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Eastern Kentucky University

The Creation of Nona: A Look at Fantasy Literature, Real Life Trauma, and World-Building

Honors Thesis

Submitted

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By

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Mentor

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The Creation of Nona: A Look at Fantasy Literature, Real Life Trauma, and World-Building

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My Honors Thesis Project looks at the relationship between fantasy literature, real life trauma, and world-building. The scholarly portion of my thesis includes research that looks at the relationship through both literary and psychological perspectives. This research included looking at the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, as well as fantasy games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and how they both relate or have been used to cope with trauma. The works of Cathy Caruth and Bruno Bettelheim are used to look at the relationship from a psychological perspective with the introduction of trauma theory and its ties to literature. My project also looks at how this all relates to mine and my friends' own traumatic experience and how I have used fantasy literature to help deal with said experiences by creating a fantasy world and narrative of my own called Nona. On top of all of this, my Honors Project also includes a compendium to the fantasy world I have created called "The Traveler's Guide to Nona". This compendium acts as the creative project side of my Honors Thesis Project, and includes looking at some of the basic aspects of world-building, including the history of the world, its theology, races, and cultures.

Throughout the twentieth century, an endless amount of advances were made in many different fields of study, along with many new areas of study being formed. Two such fields were modern psychology and modern fantasy literature. At first, one could not be blamed for thinking these two subjects have no real relation. However, as I found out as I started to research the subject of world building in order to create my own work of fantasy literature, there is a major relation between modern psychology and modern fantasy literature when it comes to the issue of coping with trauma. This can be seen with the one of the most influential modern fantasy writers, J.R.R Tolkien, and some of his works and inspirations for the fantasy world of Middle Earth. Works like those of Tolkien led to the creation of tabletop fantasy Role Playing Games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*. In these games, players take the role of heroes in fantasy settings and go on adventures together. In recent years, a relationship has formed between games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and therapeutic methods that use these game to help people deal with trauma. This relation is also very essential to my current work of fantasy literature and the world it takes place in, Nona. The inspiration to create this world came from me using *Dungeons & Dragons* to help deal with a traumatic event that occurred to me and my friends, which dealt with someone we considered a dear friend betraying our trust and hurting one of my best friends.

Before I go into these different subjects in closer detail, we must look at the origins of the relation between psychological trauma and literature alone. The concept of trauma is nothing new, with the word itself originating in Ancient Greece with the meaning of “wound”. However the modern meaning of trauma is one used mainly in the psychological field. It was famous psychologist Sigmund Freud who helped create the idea of trauma theory, even though it would not be fully looked at until later in the twentieth century.

Trauma Theory is the idea that a traumatic event can have great effects on a person. These effects tend to affect a person on a psychological level, with a focus on memory. There are cases where a person is forced to relive a traumatic event through flashbacks, which is common in those suffering from PTSD. Another common way a traumatic event may affect one's memory, according to trauma theory, is that one may block out and forget the memories they have of the traumatic experience. Trauma theory that has been shown great interest in not only the psychological field, but also in literary studies. A famous studier and writer of trauma theory's implications to both fields is Cathy Caruth, whose book, "Unclaimed Experience" was one of the first to look at the implications trauma theory held.

In the introduction of the book, Caruth looks at one of Freud's works, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In it, Freud references a story by Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, that he claims exemplifies the idea of trauma. In the romantic epic, the hero of the story, Tancred, accidentally kills his lover in a duel where she is disguised as an enemy knight. Shortly after the burial of his love, the hero runs into a magical forest where he cuts at a tree with his sword. The tree ends up bleeding while the voice of the hero's lover cries out asking the hero why he struck her again. Both Freud and Caruth dive into different meanings that aspects of the story may have in accordance with different aspects of dealing with trauma. However Caruth goes on to say that Freud could have turned to literature to describe traumatic experiences because, "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the relation between knowing and not knowing." (Caruth 3). It is also important to note that both Freud and Caruth looked at an example of medieval romantic literature, which is a precursor to modern fantasy literature. So already here is a tie to the relations between modern fantasy literature and trauma theory.

In a later chapter, Caruth then looks at another work of literature in the form of a French movie, *Hiroshima mon amour*. The film centers around a French woman who lost her lover, a German soldier, in WWII, and a Japanese man she meets in Hiroshima. Their “passionate encounter” is what shapes the rest of the narrative. However one thing that Caruth focuses on is how the two characters, who have both had traumatic experiences, are not able to truly know each other’s stories, but are able to understand them through the similarities of the trauma they have experienced. It is the relation between the sharing and understanding of the stories, both told and untold, that Caruth sees as important in order to help deal with trauma. This is something I also see as important, which is what led me to actually write down the story that would develop into Nona. I believe, like Caruth, that by sharing the story inspired by the traumatic event my friends and I dealt with it will not only help me, but even those going through traumatic experiences similar to my own.

Another point that must be covered is how some of the essential aspects of fantasy literature helps deal with trauma. Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim really looked into this in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. In one section of his book, Bettelheim talks about how a child can use fairy tales to help them construct order out of chaos while they are in the developmental years of their lives. They can do this by, “isolating and separating the disparate and confusing aspects of the child’s experience into opposites and projecting them onto individuals.” (Bettelheim 75). In reference to fairy tales, Bettelheim says this is shown by how characters in fairy tales tend to be one dimensional. An animal is either friendly, or it is a deadly enemy. As far as this goes for adults, Bettelheim claims that not even Freud could find out a better way to construct order in our inner minds, and so he came up with the individuals of id, ego, and superego. Bettelheim actually claims that something

we have lost in the transition from the idea of fairy tales to Freud's idea is that no matter what it is, fictional character or one of Freud's inner mind individuals, it is still a fiction. So there is even ground to state that to be able to confront the chaos of one's inner thoughts would be better done in a fictional world, through building a narrative and a world around said chaos, than with Freud's technique due to the fact that you can separate the real from the fake far easier in a fairy tale.

Bettelheim also references Tolkien, and what Tolkien considered necessary facets of fairy tales, fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. According to Bettelheim, Tolkien put a stress on consolation; a fairy tale needed a happy ending. This consolation can give a, "child or man that hears it... a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to tears." (Bettelheim pg. 143). This is another major part of why platforms of a fantasy nature are helping for coping, they can simply be a pick-me-up. Something to give a struggling person a break in order to help them continue. Another is that it allows a platform for the person to confront some of the aspects of trauma, as it did for me, without any real life consequences. For me there is also the fact, as Tolkien said, that all fairy tales need a happy ending. As I will go into more detail later with, this played a huge role in my actual decision to make a fantasy world.

When I started doing research into different authors to look at when it comes to the idea of world building, the first author I turned to was J.R.R. Tolkien, the creator of The Lord of The Rings trilogy. This is because very few fantasy worlds are as developed as Tolkien's Middle Earth. This could be due to the fact Tolkien came up with the stories and ideas that would shape Middle Earth as either stories for his children, or as therapeutic writings for himself. It was only after the encouragement from his friends and colleagues that he would decide to publish some of his works. As I was researching his writing style and inspirations, I came across multiple article

that discussed how real life trauma helped inspire much of what Tolkien created. This is actually what made me consider looking into the relationship between literature and trauma, with a focus on fantasy literature. I found the articles and the idea of fantasy literature being tied to real life trauma both very interesting and very important to the world I was making.

The first article I found incredibly insightful was John Rosegrant's, "From the Ineluctable Wave to the Realization of Imagined Wonder: Tolkien's Transformation of Psychic Pain into Art.". This article takes a look at an important event that occurs in the history of Tolkien's Middle Earth, The Downfall of Numenor, and how by writing it Tolkien was able to overcome an issue that had bothered him since he was a child. This event was a giant flood called on by the most powerful being of Tolkien's mythology that wiped out the vast island of Numenor and all of its inhabitants, except for a few who escaped on ships. The article then looks at different inspirations that occurred in Tolkien's life that he even admitted helped inspire him writing about this fictional event in many different writings. Tolkien admitted since he was a child he would have nightmares about a flood destroying everything he knows. It was a recurring nightmare that plagued him for most of his life. However, he wrote that after he had written the Downfall of Numenor, the nightmares occurred far less frequently. Simply the writing of this fantasy event served as a kind of catharsis for Tolkien with an issue that had plagued him for most his life. Rosegrant's article does go on to speculate what caused these nightmares in the first place, but due to Tolkien's very closed nature, there are many things most who study him will never know for certain.

Although Rosegrant provides insights into how Tolkien's fantasy stories helped him deal with real life issues, some may argue that one example alone cannot make a connection between trauma and fantasy literature. To see how other writings of Tolkien's were inspired by

undeniable traumas of his life, I looked at Nancy Bunting's, "1904: Tolkien, Trauma, and Its Anniversaries." In this article, Bunting looks at some of the horrible events of Tolkien's childhood, mainly his mother's early death, and how even the anniversary of this event tended to cause shifts in Tolkien's works. Many of the works she references were made before Tolkien made the world of Middle Earth, but they were written on the 10th and 20th anniversary years of his mother's death. She, along with many other scholars, infer that the somber shift in tone and subject many of Tolkien's works that were made on these years have are due to the anniversary of his mother's death. This is an event Tolkien did not like to talk much about publicly, so yet again most of this is speculation, but very well sourced speculation.

Even some of those who do not study Tolkien or his works know that he was a soldier in World War One who served in the trenches. This has led many to draw similarities and inferences from his experiences of war and events or themes in Middle Earth and its creation. A movie was even made recently about this very subject. Though Tolkien himself would, again, tend to remain private about most of this, this never stopped scholars from trying. Something that is a bit more obvious though is the impact the second World War had on Tolkien's Middle Earth. He wrote much of Frodo and Sam's journey through Mordor while his own sons were in the trenches against the Nazis and was known to send manuscripts of these chapters to one of the sons, Christopher. This is talked about in Jerome Donnelly's article, "Nazis in the Shire: Tolkien and Satire." Along with this, the article focuses mainly on how the event of the Occupation of the Shire in the Lord of the Rings books is very similar to Nazi occupation throughout most of Europe. This ranges from how it starts, to how people/hobbits acted as both occupations went on, to the building of what can easily be described as concentration camps in the Shire itself. Another major point within this event is the issues of complicity and responsibility of those

involved in the event. This is an issue that relates straight to my project, which also deals with the issues of how my friends and I feel responsible in a way for allowing someone who we thought was our friend to get close enough to us in order to betray and hurt us.

Many have taken to call the Occupation of the Shire a satire of Nazi occupation, although Tolkien said he was not aiming for any type of satire in Middle Earth. However, as Donnelly points out, some of the similarities between the two are too similar to be coincidence. Donnelly assumes that Tolkien used his works, like many European writers at the time, to help express/deal with the horrible events that were going on around them.

Through these three articles, it becomes very obvious that Tolkien was greatly inspired by not only real life tragedies in his own life, but in the world around him. It also helps show how writing about some of these events helped Tolkien deal with these events in his own way. This is all very important to the world I am trying to create due to the fact, as I said earlier, that a lot of its inspirations come from a traumatic event a few close friends and I had to deal with.

The next major example I have to talk about deals with the Tabletop RPG known as *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game that came out in 1974 where players take the role of different fantasy characters they have designed and play through different adventures that the person known as the Dungeon Master creates and controls. While there have been many controversies over the game and its implications over the years, it has only become more and more popular over time, with groups like Critical Role helping bring about another upspring in its popularity. In Ryan Vu's article, "Fantasy After Representation: D&D, Game of Thrones, and Postmodern World-Building", he argues about many of the positives that games like *Dungeons & Dragons* have added to not only the fantasy genre, but the modern world as a whole. He talks about, like many others have, how these types of games demand participations

and representation from the players. However, he goes beyond this even, saying, “ that RPGs not only provide a forum for fans to inhabit their favorite fictions while strengthening community identity, but that they also provide an unprecedented set of tools for analyzing their genres, by teaching their players how to reproduce genre fiction with themselves at the center.” (Vu 281). He also later argues how it is also these games that, “are an important key to understanding fantastic genre’s embrace of “world-building” over the course of the twentieth century.” (Vu 287). Both the topics of representation and world-building lend themselves to the reasons why *Dungeons & Dragons* has been used for different therapeutic processes.

Multiple different groups and projects that use *Dungeons & Dragons* in group therapy sessions to either help volunteers deal with personal anxiety and other social issues. Even my Alma Mater of Eastern Kentucky University’s Counseling Center runs a group game of D&D to help students with these problems. The game has also be used to help teach or communicate those with learning disabilities. It has even been used in more extreme cases, like the one talked about in the article, “Dungeons and Dragons: the use of a fantasy game in the psychotherapeutic treatment of a young adult”. This case study deals with how D&D was used to help a young mentally ill man who had made multiple suicide attempts. According to the study, “the therapy was modified to use the game material as displaced, waking fantasy. This fantasy was used as a safe guide to help the patient learn to acknowledge and express his inner self in a safe and guided way.”. So, there is plenty of examples out there of how games like *Dungeons & Dragons* have been used to help deal with psychological issues.

It is here, though, that I shall start to talk more about my project of Nona in more detail. As mentioned earlier, my whole project started as a way for me to help cope with a traumatic event that occurred to my friends and me. Someone who we considered a dear friend for a couple

years betrayed our trust and sexually assaulted one of my best friends. This occurred in the Fall of 2019. About a month after the event had occurred, with it still very much being fresh in my mind, I decided that I needed a way for myself to be able to personally deal with and process what had happened and could continue to happen. I decided to make a campaign for myself in the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* that featured characters and events based around me, my friends, and the events we had gone through. I chose this format for two reasons. The first is that this game was one of the main ways that my friends and I hung out and had fun together. The second is something that I touched on earlier. One of the main aspects of fairy tales is that they have a happy ending. I needed this to be true for my coping method. I needed to be able to not only believe that everything would end for the better in some way, but also be able to see how the people based off us would achieve this happy ending to see what I could gain from this coping method. When I had made this personal little narrative for myself, however, I saw the possibility for a full fantasy story. So that is what I set off doing.

As I was making the world, Nona, it was not enough for only my characters' stories to deal with trauma. Instead, it was going to be a central theme around my work. This can be seen from the creation of Nona itself. In order to create the world, the 12 gods of the world, known as the Forgers, all sacrificed a part of themselves, thus limiting their powers, in an event known as the Great Sacrifice. I modeled the nature of the Forgers to be similar to that of the Ancient Greek pantheon. This is not only because I am a fan of Greek mythology, but also because in that mythology, the gods tended to be imperfect beings. They made mistakes and often did things less than morally good. All in all, this allows for even the most powerful beings in the universe I created to be able to have flaws and then have to deal with them. Another major event in the history of Nona is an event called the Wilder Crisis. In this event, a wizard accidentally wounds

the actual fabrics of the realms that make my fictional universe. This event causes a century long war that sees mankind conquer all of Nona, nearly wiping out some of the other major fantasy races to the edge of extinction. As for the core narrative itself, it centers around Landen, a young knight who is tasked with recruiting a group of adventurers known as the Nobles of Nona to help him reclaim his city, which has been taken over by a rogue army. The issue is that the Nobles had all gone their separate way after a member of the group betrayed them all, leaving the group broken. The characters who make up the Nobles of Nona are the ones who I designed off of my friends and I. The main challenge for these characters, like it was for those of us who the characters are designed off of, is to not only come to terms with the traumatic event that transpired, but to also learn how to continue to work together and do what is needed from them. When you combine all of these factors together, it is easy to see the main theme behind my project being not only the issue of trauma, but also looking at how said trauma can change a person, or even the whole world.

Looking more specifically at the world building aspect of my project in material form, we yet again have to go back to *Dungeons & Dragons*. This is because the other half of my thesis project, the compendium that goes along with my world, it designed off of the handbooks that come with *Dungeons & Dragons*. These books are designed and used to introduce the players to different aspects of the game itself, and gives the Dungeon Master the tools necessary to build their own adventure. To be more specific, the D&D handbook I looked at for inspiration was mainly the manual for “The Worlds of Greyhawk”. While my compendium, “The Traveler’s Guide to Nona”, might not be of the same quality, the very simple DIY nature of my book adds to the idea that is center to the heart of modern fantasy literature and games. It is the appeal that you don’t have to be anyone special to create these worlds and projects, anyone can do it. This

has always been the appeal of games like *Dungeons & Dragons* to me, it is meant for anyone and everyone. So, it is vital to me that I keep that same feeling as I am working on my literary work. While it started out as a simple coping mechanism for me, it is evolving for a story that anyone can relate to in one way or another. It is the story of a group of friends overcoming a great challenge and trying to come out the other side stronger.

In conclusion, while it may not seem it, there is a strong relation between fantasy literature and world building and the issue of real life trauma. It is a relation center not only to the story I am creating the world it takes place in, but also to some of the biggest staples of modern fantasy literature like the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Role Playing Games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. This is a relation that has been, and can be continued to be used to help those who have lived through traumatic experiences deal with it, as it has for me.

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