*. This practice makes us anticipate all the more eagerly the arrival of a method of narrative revelation that will summon into being the invisible. Here we must note, as we have at numerous points in these chapters, that Pullman could have found alternative methods to make us eager for particular narrative methods by placing emphasis on the other effects liminality can have on a text. *The text need not have been constructed as it was*. If we are to understand why Pullman employed this particular method to accomplish this particular task, we must first consider his theological assumptions.

Pullman's theological assumptions are different from those we encounter in Tolkien and King. The romantic poetry of Keats, Shelley, and Blake can be found throughout the text, often serving as epigraphs at chapter openings. And the philosophy espoused in the trilogy is what we might call the philosophy of a Modern Secular Humanist. One does not need to read far to understand that very little in Pullman's universe is concrete. Everything has a fluid quality. No sooner is one absolute established

for us than it gives way under Pullman's relentless imagination to something (apparently) better. What results from this practice is our perpetual estrangement from the text. There is no well defined Middle Earth or "real world" for us to stand upon to judge all that comes to pass. There is only the wonder of any given moment, against which we judge the wonder of any subsequent moment. As a result, Pullman continually has to outdo himself to retain our attention and interest. Fortunately, Pullman is almost always up to the task.

By separating the invisible from the visible, Pullman affords himself an imaginative freedom not found in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Stand*. He uses this freedom almost exclusively to emphasize the effect liminality has on narrative method. If anything, Tolkien and King sought to de-emphasize this effect. For example, a glance at Tolkien suggests that the Oxford Don was unwilling or uninterested in trusting his readers to accept the vast strangeness of Middle Earth without guidance. In Tolkien, the visible is always commenting on and describing the invisible, in effect rendering it visible: nothing remains invisible for long, so we do not anticipate the arrival of a narrative method that will make the invisible visible. The authorial voice goes to great lengths to steel us against impending strangeness. Even before Tolkien gets his epic off the ground, he confronts us with a large, somewhat clunky prolog entitled "On Hobbits" in which he details all that even the most unimaginative reader would need in preparation for *The Lord of The Ring's* early chapters. And note how often this story is marked with long lectures, preparing the reader for what is to come *next*. Tolkien did not have to write this way, but he chose to. The result of his technique is a text that does all but tell you what is going to happen before it comes to pass. The invisible is prepackaged for you,

delivered at critical junctures, and serves as fuel to rocket you from narrative segment to narrative segment.

Liminal moments appear to occur in Pullman, but we are always in the position of watching them happen: never do they happen to “us.” Because we are never part of the liminal moment, we can only suspect its existence; we can never know a liminal moment in Pullman as we know a liminal moment in Tolkien and King. For example, during the most powerful liminal moment in *The Golden Compass*, we are forced into the role of spectator, not participant. In the chapter entitled “The Bridge To The Stars,” Lord Asriel murders the child Roger. Lyra attempts to save her friend, but fails:

[Lyra] pulled hard, and then they tore away from Lord Asriel and ran, hand in hand, but Roger cried and twisted, because his daemon was caught again, held fast in the snow leopard’s jaws, and Lord Asriel himself was reaching down, toward [Roger’s daemon] with a wire; and Lyra knew the heart-convulsing pain of separation, and tried to stop –
But they couldn’t stop...
[Roger’s] body suddenly went limp in hers. (393)

Two characters appear to be undergoing real change here, though we can only be certain that *one* character actually is. Roger, of course, is dying: there can be no doubt he is changing. And Lord Asriel *might* be changing. He appears to be becoming a murderer of children, but it is also possible that he may already be a murderer of children and that Roger is simply his most recent victim. We do not know for certain. Lord Asriel “appears” to be changing. This “change” is happening in our *eyes*, and our eyes are linked to *Lyra*, not Lord Asriel. We are *one* step removed from the liminal event.

In the trilogy, we are perpetually one step removed from liminal moments. As a result, we can never be certain that what appears to be a liminal transformation actually is a liminal transformation. Because we can never be sure of this, it is always unclear if

what we are witnessing is a definite movement towards Good or Evil for any the character that appears to be transforming. This method of storytelling disregards one of the basic precepts that many works of fantasy have been based upon since Tolkien wrote *The Lord of The Rings*, namely, that Good and Evil *be recognizable qualities embodied in all characters*. For Pullman, Good and Evil are always relative terms. No one “is” just to be Evil. And no one “is” just to be Good. And no one “is” simply to be a battleground between Good and Evil. Pullman’s characters “are” the way they are so we might wonder about their moral conditions, and not so that we might know their moral conditions. Pullman’s segregation of the visible and invisible realms makes us anticipate narrative moments that will not only call invisible subjects into being, but will also function as a moral compass, so that we might know the theological value of the actions committed by certain characters. Pullman, of course, never provides this compass, but its absence does not discourage our reading. On the contrary, it is because we anticipate its arrival so strongly that we *read on*.

By segregating the visible and invisible, Pullman not only withholds direct access to Good and Evil from us, but he also avoids building in any way upon the Christian heritage that has become central to the fantasy novel. Pullman’s Church is a worldly organization, despotic and malicious. We cannot turn to it for solace. Nor can we turn to the immortal realms, which always seems to be more interested in destroying Pullman’s primary characters than helping them. The trilogy can be read as an attempt to find an imaginative alternative to the modern Christian worldview. Pullman seeks a solution by abandoning any and all precepts that have to do with absolute morality and, instead, placing at the center of his trilogy the process of maturation, which is not dependent upon

morality as much as it is on an individual's burgeoning awareness of the complexities of the world.

However, an understanding of the reason for and results of Pullman's segregating of the visible and invisible realms does not answer what is perhaps the most important question we might have about the trilogy. How did Pullman manage to diffuse liminality into all the operations of his text? Pullman accomplished this feat with a cast of rock-solid, static personalities that serve as our frames of reference. When we look through the eyes of Lyra, Will, or Iorek Byrsonson, we never experience the liminal: we only see it.

These characters do not undergo real change when we are riding along with them.

Whereas in more traditional narratives *liminal moments* fulfill the threefold effect needed to join two narrative sequences together, in Pullman it is *static personalities* that hold the narrative segments together. These static personalities promise the one thing a narrative segment permeated with liminality cannot: consistency. No matter how wild Pullman's universe becomes, we know that should it escape the understanding of any of our point of view characters, a moment of insight will come to pass so that our point of view characters might reevaluate *their* relationship with the universe. Upon gaining their insight, our point of view characters will render not only the invisible visible for themselves but also for us.

That these personalities should remain static (visible) is important. Should Lyra undergo real change while operating as our frame of reference, then the authorial voice would be forced to pick up some of the narrative slack that such transformations always generate. The authorial voice would have to describe the experience to us in ways that Lyra, for obvious reasons, could not. This strategy would, as we see in Tolkien, result in

the authorial voice taking on an authority that would place it “above” Lyra: it would become the mediator of the invisible and visible realms. For Pullman, a humanist, this development would have proved a disaster for his project.

Pullman’s desire to employ his static characters as his essential method of drawing our eyes to the invisible explains why the Battle for Heaven in the third book of the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, is so very disappointing. By the time the battle arrives, we have been teased for hundreds of pages with scenes of *weirdness percolating*, magical forces marshalling for what very well might be a successful overthrow of the Kingdom of God. We anticipate that Pullman might be able to write the scene Milton could not. But when the battle finally begins, we are neither shocked nor awed by the fighting. While the battle is raging, we are tied to Lyra and Will, who only stumble around the periphery of the battlefield. They always seem to be looking in the direction where the least amount of interesting activity is taking place. Pullman is very aware – perhaps too aware in this instance – that he has to keep his readers grounded to the adventures of Lyra and Will, lest he lose us to what I will call *weird fatigue*. It is for this reason that we are thrust so closely to Lyra and Will during the Battle for Heaven. Pullman believes that by doing this he can simultaneously move the story forward and still manage to interject instances of wonder. Unfortunately, Pullman underestimates our interest in the battle itself, and does not anticipate that we might resent having to stumble around with Lyra and Will. The effect is similar to that of going to Disneyland with your grandparents: things never seem to be moving fast enough. If there is one great failure in this trilogy, the Battle for Heaven sequence is it. If it had been done correctly, Pullman’s perpetual place in our bookstores would have been assured.

However, Pullman rarely makes such a blunder. Good examples of how Pullman manages to strike a balance between the invisible and the visible can be found in the Ci'gazze sequences. Every time Lyra wanders into Ci'gazze, it becomes more and more dangerous – more and more strange. This is because every one of Lyra's visits covers new ground, reveals more than the previous trip. The city becomes a place of strange danger from unknown sources. Initially, the city itself is a mystery, and then its emptiness becomes a mystery, and then the specters that depopulated it, and then the tower where the subtle knife is being kept. If Pullman stepped in at any point and told us what was important about the city, we would have been robbed of the suspense each foray into the haunted city generates. We don't mind learning about the city bit by bit, because we do not know what its purpose in the narrative will be. The opposite is true during the Battle for Heaven sequence. We know that exactly only one of two things can come of the Battle for Heaven. Lord Asriel can win, or Lord Asriel can lose. As we anticipate both of these outcomes, we feel robbed when we are not allowed to watch the sequence unfold. But in Ci'gazze, we simply do not know what is going to happen. Had Pullman told us, we would have lost the sense that much of the Ci'gazze was beyond our ability to comprehend. Instead of being a haunted city, it would have become a ho-hum city. Visibility erodes any object or event's capacity to generate suspense.

Pullman's static characters do undergo real change, but they never function as our frames of reference when they are undergoing real change. An excellent example of this practice can be observed near the end of the final book in the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*. Lyra and Will walk off, hand-in-hand, to "grow up." At that moment, we are relocated into Mary Malone's mind. And we stay there until, several passages later, Lyra

and Will return. We learn of Lyra and Will's transformation not via first hand experience (which, admittedly, would be gross), but from a character that, for the moment, is static. Throughout the trilogy, this narrative style allows Pullman the freedom to stage wild transformations and put on display spectacular confrontations without alienating the reader from a sense of relative security.

In the *His Dark Materials* Trilogy, Phillip Pullman emphasizes the effect of the liminal on narrative method. By drawing our eye to the gulf that separates the visible and invisible realms, Pullman leads us to anticipate narrative moments that will render the invisible visible. This practice excels at sustaining our interest in the text. Pullman manages our interest in the invisible by providing us with static frames of reference. These frames of reference enjoy a relationship with the invisible but are not themselves invisible. Like both King and Tolkien, Pullman's practice is quantifiable, and, as such, we can say that it could, at any time, have been something other than what it is. The murder of Roger could have been recounted in another way, as could the Battle for Heaven or any of the Ci'gazze sequences. Central to an alternative version of any of these moments would be a different management of the liminal, one that would place more emphasis on a different effect of the liminal.

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