

Thematic Divergence in John Crowley's *Little, Big* in Respect to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle*, and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

A running theme in *Little, Big*, very much evidenced by the novel's title, is the dichotomy between opposites. Obviously, there is the little-big dichotomy; then there is the young-old dichotomy, the destiny-autonomy dichotomy, and several others. Ultimately, nothing is what it seems (and sometimes what seems to be either one thing or another can be both). For a fantasy novel, particularly one subtitled *The Fairy's Parliament*, *Little, Big* has little to do with fairies for a good portion of its narrative. Fantasy conventions aren't abandoned completely though. They are spread threadbare across the pages of the narrative, interjecting themselves unsteadily such that the novel straddles the line between realistic fiction and fantasy fiction, more magical realism than fantasy proper.

Little, Big relishes in its vagueness, its uncertainty. The multigenerational tale of the Drinkwater clan and their associates tells of wizardry both apparent and subtle. The fantastical often clouds itself amidst the overbearing simplicity of it all. Throughout the course of his tale (and *The Tale* itself), Crowley weaves the fantastic elements intricately throughout an otherwise mundane legacy – the day to day activities of the Drinkwater family. The back cover of the Harper Perennial print edition sells the tale as “the epic story of Smoky Barnable,” but the breadth of the tale far exceeds the goings-on of one man. The quest here extends throughout every member of the family, be they legitimate or illegitimate.

The philosophy of *Little, Big* may function as an analysis of itself. A much larger, more intricate, and more expansive element of supernatural, though hidden between lines of ambiguous – and often seemingly arbitrary – prose distinguishes itself from the flamboyance a casual reader of fantasy works might expect from the genre (i.e. the flamboyance / as a reader expected), and even a prolific reader of the various sub-genres might be easily lost amidst the subtleties of Crowley's world. Certainly, the taste for such a tale requires a painful acquisition, but attaining a palate refined enough to piece apart and back together the various pieces presents a reward in itself. That reward is the sense of discovery; like

Smoky (and even the larger Drinkwater clan, albeit to much lesser degree), the reader exists somewhere separate from the world of Fairy and though this seems counter-intuitive, immersion within the work depends on this separation. This formulation might best be described as an *existential portal fantasy* wherein the reader is transported into the world of the novel and forced to accept, for better or worse, the vaguely defined rules. Should they, the reader, reach the end of this journey, what awaits isn't enlightenment, but a curious death, like Smoky's, because the rules governing the world of Fairy remain just out of reach, protected perhaps, by the one physical rule understood by the novel's conclusion: Fairies will always exist in one realm detached from those who follow them, and they'll take their secrets with them. There is no uncovering of those secrets, only the eternal quest towards them.

THROUGH THE PORTAL

Initially, the style of storytelling Crowley employs appears to be the practice of malicious negligence. His lore is obscure even to the denizens of his creation. Five generations of Drinkwaters, despite all their greatest efforts, are wholly incapable of drawing any concrete conclusion regarding the world they inhabit. In this, *Little, Big* exists as antithesis to a sprawling fantasy like *Lord of the Rings* where Tolkein oftentimes sacrifices natural pacing for the sake of exemplifying the peculiarities of his world via a detailed history captured in the songs of Middle-earth's people. The Ents, sentient trees in *LotR*, grant unto their company the details of their history whereas the many talking animals in *Little, Big* (Grandfather Trout, Meadow Mouse, the stork) speak simply because they can without further explanation for this peculiarity except that these creatures may or may not have direct connection to Fairy. Fairies being creatures of immeasurable complexity and infinite secrets, there's no evidence against which to test the plausibility of talking animals or men who may converse with these animals. These two texts are set apart by this mode of operation, *LotR* operating with the creed that all functions of the world must be revealed, and *Little, Big* with the creed that basking in mystery is more fantastic than the understanding of its world. In this sense, *Little, Big* is equally dissimilar to *His Dark Materials*

which progressively reveals more about the world(s) until its conclusion when all is revealed. *Little, Big* is not alone in the mode of its operation though, at least not entirely. Ursula le Guin writes that “the arguments of mages are many” and refuses throughout all of *A Wizard of Earthsea* to grant a concrete answer as to the identity of the shadow, or Gebbeth or darkness, that plagues Ged throughout the first tale; and although dragons have central importance to the world and narrative, it’s not until the final act of *The Other Wind* that a true sense of their place in the world arises, and even then, the conceptualization of where and what the other wind is remains mysterious. This despite, her characters retain confidence regarding the issues they discuss and refuse to issue forth proclamations they are unsure of. At a particular junction in *Little, Big*, Nora Cloud, the oldest and wisest of all the modern Drinkwaters, revealed a metaphorical interpretation of the modified Tarot to Sophie but “Sophie asked her what she meant by that, and Cloud said she wasn’t at all sure.” This is only one instance of many when characters are guided solely by a mixture of intuition and uncertainty.

Partially because the world unfolds before both the reader and the novel’s characters as a series of certain uncertainties (none of the Drinkwaters find themselves strongly bothered by the idea of not knowing and even seem content at times with not having all the answers despite how critical the questions are), the novel progresses, ironically, with a sense of stagnation. The promised “epic story of Smoky Barnable” falls into a snare of listlessness. The many events determined in the Tarot seem never to come, or never to matter, and the greater meaning behind these smaller events – more critically, the *sense* that there even *is* a greater meaning – dwindles seemingly to naught. Where *LotR*, *Earthsea*, and *HDM* treat readers to sprawling journeys against perilous odds and creatures, *Little, Big* sees them trapped in the expanse of Edgewood. “Epic” as a descriptive term in fantasy carries with it certain connotations unfulfilled in Crowley’s stories, not in the traditional sense.

THE JOURNEYLESS QUEST

Therein lies the first aspect of fantasy which *Little, Big* subverts in relation to the other works we've read. *Lord of the Rings*, *The Earthsea Cycle*, and *His Dark Materials* all contain plots centered on the completion of one quest or another, or a series of quests. Sam and Frodo must fight against the forces of Sauron on a journey to dispose of the One Ring in the depths of Mount Doom; the wizard Ged must conquer his own arrogance to become Archmage and, through his wisdom, assist in bringing peace to Earthsea; Lyra must evade death and capture to learn the secrets of Dust and bring order to the world as is prophesied. The closest to a quest *Little, Big* reaches is for the residents of Edgewood to follow the path set before them by the cards and contribute, as they are destined to, to *The Tale*. Taken as it is, this seems as much a quest as the prior three examples, but there's a significant difference between them in that the action in *Little, Big* is generally *inaction*. The residents of Edgewood live incestuously in their house, largely isolated from the greater "war" waged by fairies and humans. Their quest is to live in passive compliance with the forces that direct them.

Auberon the Younger, try as he does to seek out a life outside the confines of Edgewood, cannot escape the calculations of destiny. Nor do characters in any of the other three texts manage to escape their destinies, but those stories don't feature protagonists so oppressed by a preconceived existence that they attempt to set their own design. Crowley truly steps apart from more popularized works in that he's unafraid of designing mysteries in a world that's already a mystery on account of being fantasy.

AT ODDS WITH DESTINY

Oddly enough, these mysteries are born deep within the histories of their worlds, scribed in ancient texts or assortments of cards and granted to future generations that they might be prepared to face future dilemmas or uncover mysteries of the past. Destiny plays its part as song in *LotR* ("renewed shall be blade that was broken"), spoken word in *His Dark Materials* (choosing the proper pine branch and bringing about "the end of destiny"), as text in *The Earthsea Cycle* ("prophecy of Ged"), and foretold

via augmented Tarot cards in *Little, Big*. Destiny serves as a direct method of designating character duties in fantasy fiction, but do those duties need to be striven for by the protagonists? Despite the convention, *Little, Big* takes a few moments to argue against this, giving the only characters among these four series who actively resent and work against their destiny.

Of course, both Sam and Frodo had apprehensions regarding their qualification to be the ring-bearers entrusted with the duty of destroying the One Ring, but never were those moments of uncertainty so great that either of the Hobbits decided mid-quest to abandon their responsibility. Quite the opposite, they whole-heartedly acknowledged their fears and shortcomings, and they persevered in spite of those. These Hobbits bear the most similarity to the Drinkwater family, both groups of characters having little understanding of the greater world (for the Hobbits, the land outside the Shire; for the Drinkwaters, the realm of Faerie). The seclusion of their homeland from past and current socio-political events ostracized them from a full understanding of exactly how forces outside the Shire function, except that they understand what is good and what is evil. On this alone, they accept the quest as their form of destiny, knowing that Sauron's influence must be extinguished. On the other hand, the Drinkwaters are admittedly oblivious to the intricacies of Faerie thought and behavior. Like Sam and Frodo, all Drinkwaters descended from John Drinkwater are involved with their own destiny only by chance. Frodo inherits the Ring from Bilbo unknowing of its great importance, and the descendants of John Drinkwater inherit his legacy on account of that exactly: being his descendants, an uncontrollable lineage. Neither group has much to say on the matter (note that this, too, is an aspect of fantasy fiction – the unwilling or unknowing hero: Frodo and Sam, Lyra, and Katniss). In *Auberon* is the same sense of apprehension the Hobbits experience at troubling moments of their journey, but unlike the Hobbits, he acts on these feelings in a way unseen in *LotR*. He shuns the notion of remaining forever in Edgewood and seeks to escape from his calling despite a foreknowledge that the cards cannot deceive and that the events augured by Nora Cloud shall inevitably come to pass. As with the quest, Crowley works in the negative,

using the construction of his characters and narrative in such a way that juxtaposes it with traditional fantasy literature. Aragorn might have chosen not to reforge the broken blade and found a different weapon to wield against the darkness; the witches might have chosen to inform Lyra about her destiny to help guide her towards the best decisions; and Arren might have chosen not to uptake the mantle of Lebannon and left the duty to someone else, or no one. These characters all were faced with a choice and in every instance, they chose to conform. Only Auberon of *Little, Big* thought it reasonable to want to shape his own future. Perhaps this sense of defiance is inherited from Smoky who never, until the end, fully subscribes to the ideas of destiny held so firmly by the Drinkwaters. He too refuses the all of destiny, seeing that its fulfilment will bring about his death. (And Ariel Hawksquill provides a tertiary example of this, for despite having wisdom and ability on par with, or maybe exceeding, Nora Cloud and firmly believing that Barbarossa is not meant to have the Tarot cards, she willfully steals them from under Sophie's nose and takes them with her to a meeting with the tyrant; she effectively disrupts the expected chain of events if one assumes the legitimacy of her beliefs regarding the ownership of the cards.)

The desire of characters in *Little, Big* to disbelieve or reject the forces related to Faerie can be pinned down to the form destiny takes in Crowley's novel as opposed to the other works we've read. Whereas the prophecies of LotR and *Earthsea* are concrete and easily understood, those in *Little, Big* are clouded in mystery, making belief in them difficult for characters susceptible to cynicism. Crowley subverts the trope of destiny by never allowing his characters or readers to have a firm grasp on the real versus illusion, truth versus non-truth. Whether or not the destiny foretold in the cards or the happenings of Faerie are inventions of the Drinkwaters remains a central issue throughout most of the narrative, and this ambiguity drives Smoky and Auberon away from adherence to destiny. Simultaneously, Crowley insists that destiny in *Little, Big* is actually quite concrete, evidenced when Sophie comes to understand\

that “if this were indeed a Tale, and she in it, no rising up to dance or sitting down to eat and drink, no blessing or curse, no joy, no longing, no error; if they fled the Tale or struggled against it, well, that too was part of the Tale.” Free will might very well exist until the moment of the Tale’s ultimate conclusion (or until key events, such as Auberón’s falling in love with the dark-skinned girl, Sylvie) or doesn’t exist at all; there’s never any way to know for sure.

WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS

One could argue that the object of fantasy as a genre is to portray a limited number of fantastical elements in infinitely many ways, each variation having some interpretive value that varies from other accounts of similar phenomena. Regarding *Little, Big* as fantasy and considering its heavy divergence from the works we’ve covered this semester (and ignoring, for the sake of argument, its classification into a different subset of fantasy literature, namely magical realism) supports this notion. *His Dark Materials*, by the end of the first novel and into the second, fully realized the concept of multiple worlds, infinite worlds, all overlapping one another, somehow practicing cohabitation in occupied space. Far-fetched as this sounds, there’s a certain believability to it if all these worlds were in actuality on separate planes, stacked atop each other like infinitely thin sheets of paper. Suspension of disbelief works here because a working conceptual model (i.e. the stacks of paper) can be constructed to demonstrate the plausibility of this impossibility. But to purport that there are worlds within worlds, and that the contained worlds are larger than the worlds containing them baffles all logic. *Little, Big* takes “bigger/larger” to mean “more spacious” and in doing so eliminates the one possible model which might effectively represent the abstract. (That model would be an augmented version of Chinese boxes or nesting dolls wherein the smaller boxes are denser than the boxes containing them. But even this comparison isn’t exact because even if the boxes were constructed such that the smaller ones were denser, the volume would be no greater, and thus the smaller boxes could not be more spacious than the bigger boxes.)

It's no mistake that Crowley has touched upon such a varied number of fantastical elements and utilized them against expectation or that the structure of his physical world defies logical description. The tendrils of fantasy he employs have the distinction of being indistinct, yet the weight of the world he creates is no less. His divergence establishes a world that refuses to give itself to the reader, the Smoky Barnable, instead demanding that those transported into this marvelous world take the task upon themselves. He demands you to read between the lines where no elven ballads intrude, and to deduce the deeper application of standard fantasy tropes and themes. In this, his world is surely littler than a sprawling expository epic, but so too is the depth of purpose, given some thought, undoubtedly bigger.