

# Evolving a Genre: Doctor Strange Comics as Post-Fantasy

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

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April 15, 2019  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Fantasy, Comics Studies, Postmodernism, Post-Fantasy

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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis demonstrates that Doctor Strange comics incorporate established tropes of the fantastic canon while also incorporating postmodern techniques that modernize the genre. Strange's debut series, *Strange Tales*, begins this development of stylistic changes, but it still relies heavily on standard uses of the fantastic. The 2015 series, *Doctor Strange*, builds on the evolution of the fantastic apparent in its predecessor while evidencing an even stronger presence of the postmodern. Such use of postmodern strategies disrupts the suspension of disbelief on which popular fantasy often relies. To show this disruption and its effects, this thesis examines *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)* as they relate to the fantastic cornerstones of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. It begins by defining the genre of fantasy and the tenets of postmodernism, then it combines these definitions to explain the new genre of postmodern fantasy, or post-fantasy, which Doctor Strange comics develop. To show how these comics evolve the fantasy genre through applications of postmodernism, this thesis examines their use of otherworldliness and supernaturalism, as well as their characterization and narrative strategies, examining how these facets subvert our expectations of fantasy texts.

# Evolving a Genre: Doctor Strange Comics as Post-Fantasy

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(GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT)

This thesis analyzes the ways in which Doctor Strange comics use common features of popular fantastic texts while also drawing attention to them in ways traditional fantasy does not. In doing so, these comics create an environment for the reader which entertains through the use of fantastic devices but disrupts the escapist tendencies frequently encouraged by fantastic texts. Specifically, this thesis examines Doctor Strange's 1963 debut in Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *Strange Tales* and the contemporary series *Doctor Strange*, begun in 2015, in comparison with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. In doing so, this thesis aims to show what tropes Doctor Strange comics borrow from these popular texts and how they change such tropes to revitalize the fantastic genre. The first chapter defines important terms and genres used throughout the thesis, including postmodernism, fantasy, and post-fantasy. The following chapters explore the changed ways in which Doctor Strange comics present expected features of the fantastic genre, specifically otherworldliness, the supernatural, character tropes of the hero and the villain, and narrative conventions. Each chapter also the effects these changes have on the comics as a whole and how these effects ultimately develop the fantastic by disrupting our expectations of it.

# **Dedication**

To my very best friend, and to my very cute cat.

## **Acknowledgements**

A tremendous amount of gratitude is owed to my committee members, each of whom provided much needed feedback, guidance, and support throughout the creation of this thesis, as well as throughout my academic career as a whole. They have each inspired me as mentors and helped motivate me to reach a deeper understanding of my own interests and goals, and I am both proud and grateful to have had the experience of working with them.

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# Chapter 1:

## Introduction

The world of Marvel comics—with its superheroes, aliens, monsters, magic, impossibilities, and epic battles—provides a prime setting for the fantastic to flourish. More specifically, the narrative of the surgeon-turned-sorcerer, Doctor Stephen Strange, begs the use of fantastic convention. Yet despite the opportunity for such use, and in spite of their publisher's title, these comics often eschew the marvelous, opting instead to normalize elements which popular fantasy seeks to emphasize. When marvelous facets are included, they are used subversively to question the nature in which they are traditionally presented. Such treatment of fantastic subject matter questions our standard of the fantasy genre and asserts the possibility of a new style of narrative and a new type of hero, both of which expose the fact that, contrary to what fantasy seeks to have readers believe, if the fantastic actually existed it would cease to amaze. In providing this exposure by regarding the fantastic through a postmodern lens, these comics, specifically *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)*, develop and conform to a genre I refer to as post-fantasy.

To support this claim, I analyze Strange's debut series, *Strange Tales*, and the contemporary series, *Doctor Strange (2015)*, which includes *Volume 1* through *Volume 5* and *Volume 1: God of Magic*, which functions as the sixth book in the series. This analysis accompanies observations about the conventions of popular fantasy based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. These

works are commonly regarded as pieces of fantasy which have been influenced by and continue to influence the formation of the canon. Throughout this thesis I aim to show how Doctor Strange comics make use of postmodern strategies, namely subversion, self-reflexive metafiction, intertextuality, and pastiche, as a means of deconstructing our expectations of fantastic texts and shifting the fantasy genre to appeal to contemporary audiences.

The most widely used origin story for Doctor Strange's character, and the one that is used in both series analyzed in this thesis, is one in which Stephen Strange transitions from pompous, world-renowned surgeon to Earth-defending master of mystic arts. After a car accident results in Strange's inability to use his hands, rendering him unable to continue his practice as a surgeon, he makes a desperate trip to Tibet seeking untraditional medicine to heal his hands and restore him to his comfortable lifestyle. After initially refusing to believe in the mystic arts he found in Tibet, Strange comes to recognize the potency of such practices and makes the decision to begin his magical training under the tutelage of the Ancient One. Through these experiences Strange not only develops a relationship with the Ancient One, he also befriends Wong, a fellow student, and develops enemies like Mordo and Dormammu. Eventually, Strange and Wong both come to occupy the Sanctum Sanctorum in New York, and Dr. Strange spends his days protecting the Earth from mystical threats under the title of the Sorcerer Supreme.

Given the journey he undergoes to become a hero, the character tropes found in his comics, and his propensity for magic, Dr. Strange's comics exemplify those most closely related to the fantastic canon. It is for this reason that they were chosen for analysis within this thesis, with the older series, *Strange Tales*, evidencing greater conventional use of the fantastic and the more recent series, *Doctor Strange (2015)*, showing a heightened awareness and subversion of the fantastic styles from which it borrows. Use of the beginning series and the most

contemporary series is also meant to evidence changes to the character and to the narrative styles surrounding him, showing how writers of these comics came not only to subvert fantastic norms, but also to subvert and change the tropes and conventions they initially used in the early days of the character.

To begin, Chapter One develops the definitions of fantasy, postmodernism, and post-fantasy, explaining how each term is used throughout the thesis. In Chapter Two I examine the use of the Secondary World in fantasy, and how Doctor Strange comics forego such use, instead mixing the fantastic with the realistic. Chapter Three is dedicated to the supernatural as commodified and normalized in *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*. Chapter Four is used to explore the ways in which these comics toy with the narrative conventions of fantasy by demystifying the hero and the villain and disrupting the suspension of disbelief. Following these chapters is a brief conclusion about the general purpose of the thesis and its intended influence.

Comic books, along with providing a valuable and beloved source of entertainment, are worthy of academic study, as they create innovative, exciting, important changes to old or traditional storytelling methods while also raising thought-provoking questions that are worthy of discussion. They are part of our world's evolution of writing, and examining them in comparison to established and conventional narratives provides insight into how our artistic culture is changing, while also giving us a new way evaluating classic texts and genres we have explored in the past.

## Chapter 2:

# Defining Fantasy, Postmodernism, and Post-Fantasy

In order to understand how Doctor Strange comics are post-fantasy, we must first understand how fantasy is defined for the purposes of this paper and why, although Doctor Strange relates to this definition, it is not sufficient to describe the genre of Doctor Strange. Only once I establish this understanding can I move on to a definition of post-fantasy and make my argument for Doctor Strange's place in that genre. Scholars have long debated the questions of what fantasy is and what counts as fantasy, and these questions continue to be pervasive in studies of the genre. This chapter discusses the various arguments centered around these questions, ultimately defining fantasy by the themes and conventions laid out by Jane Mobley, as well as by its roots in mythology, folklore, religion, and medievalism. Following this definition of fantasy, I provide an overview of postmodernist strategies and how these strategies would need to work with the fantasy conventions in order to define the genre of post-fantasy. With these terms established, I can move on to an analysis of Doctor Strange's place in the post-fantasy genre.

Brian Attebery, in his book *Strategies of Fantasy*, provides a succinct summary of scholars' definitions of the fantasy genre, noting that "Kathryn Hume refers to 'departure from consensus reality' (8), C.N. Manlove mentions the supernatural, Jane Mobley calls it magic," and that, despite their differences, these prominent scholars agree on the importance of a violation of reality being an essential element of fantasy (14-15). In most cases, what causes this violation is

some element of magic and/or supernaturalism. Also complicit in this violation is the creation of what Tolkien refers to as a “Secondary World” (12). This world is entirely separate from the ordinary world, existing as a self-sufficient universe with its own framework. Tolkien explains that it is not enough just to build a world that contains disjointed fantastic images; rather, to be actual fantasy, the story must contain a world in which these fantastic images are believable (16). As Jane Mobley adds, “the fantasy world is the Real world” within the confines of the fantasy text, and understanding that helps us see even the most absurd features or events as logical within the fantastic framework of that text (118). Exemplifying this separate world are Camelot, Middle-earth, Narnia, and the wizarding world of Harry Potter.

Mobley writes that, along with the creation of secondary magical worlds, fantasy fiction is characterized by poetic quality and essential extravagance (122-124). The poetic quality is found in the magical incantations, as a necessary component to suspend disbelief and create a fictional reality, and it is found in formulaic phrases (“once upon a time”) to establish that the world and story are set apart from our world and reality. Extravagance, exemplified in the vivid and marvelous language of description, is one of the ways in which “fantasy deliberately dissociates itself from our network of expectations, from sameness, and from consistency with everyday life” (Mobley 124).

Along with the presence of supernaturalism, the setting of a Secondary World, and the conventions of poetic language and extravagance, fantasy is defined by an adventurous narrative, or as Mobley puts it, a “quest and discovery motif” (126). It is because of this adventure that the protagonist is even introduced to the Secondary World, and this adventure is the reason for the story and the dynamic characterization of the protagonist throughout. According to Joseph Campbell, the adventure can serve a variety of purposes, including: a “high historical

undertaking,” “religious illumination,” “the awakening of the self,” or “the coming of adolescence” (42). Throughout this adventure we are presented with multiple other common motifs and symbols that shape the fantasy genre. The adventure itself is typically the common motif of the quest, and during this quest through an otherworldly realm we come across magic and magical artifacts, fictional creatures or species, and the fight between good and evil. This dichotomy of good and evil is one of the most crucial parts of the fantasy genre; with no distinction between good and evil, and with no clear indication that the protagonist is on the side of the good, readers would lose the motivation to hope the protagonist succeeds in their journey, and in many cases, the protagonist would not even need to undergo a journey.

One of the most common uses for fantasy stories is moral instruction, and as such these stories must display clear distinctions between what and who counts as good and what and who counts as evil. Although authors often recognize the complexity of the human psyche and display this complexity by sometimes blurring the good/evil distinction, “good” ultimately emerges victorious as “evil” is thwarted. In these battles of good and evil many secondary characters may switch sides, showing both the dangers of temptation and the hope that one can always be better, but the protagonist and the antagonist must remain constant in their values and goals, never being afforded the luxury of a change of heart, for the villain, or the threat of an irreversible fall, for the hero. To summarize, “most good ‘fairy-stories’ are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches (On Fairy Stories 4),” and along these adventures we find ourselves brought to sympathize with our good protagonist and hope for the defeat of whatever evil awaits them at the climax of their journey.

Further characterizing the fantasy genre are its roots and influences, which are most strongly found in mythology, medieval lore, folklore, and religion. Jane Mobley explores

mythology's influence on fantasy, noting that the presence of popular mythology in fantasy provides readers with familiarity, even as the myth is being reshaped for a fantastic tale, and this familiarity is what allows fantasy stories to last for so long (125). In his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell traces patterns in the journeys of multiple heroes within mythology, folk tales, and religion, and these patterns hold true in the tales of our fantastic heroes, serving as examples of the way these mythological forms influence popular fantasy. Sullivan tracks uses of folklore within fantastic literature, noting narrative strategies like the utilization of familiar idioms and taking them a step further to create idioms that are specific to the story's Secondary World in order to create the World's own folklore, which adds to its depth and believability (282). Also borrowed from folklore are fantasy's motifs, structure, creatures, names, and artifacts (Sullivan 283-284).

Similarly, a wealth of research is devoted to examples of religion, most commonly Christianity, found in popular fantasy; we often find Christ-like figures, themes of redemption, glimpses of the afterlife, evidence of destiny and divine intervention, an emphasis on faith and the victory of good over evil, and moral values that adhere to Christian teachings. Sullivan writes that fantasy is riddled with Old and New Testament plots and conflicts, most frequently those related to the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Christ (286). According to Tolkien, it is from religion, and in particular Christianity, that we get evidence of marvels that encourage our desire for and temporary belief in fantastic stories (23). These influences of religion, folklore, and mythology also manifested within medieval literature, which in turn influences fantasy. Medieval fantasy draws heavily from religion, and often uses fantastic elements to create allegories that continue to make their way into contemporary fantasy. Additionally, popular

fantasy is riddled with Arthurian heroes of impoverished and isolated beginnings who rise to power and join a more accepting community.

Along with the similarities in heroes, fantasy also depicts sidekicks, close friends, and fellowships that resemble Arthur's knights of the Round Table. From Arthurian legend fantasy also gets the motif of the quest, along with many of the other motifs, such as imaginary worlds, magic, fantastic beasts, and distinctions of good and evil. The motif of the quest in particular is one that contemporary fantasy closely models after its medieval predecessor; the medieval quest often involves a spiritual or internal quest that mirrors the physical one, and similarly in contemporary popular fantasy we find characters who, along their physical journey, self-actualize and undergo introspection to reach clarity and resolve internal issues.

To summarize, fantasy derives from mythology and folklore some of its most central elements: tropes of plot and character, as well as motifs and symbolism within fantasy that can in many cases be traced to mythological roots. Religion also provides the concepts of good and evil used to describe various fantasy characters, as well as symbolism and metaphors often used allegorically throughout fantastic tales. Medievalism perpetuates and refines these roots, providing similar motifs and plots, but also adding plots, particularly those centered around quests, as well as characterizations of heroes and villains that we continue to borrow from today. And from each of these roots fantasy derives its most basic fantastic inspiration: that of the involvement with the supernatural.

The genre of fantasy is not nearly as homogenous as this overview makes it appear, and it is important to note that many other motifs, themes, and influences are found in the expansive realm of fantasy literature. However, this brief overview describes the cornerstones of many significant fantastic works, including J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. The conventions and roots discussed above create the definition of fantastic literature that I will use in the remainder of this thesis. Simply put, I define fantastic literature as literature in which a story of the supernatural draws upon religion, mythology, folklore, and medievalism to tell the tale of a hero undergoing an adventure in a Secondary World that allows them to complete self-discovery and triumph over evil. In other words, the definition of fantasy for the purposes of this thesis follows Brian Attebery's "recipe" for fantasy literature:

1. Take a vaguely medieval world.
2. Add a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it.
3. Introduce one villain with no particular characteristics except a nearly all-powerful badness. Give him or her a convenient blind spot.
4. Pour in enough mythological creatures and nonhuman races to fill out a number of secondary episodes: fighting a dragon, riding a winged horse, stopping overnight with the elves (who really should organize themselves into a bed-and-breakfast association).
5. To the above mixture add one naive and ordinary hero who will prove to be the prophesied savior; give him a comic sidekick and a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot.
6. Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals.

(10)

The definition crafted throughout this chapter outlines three main components to be considered when determining a text's relationship to the fantasy genre: otherworldliness, supernaturality, and motifs and conventions. In some cases these categories may overlap, however they still remain distinct enough to be analyzed separately. The remainder of this thesis will utilize these categories to show how Doctor Strange departs from fantastic norms and inspires the need for the post-fantasy definition.

Attebery writes that some works of fantasy, most notably Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, incorporate and rely on postmodern narrative structures. Because, at the time of the trilogy's publication, fantasy was often considered merely escapist or dismissed as children's

literature, Attebery asserts the academic value of Tolkien's texts, writing that in a simple sense the trilogy was postmodern because:

To tell a story, as Tolkien seemed to do, as if it were still possible to take heroes and happy endings seriously was to incur the disdain of the apostles of Modernism. Tolkien committed such sins as telling his story from beginning to end; dividing his characters into good and evil; allowing the good to triumph over the evil; writing in transparent, workmanlike prose instead of densely poetic language (even in his verse); resting comfortably within a tradition rather than Oedipally slaying his ancestors; and supposing the fairy tale might be a suitable form for adult reading. (39)

Attebery notes other postmodernist strategies used in Tolkien's works and in other prominent works of fantasy. One of the cornerstones of postmodernism is the breaking of expectations through such strategies as metafiction, intertextuality, subversion, and deconstruction. Attebery argues that in a similar manner "fantasy is generally defined in terms of a violation of expectations: prominent within a work of fantasy is some elements of the *impossible* or *supernatural*, the writer relying on our consensus as to the nature of the possible or natural within the world of nonliterary experience" (54). He adds that "postmodernism deliberately perpetuates illusions, adopts and even exaggerates outmoded conventions, and attempts to de-center the individual" (37), claiming that many fantasy texts emulate these facets of postmodernism. However, while it may be true that fantasy enacts many of these postmodernist principles, Attebery neglects to address the fact that violating expectations of realism is itself a convention of fantastic literature and that doing so does not inherently make a fantastic text postmodern; rather, it simply makes it fit into its expected genre. In order to be postmodernist fantasy, the text

would not just have to violate expectations of reality, it would have to violate expectations of the fantasy genre.

*Strange Tales* begins this violation of fantastic norms, and the process is continued and heightened in *Doctor Strange (2015)*. Fredric Jameson cites the use of pastiche as a postmodern tactic, writing that pastiche is “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask” (1761); these comics don the mask of fantastic norms as outlined by Mobley and Attebery, imitating fantasy’s use of otherworldliness, the supernatural, and narrative conventions of quests and good versus evil, while underneath they work to expose and alter the very traditions behind which they hide.

As previously noted, one of the most important parts of fantasy is its involvement with an otherworldly setting. Through its disconnect with the realistic world of the reader, these other worlds featured in prominent fantasy provide a place in which the unrealistic becomes believable, allowing the reader to not only become interested in the narrative, but to escape into it. Mobley writes that “new dimensions of the fantastic may be constantly opening within the narrative; but if the tale-teller allows primary reality to intrude in ways which violate the integrity of the Secondary World, it will shatter...” (124). This intrusion and subsequent shattering is created on purpose within *Doctor Strange* comics, which blend the realistic and the fantastic. The placement of the fantastic within the normal as seen within these comics disrupts the suspension of disbelief and breaks fantastic norms, functioning as one cause of the comics’ post-fantasy classification.

Further entrenching fantastic narratives in mysticism and grandeur is their use of magic and supernaturalism. Along with adding to the wonder of the narrative, magic often serves to separate the Primary and Secondary Worlds, developing the Secondary World as a place in

which the unbelievable can more believably take place. A postmodern representation of fantastic magic would require that the text include a subversive type of magic, with subversion being understood to mean a reversal of the established norms of the genre. Where traditional fantasy highlights the power and magnificence of magic, post-fantasy must show magic's futility, and where fantasy uses magic as a life-changing force, post-fantasy must make it casual. Kelly Kramer, writing on Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*, a series frequently heralded as a work of postmodern fantasy, notes that one of the strategies Grossman uses to deviate from fantastic norms is to show the gradual loss of wonder in his main character "due to too much exposure to magic" (157). *Strange Tales* does not quite reflect this type of demystification of magic in the eyes of the main character, however such demystification is seen in the surrounding characters who are aware and largely accepting of Strange's ability to do magic. The more contemporary comics, *Doctor Strange* (2015), extend this demystification to the hero himself, mirroring the postmodern strategy Kramer details by creating a hero who takes magic for granted and does not look at it with the same type of respect or awe found in works like *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

There are also specific conventions that contribute to the formulaic narratives of popular fantasy, including extravagance, poetic language, quest narratives, character tropes of hero and villain, and a narrative style that perpetuates the suspension of disbelief. *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* exemplify what Kramer refers to as "deconstruction fantasies" (154); these comics recognize formulaic fantasy, "borrowing from it for its source material but twisting it" (154), as Kramer argues Grossman's novels do, in a postmodern fashion which helps to reshape the fantasy genre for contemporary audiences. Such "deconstruction fantasies" represent the postmodern through exposing tired narrative norms, by subverting the expected character tropes

and hero's journey, and by using metafiction, intertextuality, and self-referentiality to emphasize the fictionality of the work rather than striving for the reader's continued belief in the fantastic. While fantasy gives us phrases like "once upon a time" and shows characters giving dramatic monologues in order to underscore the importance of their adventure or the magnificence of their villainous plan, post-fantasy pokes fun at such language, noting that people do not talk like that, particularly in the heat of battle; where fantasy gives clear sides of good and evil, albeit with certain temptations and defections, post-fantasy provides a more realistic portrayal of human nature in which the hero is not always good and the villain is not always evil; and while fantasy foregrounds the adventure narrative and intensifies fantastic elements as the story progresses, post-fantasy makes the hero and their adventure more casual, substituting fantasy's typical grandeur for normalization of the remarkable. Therefore, post-fantasy, while using tropes of good versus evil and adventure narratives, breaks them down and subverts them to consistently remind the reader that they are not nearly as extravagant or important as fantasy often makes them seem.

Some strategies viewed as postmodern can be attributed to traditional works of fantasy; for instance, Tolkien uses metafiction to "comment on the storytelling process" (Attebery 41). However, these strategies are not often used within such fantasies as a means of commenting on the genre of fantasy, and in *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* they are used to do exactly that. *Strange Tales* does not exhibit a post-fantasy as explicitly as *Doctor Strange*, but it does begin the process of downplaying the importance of the superhero and breaking narrative norms through the use of intertextuality and direct addresses to the reader that disrupt belief in the fantastic story. *Doctor Strange* carries on the tradition of fourth wall breaking and intertextuality, while adding a greater amount of self-referentiality and subversion of character and narrative

tropes that demystify the fantastic for the reader. Attebery writes that despite Tolkien's metafictional tendencies, "he is interested in sustaining illusion, not violating it" (42), and this interest in violating illusion is precisely what separates Doctor Strange comics from traditional fantasy. While still incorporating otherworldliness, magic, heroic adventures, and character tropes, all of which allow the comics to meet a fantastic classification, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)* violate conventions of the fantastic by consistently working to expose and subvert the traditions from which they borrow, causing them to move into a post-fantasy classification that moves the fantastic superhero into the world of contemporary audiences.

# Chapter 3:

## Otherworldliness

The believability of fantasy stems in part from a reliance upon the setting of an Other World; Attebery writes that “Tolkien upholds a fast distinction between what he called primary creation (the world we live in) and secondary world (the world of story)...” (47), and the subversion of this convention is one of the ways in which Doctor Strange comics exist as post-fantasy. Writers of both *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)* are clearly knowledgeable of the otherworldly trope found in fantasy and of its role in contributing to the appeal of the genre, and they utilize this trope while adapting it to fit their own goals. This adaptation comes in the form of intersectionality of the Primary and Secondary Worlds, the intertextuality of worldbuilding, and the infusion of contemporary culture into the narrative.

Exemplifying his own definition, Tolkien crafts a Secondary World that provides perhaps the best example of a rule-governed, self-sufficient universe separate from our own. Middle-earth, while consisting of elements recognizable to us, such as trees, rivers, and men, also contains its own history, its own languages, its own species, and its own geographical and ecological structure that is disconnected from the reality of its readers. As a more modern example, the world of Harry Potter, although in existence alongside our own world and therefore less separate than that of Frodo and his fellowship, exists in isolation. Wizarding schools are designed to repel those who are not part of the magical world, the wizarding government exists

underground and requires secretive methods of entrance, wizards are required by law to keep their magical abilities hidden from non-magic people, known as Muggles, and the magical world is home to its own creatures that rarely come into contact with the world resembling our own reality. Further separating Harry's world from ours is the medieval atmosphere in which he spends most of his time. His school bears distinct resemblance to medieval castles, including towers and suits of armor, and the school's occupants live anachronistic lifestyles, ignoring modern technology and studying magic, magical creatures, and magical history rather than math, English, or science. There is a distinct difference between Harry's life in the Muggle world and his life in the magical world, and this distinction serves to solidify the Secondary World as its own universe. Even medieval fantasy in the form of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* crafts the fictional world of Camelot which, although it bears resemblance to the England of the Middle Ages, exists as a clearly fictional world rather than a recognizable reality. These are the worlds in which the fantastic is allowed to happen, and as such they are worlds that are removed from the reader's reality.

One of the most prominent examples of Doctor Strange's violation of conventional fantasy is its aversion to an otherworldly setting. Although in many issues of *Strange Tales* Doctor Strange travels to various dimensions or planets, a similar number of them take place directly on Earth, in the same dimension as our own reality. Attebery writes that "since fantasy makes no attempt to hide its fictionality, it takes no effort at all to puncture the bubble but considerable artifice to maintain it" (46), but *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* do the opposite of this, attempting to appear as if real by taking place in the world of the reader. As such, the "considerable artifice" found in traditional fantasy is largely absent from Doctor Strange. Rather than displacing the hero and creating the narrative in a Secondary World, Doctor Strange writers

often displace the monsters, allowing them to encroach upon our own Primary World. While comparable occurrences appear in the later books of the *Harry Potter* series, with Voldemort's actions beginning to affect the Muggle world as much as the wizarding world, the inhabitants of the Muggle world are for the most part unaware of their misfortune's magical causes. In the world of Doctor Strange, however, those on Earth are aware of his existence, often believe in and seek out his abilities, and are almost accustomed to the alien threats that Doctor Strange and the Avengers, Defenders, and other superheroes fight. The existence of sorcerers, aliens, mutants, and the like are normalized, and their existence is not hidden or separate from the reality and world readers recognize.

Often, fantasy relies on a separate world to provide a place in which the fantastic is possible, as readers typically believe that it is not possible within their own. According to Attebery "most fantasy writers provide clearly defined frames: narrative devices that establish a relationship between the fantasy world and our own while at the same time separating the two" (66). Within both old and new stories of Doctor Strange, however, these frames are blurred rather than being definitive enough to enforce separation of two worlds. *Strange Tales #126* opens with the announcement that "there is a world half hidden between the real and the imaginary! It is to that world...the world of magic, that this trend-setting series is dedicated!" As it is depicted in both *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)*, rather than being a separate world, the world of magic that Doctor Strange exists in is not a Secondary World but an extension of the primary one in which readers exists. For instance, *Strange Tales #159* depicts non-magical people having dormant magical powers within themselves activated, leading to a drastic increase in the number of magicians around the world. Similarly, "common" people have access to some of the different dimensions that Doctor Strange travels to, like the Realm of

Dreams and the Kingdom of Memory as depicted in issue #25. The extension of magic to those without it and the ability of regular people to access the dimensions Doctor Strange travels to during his adventures make Doctor Strange's magical world an intersectional part of the ordinary world, rather than setting it apart.

The Secondary World within fantasy is further separated when one notes the effects that the world has on the characters in it. Middle-earth provides its characters with magic that enhances their abilities and increases their power, even as it poses various threats to them. Frodo and Bilbo, along with the other protagonists of Tolkien's works, are able to go on adventures and perform feats that they would not be able to do in our world. Similarly, Harry's entire life, including his abilities, is improved, even as it is endangered, upon his entrance into the wizarding world. This world ultimately becomes a home for Harry, offering him friendship and love as well as knowledge, power, and adventure. Contrastingly, *Strange Tales* shows that Doctor Strange becomes less powerful when he travels to other planets or dimensions. Each new dimension or planet offers a threat that overwhelms any potential beneficial presence in those worlds. Because of this, each new realm renders him less powerful rather than functioning as the locus of his power in the ways that Middle-earth and the wizarding world do for their respective protagonists. The Secondary Worlds of traditional fantasy are often designed for the adventure of a hero, and the hero either already knows or quickly comes to learn the rules of that world. The various destinations in *Strange Tales*, however, do not offer a similar opportunity for learning, and therefore Doctor Strange is less prepared to understand other worlds, making them less obviously designed for a heroic adventure. Because of this, each of these worlds often holds no attachment for Strange and can only last for one or two issues before it is worn out and must be left behind.

Therefore, the ordinary world is “home” for Doctor Strange, contrasting the trope of the Secondary World serving as a home or haven for fantasy protagonists.

Another distinction between the world of Doctor Strange and the typical Secondary World found in fantasy is the art of building the world. Conventional strategies of worldbuilding found in popular fantasy include constructed languages, fictional creatures, lore, and often medieval settings. In *Harry Potter* there is the constructed language of Parseltongue, in which the human speaker can communicate with snakes. If a wizard is going to develop this ability, they are born with it and come to use it not through learning it as we do normal language but through an innate ability to be able to speak and understand it. This language is used to further establish the separation of the magical world and the Muggle world, as it is used to characterize Slytherin, one of the houses of the wizarding school of Hogwarts, as well as both Harry and Voldemort. In *The Lord of the Rings*, pages of the primary texts as well as multiple appendices are devoted to the creation and development of constructed languages for creatures such as elven and dwarf species. Tolkien thought of himself primarily as a linguist, and the creation of his stories stemmed from his desire to create a world into which he could fit his various invented languages, which shows how significant these languages are in the formation of his Secondary World as its own self-contained universe. In addition to these invented languages, fantasy also often features various fictional creatures that exist only as part of the Secondary World. These creatures are exemplified by the hippogriffs and phoenixes in *Harry Potter*, the Ents and Hobbits of Middle-earth, and the centaurs and fauns of Narnia.

Constructed languages and fantastic beasts are also components of the lore provided to flesh out Secondary Worlds in these texts. The lore is created to provide a history for the Secondary World that gives it roots and further establishes it as a “real” world for the duration of

the story. In *Harry Potter* there are references to battles of years past and there is a course complete with textbooks on the history of magic which, when the protagonists are enrolled in it and discuss their assignments, shows the reader that magic has been around for centuries and provides insight into how the magical world became separated and developed into a fully functioning independent universe. Similarly, Tolkien includes references to the formation of Middle-earth as well as the land that lies beyond it once its inhabitants choose to leave, and he also created auxiliary texts such as *The Silmarillion* which provide histories of various Middle-earth creatures and events. Much of this lore, including many of the fictional creatures, draws from medievalism. The history provided in *Harry Potter* provides accounts of medieval witch-burning, and the world of magic the reader is exposed to is largely medieval in its disconnect from the modernized world; the environment contains a castle full of knights in armor and its inhabitants are cut off from technology, making the world outdated. Similarly, Narnia and Middle-earth both house kings and queens and show their characters using swords and shields and other battle gear reminiscent of the Middle-Ages. Each of these facets works in popular fantasy texts to remove the Secondary World of the story from the reality of the reader and establish the believability of the Secondary World.

Doctor Strange comics pay respectful homage to these roots with glimpses of various medieval weapons and fantastic beasts, but in contrast with traditional fantasy they do not use them to heighten the separation of the Secondary World and emphasize its fantastic nature, rather, they normalize them, making them part of the Primary World. In contrast to traditional fantasy, Doctor Strange purports that the dimensions and planets different from our own are not separate worlds but worlds that are realistic within our own, are acknowledged by regular Earth citizens, and frequently come into contact with Earth without causing a surprising revelation for

the people of Earth. Because the establishment of a Secondary World is so important to the believability of the narrative, popular fantasy often involves extended and detailed descriptions of the Secondary World. *Volume 1: The Way of the Weird*, on the other hand, does not rely on this narrative description and instead uses images to highlight the fact that Doctor Strange's world is incorporated into our Primary World; the images show the characters of the two worlds in different colors, with the normal characters drawn in black and white and the creatures Doctor Strange can see drawn in color, each living and going about their day alongside the other, emphasizing their coexistence rather than their separation (#3).

Rather than using the worldbuilding strategies of fantasy to establish an independent Secondary World, *Doctor Strange* bases worldbuilding on intertextuality. This intertextuality comes both from references to its own previous issues and from references to other stories and characters within the Marvel universe. Callbacks to the character's history are provided as asides in various issues from both *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)*. *Strange Tales* is riddled with these intertextual references, with referential comments like "personally, we learned it while paging perfunctorily thru *Strange Tales* #124," and "what thinkable amnesia could erase a true believer's recollection of those unforgettable episodes?! (ishes #34 and #155)" each signed with various monikers for the creator, Stan Lee, like "archivist Stan" and "Strange Fan Stan" (*Strange Tales* #150, #164). Similar referential notes are found in Strange's contemporary narrative; for instance, issue #384 references a spell from a separate *Doctor Strange* comic and the writer includes the note "you may remember this spell from *Doctor Strange: The Oath!*" Additionally, in *Volume 1: The Way of the Weird*, Doctor Strange's origin story, rather than being presented in an original narrative format, is told by positioning a reprint of the first origin story that was given in Strange's debut comic run, *Strange Tales*, in the background with the contemporary Doctor

Strange narrating in the foreground. These narrational asides from the writers and the use of past issues in modern issues draw attention to intertextual references. In "Batman: The Movie, Narrative: The Hyperconscious," Collins notes the ways in which comic narratives incorporate a hybridization of forms that references their own history, highlighting rather than avoiding the inconsistencies of the hero, citing Doctor Strange as an example of this phenomenon, and this is seen in these examples of intertextual worldbuilding. While fantastic worldbuilding depends on consistency to create a believable world, Doctor Strange comics forego this believability by directly referencing their own history and variety of narratives. The credibility of Doctor Strange's world is instead built on its incorporation into the Marvel universe as a whole. For instance, *Volume 1: The Way of the Weird* reminds readers of Doctor Strange association with the Avengers and other Marvel characters like Scarlet Witch and Thor. The intertextuality created by involving separate Marvel characters establishes a believable world around Doctor Strange by recalling stories that lead to a world knowledgeable and accepting of superhero existence.

Doctor Strange texts, in taking place in our world, acknowledge the modernity of reality, rather than relying on a medievalist Secondary World to enforce separation. Attebery writes "additionally, Tolkien, unlike most Postmodernists, does not juxtapose contemporary culture and traditional storytelling forms. He draws from folk culture but not from popular arts or literature (although, of course, his creations have since entered into pop culture, usually in simplified form)" (42). Doctor Strange, on the other hand, does infuse contemporary culture into the fantastic narrative, mixing popular culture with folk culture. For instance, issue #381 shows characters texting, humorously exposing the expectations of fantastic characters to rely on their

magical abilities without regard for modern intelligence or technology— as exemplified by the medieval setting of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*— with the dialogue:

**Sentry:** “Wong, you knew the plan already? That’s...man, you two must share some sort of...psychic bond from so many years together battling in the magical realm, able to perceive each other’s---”

**Wong:** “I texted him.”

While most fantastic worlds rely on medievalism, Doctor Strange has continuously been modernized to reflect the culture surrounding its various publications through the years. Gruber writes on the revamping of Strange’s character, noting:

Though Strange occasionally appeared as part of a superhero team, or in guest cameos with some of Marvel’s stranger comic book heroes, such as Dead Girl, he had become anachronistic. A wizard wearing a golden amulet, a vampire cape, and a magician’s robe was not as appealing to Generation X as Strange had been to their parents. Thus Marvel attempted to modernize the character and the world he inhabited, making it more realistic, thematically consistent, and less fantastic... (363)

Contrary to fantasy’s reliance on anachronistic development, Doctor Strange and the world surrounding him were modified to avoid being anachronistic. These modernizing changes to Strange’s character further establish his comics’ existence as part of an intersectional normal and magical contemporary world, subverting the expectation of the traditional medieval Secondary World based on traditional fantasy.

Attebery adds that “it is possible to work within the fantasy tradition and yet play freely with narrative frame in the Postmodernist manner, causing the self-contained fantasy world to intersect with contemporary life” (42), which is the postmodernist strategy that *Doctor Strange* writers employ. *Doctor Strange* actually takes this deviation from fantasy norms a step further by

not even having a self-contained fantasy world; along with the trend of allowing other dimensions and realms to merge with our own, *Strange Tales #133* mentions that “the dimensions of infinity are endless,” so that even when the setting is otherworldly it violates the rule of fantasy as written by Mobley, that the Secondary World must be self-contained (123). The possibility for a self-contained narrative is further disrupted in *Volume 1: The Way of the Weird* with allusions to other well-known magical tales like *Harry Potter* and *Aladdin*, incorporating even more worlds into the narrative and making the effects of Doctor Strange’s story overflow into other worlds. Mobley adds that belief in the Secondary World depends on consistency within the narrative descriptions of the world (123), but Doctor Strange directly states that he can never be sure of anything (#26), so the world is not as defined by certain rules as it needs to be in order to have the consistency necessary for sustained belief.

Sullivan writes: “the polar opposite of reality is fantasy” (279), and while many prominent works of fantasy rely on this opposition to create their Secondary World, Doctor Strange comics do not. Instead, they work to maintain the belief that the fantastic is not only possible but accepted in our own world. In doing so, these comics subvert the feature of otherworldliness we have come to expect from the fantasy genre while still upholding fantastic elements, allowing them to exist as post-fantasy.

# Chapter 4:

## The Supernatural

One of the most recognizable and relied upon staples of fantasy is the incorporation of magic and supernaturality. In many cases, magic is a driving force of the plot: Harry's introduction to his wizarding abilities leads to the rest of the events in the series, and the threatening magic of the One Ring is the reason for Frodo and company's journey to Mordor. Whether it is being used for good or evil, magic is clearly powerful, and is a force to be regarded with wonder and respect. Often the power and magnificence of magic increases as the series builds: Harry's introduction to magic begins with Hagrid starting a small fire in the fireplace, and Frodo and Bilbo both begin by becoming acquainted with small feats of Gandalf's magic, like blowing fancy smoke rings and creating magical fireworks. Yet by the end of each of series, the protagonist is exposed to and engaged in epic battles featuring grand sorcery. *Doctor Strange* and *Strange Tales* place this powerful magic into our world, in many cases devoid of its spectacle and wonder, making it realistic and commonplace. These comics depend on magic and supernaturality as fuel for their narratives, as do the dominant works of the genre, but they depict magic in a subversive fashion by demystifying and commodifying it.

*Doctor Strange* disrupts the mystery surrounding magic by making it disruptive and transactional, as well as mortal, rather than an inexhaustible source of power. In popular fantasy there are some restrictions placed on magic and its practitioners; for instance, in *Harry Potter* magic is not meant to bring people back from the dead. These rules, however, are often not expanded upon, and the nature of magic is left largely unexplained. This lack of detail on

magic's origins, properties, and powers serves to shroud magic in mystery, contributing to its grand and powerful nature. Because of the lack of description and rules, magic can often be used in new and unrestricted ways to provide salvation at the height of an emergency; for instance, Voldemort is unable to kill Harry because of Harry's mother's sacrificial love, yet this protective magic is never fully detailed, instead existing as something readers are meant to take at face value. In *Doctor Strange: Volume 1* magic is threatened by the Empirikul, who wish to eradicate magic in favor of science. Instead of presenting a villain who presents a threat to the hero and their world, these villains threaten not only the hero but also magic as a whole. As such, magic is demystified through the creation of its mortality. The writers extend this demystification to works outside of their own series, showing the death of magic within the world of Doctor Strange but also including images depicting the death of magic in recognizable fictional works such as *Harry Potter* and *Aladdin*. In doing so, *Doctor Strange* pokes fun at its fantastic forebears, at first innocently, by referencing them in a manner that hints at their fictionality, and then more maliciously, by co-opting their magical worlds and then destroying them by killing magic.

Once magic is destroyed, Doctor Strange and his allies are left to find ancient relics imbued with trace amounts of magic in order to defeat the Empirikul. These relics show that magic, rather than being an omnipresent and independent force, instead has a specific source from which it must be released or taken. Tolkien begins to use a similar strategy of subversion by discussing the mortality of magic in *The Lord of the Rings*; Ravikumar et al write "at one moment, magic represents the nostalgia of a bygone time, celebrating the connection between man and nature, as represented by ancient races. And yet at the same time, magic is seen as a dying concept, something that must make way for a new age" (270). Yet the full demystification

of magic through death is not realized in Tolkien's works, as they only narrate the events leading up to magic's end, while *Doctor Strange's* events take place only because of its death, showing in full detail its fragility and lack of influence.

Demystification of magic is furthered by the dismantling of the magnificence and power attributed to magic in popular works of fantasy. When Harry Potter is first exposed to magic his entire life and purpose are altered, and these effects develop magic as an awe-inspiring and life-changing force. Similarly, Frodo and company are inspired and restored by the elven magic of Lothlórien and in many cases are saved by Elven magic or Gandalf's magic. While in many fantastic tales magic is used to take the narrative from the commonplace to the fantastic, *Doctor Strange* often reverses this process, normalizing magic and highlighting its fallible nature. Magic is characterized as "smoke and mirrors, mostly" (#24) and is compared to ordinary professions, as when Doctor Strange likens working as a wizard to being an electrician (#3). At times, magic is not enough to save the day, and Strange has to resort to his pre-superhero life to solve problems, as is the case in issue #18 when he saves people as a surgeon because he is unable to save them as a magician, as well as in issue #2 when Zelma is described as the only person who can save the world, despite the fact that she is not the hero and does not yet have magical powers. Similarly, other forces are described as being more powerful than magic; for instance, *Strange Tales #155* comments on magic's shortcomings, telling us that "emotion, alas, is far beyond the pale of sorcery." Riga notes a similar type of disregard for magic shown by Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, writing that "when Gandalf leads the small army that sets out for Mordor, he does not hope to win through magical power or strength of arms. Instead, he develops a final strategy that allows the seemingly weak to bring about the greatest victory, not through magical intervention but through wisdom" (38). Yet this weakened display of magic is

pushed further in *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*, with *Strange Tales* #133 blatantly asserts that knowledge, rather than any type of magical ability, is the greatest attainable power. Even magical artifacts serve as a testament to magic's fragility, as they get worn out and need to recharge, and Doctor Strange's spellbook, the Book of the Vishanti, can only be used for defense, exemplifying the limitations of magic and of the hero. While previous works of fantasy may contain limitations of magic, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* emphasize its fragility.

Magic's normalization throughout the comics develops this fragility, as does the normalization of those with magical abilities. Riga comments on Tolkien's degradation of magic and wizardry, claiming that he chooses to make Gandalf, his Merlin figure, much less powerful than traditional examples of Merlin (41-42); however, even if Gandalf does not exhibit the type of absolute power found in many Merlin figures, he is still the most powerful figure in the company of the Ring, his power equaled or surpassed only occasionally, by briefly featured characters like Galadriel. Contrastingly, Doctor Strange, in both *Strange Tales* and the 2015 series, is frequently surrounded by better, more powerful magicians along with gods such as Thor and Loki, making him and his magic even more subversively ineffectual than Gandalf's. Riga continues to argue that Tolkien downplays the role of magic and wizardry in his works, noting that Gandalf rarely relies on magic to help the company; he writes: "the few times when Gandalf actually does call upon his powers are striking because they occur so seldom" (35). However, because Gandalf uses magic so sparingly, this actually makes its presence more remarkable rather than detracting from its significance, as Riga argues it does. Meanwhile, Doctor Strange's frequent use of magic in both grand and minor affairs in a world that is casually aware and tolerant of magic and wizardry normalizes its use and existence in a way that is not found in traditional fantasy. Furthermore, Riga's argument for the lack of magical power in *The*

*Lord of the Rings* is in part negated by the fact that “even races that cannot control magic are still bound by its natural laws, as they exist because of magic” (Ravikumar et al 268). Meanwhile, *Doctor Strange* and *Strange Tales* refuse to provide magic with this type of power over non-magical characters, allowing it to influence them, but not to control them in the manner present in Tolkien’s texts. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* continue to highlight the power of magic, indicated by the fact that magic, specifically the magic of the One Ring, threatens the entire existence of goodness. *Doctor Strange* shows magic’s ability to corrupt, although this corruption is more physical than mental, contaminating Strange’s body to the point of illness. However, this ability to corrupt, which is so emphasized in Tolkien’s works, is unceremoniously circumvented and adapted to by simple acts like changing one’s diet in *Doctor Strange*, and, while it does threaten other people, it does not threaten the entire universe, as is the case in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Magic’s magnificence and sanctity are also disassembled in *Doctor Strange* texts due to the fact that, unlike its role in many other prominent fantastic texts, magic does not serve as a metaphor for Christian supernaturalism. Griesinger writes: “paradoxically, while drawing on imagery and symbols associated with witchcraft and the occult, Rowling nevertheless incorporates into the magic of her vision ideas that are neither occultist nor pagan but decidedly Christian” (318). Similarly, Tolkien’s writing is famously fraught with Christian imagery, themes, and metaphors, and its magic, rather than existing in contrast with its Christian influences, supports and enhances their impact. In *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*, this metaphorically Christian brand of magic is abandoned in favor of expressly pagan supernaturalism. This is seen when *Strange Tales* #115 introduces the hero as “the mysterious master of black magic,” a title that both highlights Strange’s magic as occultist and develops

Strange as a hero who contrasts his fantastic counterparts' frequent associations with light imagery and Christian symbolism. Doctor Strange's magic continues to be referenced as black magic throughout *Strange Tales*, and to be characterized as a demonic or at least pagan entity in *Doctor Strange*. In issue #1, holiness is attributed to characters without magic, and stripping a sorcerer of their magic is described as a form of purification, and in issue #2 sorcery is cited as a form of corruption. This depiction of sorcery as evil even in the hands of the protagonist continues throughout the series, reinforcing the subversively impious magic of the titular hero.

Magic in traditional fantasy often functions as a home or comforting entity for the protagonist; despite its dangers, magic is what saves Harry from his unhappiness and what provides adventure for both Bilbo and Frodo. Yet in *Doctor Strange*, magic sometimes is alienating rather than comforting, and it is just as harmful as it is helpful. In depicting magic as mundane, *Doctor Strange* subverts the idea that magic will solve one's problems and add positive excitement to one's life. In fact, despite magic's catalyzation of Stephen Strange's transformation into a superhero, it is depicted as having a damaging impact on him and those around him on many occasions. For instance, *Doctor Strange: Volume 1* emphasizes the physical toll that magical performance has upon Doctor Strange: his body rejects normal food, forcing him to consume strange creatures, and after using large amounts of magic he is shown vomiting and struggling with physical pain so great that he must create a being onto which he can transfer his suffering. Subverting the notion of magic as one's purpose or calling is the fact that the suffering that magic can cause is so significant it causes Doctor Strange's friend and sidekick to leave the magical Sanctum Sanctorum because he wants his life to be about more than magic.

Often magical ability is random or selective, offering itself through genetics, as is the case in *Harry Potter*, or stemming from the power and creation of old gods and powerful beings, as is the case in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Mobley writes of magic:

In its first form it is a force paradoxically dualistic, appearing creative/destructive, moral/immoral, benevolent/malevolent, eternal/incarnate simultaneously. In this form it works in human affairs largely by chance; that is, the hero (landscape or other elements of the narrative) may be cursed or blessed by Magic according to luck rather than to worth or skill. (121)

It is this form that often manifests within fantastic heroes, and magic is characterized as a special and treasured gift or ability that one must use with gratitude and responsibility. Doctor Strange, however, teaches himself magic, earning through study rather than being naturally gifted with it.

Mobley adds:

In the second form personal or directed Magic is a power called out by a gifted one, an initiate in the arts or discipline of magic usage, skilled in effective magic. His skill is the end of study, not luck, and he functions in special roles in the community. In fantasy fiction, his is most often the role of guide or tester, the arbiter of change and purveyor of new wisdom in the narrative. (121)

This form of magic, as Mobley notes, is often reserved for the mentor, yet Doctor Strange comics give it to their hero, and Strange's ability to acquire magic by choice begins the series' subversion of the idea of a hero's magic as a special gift. This idea continues to be refuted when, in *Strange Tales #159*, people around the world have the dormant magical abilities lying within them awakened, and again when, in *Doctor Strange: Volume 4*, Strange's sidekick Zelma acquires magic because Strange chooses to give it to her.

In traditional fantasy, magic is often personified and given character; it is dualistic and fickle, as Mobley notes, being used for both positive and negative, and it also clearly has a life of its own, which in turn provides life to others. Without it, the entire magical world of *Harry Potter* would not exist, nor would a variety of creatures in Middle-earth. Doctor Strange texts subvert the typical wonder of magic by dehumanizing and therefore demystifying the previously humanized entity of magic through commodification. This commodification begins with *Doctor Strange*'s creation of magic as an economic good, stemming from its transformation from a guaranteed and constant force to a limited resource when the Empirikul destroy it in *Volume 1*. From there, magic becomes transactional, and by depicting magic, not as a free and guaranteed source to all those with magical abilities, but as an object that can be bargained with and traded off at will, *Doctor Strange* transforms what is often priceless into something of worth a specific value. This creation of magic as something to be priced and sold, traded, or bargained for makes it more attainable to non-magic people and therefore less valuable, as well as detracting from magic's own power and will by allowing its very essence to be controlled and dominated, not just used, by certain characters. Once magic dies, the series shows spells being sold on the internet in issue #383 as well as the few remaining magical objects being auctioned off in issue #20. Even prior to magic's defeat and subsequent objectification and incorporation into an economic system it is discussed in terms of financial value; issue #8 warns of the "mystical debt magicians accumulate if they do not give some sort of payment for using magic.

Popular contemporary fantasy teaches us that magic is a powerful, life-altering, and omnipresent entity with its own personality, and therefore is a force designed to be looked at and used with respect and awe. It has the ability to corrupt, and to be used in corrupted ways, but it is largely shown in a more optimistic light saving protagonists from their mundane lifestyles and

providing them with the ability to save the world. Regardless of its uses within the narrative, magic is always given a type of gravity that is subverted in *Doctor Strange* and *Strange Tales*. These comics strip the traditional significance of magic power by making it mortal, disrupting its sanctity, and making it a commonplace force. Therefore, while they continue to follow their fantastic literary ancestors, they enforce changes that subvert the type of magic readers have been led to believe in.

# Chapter 5:

## Unconventionality

Completing Doctor Strange's exhibition of the postmodern fantastic is its subversion of fantasy conventions and motifs. As outlined in Chapter One, fantastic literature has become formulaic, with popular works like *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifying this formula. While this formula generally applies to plot—most notably including a medieval otherworldly setting in which forces of good battle forces of evil—it also pertains to common character roles and language conventions.

Doctor Strange texts use of many of the narrative conventions common among fantasy texts, yet they often poke fun at them as a means of exposing and changing the overused tropes of the genre. One portion of such narrative conventions are language conventions, such as extravagance and poetic language as defined by Mobley. Other narrative conventions toyed with in Doctor Strange comics include traditional plot elements like the hero's journey and clashes between good and evil, as well as narrative style changed through the use of self-reflexive metafiction. Experimentation with such conventional plot elements and narrative style disrupts our expectations of fantasy while still using many of its most recognizable features. According to Attebery, "by displaying rather than suppressing the arbitrariness of narrative choices, fantasy can breathe new life into its own conventions" (68), and this is precisely what *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* do, effectively evolving the formula of fantasy.

Subversion of language and narrative conventions within *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* achieves the effect of disrupting the character conventions present in many works of

fantasy, providing a hero whose humanity, rather than his power and goodness, is emphasized, as well as forgivable or understandable villains. Jason Edwards and Brian Klosa write on heroes and villains in modern mythology, noting:

Specifically, within a myth's story arc there is a constructed cosmology between good and evil. The story often provides a lucid, if not simplistic, view of who is in the right and who is in the wrong. This dichotomy becomes more apparent when one defines the basic characteristics of the villains within the story. Evil characters are constructed as one-dimensional. There is no depth to their experience. Their purpose is self-preservation, self-interest, and wicked in nature. They are easily recognized based on wanton acts of cruelty they perform without regard to who their victims are. (36)

Many scholars agree that fantasy finds its foundations in mythology, and the similarities between modern conceptions of good versus evil found in popularized fantasy reflect such foundations. Bergen writes that "*The Lord of the Rings* pits the forces of good and evil against each other in non-negotiable clashes of arms" (117) and Griesinger adds that "Rowling's Dumbledore is in the same company as the heroes of Lewis and Tolkien when he says that there is a battle and that everybody is on one side or the other" (247). Because of this, there are typically strict lines that separate the good characters from the evil ones; Sauron and Voldemort each reflect a greed for power which consumes them and motivates their villainy, while Frodo and Harry are heroic simply because, despite any temptations, they do not fall victim to such greed permanently enough to harm others. Doctor Strange texts take a more realistic approach to characterization, still creating forces of good and evil but blurring the line between them.

It is this blurred line between good and evil that serves to demystify the role of the hero and the villain in *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*. Heroes are tempted, and sometimes they

briefly succumb to those temptations, but they manage to right their wrongs and atone for their sins in ways that the villains do not. Doctor Strange texts, on the other hand, develop their titular character as something closer to an antihero, making it clear that the constant heroism of many fantastic protagonists is not necessary, and that a protagonist can be as similarly flawed as real people, at times even more so, and can still exist as a believable and likeable hero. Such consistently flawed characterization, along with unconventional heroic methods and the normalization of the heroic lifestyle leads to an unglorified and casual hero who unconventionally occupies the same social stratification as the normal people surrounding them.

While protagonists often possess initial flaws or lowly beginnings that they work to overcome along their journey, their flaws are usually small and understandable, often making them empathetic or likeable; Harry is orphaned and abused, and Bilbo and Frodo are both attached to their calm lifestyles in the Shire. Ingalls writes that Harry Potter complicates the question of goodness due to certain acts he performs despite being the hero:

...he copies Hermione's homework, he often breaks rules while at school and sneaks around using the Marauder's Map, he lets his anger get the best of him and "accidentally" practices magic on the Dursleys and Aunt Marge in the beginning of Book Three, he frequently gets into tussles with Draco and his cronies, and he acquiesces to adolescent lust and engages in a physically romantic relationship with Cho Chang and Ginny Weasley... (14)

However, these "flaws" are the small-scale impurities of an adolescent, and in spite of them it is clear that Harry is meant to be the "good guy." Contrastingly, Doctor Strange's initial flaws do not stem from lowly beginnings; instead, his flaws are more demonizing than endearing, as he exhibits vanity, greed, and pride resulting from his success and fame as a surgeon. Even following his transformation into a hero who cares more about his patients than his image, Doctor Strange exhibits flaws and normalcy that continue to demystify his role as a hero. For

instance, issue #1 shows Strange drinking and casually discussing failed relationships and the dangers of the superhero job with his magical friends, and after losing magic, issue #383 shows him stealing magic from Asgard and acting heroically only due to prideful, selfish, and vengeful motivations rather than moral motivations. These flaws, along with being more normalizing than those of the traditional hero, mainly humanize Doctor in a more realistic way than the constantly morally upright figures of popular fantasy. Yet there are other, more serious flaws that call into question Strange's status as a hero; in issue #12 it is revealed that the monstrous creature who has recently become a villain only exists as such because Strange created him to serve as a vessel into which he could transfer his own pain; in issue #25 we see that Doctor Strange does not often check on the people he saves once the heroic deed is done and is rarely held accountable for the damage that he causes by neglecting to do so; and issue #26 depicts Doctor Strange bending right towards wrong "for a greater good," ominously mirroring the *Harry Potter* villains Grindelwald and Voldemort, who operate under similar mindsets.

Aiding in the degradation of the hero is the description of Strange's heroic lifestyle in terms comparable to those describing the lifestyle of regular people. Alongside descriptions of Strange's daily heroic achievements are descriptions of him performing or commenting on tasks relevant to regular readers. For instance, in issue #147 he must get his Sanctum Sanctorum up to standard building codes and regulations, and he makes telephone calls to find a regular job because he needs money. Even his actual heroic escapades are discounted by their casual nature in comparison to the momentous battles of typical heroes; while his first appearance in *Doctor Strange Volume 1* shows him in the heat of battle, he tells the reader "this is just a normal Tuesday for me" (#1) rather than enforcing the idea that all battles are a challenging opportunity for growth and character development, and he continues to have casual battles with unseen

creatures as he walks down the street, again disrupting the trend of grand and adventurous confrontations. Similarly, issue #13 juxtaposes the “superheroism” of being a surgeon, representing Strange’s pre-superhero life, with his work as a superhero, positing his work as a surgeon as the more heroic and helpful of the two lifestyles. Other subtle belittlement of the hero comes from Doctor Strange’s language use, as when he refers to the superhero figure as a “costumed jerk” (#17) and when he says things like “I wonder if superheroes get discounted subway rates” (#12). This demystification mirrors what Triana mentions as one of *Deadpool* writers’ strategies for creating an unconventional protagonist: “the use of humor to distance heroic identification” (1024).

Even his heroic methods present a different type of hero than that presented in fantasy: Mel Ash, a reader of the comics and writer of *The Zen of Recovery* (2004), writes:

The story [of Dr. Strange] affected me profoundly. Dr. Strange didn’t use violence to defeat his enemies and didn’t kill...it was apparent to me as a child that something very different was happening here. Dr. Strange was often shown meditating in the full lotus position...so I started meditating like Dr. Strange, hoping to escape into other, better realms.

This type of audience reception attests to the fact that Doctor Strange contrasts the fantastic heroes to which readers are accustomed. In addition to lack of violence, Strange at times relinquishes the role of hero to other characters. For instance, issue #10 shows people he has saved in the past coming together to take on his pain because he is unable to exist under its weight on his own, which is an effort that reverses the narrative trope of the hero saving masses of people. While exhibitions of violence in Harry Potter and Bilbo and Frodo Baggins are not quite common, they do become necessary as their respective stories progress, and ultimately part

of their heroic glory stems from their abilities as warriors. In contrast, Strange's more heralded abilities are those that involve meditation and knowledge.

Strange's identity as a hero is further complicated and diminished by the temporality of his character and by the fact that his very identity as a superhero can be taken away and transferred to other characters. Because of the serialization of the comic book medium and the consistent reboots serialization allows for, different versions of Doctor Strange's character are created, with each version reflecting the culture of the time period surrounding it. Therefore, what constitutes his heroic deeds and his flaws fluctuates based on the values of the audience of the time. This character fluctuation is not only dependent upon the surrounding audience, but also upon the changing writers of the series. Gruber notes the changes Strange's character undergoes from the time of his creation, writing that "for more than a half of a century, a rotating cast of writers and artists contributed their own unique vision of the Doctor, updating the superhero and the world he inhabited in order to address, and even anticipate, the changing interests of their audience" (348). This type of characterization is in direct contrast to fantastic characters whose personalities and existences as heroes are immortalized upon completion of the publication of their series.

Along with the reconceptualized idea of the hero that Strange's consistent changes reflect, his heroic identity is less sublime than other fantastic heroes due to the fact that he is not prophesied to be the hero and his title as Sorcerer Supreme does not belong to him and can be transferred to others. Divination and prophecy "are common to many work of fantasy" (Tredray 251), being featured prominently in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tredray 251) as well as *Harry Potter*. In such works, it is often prophesied that the protagonist will fill the role of the hero, and many of their adventures are foretold. As such, the protagonists almost has no choice but to resign

themselves to the role of the hero as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This tradition is somewhat subverted in *Harry Potter*, since Dumbledore informs Harry (and the readers) that Neville Longbottom also fit the prophecy that Harry filled; however, Harry is still destined for heroism based on the criteria of the prophecy, and he was forced into the strict role of hero once Voldemort chose him, rather than Neville, to be his enemy. *Doctor Strange* shows a heightened subversion of this trope by entirely erasing it and showcasing a protagonist who is under no prophesied obligation to act as hero. Because the Sorcerer Supreme is not prophesied or destined the way the Chosen One is, the person who holds the title can and does change. In issue #381, the trickster god Loki takes the mantle of Sorcerer Supreme, and Doctor Strange returns to the medical lifestyle he exhibited before he gained his mystical title. Loki's existence as the Sorcerer Supreme further complicates the idea of heroic identity. The title of Sorcerer Supreme designates the one holding the title as mystical protector of that universe, essentially rendering them a type of hero. However, Loki, even more so than Doctor Strange, fails to uphold the traditional image of the fantastic hero; rather than holding the title with dignity and solemnity, Loki introduces his role with the line "my name is Loki Laufeyson, god of lies, mischief, and stories...and I'm the %\$#@ Sorcerer Supreme." In addition to the transference of the title of Sorcerer Supreme, the importance of the role continues to dwindle when one considers that there are different Sorcerer Supremes shown for various different versions of the comic book multiverse. While in fantasy there is a Chosen *One*, or only one fit to take the Ring to Mordor, *Doctor Strange* gives us multiple versions of the hero, decreasing Stephen Strange's importance. Each of these instances diminishes the typically elevated status of the hero, complicating the question of what makes a hero rather than accepting and following the model of the obviously heroic fantastic protagonist.

Despite attempts to blur the boundaries between good and evil, traditional fantasy often depicts these natures as a binary by narratively convincing us to identify with the protagonist, creating the protagonist and their allies as “good” and anyone who opposes them as “evil.” Tolkien cites malice, greed, and destruction as “the evil side of heroic life” (142), reminding us that even those attributes commonly associated with villainy are often found in the hero. Such a notion coming from Tolkien shows that he is aware of the thin line between goodness and corruption, and we see him exploring this line in his works. While he clearly wants to show that ideas of good and evil are complex, his works still exhibit distinctions between the sides of good and the sides of evil, with obvious indicators as to who belongs on which side. Bergen highlights this rigid distinction, writing “even though orcish behaviour is obviously comparable to human behaviour, the reader is never asked to consider any alternative course of action against them other than violence, and is constantly encouraged to look on them as evil monsters, as foulness that is best exterminated by arms” (116). Heightening our forced desire to see the demise of villains are characterizations that depict them as revelling in their villainous identity. In *Harry Potter*, Voldemort is shown laughing and enjoying himself as he kills and tortures victims, priding himself on cruel actions and promoting the vanity of blood status. Similarly, Bergen notes that “the army of the evil faction in *The Lord of the Rings* is overwhelmingly vast; they are, so to speak, the ‘infantry’ of evil; they provide the disagreeable sweat and muscle that discourages readers from identifying with Sauron’s factions in the War of the Ring” (113).

In contrast, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* show a more realistic back and forth between the natures of good and evil, creating them as a spectrum rather than a binary. The characters who are at times labelled as villains are shown to exhibit both good and evil, depending on the context, as are the characters labelled as heroes. For instance, Dormammu is a

consistent villain of the series throughout both runs, yet in *Strange Tales #147* he is seen to be a good protector of his dimension, showing that in the eyes of his subjects he may not be seen as entirely evil. This is dissimilar to the Orcs and other members of Sauron's army who are aware they are fighting for darkness and Voldemort's followers, known as Death Eaters, who for the most part are comfortably settled into their identifications as villains. Another popular comic villain, Kingpin, joins forces with Doctor Strange and the Defenders in *Doctor Strange #22*, showing that, depending on the situation, villains are not always villains. The smaller adversaries in *Doctor Strange* are made particularly sympathetic: despite the fact that certain creatures are trying to kill him, Strange informs the reader that "they're not evil, these slugs. They're not monsters. They're just hungry animals trying to fill their empty bellies" (*Doctor Strange #3*). Here we see creatures committing evil deeds yet not being classified as evil because they are only working on survival instincts. Sympathy for the villain and the complexity behind classifying a character as such is further complicated in *Doctor Strange* with the presentation of Mr. Misery. This being onto which Doctor Strange transferred all of the pain that magic caused him grew sentient and developed into a villain; however, his identification as such is complicated by the fact that his very existence is the result of Strange's own evils and selfishness. Because of this complication, his character demystifies the hero and obfuscates the distinction between good and evil. This obfuscation is deepened in issue #10, as Mr. Misery helps Doctor Strange defeat the villainous Empirikul, saving Doctor Strange's life but admitting that he only did so because he wants to kill Strange himself. This repeated oscillation between good actions and evil intentions shows the comics' aversion to the somewhat reductionist attitudes towards morality and human nature exhibited in popular fantasy.

In short, where fantasy depicts a good character doing a bad thing but ultimately remaining on the side of good, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* show frequent fluctuation of characters' natures based on context, blending good and evil and allowing characters to move along a scale between the two in a more subversively realistic nature. *Harry Potter* contains examples of people switching sides and acting out of preservation in a manner similar to Doctor Strange comics: the Malfoys abandon the Battle of Hogwarts, defecting from the side of evil yet not joining the side of good, and Xenophilius Lovegood attempts to turn Harry over to Voldemort in an attempt to rescue his abducted daughter. Yet these actions stem from conscious and willful decision making rather than a primal survival instinct, and these characters are still widely regarded in terms of a binary understanding of good and evil, as Xenophilius is consistently understood to be "good" and the Malfoys understood to be "bad." In fantasy, evil characters are clearly marked by their defeat; C.S. Lewis writes that fantasy must "let villains be soundly killed at the end of the book" (31), and this sentiment is reflected in his works as well as in the works of Tolkien, Rowling, and multiple other fantastic authors. *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*, however, do not always enact such a fate on their fantastic villains. *Strange Tales #127*, for example, shows Doctor Strange working to help Dormammu, rescuing him instead fighting to defeat him. Because of the narrative style of comic books, villains are frequently defeated but not killed, as it is comic book convention to cycle through a set of villains multiple times instead of creating a new villain for each issue. Therefore, the form of comics forces a narrative that subverts the tradition of killing of fantastic villains for a satisfactorily triumphant ending.

In addition to their portrayal of good and evil as fluid, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* use language to characterize villains in a facetious manner, demystifying their role by detracting from their threatening image. When describing her villain, Rowling uses language which

develops an unsettling image for readers to help them understand the danger Voldemort poses and the fear he instills in other characters; she writes that he is “whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes, and a nose that was as flat as a snake’s, with slits for nostrils” (*Goblet of Fire* 697). Similarly terrifying, Sauron is described in *The Silmarillion* as “a sorcerer of dreadful power, master of shadows and of phantoms, foul in wisdom, cruel in strength, misshaping what he touched, twisting what he ruled, lord of werewolves; his dominion was torment” (182). In *Doctor Strange #12*, Zelma states “no offense, Doc, because I know he’s your archenemy and all, but according to the internet, this Baron Mordo guy...is kind of a loser,” a description which, when juxtaposed with those given for other fantastic villains, humorously deconstructs the precedent of the horrifying antagonist. In a similar move, *Doctor Strange #7* includes Strange’s ally, Monako, using a colloquial register to banter with the villain, responding to his threats with “you sound just like my ex-wife.” Additionally, while even the names of fantastic villains are demonized, with Voldemort referred to as “You-Know-Who” and “He who must not be named” and Sauron referenced as “the Dark Lord of Mordor,” Doctor Strange conversationally calls Mordo by his first name and, in issue #16, almost affectionately refers to one of his most powerful adversaries, Dormammu, as “Dormie.” These descriptions diminish the menacing appearance of villains, working alongside the comics’ spectrum of good and evil to deconstruct the simplistic trend of evil and villainy in popular fantasy.

Even the more minor character trope of the fantastic mentor is subverted in these comics. *Strange Tales* maintains the trope of the “western superhero and his Eastern mentor” (Gruber 351), however, it also depicts the Ancient One with weaknesses that are not often found in the fantastic hero’s mentor. Additionally, the Ancient One’s practices and style of mentorship differ from those of the magical mentors in popular fantasy. Gandalf and Dumbledore, notably similar

mentor figures stemming from Arthurian representations of Merlin, both are recognized as Christ-like figures: Gandalf undergoes temptation from the Ring that mirrors the Devil's temptation of Jesus, and he exhibits a death and resurrection that allow him to emerge more powerful than before, and Dumbledore, while he does not return from death, sacrifices himself and preaches on the power of love in a Christ-like manner. In contrast, the Ancient One, and Strange's training as a whole, reflects greater hints of Buddhism, or at least quasi-Buddhism, than Christianity. As Gruber notes, "the Ancient One's wisdom challenged a predominantly Christian culture and provided an alternative worldview..." (360). In addition to challenging the template of Christian wisdom and guidance in the mentor, the Ancient One also disrupts fantastic trends by presenting a mentor who frequently requires aid or rescue from the protagonist. Where Dumbledore and Gandalf exhibit power and enact fortunately-timed salvation for the hero, the Ancient One, after awaiting rescue from Strange in *Strange Tales #124*, desperately proclaims "my limbs are old...my powers fading! I needed him!" In popular fantasy, mentors rely on the protagonists in the sense that they need the protagonist to save the world, but the Ancient One on multiple occasions needs Doctor Strange to save himself specifically, not to save the world.

Subversion of the mentor trope is continued in *Doctor Strange* due to the fact that the series eliminates the character, alluding to him briefly in issue #9 but making it clear that he is dead. Dumbledore and Gandalf each die as well, but Gandalf returns from death and Dumbledore does not die until the end of the series, and even then he still manages to play a crucially helpful role in Harry's victory. Contrastingly, *Doctor Strange* shows the Ancient One as only being useful in his death, as Strange uses his mentor's bones as a final scrap of magic once magic has been killed. In this way, the comics' portrayal of the mentor is not only subversive in its erasure

of the character, but also in its notion that the Ancient One's decayed body is more useful than the knowledge he could impart were he alive.

Along with altering the character conventions relied on by the fantasy genre, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* also experiment with the language and narrative conventions of the fantasy genre by using metafiction and self-reflexivity to expose and alter tired plots and expected storytelling methods while still involving many narrative staples of the genre. Each of the components of the fantasy genre outlined by Mobley and discussed thus far serve the purpose of distinguishing the narrative's world and reality from our own and strengthening the suspension of disbelief, and I have so far outlined the ways in which Doctor Strange comics toy with these components to achieve the opposite goal. In subverting the traditional use of poetic language and extravagance, as well as incorporating narration designed to disrupt the belief of the reader, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* distinguish themselves as contemporary revisions of old patterns.

Poetic language refers mainly to the flowery descriptions and names used in fantasy to heighten the uniqueness of the otherworldly setting, and, while Doctor Strange is occasionally seen using spells and referring to places and creatures with such language, he often forgoes poetics in favor of a casual tone which, rather than heightening the difference of his world and lifestyle, humanizes him and normalizes his magical career. In the world of Harry Potter, this quality of poetic language manifests itself most frequently in names of spells and characters. Characters utter incantations like "Wingardium Leviosa" and encounter creatures like Aragog the Acromantula. Similarly, in *The Lord of the Rings* we find character titles such as Gandalf the Grey and place names like Lothlórien and the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, as well as many literal songs and poems spoken in various poetic constructed languages. Doctor Strange utters similar

poetic spells and exclamations, such as “by the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth” and “aided by the Shades of the Seraphim” (*Strange Tales #152*), allowing him to keep up with the trends set by his fantastic predecessors, but at times he also acknowledges the ridiculousness of such exaggerated phrases. For instance, he makes fun of poetic language, explaining that without magical energy “my spells are nothing but weird words” (#3) and parodies complicated incantations by using phrases like “Abracadabra you son of a bitch” (#6) as he fights his enemies. Poetic language is also present in the motivational speeches given by heroes in many works of fantasy, as well as in their heartfelt dialogue with villains. For instance, Éowyn, when facing the Nazgul in *The Return of the King*, exclaims “you look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him” (116). And such lofty speeches, which inspire readers and add energize the story, work in stark contrast to Strange’s casual, sarcastic exclamations of “ah, no thanks there, Dormie. New York’s not looking for another borough. It’s bad enough we’re stuck with Staten Island” (#16) after hearing the villainous Dormammu’s extensive threats against him and the world around him.

Doctor Strange texts use more traditional examples of extravagant language than they do of poetic language, yet the role of extravagant language within the texts does not serve to set apart the worlds and characters from that of their readers, as do many fantasy texts; rather, they function as a means of rushing or skipping plot, thereby diminishing the role of the hero. As is the case with poetic language, extravagance is also commonly found in the spells, names, songs, and descriptions within many prominent works of fantastic literature. Frequently exemplifying extravagant language are “stylistic formulas which report the events as ‘more horrible than can be imagined,’ or describe the ladies as ‘more beautiful than tongue can tell” (Mobley 124).

Similar usage of such phrases manifests within *Strange Tales*, as when the narrator comments on a “description-defying dimension” in issue #138 and claims of the Dark Dimension: “there are no words in earthly language to accurately describe it” (#127). However, *Strange Tales* ultimately begins to subvert the common purpose of such phrases; instead of using them to heighten the otherworldliness of their settings or the grandeur and heroism of their characters, *Strange Tales* makes use of extravagant language mainly to supplement plot, relying on images rather than elaborate description for settings and characters. For instance, issue #147 details an event so impactful that “human senses could not understand the cataclysm that followed it” and issue #155 introduces the story with the sentence: “then begins a journey—so mystifying—so incomprehensible—so utterly beyond our poor powers of description—that we can only depict the barest details thru the use of mere mortal illustration.” These instances of extravagant language reflect an avoidance of plot description that negates the role of the hero; if readers are not shown Strange’s journey or struggle in fighting evil, how are they to appreciate the outcome as fully as they can appreciate the victory of a hero like Harry Potter, whose life is followed from the time he is eleven years old, or Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, whose adventures are detailed in full through nearly each stage. Despite the instances of traditional extravagant language within *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*, such language is also employed as a means of eschewing the promotion of the hero by refusing to detail his journey, functioning as one of the ways in which *Doctor Strange* writers begin to question expected fantastic character roles.

While fantasy texts are largely focused on sustaining a reader’s belief in their fantastic worlds and plots, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* both consistently ruin the opportunity for such belief by directly addressing and involving the reader and by frequently reminding the reader of the construction of the fictional text. *Strange Tales* #159 opens with an invitation for

the reader to repeat the incantation “let the flames thus flicker low, let the silent shadows steal, let the lonely candle’s glow our mystic tale—reveal!!” in order to begin the story, and the writers add “as a last resort, if the above spell fails to work, try turning the page...” Similarly involving the reading is the introduction of *Strange Tales #129* in which the writers warn the readers not to “peruse this spellbinding saga too hastily” because “there is far more here than meets the hurrying eye!” These asides and others like them form a conversational relationship between reader and writer, rather than between reader and fictional characters, which reminds the reader that they are, in fact, reading and not escaping into the fantasy world. Other author notes and asides force readers to recognize the artificiality and construction of the text. For instance, *Strange Tales #150* includes the narration “...hurling the immobile body and spirit of the conquered wizard into the depths of limbo—till the end of time!\* \*or at least until we decide what to do with him.” These types of addresses to the reader exhibit the way the writers forego the attempt to craft consistent, independent, and well-planned narratives, contrasting the believable world-building and narrative planning for which *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* are praised. Also disruptive of the reader’s ability to escape into the narrative are reminders of past issues of the comic. The ability to include such direct references to previous issues is itself a new narrative format afforded by the comic book medium which fantastic texts do not allow for; while fantasy series may include inter-series references, they do not come in the form of writer addresses to the reader. Such conversational, intertextual references encourage readers to remember a character’s inconsistently constructed past, rather than attempting to immerse readers in a story through narration that makes characters and plots believable.

These asides and intertextual references, along with disrupting the reader's ability to escape into the story, also call out tired tropes of the fantastic narrative; instead of relying on established methods, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* question such methods by drawing attention to their overuse. *Strange Tales* #142 immediately labels the "good guy" and the "bad guy" at the beginning of the story, self-reflexively exposing the pattern of simplistic moral categorization of characters found in many fantasy narratives. This pattern is later disrupted in *Doctor Strange* when the line between good and evil is blurred, as discussed previously. In *Strange Tales* #150, the Ancient One leaves Doctor Strange on purpose and comments that he must do us in order for Strange to learn to fight on his own, explicitly labelling another common trope within the fantasy and superhero genres. While *Strange Tales* points to overused conventions by blatantly labelling them instead of trying to disguise them, *Doctor Strange*, in a more modern take, uses humor to highlight and dismantle the prevalent narrative structures of the fantastic canon. For example, in issue #22, Kingpin calls out the trope of "superhero banter" and the "screechy wordplay" of villains, and Doctor Strange asks readers "what is it with dark wizards and alliteration? Always sounds like a Saturday morning cartoon." Along with self-reflexively acknowledging the conventions they are drawing from, these comics also directly reference other works of fantasy to infuse humor into the narrative, and in doing so they highlight the fictionality of such works. In issue #22, the villainous witch tells Doctor Strange and his comrades that they "shall not pass," to which Kingpin responds: "holy hell, she went full Gandalf!" Similarly, issue #23 shows Daredevil jokingly referring to the villainous Mordo's "Slytherin robes." These references use components from other works of fantasy in a jocular manner where those other works used them seriously, and in doing so they subversively trivialize their own narratives as well as those from which they are borrowing.

Additionally subversive are the plot and style differences found between these comics and their fantastic literary influences. Because of their serialized format, these comics have more flexibility to experiment with new styles that challenge those of fantastic tales published in book or short story form. Because the serialized comic book format allows for constant reboots and alterations of characters and timelines, the various writers of *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* are free from the creative burden of narrative planning, as seen in the above quote from *Strange Tales* #150 in which Stan Lee admits that he has not yet decided what to do with his character. When writers of popular fantasy plan their hero's story, the story is their own to create, and they follow their characters through to the end. In *Strange Tales*, however, Lee and Ditko directly address the audience asking for input, and they tailor future issues to fit the audience's requests. This format makes room for a hero who can continue to be adapted to audiences as time progresses, allowing them to reflect both literary and cultural changes, as opposed to characters who become static once their book or series ends.

Serialization also allows for the hero's adventures to take place in discrete units: Doctor Strange fights one villain for ten pages in *Strange Tales*, and then that event is over and he moves on to a new villain or a separate fight in the next issue. While fantasy often is published in a series, it is not the same type of serialization; the serialization of *Strange Tales* references a type of publishing, while the series format of fantasy is a description of narrative style. *Strange Tales* exemplifies an ongoing series—a series that is designed to continue indefinitely—while *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*—texts with predetermined endings—exemplify a limited series. As an ongoing series, individual issues of *Strange Tales* contain discrete narratives, as opposed to the continuous narratives of fantasy. *Doctor Strange (2015)* exists as a style in between the discrete adventures of *Strange Tales* and the consistent storyline of works like *Harry*

*Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*; unlike *Strange Tales*, the narrative continuously builds rather than having an entirely new story in every issue, but unlike in fantasy, the hero is not just facing one main villain throughout the series, instead carrying the problems created in the first volume as he faces a variety of villains throughout Volumes 2 through 6.

Along with serialization, the comic book medium involves uses of images and styles of narration that distance them from the formulaic conventions of fantasy. Because comic books are intertextual, they often incorporate plots and characters from other comics. *Doctor Strange* exhibits this in Volume 5, interrupting its own narrative to instead focus on the narrative that corresponds to Nick Spencer's series, *Secret Empire*. This intrusion of a foreign story into *Doctor Strange*'s narrative downplays the importance of Strange's own adventures, and it presents a style that is in direct opposition to popular fantasy's emphasis on the hero's journey and the unbroken narrative. *Doctor Strange #25* shows a fractured reality in which a plot from Strange's past is infused within the plot of his current character. In this issue, changes in artistic style are used to represent the alternating time periods, with the story of the past showing an outdated superhero wardrobe and linguistic style and the story of the present showing a modernized Doctor Strange. While it is true that fantasy plays with the motif of time in a similar fashion—for instance, Harry and Hermione go a few minutes back in time and end up hiding as they watch future versions of themselves—these occasions do not reflect significant changes to characters and instead are only used to enhance the fantastic nature of the stories in which they are used. Issue #25's examples of intertextuality celebrate the evolution of Strange's character while also disrupting the reader's belief in the modern narrative by reminding them of the narratives of the past, again exemplifying Collins's notion that comics reference their own inconsistencies, as mentioned in Chapter Three.

Many of the elements of fantasy designed for worldbuilding must be relayed through narrative and discourse, but comic books do not quite rely on these elements due to their use of images. For instance, when *Doctor Strange #1* wants the reader to recognize the extension of our world that Strange is able to see, instead of describing this extension to readers, the author and artist use background images that show our regular world in black and white and our unseen extended world in color. Images are also used to show Strange's backstory in *Doctor Strange #1*, again reminding readers of the character's literary past and refusing to prioritize the hero's journey. In *Doctor Strange #7* the background images depict the world with more gray than color to symbolize the death of magic; however, these pictures involve subtle symbolism that the reader is meant to interpret, contrasting the extensive explanations and descriptions used in fantastic texts to aggrandize the narrative and the fantastic setting. Because comics do not have to devote much text to description due to their stylistic incorporation of images, they are able to foreground dialogue and narration rather than worldbuilding.

*Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* also include subtle uses of language that distinguish them from fantasy; while Tolkien develops a variety of languages in his works as a means of establishing Middle-earth as a realistic world separate from our own, these comics de-emphasize language differences to lessen the otherworldliness of the story. *Strange Tales #159* contains images of newspapers printed in different languages shows an event affecting the entire world, and many issues of both *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* show different dialects through the use of different fonts. In *Strange Tales #156*, the villainous Umar's dialogue is written in English although she is from the Dark Dimension, with Stan Lee including the note: "never wishing to deceive our frantic fans, we must confess that Umar's dialogue is but loosely translated from the original Dark-Dimensional dialect! Those of you desiring a more precise version may remain

after class!” This dismissal of language differences is in stark opposition to wealth of text devoted to the development of various different languages in *The Lord of the Rings*. While fantastic texts incorporate and emphasize constructed languages, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* de-emphasize them, reducing them to font variations or explaining them away with asides to the reader, thereby taking one of the staples of fantasy and deconstructing it by disregarding it.

In addition to differences of style and narration, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* also exhibit differences in plot which continue to reveal patterns of fantasy that can be adapted to reinvigorate the genre for contemporary audiences. One of the foundations of the fantasy genre is the battle between good and evil, with the conflict existing on a cosmic level rather than simply affecting the earthly (or Middle-earthly) groups directly involved. Bergen addresses the “cosmos of light and dark” (107) in Tolkien’s works, noting the “cosmic evil and mundane evil” (119), as well as cosmic and mundane goodness, that Tolkien includes in his fantastic world. This cosmic scale is seen in the interference of higher beings: angelic figures known as the Valar send wizards known as Istari, including Gandalf, to combat the dark powers of Sauron. This type of celestial interest in the battle between good and evil is reversed in *Strange Tales*; issue #158 depicts the Living Tribunal, a three-headed being that functions as overseer and god of the universe, asking Doctor Strange: “do you think that such mortal mutterings as good and evil—right and wrong—have meaning to such as...the Living Tribunal?” Because this being is concerned with the problems of the entire universe, the problems of the Earth, and more specifically of the comics’ protagonist, are trivialized. The Living Tribunal is only concerned when the actions of the hero threaten to disrupt the universe, not just one world. This apathetic attitude towards the end of the world, which is drastically different from the magnitude given to

world-ending villains or events in popular fantasy, continues in *Doctor Strange*, with issue #4's humorous dismissal of impending catastrophe; Monako, bar owner and friend of Doctor Strange, states that "the end of the world is always good for business." While these comics include the motif of good versus evil in the form of fantastic battles, they do not present them with the cosmic gravity present in seminal works like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, a famously postmodern comic book, is said to "question the status quo of superhero narratives by showing their futility and meaninglessness in the postmodern world" (Frank 141), and *Doctor Strange* emulates this goal through its subtle indication that it is not always possible for the superhero to save the world.

These comics also deconstruct the traditional hero's journey that serves as a cornerstone of popular fantasy. Attebery writes:

The structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is that of the traditional fairy tale. It conforms to the morphology described by Vladimir Propp: a round-trip journey to the marvelous, complete with testing of the hero, crossing of a threshold, supernatural assistance, confrontation, flight, and establishment of a new order at home. (15)

Harry Potter undergoes a similar process, crossing the threshold into a new, magical world, meeting friends and supernatural guides, carrying out various adventures that cause him to grow as a person and as a wizard, facing an ultimate confrontation between himself and the main villain, and, upon emerging victorious, returning to a changed world with the ability to live at peace.

*Strange Tales*, despite its adherence to many of the traditional examples of the hero's journey as refined by Joseph Campbell, begins the process of subverting some of the expectations of the individual stages, and *Doctor Strange (2015)* expands these subversive

efforts and carries Lee and Ditko's hero into the contemporary age. While the narratives of these comics deconstruct the various individual stages as they are seen in fantasy, many of the important differences are found in the form of the story, rather than just the content. In manifestations of the hero's journey in fantastic literature, the story often begins at the start of the hero's journey. For instance, we meet Harry Potter when he is of age to begin his wizarding education and learn his true identity, and we meet Frodo when the world is in trouble and it is time for him to take the ring to Mordor. Doctor Strange's debut, however, reveals him as having already undergone his journey and emerged as a learned and established magical hero. It is only in the issue of his sixth appearance, *Strange Tales #115*, that he is given an origin story that reveals some of the stages of his hero's journey. The importance of the hero's journey and the hero himself are further decreased by the fact that *Strange Tales* is not wholly devoted to Doctor Strange; instead, Doctor Strange receives ten to twelve pages at the end of each issue, introducing him "quietly and without fanfare" (*Strange Tales #110*).

Along with changes to the hero's journey based on the comic book form, there are also important changes made to the narrative itself. In contrast to the humble beginnings of many fantastic heroes, Doctor Strange begins his origin story as depicted in both *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange Volume 1: The Way of the Weird* as a famed, wealthy surgeon, and the beginnings of the hero's journeys depicted in the issues following his origin story already take place in the new world surrounding his mystic career. In both his origin story and his subsequent narratives, he is never an ordinary person in an ordinary world; both as a surgeon and as a sorcerer he is a man of influence and skill in a flashy world, which ruins our expectations of the rags to riches tale that traditional fantasy has led us to believe in.

*Doctor Strange* inverts the hero's journey, showing a hero who, rather than being cut off from a life of normalcy, is cut off from his usual life of sorcery. Additionally, rather than returning from this stage stronger, Doctor Strange returns weaker. He is even further cut off from his life as Sorcerer Supreme issues later in *Doctor Strange #381* when the mantle is taken over by Loki. This "death" of the superhero subverts the tradition of the hero getting stronger after undergoing trials that heighten their magical affiliation or skill and instead depicts a hero who is forced to find strength in the normal skills of strategy and experience rather than the fantastic skills often gained in a magical world. Ultimately, instead of progressing, Doctor Strange finds himself back at the starting point, learning and creating new spells all over again and disrupting the linear journey to victory expected from fantasy.

Upon completion of the quest, the hero must return to their ordinary world with the boon, knowledge, relationships, and changed psyche acquired along their journey. Bilbo returns from his adventure in possession of the ring and a large amount of money, Frodo returns so changed that he no longer has reason to exist in the Shire and instead must pass on to Valinor, and Harry emerges from each adventure with more knowledge and skills to aid in his ultimate defeat of Voldemort which saves the wizarding world. In his origin story, Doctor Strange does not exhibit this, as his journey does not require him to return to an ordinary world from a magical one but to take residence in both as they exist alongside one another. He does return to from his training in Tibet to live in New York as the Sorcerer Supreme, but this return is simply a geographical move in the same world, rather than a return to mundane or calm existence. In *Volume 1: God of Magic*, when Doctor Strange returns to his "ordinary world," it is really a return to a world in which magic is functioning normally again; rather than moving from a untroubled or mundane world to a magical world and then returning to a calm world, Doctor Strange makes his journey

in the 2015 series from a magical world through a non-magical one, and then returns to his usual magical world.

At this point, the hero is the master of two worlds, as they are able to travel freely between their ordinary world and their Secondary World. Following this return and mastery, the hero, having restored the world, experiences the freedom to live in peace; Bilbo lives calmly in the Shire, Frodo's destination of Valinor promises the peaceful Middle-earth version of heavenly afterlife, and Harry's story concludes with the line "all was well" (759). This is altered in the journey of Doctor Strange as seen in *Strange Tales #115* and the subsequent issues, leaving the stage and the journey as a whole incomplete. In a sense, Doctor Strange emerges from his origin story in *Strange Tales* as the master of two worlds upon completion of his training and return to New York in that he has mastered the mystical arts enough to accept the job of protecting his world from various enemies, yet he does not exhibit total mastery, as each issue forces him to display further learning of the mystic arts to tackle increasingly challenging threats. Therefore, at the end of each issue of both *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange (2015)*, rather than emerging as a total master of two worlds, Doctor Strange emerges as a hero that must continue to learn how to master two worlds with each new threat. This also leads to his inability to experience the full freedom to live, for as soon as Doctor Strange reaches the end of one hero's journey, his next experience as a hero begins. Rather than returning in peace, he returns to continue upholding the mantle of mystical defender of the Earth, with the knowledge that as such he will never have the freedom to live a peaceful life. This is specifically stated in the text, as *Strange Tales #143* informs us that "for Dr. Strange, the fight is never fully ended, the battle is never truly won..." Popular fantasy depicts a hero adventuring through a magical world in order to save it, and *Doctor Strange* mimics this trend, but while doing so it also changes our idea of the hero and

their journey, allowing it to fit into a more contemporary genre of postmodern fantasy that better reflects contemporary attitudes towards heroism.

While still incorporating certain fantastic themes, such as the struggle between good and evil and the hero's journey, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* shine a light on the overuse of certain elements of fantasy. They treat events often regarded with gravity as casual, and they use humor to disrupt trends that are often regarded with seriousness in order to encourage the reader's belief in the Secondary World and the events it hosts. In doing so, these comics give new life to a formula to which audiences have grown accustomed.

# Chapter 6:

## Conclusion

The goal of this thesis has been to explore the idea that Doctor Strange comics exist as part of a genre I refer to as “post-fantasy” and that it shapes this genre by using the conventions of fantasy as a building block. To do so, I have looked at *Strange Tales*, which was written by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko beginning in 1963, as well as *Doctor Strange (2015)*, including issues #1 through #26 and #381 through #385, in comparison to such popular works of fantasy as Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This existence as post-fantasy evidences the idea that Doctor Strange narratives take the beloved formula of fantasy and push its boundaries, adapting nostalgic but tired plots and narrative conventions to appeal to contemporary audiences.

Mobley and Attebery each provide their own contributions which create the comprehensive definition of fantasy used throughout this thesis. This definition centers around the tenets of otherworldliness, the use of magic and supernaturalism, conventions of poetic language and extravagance, narrative conventions that encourage the suspension of disbelief, and plot conventions that involve a strict dichotomy between good and evil. Each of these pieces are used within Rowling’s and Tolkien’s works, and these works, as cornerstones of the genre, have consequently developed and popularized such elements of fantastic literature. The inclusion of these conventions serves the ultimate purpose of heightening the fantasy in order to provide a believable world and story into which readers can escape, adventure, and triumph. Throughout each stage of the examples of fantasy used within this thesis, the grandeur and importance of the

fantastic is emphasized, particularly through the possibilities and characteristics of the Secondary World's distinction from the Primary World. The fantastic is not only highlighted as an alternate world, but as one in which magic can save one's life, and in which the battle between good and evil is fated to favor the good.

Development of the definition of post-fantasy as it is used within this thesis stems from the definition of fantasy previously created. To exist as post-fantasy, a text must exhibit the components of fantasy outlined by Mobley and Attebery, but it must use these components to achieve a different goal of disrupting the traditional wonder of the fantastic. Post-fantasy uses the standard components of the fantastic canon ironically to place a questioning, critical eye on the genre. The result of such criticism is a move away from formulaic structure which creates a text that uses fantastic conventions for entertainment but not for suspended belief. In such texts we find humor where there is meant to be solemnity, blending where there are meant to be distinctions, and normalization where there is meant to be amazement.

*Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* use the fantastic: they show unseen worlds and undiscovered planets, they include a magical hero facing and often triumphing over villains in fantastic fashion, and they show the growth of the hero throughout his journeys and adventures; however, it uses these features as a means of questioning their traditional presentation within fantasy. By placing the magical world within the realistic world, these texts normalize the fantastic, making it something that is acceptable within reality; by diminishing the power and influence of the supernatural, they posit that perhaps magic is not as grand as many fantastic texts make it appear; by blurring the line between good and evil, they force us to question our adoration of heroes, and by referencing previous issues and involving the reader, they disrupt our belief in their narrative. Each of these strategies presents the fantastic ironically, providing the

reader with the entertainment associated with the fantastic genre but deconstructing the marvelous to enforce the realistic before the reader can escape into this entertainment.

Through exploring Doctor Strange comics' identity as post-fantasy, I hoped to indicate that such texts have a significant potential to catalyze the evolution of the fantastic genre.

Attebery writes: "Tolkien's form of fantasy, for readers in English, is our mental template, and will be until someone else achieved equal recognition with an alternative conception. One way to characterize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*" (14). By altering the fantastic formula presented in *The Lord of the Rings* and used within many other prominent works of fantasy, *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange* attempt a type of "alternative conception" that presents fantasy in a new form. Such an exploration of *Strange Tales* and *Doctor Strange*'s genre identity will ideally encourage others studying fantasy and comic books to use such interdisciplinary methods as a means of noticing the influences that different genres have upon each other and how genres evolve because of these influences. Through such studies, we may gain greater insight into evolving popular culture and understand how comic books possess the power to create literary change.

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