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UNICORNS ARE NOT REAL AND NEITHER ARE YOU: PETER S. BEAGLE'S
POSTMODERN FAIRY TALE

By

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

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For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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UNICORNS ARE NOT REAL AND NEITHER ARE YOU: PETER S. BEAGLE'S

POSTMODERN FAIRY TALE

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ABSTRACT

Although considered by many readers to be a "cult classic," Peter S. Beagle's

1968 novel *The Last Unicorn* has been unrepresented in literary scholarship. Many

fantasy critics in the past have dismissed the work as lacking a sense of reality through its

mixing of modern language with a medieval, fantasy setting. However, the novel's

purposeful muddling of reality raises questions of ontology and the nature of

storytelling/world-projection. The objective of this study is to not only to act as a sort of

apologetic for *The Last Unicorn*, but also read the novel in the context of fairy

tale/mythic studies and postmodern theory—specifically through the critical lenses of

Bruno Bettelheim, J.R.R. Tolkien, John Barth, and Brian McHale. By simultaneously

deconstructing and following fairy tale conventions/tropes, *The Last Unicorn* offers its

reader a postmodern story that explores the reality of fiction. The complex merging of

reality and myth demonstrates *The Last Unicorn*'s literary merit and paves the way for

future postmodern fantasy works.

crazy years. Thank you for listening to me about my worries and my ramblings about literature.

And, above all, I thank God—the original world creator. Thank you for all you have given to me, and for making me as real as a unicorn.

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike other fantasy works—such as those of J. R. R. Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin—that have broken free from the sanctimonious cage of "genre-fiction" to canoodle with the literary canon, Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968) is positioned similarly to its main character at beginning of the novel: alone and seemingly forgotten. The first literary treatment of *The Last Unicorn* was actually written a year after its publication. Raymond M. Olderman's *Beyond The Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-sixties* placed Beagle's novel within the American literary context of such works as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and studied overarching themes in the decade. Already there seemed to be clear, literary value in the novel. However, after only three significant pieces were written in the 1970s, scholarship would disappear until the 1980s. This is most likely due to the 1982 film adaptation bringing the novel back into the public conscience, as well as a new surge in interest in the fantasy genre during the decade. Scholarship, however, would become sparse once again, with only a few notable works being written in the 1990s and the 2000s. While a popular and influential work that is well respected within the fantasy genre, having been recently listed in *Time*'s "The 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time" alongside not only Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series and two of Le Guin's *Earthsea* books, but also such other classics as *Arabian Nights*, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, literary scholarship on Beagle's novel remains limited. There has been no

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literary scholarship written on *The Last Unicorn* since 2014, and there are only a little

over twenty works written on the novel as a whole.

This is perhaps because the novel is often misunderstood due to its mixture of

both classic fairy tale elements and postmodern sensibilities. Many critics have failed to

understand the purpose of this mixture, such as C. N. Manlove, who stated that "the

wonder at the nature of created things [within Beagle's writing] goes too far and defeats

itself" (*Impulse* 127), and that *The Last Unicorn* is nothing more than "a fantasy in search

of a story and of inspiration" (148) and that it "lacks the fibre of reality" (127). Yet

Manlove and others fail to recognize this departure from "the fibre of reality" for what it

is: the purposeful decentralization of the "presumed" real. In fact, the novel's

anachronisms and ontological questioning lend themselves well to the critical,

postmodernist lenses of John Barth and Brian McHale. This thesis thus argues for the

scholarly value of *The Last Unicorn* not only in the fantasy genre, but as an example of

American Postmodernism. Through its use of postmodern elements, Beagle creates a

modern American fairy tale that revitalizes (or, to use Barth's language, *replenishes*) the

fantasy genre.

Beagle's novel is a transformative work that reinvents traditional fairy tale and

fantasy tropes/archetypes in order to, as Barth describes in "The Literature of

Exhaustion," "rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature" (31)—or, per

Beagle's aim, "make that whole tradition [his] for a moment" (qtd. in Tobin 19). *The Last*

Unicorn succeeds in what Tolkien describes as the "recovery" and "consolation"—the

healing that fairy tales bring to their readers and their happy endings—and follows the traditional structure of classic fairy tales. However, *The Last Unicorn* also bends these "rules" and acknowledges the fictionality of its own characters. This is not done for the sake of simple parody, rather, it is done to keep these modes of storytelling alive. The transformative nature of fairy tales (established later in chapter one) lend themselves to these sorts of postmodernist retellings. Renowned folklorist Vladimir Propp argues that the myth possesses "striking uniformity [and] repetition," as well as a contradictory "amazing multiformity" (21). Similarly, Manlove states that "what is present in the modern retelling [of fairy tales] is the sense of a mindcrafting, reflecting on and delighting in the scene" (*Modern* 7), and that the tropes and archetypes of the classic fairy tale "are now part of the furniture of almost any writer's mind" (4). In order for the fairy tale to continue to exist and thrive, it must be added upon and made new again.

Entirely "new" stories cannot be made, however, if a writer is still decorating with the same old furniture. Both Barth and McHale argue that the "mimetic nature of all literature lends itself to repetition and reinvention" (McHale, *Constructing* 28). Barth argues that while "the number of splendid sayable things…is doubtless finite, it is also doubtless very large, perhaps virtually infinite" ("Replenishment" 285). Thus, postmodernism involves artistic conventions "deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (176). However, "deployed against themselves" does not mean that a postmodernist work can only parody what has been done in the past—rather, it is this very reinvention that keeps art alive. Postmodernism *aids in* the replenishment of art.

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian* are not parodies of westerns that seek to mock the genre. They are undoubtedly *members* of the genre— postmodern members. They are reinventions that still hold to conventions of the genre's tropes and "rules" while using them in new ways. Likewise, *The Last Unicorn* is not a parody *of* fairy tales, but rather *is* a *postmodern* fairy tale. It is a postmodern fairy tale that, with the strange dilution/mixing of the real and the fictional in both the postmodern and fantasy genre, captures both Tolkien's requirements for a fairy tale and Barth's concept of "replenishment." *The Last Unicorn* simultaneously follows the conventions of a fairy tale and presents the aspects of a well-constructed one while providing a postmodern reinvention of the genre's old tropes.

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The Last Unicorn: Plot Summary

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This summary serves to provide context for the various chapters/scenes that will be examined as both traditional and postmodern. *The Last Unicorn* has one, overarching plot that involves the unicorn's journey to King Haggard's castle in order to free her lost people.

Her story begins with her alone in her lilac wood. She overhears the discussion of two hunters, one of which insists that the woods are enchanted because they hold what is most likely the world's last unicorn. Refusing to believe that she is the last of her people, the unicorn leaves her lilac wood in search of other unicorns. Along the way, she meets a butterfly that speaks only in phrases borrowed from books, songs, and random clichés. After the butterfly identifies her with the etymology of the word "unicorn," he states that

the unicorns have been led away by a creature known as the Red Bull. With her new lead she continues her quest, but after laying down to sleep, she is captured by Mommy Fortuna—a witch who runs a travelling show of mythical creatures known as the "Midnight Carnival."

Mommy Fortuna's carnival is filled with normal animals that, through her "spells of seeming" (*Last* 27), appear as mythical creatures to the carnival patrons. A starved dog and lion become Cerberus and a manticore, a house spider becomes Arachne, a common snake becomes Jörmungandr, etc. Besides the unicorn, the only real mythical creature at the carnival is Celaeno, a harpy captured by Mommy Fortuna. However, both the unicorn and the harpy must be placed under the same spell the common animals are for the crowds to see them as what they truly are. It is at the carnival where the unicorn meets Schmendrick: a magician so lacking in magical talent that his mentor, Nikos, cursed him to wander the earth as an immortal until his powers improve. Schmendrick helps the unicorn escape her cage in the middle of the night. She then promptly releases all the animals locked away, including Celaeno, who kills Mommy Fortuna.

Schmendrick tells the unicorn that the Red Bull is owned by King Haggard and that he knows the way to his castle. After doing some odd-jobs in a town they pass through, Schmendrick is captured by bandits and taken to the hideout of Captain Cully, a man who wishes to become a mythic outlaw like Robin Hood by writing folk songs about himself. This irritates his band of outlaws (especially Molly Grue, his common-law wife and disillusioned Maid Marian), who wish for Schmendrick to entertain them with his

magic rather than sing Cully's songs. Schmendrick—having no real control over his

magic—accidently creates a vision of Robin Hood and his merry men. All of Cully's men

leave him behind to follow the vision. The unicorn then appears, making Molly break

down in tears over her lost youth and innocence. Molly then decides to join the unicorn

on her journey to King Haggard's castle.

After travelling to the town of Hagsgate, a town cursed to await the birth of a hero

destined to bring the destruction of Haggard's castle and their town, the unicorn and her

questing companions are met in the forest by the Red Bull. Desperate to save her,

Schmendrick invokes his uncontrolled magic and turns the unicorn into a human. This

leaves the unicorn and Molly distraught, but Schmendrick insists they continue on their

quest. The group enters King Haggard's castle, and the unicorn's human form is

introduced as "Lady Amalthea." Haggard's adopted son, Prince Lir, quickly falls in love

with her and attempts to woo her in the way he is used to wooing maidens: bringing her

the heads of dragons and other monsters. This only upsets Lady Amalthea, but she is

charmed by him after Molly suggests he writes her poetry—something he, unlike killing

monsters, is absolutely terrible at—and swears to protect her from her nightmares.

It is soon revealed that King Haggard is keeping the unicorns herded by the Red

Bull in the sea his castle overlooks, wanting the beauty of the world to be kept to himself.

After Lir, Molly, Schmendrick, and Amalthea move through a series of puzzles to find

the Red Bull's lair, it attacks the group. Schmendrick turns Amalthea back into a unicorn

and Lir, in an effort to defend her, is killed by the Red Bull. This sends the unicorn into a

grief stricken rage, and she drives the Red Bull into the sea. The unicorns run out of the

ocean and Haggard's castle falls apart. The unicorn revives Prince Lir with a touch of her

horn and flees. Later, she comes to Schmendrick in a dream and thanks him. She tells

him she is the only unicorn who knows regret, but that she will have no sorrow knowing

that her people are back in the world, "save one" (289). Lir becomes king of a reborn

land, and Molly and Schmendrick travel away together off to a new journey.

Overview of Chapter Objectives

This study is divided into three chapters. If postmodernism is to be defined as a

literature of replenishment and not cynic parody, I must first establish *The Last Unicorn*

as a definite member of the literature it replenishes. Thus, chapter one of this study

focuses on *The Last Unicorn* as a traditional fairy tale as well as a work of modern

fantasy. The chapter begins by defining what constitutes a "fairy tale" and the structures

and purposes one possesses within the context of Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" and Bruno

Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*. Ironically, *The Last Unicorn* follows this

traditional structure through transforming these traditional elements. More specifically, it

takes the structure of a human character leaving their mundane world to enter the

fantastic and flips it to a magical character (the unicorn) entering the mundane world.

Even with this switch, however, the goal of a fairy tale is still met: the characters and

readers are changed forever through the magic they experience.

Chapter two continues this discussion on bending fairy tale rules by reading *The

Last Unicorn* in a postmodernist context. The chapter begins not with a definition of

postmodernism—as it cannot be properly defined—but by an explanation of the specific, postmodernist lens used to discuss the novel (that being from McHale and Barth). I contend that postmodernism is not required to be nihilistic or nonsensical. While many postmodern works *can* be these things, this chapter argues that many works, including *The Last Unicorn*, use a blurring of "reality" and "fiction" as well as other seemingly contradictory elements to keep the spirit of literature alive through reinvention. In the fairy tale, "normal logic and causation are suspended" (Bettelheim 62)—as is such in many postmodern works. This ontological questioning is hinted at when Beagle defines the title of his short story collection, *The Line Between*, as "that invisible boundary between conscious and not, between reality and fantasy…A line neither one thing nor ever the other" (vii). In this definition, we see Beagle's very postmodern, yet traditionally fantastic goal: to blend what is real and fictional and to prove that perhaps fiction is more real than it seems. John Pennington argues, "[Beagle] takes two strains of fantasy—vision and revision—and meshes them together to make a whole that is more powerful than the parts" (16). I shall conclude, then, that Beagle's postmodernist fairy tale does not destroy or satirize the fairy tale—rather, the novel replenishes fantasy through a stylization that follows what McHale calls the "dominant" of the original, fairy tale mode.

Chapter three discusses these traditional and postmodern elements of the novel in tandem and argues that this successful mixture has influenced many modern works of fantasy. *The Last Unicorn* has immense value in that regard, and its successful replenishment evidenced by the work's influence argues for its canonicity. Three

postmodern fairy tales that are themselves influential in popular culture are discussed in this chapter: William Goldman's novel *The Princess Bride*, Neil Gaiman's comic series *The Sandman*, and the film *Shrek*. Each of these works, like *The Last Unicorn*, explore ontology, world-projection, and metafiction. The influence of these works speak to the goal of *The Last Unicorn*, or any postmodern work participating in Barth's theories of exhaustion and replenishment, for that matter: the fairy tale genre has been revitalized in a way that is relevant for a modern, changing world.

In the novel, the unicorn is seen by men as nothing more than a white mare. While some scholars and readers, like Schmendrick, see the novel as truly magical, my fear is that this novel is not being properly recognized as the unicorn it is. Through this study, I argue the value of increased literary scholarship of this work both as an example of the fantastic and the postmodern. Both fairy tales and postmodern fiction present their readers with strange, unbelievable worlds as realities. They make the fantastic mundane and the mundane fantastic—they make a unicorn a white mare and a white mare a unicorn.

GOING WHERE THE TALE GOES: UNIQUE TRADITION

In his 1980 study, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature from Irving to Le Guin*, science fiction and fantasy critic Brian Attebery explains that the "most important" part of the fantasy novel is a shared sense of wonder, and that "Fantasy invokes wonder by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange. When you put a unicorn in a garden, the unicorn gains solidity and the garden takes on enchantment" (3). Attebery was not, however, impressed with Beagle's unicorn, nor the garden he put her in. He calls Beagle "one of the great appreciators of Tolkien" (158) and that in *The Last Unicorn* he merely "attempted to express his appreciation for Tolkien in the form of a literary homage, he had to find some middle ground between the style he was accustomed to and the matter he was trying to incorporate" (158). The emphasis here is on "attempt," as Attebery finds that "as soon as Beagle tries to inflate his fairy tale to encompass a world and a vision, after the manner of Tolkien, the Thurberish deftness departs and he grows self-conscious" (159). He finds the anachronisms and imagery distracting, harshly deeming them "pixy dust" that is "throw[n]…in our eyes to keep us from finding him out" (159). Ultimately, Attebery finds that Beagle fails as a serious fantasy writer like Tolkien and as a comedic fantasy writer like James Thurber, and he concludes that, "The center of *The Last Unicorn* does not hold: its characters and imagery

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go flying off in all directions, without reference to the patterns of significance that should command" (159).

Literary critic C.N. Manlove was also less than impressed by Beagle's unicorn story. In his 1983 study on twentieth century fantasy novels and their relation to classic members of the genre—*The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*—he praises C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, but classifies Beagle's work as "anaemic"—that is, a work that is "delightful, beautiful or exciting, but in the end it lacks the fibre of reality. Here the wonder at the nature of created things goes too far and defeats itself" (127). While Manlove asserts the essential role of wonder within a fantasy story (150), he argues that Beagle—as well as the other authors he critiques in his chapter—have an "uncontrolled love of the wondrous" (154). Besides admiring the Mommy Fortuna chapter, Manlove describes *The Last Unicorn* as "a fantasy in search of a story and inspiration" (148) and argues that the book is "the product of inaccurate feeling and falls into excess—of emotion, of explanation, of description and of length" (154). According to Manlove, Beagle is an author "trying to say too many things" and the novel does not present itself as a proper, well-designed fantasy (150).

The two critics, though prolific in the area and undeniably valuable for their input on American and British fantasy literature, miss the point of the *The Last Unicorn*. For them, it is as babbling and unstructured as the butterfly who speaks only in a mixture of poetry and pop culture, spouting only the occasional useful line to help the story along. It is silly, distracted, and, "saying too much." There is a notion here that Beagle's work is

but an off-brand *The Hobbit* or a bootleg *The White Deer*. Their unfavorable reading of the novel does not acknowledge that Beagle, with the very "self-consciousness" which they deem a failure of sincerity, upholds the traditions of the fairy tale by drawing attention to its common tropes/structure. Even esteemed speculative fiction critic John Pennington offered his defense of *The Last Unicorn* when he stated in 1989 that Manlove and Attebery should perhaps read the novel as "homage and parody *simultaneously*…Beagle creates in *The Last Unicorn* a new breed of fantasy that is dependent upon traditional fairy tale structures and themes but one that also undercuts these and forges into new fantasy territory" (11; emphasis added). Pennington is correct in his assessment here, but there is less "parody" than there is reinvention—the kind fairy tales are already prone to. *The Last Unicorn* is not strictly comedic like a Thurber novel, nor is it all together serious as one of Tolkien's, but is instead a discussion of serious issues through a comedic, self-aware lens which Attebery mistakes as a failure of cohesion. While Manlove and Attebery see Beagle's playfulness as disrespectful to the genre and distracting to the reader's personal enchantment, *The Last Unicorn* actually demonstrates a high regard for the traditional order of these sorts of tales by directly examining how and why readers are enchanted by them.

Attebery firmly states that "Fantasy…needs consistency. Reader and writer are committed to maintaining the illusion for the entire course of the fiction" (2). Without this consistency, the ability to believe in the enchantment—to believe that the unicorn is indeed solid and in the garden—is lost. The concern for satire—if it is not used carefully

like in a Thurber novel—is not out of the question, then. In his famed essay "On Fairy

Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien explains, "If there is any satire present in [a] tale, one thing

must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously,

neither laughed at nor explained away" (323). For all the fun Beagle has with archetypes,

tropes, and anachronistic language in his tale, one thing that is surely taken seriously is

the magic—not just in the sense of the literal magic Schmendrick controls, but in the

magic of mythical creatures and the fairy tale world they inhabit. The novel is

respectfully concerned with the structure of fairy tales, and the structure is viewed as an

almost sacred law among the characters. The structure of the story and the way it "must

go" (*Last* 128) is an unbreakable, universal truth within the novel. In fact, it is so

unbreakable that even Prince Lir's desire to be with the unicorn must go unfulfilled.

Moreover, the reader's desire for such is similarly discounted. Magic is the immutable

law and Beagle devotes his novel to proving as much. Prince Lír's entire character arc

revolves around coming into his role as a proper fantasy hero. Despite wanting nothing

more than to ignore fate and the battle with the Red Bull and run away with Lady

Almathea before the story's end, he makes the following speech:

> I am a hero. It is a trade, not more, like weaving or brewing, and like them it has
>
> its own tricks and knacks and small arts…But the true secret of being a hero lies
>
> in knowing *the order of things*…Things must happen when it is time for them to
>
> happen. Quests may not simply be abandoned; prophecies may not be left to rot

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like unpicked fruit; unicorns may go unrescued for a long time, but not forever.

The happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story. (251; emphasis added)

When Schmendrick questions Lír and asks "who says so?" the newly matured Lír restates his stance on order, replying "Heroes…Heroes know about order, about happy endings" (251-252). This respect and duty to the "order of things" reflects not only the metafictional aesthetic of the novel, but also its nature as a proper fairy tale. *The Last Unicorn* quite purposefully follows the structure and, for lack of a better term, "rules" of a fairy tale. Although these rules are bent in some ways—not broken, bent—the characters' adherence to these tropes not only makes Beagle's novel a traditional member of the genre, but one that adheres to the purpose of offering the reader an escape into a fantastic world that offers recovery from the "real" world once they return to it.

The Rules and Their Purpose

To properly explain the order and rules that Lír states a hero must follow, it is first important to establish an agreed upon definition of "fairy tale." Tolkien states that "Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words, for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable" (322-23), but an attempt shall be made here. One has images that come to mind when the descriptor is given: talking animals, an evil witch or queen (or both), a princess who is saved by a handsome hero, and, most of all, the phrases "once upon a time" and "happily ever after." These common tropes are repeated, reused, and morphed again and again and again in a way that fairy tale readers are going to have some idea of how the tale is going to end, even when the story is inverted in some way. Many critics (such as Claude Lévi-

Strauss and Vladimir Propp) have found almost as many variants to Cinderella as there are stories of the Great Flood—they are all tales as old as time. The repeated constructions of these stories have been well studied and found to have a complicated purpose. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp finds that the question often arises in studies on myths and fairy tales that if they are all similar in their structure, do they come from a singular source? Propp states that a folklorist "does not have the right to answer this question," but that a supposed singular source may very well be a "psychological one" (106). Even when the tale is morphed/inverted (details changed, perspectives switched, etc.), if the tale adheres to the "order of things"—a very specific order that will be made clear in this working definition—then the common and desired reaction in the reader is still obtained. These repeated tropes speak to internal, human desires—the desire to be loved and the desire to be healed.

Both Bruno Bettelheim and Tolkien thoroughly analyze the psychological needs fulfilled by the predictable structures and rules found in fairy tales. While Bettelheim's study, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, focuses on the psychological impact of fairy tales on children and Tolkien's is on the needed impact of tales on adults, both scholars posit that fairy tales are anything but immature, that they instead function to emotionally *mature* the reader. Bettelheim states that the old cliché of "and they lived happily ever after" is not vapid wish fulfillment, commonly criticized in popular media/culture as "unrealistic" or even "unhealthy," but evidence that taking risks is good and ultimately fulfilling. Bettelheim writes, "The fairy tale is future

oriented and guides the child…to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve

a more satisfying independent existence" (11). Beyond childhood psychology and

development, the fairy tale uses its fantastical scenarios and worlds to push the reader

into a very real world goal of maturity. This goal of maturity and growth does not only

apply to children. Tolkien posits that this lesson is in fact more applicable to adults,

stating that the elements a fairy tale contains are "all things of which children have, as a

rule, less need than older people" (361). Thus we come to one part of our definition: a

fairy tale is a story in which specific, fantastical elements are used to allow the reader,

through the characters pushed into these fantasy worlds, to learn to adjust to the world

they live in through emotional maturity.

 The fantastical elements in question are dubbed by Tolkien as "fantasy,"

"recovery," "escape," and "consolation." Tolkien defines these terms in great detail in his

essay, but, for the purposes of this chapter, I will provide a basic set of definitions for

these terms. In the basic sense, a fairy tale must contain a sense of wonder and call the

reader to a suspension of disbelief—or, rather, belief—in an unreal, magical world. This

is the element of fantasy, and it is revealed to the reader through their willingness to

accept the enchantment of the tale and—like the protagonist—enter into the fantastical

realm. Tolkien calls this idea "secondary belief." The reader must choose to believe in the

unreal. It is as nonsensical to question why an owl talks in a fairy tale as it is to question

why one hoots in real life. Likewise, the existence of unicorns and magicians are as real

as anything else in our world. Bettelheim states that "normal logic and causation are

suspended" within a fairy tale (62), and this connects smoothly with Attebery's notion of the unicorn in the garden. The "garden" in his metaphor is not only the mundane world juxtaposed against the fantastical creatures from what Tolkien calls "Faerie," but also the real world of the reader. Attebery believes this "secondary belief" is the core of fairy tale and fantasy literature, and he uses it as the basis for his definition of the term:

> Any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law—that is fantasy…fantasy treats these impossibilities without hesitation, without doubt, without any attempt to reconcile them with our intellectual understanding of the workings of the world or to make us believe that such things could under any circumstances come true. (2)

Attebery bases his definition not only on Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories," but on an earlier study by Manlove, who stresses the importance of "wonder" within a fantasy: "in fantasy wonder is not only [a] by-product…but a central feature—or as Tolkien puts it 'the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder'" (*Modern* 7). Wonder/fantasy and the ability to convince (enchant) the reader that the unreal is real is crucial to the structure of a fairy tale.

Tolkien explains that fantasy is a "natural human activity" in regard to storytelling (370), and Beagle has stated as much himself. In a 1978 collection of his works, Beagle argues that "all writing is fantasy anyway: that to set any event down in print is immediately to begin to lie about it…it's no less absurd and presumptuous to try on the

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skin of a bank teller than that of a Bigfoot or a dragon" ("Introduction" [*Fantasy*] x).

Despite this universality of fantasy (something that will be explored more in later

chapters), for the current purposes, the key aspect of this element is that a fairy tale must

contain magic and the unexplained. Hence the term "fairy" in "fairy tale," which Tolkien

explains invokes this fantasy world of "Faerie."[1] This magic must invoke a sense of

wonder and secondary belief within the reader.

Recovery and escape are related to each other in the sense that a reader seeks to

recover from the horrors of the real world—that is, the nonfictional reality we live in—by

escaping into fantasy and enchantment. Tolkien defines recovery as a "regaining of a

clear view" (373). Ironically, escaping into the realm of Faerie creates a clearer view of

our own world; as Bettelheim argues, fairy tales prompt psychological growth. "Escape,"

then, is not simply unhealthy escapism, but rather a respite from harsh reality. In other

words: one escapes to recover.

Bettelheim clarifies the need for this escape and recovery by adding another

element to Tolkien's list: threat. He argues that a threat must be made against "the hero's

physical existence or to his moral existence" at the start of the tale in order to motivate

this journey into the fantastic (Bettelheim 144). "[A]s soon as the story begins,"

Bettelheim explains, "the hero is projected into severe dangers" (145). Just as the reader

needs the motivation of their internal fears to escape into the fairy tale, the hero must

have a representation of these fears to fight and overcome. Indeed, there is no call to

action for the hero to take if there no action to be called for. This then relates to Tolkien's

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final element: the "consolation," or, the "sudden joyous 'turn'" (384). In other words, the tale's "happily ever after."

Bettelheim states that "consolation requires that the right order of the world is restored" (144). This typically comes in the form of righteous justice: the villain is defeated, the hero victorious. Hence the need for threat: there can be no "joyous turn" if there is nothing to turn from. Rapunzel cannot escape her tower with her prince if there is no tower to escape from in the first place. This joyful justice and return to order allows for both protagonist and reader to be changed and recovered from the threat of villainy in their worlds. This Bettelheim/Tolkien hybrid of structure thus expands my working definition: a fairy tale is a story in which a threat is made against the main character's happiness by a villain or evil force that must be overcome by delving into a realm with fantastical elements. Through interacting with the story's hero, the reader is invited to believe in these unreal, fantastical elements, recover and escape from the threats of their own world as they are mirrored in the story by the threat against the hero's, and ultimately come to their own consolation when this threat/evil is defeated. This allows the reader to both recover and grow emotionally as the hero in the story has.

In order to present these elements, regardless of characters and plot, a fairy tale follows this basic structure: the protagonist begins in a non-fantastical setting, receives a call to adventure and enters the world of fantasy, carries out fantasy, and returns back to their non-fantastical world. This structure—agreed upon by Bettelheim and Tolkien—is not dissimilar to Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" model, which is explained as such:

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"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (28). The journey and return of the fairy tale's hero mirrors the journey the reader takes by picking up a fantasy novel or listening to a classic fairy tale. Fairy tales invoke a certain, metafictional reality in which what is gained from fantasy by the fictional characters is what is gained by the reader. This structure, Bettelheim argues, is imperative to the goal of recovery and growth in the reader, stating that a fairy tale "from its mundane and simple beginning, launches into fantastic events [and then] [h]aving taken the child on a trip into a wondrous world, at its end the tale returns the child to reality in a most reassuring manner" (63). As the wandering knight goes off into the sunset to another journey, the reader shuts their book and reads another tale—it is a parallel, mirrored reality and relationship. Attebery also believes in this mirrored effect, stating that, "The hero of a fairy tale embodies every reader's desire to come into his own" (13). By having both hero and reader return to the mundane, it does not produce the goal of envy or unrealistic expectations. The reader of a fairy tale is not to become a Madame Bovary who desires beautiful things that do not exist, but to instead use the beautiful things taken with them from the closed book.

With this notion of reader and protagonist taking beauty and fantasy with them, Bettelheim is perhaps mistaken when he states that the ending world of the tale—the beginning world the hero returns to—is one "devoid of magic" (63). Yes, there is a return

to "normalcy," but a piece of the magic remains within the protagonist because magic is the power to grow. Manlove defines a fantasy novel as "a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms" (*Modern* 1). He explains further that, while a ghost story or even some science fiction has the supernatural remain "alien" to the protagonist, a fantasy is characterized by morals "cooperat[ing]" with fantastical beings or objects and becoming familiar with them (9). Familiarity would imply a lasting effect. The characters of a fantasy do not simply forget or move on from interacting with forces beyond the confines of mortal, human logic— just as the reader is called to "secondary belief" and remains affected after reading a fantasy. Bilbo Baggins is forever affected by his adventures with Gandalf and the dwarves, and while he does return to mundane Hobbiton, he is forever changed—always speaking on elves and magic and not quite fitting in with his neighbors. It is this knowledge of elves and his friendship with Gandalf that are the "boons" he brings back to enrich Hobbiton after his journey's end. Cinderella has magic remain within her in the form of her glass slipper: evidence that she indeed experienced a magical event and was not simply dreaming (something both Tolkien and Bettelheim would argue would make a story not a fairy tale). It is through the glass slipper she is able to receive her consolation, her happily ever after, and this is gained through the magic she took with her into her mundane world. Like the reader, the fairy tale protagonist also returns to their "real" world with recovery. This recovery comes in the form of a bit of magic still residing

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within them and—now that they have gotten on good terms with it—forever familiar with the fantastic without becoming reliant on it.

Here, then, is the definition of fairy tale this chapter shall use when categorizing the "order" the characters in *The Last Unicorn*[2] are concerned with: a fairy tale is a story in which a character is called to adventure from their typical, mundane[3] existence into a world of fantasy because of a villainous threat. This threat is defeated, allowing for a happy ending (or, consolation) in which the character(s) return to their typical life, allowing both themselves and the reader to experience recovery through the magic of the fantasy world they entered remaining a part of their changed, developed, and emotionally matured character. The path of character(s) is metafictionally mirrored in the reader's own experience in gaining recovery, escape, and consolation.

"Some Part of Me is Mortal Yet": Relative Fantasy and Universal Recovery

And there is the order of things. The definition proposed here runs throughout *The Last Unicorn*, but it is especially prevalent in its characters. The structure of Schmendrick, Lír, Molly, and the unicorn's individual character arcs all follow the pattern of mundane, to fantasy, to mundane, and each character—as well as the reader—learns maturity and hope through engaging with this element of wonder/fantasy. What is interesting, however, is how Beagle manages to follow this structure while, at the same time, inverting it. Each character has a slight twist on their pattern, but these twists, trope subversions/reinventions, and related meta-humor only *support* this classical order. These inversions do not satirize the order, nor do they come at "the expense of the story" as

Attebery suggests (159). The human characters keep the magic from their relationship and journey with the unicorn, and the unicorn—in a flipped version of the established pattern—keeps the mundane from her relationship with them.

The story begins with the unicorn alone in her lilac wood. The time period and setting is not established beyond this, and the Midnight Carnival, Hagsgate, and Haggard's castle clearly exist only in the novel's version of reality. It is simply a vague fantasy setting from beginning to end. This follows Bettelheim's argument for the order of fairy tales, stating that their beginning vagueness "symbolizes that we are leaving the concrete world of ordinary reality" (62). Right away, the reader is asked to engage in wonder and secondary belief—they are quite literally presented with a solid unicorn in an enchanted garden. This vagueness is not only used to describe enchanted forests that would usually come in the middle of the story, but in the tale's mundane world as well ("Once, long ago, in a land far, far away…"). Still, despite the forest being enchanting to the hunters who enter it, it is average and real for the unicorn. She is a fantastical being, one "from books and tales and songs" (*Last* 3), and thus what is enchanting for us, what is fictional and of Faerie, is quite real for her. The unicorn is content to stay in one place forever (2) not even talking to herself, the sound of her own voice frightening her when she thinks out loud for the first time in a hundred years (6). Much like Bilbo Baggins, she is resistant to her call for adventure. She is happy in her lilac wood, and even when she is filled with the fear that she may very well be the last of her kind, she asks herself, "What could I ever search for in the world, except this again?" (6). Before she finally leaves her

wood to enter the non-fantasy world, the reader is shown the same beginning as any fairy tale: the protagonist is given a call to adventure and leaves their "real" world to begin their journey, and this is motivated by an element of threat—that being that she may very well be the last of her species.

Her initial refusal of the call also marks an important aspect of maturity found within our established definition. Campbell explains that a refusal to the call is not at all uncommon in classic myth, but that that the world of myths and folk/fairy tales make it clear that a hero's refusal is "essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest. The future is regarded not in terms of an unremitting scries of deaths and births, but as though one's present system of ideals, virtues, goals, and advantages were to be fixed and made secure" (55). Furthermore, a refusal to the call represents "an impotence to put off the infantile ego" (57). In other words, if the unicorn was to stay peacefully ignorant and choose to simply not believe that she was the last, she would be acting against her own consolation. Without taking the call, unicorns die out. They remain trapped in the sea forever. The narration mulls over the unicorn's back-and-forth with herself before finally accepting her call to adventure. This in-and-of-itself is considered unnatural, in that "[u]nicorns are not meant to make choices" (*Last* 7). This initial action indicates the unicorn's movement from immature innocence into maturity. Her newly learned ability to make a hard choice eventually leads to the ability to love near the novel's end, and it begins—like it would for any fairy tale hero—with her entering a strange and fantastical realm: the "real" world.

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It is in this real world where no one can even recognize a unicorn when they see one that this protagonist becomes a walking version of fantasy for the human characters to enter. Joining the unicorn on her journey pushes the other characters into their roles within the "order of things." The first of these is Schmendrick. The magician is the first man the unicorn has come in contact with who can see her for what she truly is. The only award he wishes for after saving her is to go with her on her journey (58), and before joining her quest, he is compelled to help her escape from Mommy Fortuna, calling it his "last chance" (40). Here, Schmendrick is making his own call to adventure. When he first meets the unicorn, he is no true magician. He works in card tricks and small illusions and juggling, and although he has travelled the world because of his curse, he still has not learned to control his power. When he first meets the unicorn, he does not know, as Nikos told him he must learn, "what [he is]" and he has not "reached [his] power" (151, 150). With the unicorn, however, he has been enchanted, and it is here—like the unicorn leaving her lilac wood—he takes his call to adventure and steps into his arc of maturity.

Tolkien explains the idea of enchantment, as it is related to his definition of "fantasy":

> Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator
> can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity
> it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an
> alteration in the Primary World. It does not matter by whom it is said to be

practised, fay or mortal…its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things

and wills. (368)

It is no surprise that Schmendrick, who breaks the fourth wall in stating directly that the

characters live in a fairy tale (*Last* 128, 152, 153), presents a metafictional experience

between his relationship with the unicorn and the reader's relationship with the unicorn.

His mundane, to fantasy, to mundane arc comes in the form of being born a mortal (151),

becoming immortal, and becoming mortal once again at the end of the tale. While this

quest was given to him by Nikos long before the events of *The Last Unicorn* take place, it

is when he meets the unicorn, however, that his powers truly blossom. Through the

unicorn's enchantment over him, his magic is finally able to effect the primary ("real")

world around him: making Robin Hood appear, turning a unicorn into a human, and

turning a human into a unicorn. When Schmendrick gains his mortality through turning

Lady Amalthea back into her true form, it is through a gaining of emotional maturity. At

first, he runs from the Bull, but when he turns to do what he must, Schmendrick feels his

"immortality fall from him like armor, or like a shroud" (259), and he is able to turn

Amalthea human when "wonder and love and great sorrow…came together inside him,

filled him until he felt himself brimming and flowing with something that was none of

these" (258). The narration explains that his name would "become a greater name than

Nikos's" (259) and that when he spoke to his companions after the fall of Haggard's

castle, "He was Schmendrick the Magician, as ever—and yet somehow it was for the first

time" (271). Because of what he has learned on his journey, he has changed for the better.

Although he is now mortal, he is renewed and filled with magic. Pennington

states that this moment is core to what he believes is the Blakean theme of the novel,

"that good and evil, innocence and experience are vital to one's understanding of one's

self and the world" (15). In terms of Bettelheim's theory, Schmendrick has matured. He

has been kept as an immortal child—he is described as having a childlike, "frighteningly

young" face (*Last* 28)—but through the unicorn's enchantment, he is able to finally

mature. Schmendrick describes this as the goal of his quest when the unicorn is horrified

at her human form, stating: "I was born mortal, and I have been immortal for a long,

foolish time, and one day I will be mortal again; so I know something that a unicorn

cannot know. Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives

forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world" (151). He has left his

mundane world of juggling and card tricks and become something truly great through the

unicorn's enchantment. The greatness comes with mortality, or, rather, the ability to

grow. Schmendrick admitted to the unicorn early in their journey that he had another

reward he wanted other than journeying with her, but said she could never grant it: to

become a true magician. The unicorn agrees that this would be impossible. The end of the

novel, however, proves them both wrong.

While Schmendrick is a magician and thus perhaps does not fit the model for a

typical fairy tale hero, whom Attebery states must be "ordinary" and surrounded by the

"extraordinary" (13), his journey still reflects the same arc of any other fairy tale hero.

Through his quest for mortality—for his return to the mundane—Schmendrick still must

be pushed into enchantment and learn to take risks in order to become what he is meant to be and succeed in the call given to him by his mentor. The more traditional hero in the story, Prince Lír, has a similar arc to Schmendrick in that he is taught maturity through wonder. Lír is self-described as "sleepy" and "a lazy coward" (178), and when he is first introduced to the reader as the unnamed prince sitting in the woods reading a magazine, he has no respect for the "order of things" or being a hero. When the princess he is engaged to—whom he later leaves for Lady Amalthea—fails in calling a unicorn and proving her virginity and purity, Lír simply calls the tradition "a formality" and tells her "you satisfy custom. You don't satisfy my father, but then neither do I. That would take a unicorn" (103). Even though the guards know he was adopted from Hagsgate, they refuse to believe Lír could be a hero. They say to Schmendrick and Molly, "The prince may slay a thousand dragons, but he will level no castles, overthrow no kings. It is not in his nature. He is a dutiful son who seeks—alas—only to be worthy of the man he calls his father. Not Prince Lír. The rhyme must speak of some other" (192). Lír has no wonder within him, and he comfortably refuses the call to adventure—that is, until he meets Amalthea.

From the moment he meets her, he is compelled to chivalric duty, asking what he can do for her and practically begs to help her (174). It is the same compulsion Schmendrick had, a unique calling to duty. Schmendrick describes Lír as the "leading man" (128) they were missing and Amalthea as the "princess" that "[t]he story cannot end without" (153). Lír's wish to serve Lady Amalthea also indicates a willingness to

take the call to adventure and secondary belief, as it is later revealed that he knew from beginning that she was a supernatural being. When Schmendrick tells him she is indeed a unicorn, he is not surprised: "I did not know what she was until now…But I knew the first time I saw her that she was something more than I could see. Unicorn, mermaid, lamia, sorceress, Gorgon—no name you give her would surprise me, or frighten me. I love whom I love" (248). Lír was in a burgeoning relationship with the supernatural the entire time he knew Amalthea, and was willing to be taken in by the wonder of it. The unicorn's enchantment and call for adventure thus comes in the form of romantic love for Lír, as he tells her before he decides to follow the "order of things" and fight the Red Bull: "I became a hero to serve you, and all that is like you" (252). His declaration here is not just to be a hero not for young, virginal women, but for all things grand and beyond himself. As Manlove suggests, he has gained a "substantial and irreducible" relationship with the supernatural (*Modern* 1).

His transition from "sleepy Lír" into hero and king not only follows the fairy tale model, but also the more specific model of the animal groom story as described by Bettelheim. Once again, Beagle does this with some unique inversions, but the moral is the same as the traditional model: the hero must accept a call to adventure through enchantment, enter the fantastic, and finally return to the mundane with a piece of the fantastic still within him. Bettelheim's psychological perspective of these tales is that they teach sexual maturity and the breaking of oedipal attachments. He explains that "for the girl to love her male partner fully, she must be able to transfer to him her earlier,

infantile attachment to her father" (Bettelheim 284). Male sexuality and sexual love is presented as, literally, beastly, but something that can be tamed. Unicorns were traditionally masculine figures in medieval art and stories (Łaszkiewicz 57), but the unicorn is female in Beagle's work. Thus, if the beast is female, Lír must take on the female role in this sort of tale to abandon his need to please his evil father and mature through his romantic love.[4] Lír is not only a hero simply for his dragon slaying and dark knight defeating, but for the mature and honest love he has for Amalthea. When Lír sees Amalthea wandering the halls at night, he shyly and immaturely wishes to run away from her. The narration interjects, however, "But he was a hero in all ways, and he turned bravely back to face her, saying in a calm and courtly manner, 'Give you good evening, my lady'" (*Last* 205). The use of "hero" here is quite purposeful, as Lír has, because of his love for Lady Amalthea, begun to take on the role of a hero—he has begun to transition from a boy into a man. When Amalthea is turned back into a unicorn and leaves him, the enchantment is gone, but the recovery and maturity gained from loving her remains in Lír's heart. He has taken his father's role as king and is no longer controlled by his urge to please him, but for the love he has for Amalthea. He is his own man. Although he has terrible sorrow in his heart, Schmendrick explains to Molly, "Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed. It is all part of the fairy tale…It cannot be an ill fortune to have loved a unicorn…Surely it must be the dearest luck of all, though the hardest earned" (291). There is a bitter-sweetness in this statement, but it is true. Lír is a hero, and he must follow the order of things.

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However, although he must return to the mundane, he still has gained something wonderful in loving Lady Amalthea. Lír was mature enough to resist his great desire to run away from his destiny and be with Amalthea, but that was not how the tale needed to end. Lír became a hero, and as such he needed to experience love and enchantment, and, with it, a return to the mundane and real.

Molly also takes the fairy tale path when the unicorn enchants her, and her maturity and recovery come in the form of emotional healing. She takes on the typical role of the virginal girl that unicorns appear to, but she is bitter that it has not come at the proper time—the proper order. When she first sees the unicorn, she mourns her lost youth: "'And what good is it to me that you're here now? Where were you twenty years ago, ten years ago? How dare you, how dare you come to me now, when I am this?' With a flap of her hand she summed herself up: barren face, desert eyes, and yellowing heart" (97). Here, Molly is angered by the notions of fairy tale enchantment because her childhood and innocence are long gone. She imagined adventure with Cully, who offers nothing of the sort with his false songs, and she abandoned all whimsy and hope long ago. Cully mocks her when he says, "Is it my fault you didn't keep up with your weaving? Once you had your man, you let all your accomplishments go. You don't sew or sing anymore, you haven't illuminated a manuscript in years" (84-85). Molly appears to have become disillusioned with fairy tales, and perhaps that is why she is the more critical of the group (for instance, not understanding why Lír had to suffer as a child, or why the unicorn has to act so cold towards Lír when he offers her courtly gestures).

However, Molly still believes in magic when *real* magic shows its head. When Cully's men begin to follow the vision Schmendrick creates of Robin Hood, he shouts, "Fools, fools and children! It was a lie, like all magic! There is no such person as Robin Hood!" (89). Molly, however, retorts: "Nay, Cully, you have it backward…There's no such person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend!" (89). A similar comment is made by Schmendrick regarding the unicorn: "We are in a fairy-tale, and must go where it goes. But she is real. She is real" (128). This is perhaps why Molly is one of the few humans who can recognize the unicorn and, before her emotional outburst, shows respect to her by curtsying (96). This respect for "real" myths and magic reflects Tolkien's firm argument that fairy tales are not strictly a children's medium. Molly is the sort of adult Tolkien described as truly needing escape and recovery, and she has a willingness to enjoy "childlike" ideas. Not only does Cully call his enchanted men "children," but Schmendrick even states that "unicorns are for beginnings…for innocence and purity, for newness. Unicorns are for young girls" (98). Molly, however, simply replies, "You don't know much about unicorns" (98). This defense of and respect for wonder not only shows the beginnings of enchantment and recovery within Molly, but speaks to the reader and affirms that the tale is not just for the innocent, but for those who have lost innocence—perhaps more so.

Molly heals quickly, telling the unicorn that she "forgives" her (98). In her essay for *Mythlore*, Weronika Łaszkiewicz argues that the novel presents a "spiritual growth" for both Schmendrick and Molly, and that her "belated meeting with a unicorn, though

painful, frees her from a meaningless existence with Cully" (56). This scene presents a

clear example of recovery through fantasy, as well as the ending of the tale, which shows

a healthy love between her and Schmendrick. No longer is she worn with a "yellowing

heart," but instead "more beautiful than the Lady Amalthea" in her joy (*Last* 291). The

magic she took from the unicorn and the journey back into the mundane was risk and

trust, and her heart was recovered by that magic. Perhaps this is why Beagle described

Molly as "the heart" of *The Last Unicorn* ("Afterward" 138): she embodies not just the

purpose, but the *need* for fairy tales. While she is not the "typical" female character to

interact with a unicorn, she is enchanted and fulfilled the same as any other character

living within a character. The structure is simply applied to an unlikely candidate,

allowing for the structure's inclusion and expansion, not mockery or parody.

All three main, human characters, while their patterns are slightly inverted, follow

the clear path of the fairy tale. What need does a fairy tale creature, however, have for

recovery and escape? The unicorn is no woman desperate for recovery from a harsh

world; she is from a perfect, unfallen one. She does not wish for mortality, like

Schmendrick, nor does she wish for love like Lír. Her job, as the supernatural force in the

fairy tale, is to bring enchantment to the mundane. In the world with no unicorns, she

allows for fantasy to enter and recover the mortal protagonists. However, as previously

stated, the unicorn is making her own journey as well. Just as Schmendrick and Lír have

wonder come into their hearts from seeing the unicorn, the unicorn has a different sort of

wonder she cannot understand: the wonder of reality. In his study on the 1960s American

novel, Raymond Olderman states that *The Last Unicorn*'s central message is that "there is magic in being human" (299). Many critics after Olderman have studied the prevalent theme of immortality and mortality within *The Last Unicorn*, and this moral is made clear when Schmendrick states that "[w]hatever can die is beautiful" (*Last* 151). What is especially fascinating, however, is how this theme of mortality relates to the structure and purpose of fairy tales. If the grand order of things indicates that a mortal must be enchanted to recover and grow, how can a tale provide the inverse? The same message is still provided. Just as a human character leaves with a bit of magic forever within them, the immortal myth leaves with a bit of *human* within them. Whether a character is more mortal or more immortal, a character ends the story in their normal life forever changed with a mixture of fantasy and reality. The unicorn experiences this both in her main quest and within her animal groom relationship with Lír.

As stated previously, fantasy is average and mundane for the unicorn, but reality is certainly not. In fact, it is presented as terrible and frightening. Not only is she hounded by the Red Bull, but also by the horrors of painful emotions. The unicorn appears cold before her human form falls in love with Lír. She feels no regret towards Mommy Fortuna's gruesome death (55), and when Molly says she is being cruel to Lír she states, "How can I be cruel? That is for mortals…So is kindness" (184). The unicorn is perfect, immortal, and mythical, and thus her focus is on duty and her quest. When Schmendrick joins that quest, however, the narration notes that she felt "the first spidery touch of sorrow on the inside of her skin…that is how it will be to travel with a mortal, all the

time" (60). Although Schmendrick is still immortal at this point in the novel, he has human emotions and failings, and this affects the unicorn. This foreshadows the character arc of her enchantment. As Schmendrick and Lír learned to be men from their wonder, the unicorn learns to be a woman, and, whereas Molly learned to love and trust through a partial regaining of innocence, the unicorn learns to love through a partial loss of it. It is not until she witnesses Lír's death and lets out an "ugly, squawking wail of sorrow and loss and rage, *such as no immortal creature ever gave*" (265; emphasis added) that she is finally able to fight the Red Bull and rescue her people. She began her quest as a child, one who saw Lír "no more truly than men see unicorns" (161) and knew nothing of sorrow, but this gaining of complex, painful, human emotion is what brings the unicorn her consolation. Just as Lír became a hero for the unicorn and her people, the unicorn became a hero for Lír.

In learning to love Lír, she is as changed as all the human characters are at the end of her arc. She tells Schmendrick in her final appearance:

> I will go back to my forest too, but I do not know if I will live contentedly there, or anywhere. I have been mortal, and *some part of me is mortal yet*. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret, but I do. I regret. (289; emphasis added)

Much like how Bilbo would go on to talk of elves in Hobbiton, the unicorn returns to her "normal" life with a piece of her unique enchantment still within her. Olderman states,

"Just as Lír has learned the love of wonder from the unicorn, the unicorn learns the wonder of love from Lír. Perishable as it is and foolish as it is, human love makes the unicorn envy the world of mortality" (314-5). Perhaps it is not as much envy as it is the same sort of longing that was in Molly and Schmendrick, and that laid dormant within Lír. In his critique of the novel, Manlove argues that the unicorn's character is underdeveloped and vague. He takes issue with the fact she falls in love with Lír, stating "the fact that Beagle did this at all suggests that he felt she was in some way lacking" (*Impulse* 152). Quite frankly, yes, the unicorn *is* lacking. She is lacking in the same way all the mortal characters are lacking: she needs to gain recovery and consolation, and, a relationship with the supernatural. The supernatural object she becomes enchanted by, however, is human love—something entirely unfamiliar and fantastical to a creature that has never experienced it before in her version of the "mundane." It is love and empathy that pushes her to defeat the Red Bull, and it is love that was so alien to her that she familiarized herself with by the end of her arc. She goes from feeling no regret (*Last* 55) to being the only unicorn in the world who does (289). This regret, this one sorrow, is something the unicorn thanks Schmendrick for: "My people are in the world again. No sorrow will live in me as long as that joy—save one, and I thank you for that, too" (289). The unicorn, like all her human friends, feels the lasting impulse of fantasy within her, and is made familiar with the supernatural—something that was supernatural to her, at least. Lír and the unicorn both allow each other escape into fantasy in their shared roles as lover and beast and, although they are parted in the end, grow and remain enchanted.

As Schmendrick states, "He will never know what she has given him, but neither will she" (256).

While the protagonists clearly support the order of things and their purpose, there is the problem of King Haggard. He is undoubtedly drawn to the fantastic and seeks recovery, so why is he denied it? The obvious, or more simplistic, answer to this would be that he is the story's villain, and a happy ending must come with the punishment of the villain. Bettelheim writes, "…consolation not only requires, but is the direct result of, justice" (144). Haggard acts as the needed element of threat. Without him, there is no character arc for Lír, no Red Bull, no reason for a quest at all. The less obvious answer to Haggard's denied recovery, however, comes in the form of his refusal to follow the order of things. He does not wish to step into fantasy and return to his real world, but wants to stay in fantasy forever. Tolkien warns: "Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came" (370). He explains further that the abuse of fantasy does not outweigh the use of it, but the threat is still there. Haggard's obsession with the unicorns is selfish and childlike. He explains to Amalthea as he looks out to the tortured unicorns being pushed and pulled by the waves: "'I like to watch them. They fill me with joy.' The childish voice was all but singing. 'I am sure it is joy. The first time I felt it, I thought I was going to die…I said to the Red Bull, I must have that. I must have all of it, all there is, for my need is very great'" (*Last* 221). Haggard wants the unicorns even in death, as he wonders out loud "but I wonder if they will take their freedom even then. I hope not, for then they will

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belong to me forever" (222). This is not the proper, healthy joy and recovery the other

characters gain from their love of the unicorn. Haggard's "love" is obsessive, possessive,

and cruel. Bettelheim argues that the reason the return to normalcy and the real world at

the end of fairy tales is that it "teaches the child what he needs most to know at this stage

of his development: that permitting one's fantasy to take hold of oneself for a while is not

detrimental" (3). Haggard has not learned this in the slightest, and the reader sees its

detriment—clearly not just in how Haggard harms others, but in how he harms himself.

He is in a state of misery, "liv[ing] without hope" (*Last* 200) because of his obsession and

hatred for others. Haggard's story is to be pitied, but it is his refusal to mature and evil

nature that deny his own recovery and consolation.

It is interesting that Manlove and Attebery were both concerned with Beagle

being *too* entranced with the wonder of things. They paint him as an overly talkative

writer whose obsession with the fantastic laid out by greats like Thurber and Tolkien

defeats his narrative. He is the butterfly and Haggard at once, and Beagle has agreed to

that much: "The butterfly is a self-portrait, and—villain of the story though he may be—

is King Haggard, with his dreadful hunger for a beauty that can never escape him"

("Introduction" [*Fantasy*] xii). What Attebery and Manlove do not realize, however, is

just how purposeful this appreciation for wonder truly is. Beagle is not trying to merely

make himself a new Tolkien—he is following an old, powerful tradition by doing

something new with each of his characters. While Beagle presents *The Last Unicorn* in a

way that inverts some classical tropes and functions, it still follows the grand purpose of a

fairy tale's order. It presents all of the needed elements, and each protagonist gains the lasting bit of magic that the reader leaves the novel with as well.

<div align="center">Tell It Again</div>

Manlove makes an interesting statement on the relationship between the modern fantasy and traditional fairy tales. The modern author presents "profound admiration tinged with a longing to imitate the simplicity of the form" (*Impulse* 4) of traditional fairy tales. Indeed, he argues that the structures and tropes of fairy tales "are now part of the furniture of almost any writer's mind" (4). A repetition of traditional plots is not to be condemned, for it is unavoidable.

Beagle's inversion of fairy tale structures through his unicorn and her journey does not refute the grand order of things, but rather it keeps them alive. A writer may choose to do more than simply dust the "furniture" that exists in his mind—perhaps he wants to repaint and refurbish it. This is the natural course of folk and fairy tale, as Propp explains that the myth possesses "striking uniformity [and] repetition," as well as a contradictory "amazing multiformity" (21). Similarly—using the several variants to the Oedipus myth, including Freud's theory—Lévi-Strauss states that "[t]here is no 'true' version of which all others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth" (186). *The Last Unicorn*, then, belongs to the unicorn myth as any medieval tapestry that hangs among the furniture of Beagle's mind.

Tales are to be told and retold again and again, and with this comes reinvention—purposeful or otherwise. It is this that keeps fairy tales alive, and, as is explained further in the next chapter, *replenishes* them.

1. Propp argues that the word "fairy" should be replaced with "mythical," because many legends and beast fables follow a similar structure to proper "fairy tales" and the term would be more accurate in his eyes (100). However, Tolkien is very distinct in his language and definition of "fairy" and, with it, "fantasy," and is directly referenced and examined by Bettelheim. Tolkien is also a direct influence on Beagle (Beagle wrote the screenplay for the *Lord of the Rings* animated film, the introduction to the American edition of *The Hobbit*, as well as various essays on Tolkien's work). For these reasons, my argument will focus on the terminology used in "On Fairy Stories" and *The Uses of Enchantment*.

2. Some could argue that because *The Last Unicorn*'s protagonist is a sort of talking animal, it may be qualified as what Tolkien calls a "beast fable." However, he states that these stories are ones in which "the animal form is only a mask upon a human face" and usually does not concern itself with magic (328). This is not the case in *The Last Unicorn*, in which the unicorn is made distinct from humans in her mannerisms and immortality. The unicorn in Beagle's novel also clearly distinguishes herself from animals and is seen by herself and humans as their protector, not as a member of their kind.

3. It is important to clarify that the world the characters begin and end their stories in does not have to reflect our literal, real world like it does in low fantasy stories. Characters may come from a world that acknowledges magic as real, but they do not

interact with it. A Hobbit is a magical creature compared to a human, but Hobbiton is still mundane compared to the Misty Mountains. Camelot is normal for Sir Gawain, whereas the Green Knight's castle is not. This contrast is enough.

4. Even the role of "sorceress" present in these tales (Bettelheim 283) is genderbent through Schmendrick.

"THERE'S NO SUCH PERSON AS YOU, OR ME, OR ANY OF US": REALITY'S

COLLECTIVE FICTION AND THE UNICORN OF REPLENISHMENT

This study has thus far established that fairy tales have a mimetic quality.

Whether one believes that all stories are Joseph Campbell's monomyth or Christopher

Booker's seven basic plots, the fairy tale (as well as many members of the fantasy genre)

follows a recurring structure regardless of its morphology. Fairy tales are designed to be

told over and over again in new contexts, cultures, and times—they exist on John Barth's

Möbius strip offered as the frame tale to *Lost in the Funhouse*: "once upon a time there

was a story that began…once upon a time there was a story that began…."

However, as Propp explains, the fairy tale also possesses "amazing multiformity"

(21). As long as a fairy tale fits within the definition established in chapter one, it has the

free range to be changed and morphed into something new, yet still old. Beagle's fairy

tale utilizes the traditional structure, but through inverting and morphing it. As

established, the characters follow the tradition in an untraditional way, and the book's

focus seems to be on specifically calling attention to the fairy tale tradition. Besides his

various statements on the roles the characters must play, Schmendrick explicitly states

that he and Molly "are in a fairy-tale, and must go where it goes" (*Last* 128). In the

previous chapter, fairy tales were described as having a "metatextual" relationship with

their reader—the reader experiences a similar character growth to the hero, creating their

own fairy tale within their reality. The fact that Beagle's characters acknowledge that their setting *is* a fictional fairy tale and yet have to enter into a fantasy and suspend their disbelief the expands this metatextuality to not just a form of relation between reader and hero for the goal of recovery and consolation, but as a question of ontology.

Beagle describes his fascination with this question of what is "real" and what is not as "the line between." In his short story collection of the same name, he defines this "line" as: "that invisible boundary between conscious and not, between reality and fantasy, between here (wherever 'here' is) and there (wherever 'there' might be), between the seen and the seen's true nature. A line neither one thing nor ever the other, but now and eternally between" ("Introduction" [*Line*] vii). *The Last Unicorn* does not only invoke the element of fantasy in that it calls the reader to believe in unreal things within the subcreation of the novel's world, but in the reader's own world as well. Theologian and fantasy literary critic George Aichele Jr. writes in his study on the metafictional qualities of *The Last Unicorn* and *The Man in the High Castle* that Beagle's "ironic play of traditional fairy tale and nontraditional elements raises fundamental questions about the meta-physics of narrative, and therefore also about the reader's primary world" ("Two" 60). This mixing of reality and ontological questioning gives way to a postmodernist reading. Indeed, in a later study, Aichele encouraged the use of postmodernist theory in fantasy literary criticism for this exact connection, calling for the rejection of the restrictive, modernist model that suggested that the real and the unreal were in exact opposition with one another. Aichele states, "Fantasy is no longer the

consequence and the symptom of metaphysical polarity, as it is for modernism, but it precedes and is destroyed by any beliefs we may have about reality; fantasy is the paradoxical anti-metaphysics of postmodernism itself" ("Literary" 327-28). Indeed, literary theorist Brian McHale states in his 1987 study *Postmodernist Fiction* that the fantasy genre—more specifically, the element of the fantastic—can easily embody postmodern sensibilities: "postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genre of the fantastic…it draws upon the fantastic for motifs and *topoi*…It is able to draw upon the fantastic in this way because the fantastic genre, like science fiction and like postmodernist fiction itself, is governed by the ontological dominant" (74).

Both the fairy tale and the postmodern works do not seek to be understood in the modernist sphere of "logic," but instead invite the reader to believe in things that do not exist—inviting those non-existing things to become real. Where the postmodern and the fantastic seemingly diverge, however, is the supposed, inherent nihilism within the postmodern movement, and while many critics have acknowledged the postmodern elements within *The Last Unicorn*, there is a hesitation among its critics to label it as a member of that group. David M. Miller argues for the acknowledgement and respect of fairy tales and fantasy among postmodernist critics, and analyzes *The Last Unicorn* as an ontological metafantasy (borrowing the term from R. E. Foust) in his essay written for the eighth International Conference on the Fantastic. However, rather than viewing the novel as an example of the postmodern movement, he uses postmodern language to defend not only Beagle's work, but the fantasy genre as a whole. He states, "the emergence of

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various post-modern theories and fictions, though they scorn high fantasy, has had the effect of allowing fantasy out of the ghetto" (Miller 207). While Miller is right to say that postmodernism allows for new, respected pieces of fantasy literature to emerge in current day, his use of the term "scorn" is interesting. There seems to be a strange disconnect between the sort of "line between" presented in the high fantasy novel (specifically, the fairy tale) and the postmodern novel—or at least, there is the perspective that these two models of literature are too different from one another. While scholars R. E. Foust, George Aichele Jr., and David M. Miller explore *The Last Unicorn* as a novel that utilizes postmodern techniques and should therefore be respected and noticed by such contemporary literary criticism, none of them define it as "postmodern" outright. In fact, Foust describes the novel—and the fantasy genre as a whole—as a "viable alternative to [John Barth's] 'exhaustion,' to the entropic interpretation of human experience that is the terminal vision of both the parodic and the anti-novel novelist" (6) and Aichele, while finding postmodernist theory more useful than modernist theory in his analysis of Beagle's novel, finds both styles of hermeneutics to be "defantasizing strateg[ies]" that fantasy resists ("Two" 56). It seems that there is a resistance to categorize many fantasy works, especially Beagle's, as postmodern due to the difficulty to define the term. These critics seem to be somewhat simplifying that allusive definition to cynical parody. Beagle's novel is not a fairy tale with postmodern elements, nor is it a postmodern work with fairy tale elements. It is a *postmodern fairy tale* that explores the concept of "fiction" and "reality" and—to use Barth's more precise, less misunderstood

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terminology—"replenishes" the genre it is a member of. The first chapter has established

what is meant by "fairy tale," but now the additional label of "postmodern" must be

clarified.

A Refusal to be Defined

Many well-respected attempts to explain the basis of postmodernism begin in the

following way: "postmodernism" does not exist. McHale says as much in the

introduction to his 1993 study *Constructing Postmodernism*: "No doubt there 'is' no such

'thing' as postmodernism. Or at least there is no such thing if what one has in mind is

some kind of identifiable object 'out there' in the world, localizable, bounded by a

definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about which we can all agree"

(1). The term "postmodernism," then, seemingly has no real sort of definition or clear

attributes. John Barth wrote in 1980 that postmodern criticism at the time seemed to

mostly consist of "disagreeing about what postmodernism is or ought to be, and thus

about who should be admitted to the club—or clubbed into admission, depending on the

critic's view of the phenomenon and of particular writers" ("Replenishment" 247). The

term cannot be easily placed on one group or the other, or even a particular time period.

"Post" would imply "after," which would simply mean that it is a movement that comes

after modernism. McHale describes this as inaccurate, as postmodern literature more so

"follows" modernism than simply comes after as something brand new (*Postmodernist*

4), and Ihab Hassan explains in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" that there really

is not true "period" of postmodern writing, and that "Modernism and Postmodernism are

not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall…we are all…a little Victorian,

Modern, and Postmodern at once" (277). While postmodern works change perspective

and can critique modernism, to describe the term "postmodern" as simply a rejection of

the previous movement would be inaccurate. The word has no place to really fit, as

postmodernism is concerned with pulling from and diving into previous modes of

storytelling. As with Tolkien's description of Faerie, postmodernism "cannot be caught in

a net of words, for it is one of its qualities to be *indescribable*" (322-23; emphasis added).

This indescribability ironically makes it a useful term for attempting to put

postmodern works under a label. If a critic is to properly discuss a trend or sensibility

found within a large number of literary works, it is helpful to use some sort of signifier as

short-hand. McHale would argue that there is really no tangible thing as Romanticism,

the Gothic, or even the term "American Literature" either—they only exist, as McHale

describes, in the sense that we as critics *talk about them* (*Constructing* 1). While

"postmodern" is perhaps not the most well-constructed term—Barth described it as

"awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new

direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anticlimactic, feebly following a

hard act to follow" ("Replenishment" 276)—it is the term that has become commonplace,

so it must be worked within. However, rather than "defining" the postmodern and

arguing about what it "ought to be" and who should be admitted into the club as Barth

observed, it is perhaps more constructive to explain the postmodern as a sort of lens. It is

not a genre—as there can be postmodern sci-fi, westerns, fairy tales, and horror—that a

text can simply follow the "rules" of and join. Instead, a story, as well as a critic, can use a particular lens of postmodernism to view a work of literature in a certain form. The following pages, then, seek to find the particular lens *The Last Unicorn* should be viewed with.

To understand the postmodern as a lens rather than genre and properly get to an idea of what postmodernism "is" in the context of this thesis's reading of the novel, one must first understand Barth's concepts of "exhaustion" and "replenishment." In his 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth examines the state of storytelling in the time period, one he describes as an age of "felt ultimacies" (30). "Exhaustion" refers to the "used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (29). Just as T.S. Eliot examined in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," it is impossible to be the "old greats." Every single basic plotline has been done before, exhausted, and it is impossible to create something entirely new. This, combined with a discussion on fiction and reality and that the world we live in is nothing more than "our dream" (34), was met with harsh criticism. There was an understanding that Barth's views were nihilistic and outrageous, that he was implying that there would be no reason to even attempt to make something beautiful ever again. One particularly angry letter to *The Atlantic* the year his essay was published describes Barth as "a nut or a clowner and a leg puller and the Editor and Goat-Boy are both schemers who together with fiendish laughter decided to print this 'exhaustion' theory" ("Letters" 48). Another letter writer believed "The Literature of Exhaustion" to be proof that "the Gutenberg Era is coming to an end" (48). More than

these disgruntled magazine patrons, the work has been misunderstood as another example

of postmodernism only being capable of cynic parody. Barth's own novels have been

simplified as "lampoons" (Foust 13), and writer Jorge Borges—whom Barth praises in

the essay—took the meaning of "exhaustion" negatively, stating that an exhaustion of

literature is impossible ("Replenishment" 285). Indeed, Barth would later state that critics

mistook his essay to mean that there is "nothing left for contemporary writers but to

parody and travesty our great predecessors" and that this is what they "deplore as

postmodernism" (285). Through a misunderstanding of "postmodernism" as a signifier, it

became a sort of pejorative for works that aimed to rework and morph older styles of

storytelling.

However, Barth's use of the term "exhaustion" does not come from a place of

cynicism, and "postmodern" should not be misunderstood as a pejorative. Barth explains

that literary exhaustion is not "a cause for despair" ("Exhaustion" 29). Perhaps the

notions of language and even reality as we know it do not truly "exist," and maybe

everything has already been done, but it does not mean that these old concepts are not

without value or should stop being explored. Barth explains that "it might be conceivable

to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature" (31). This is further clarified

in Barth's 1980 essay, "The Literature of Replenishment." Here, he explains that

exhaustion is not a result of some sort of end to the human imagination—this is forever a

constant in our world—rather, that it opens an opportunity for new ways of using old

styles. What "exhaustion" more accurately means is that "artistic conventions are liable

to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves
to generate new and lively work" ("Replenishment" 285). Like the fairy tale, Barth is
stating that literature is meant to be morphed and changed into something brand new.
Barth ends his 1980 essay by stating that he wishes that postmodernism will someday be
viewed as a "literature of replenishment" (286)—meaning that stylizations and
reinventions of old "exhausted" forms of storytelling will help keep literature alive. A
good work of postmodernism does not wish to destroy the old ways and replace them, but
to use them to create something new and wonderful. It is not simply the "next best thing,"
but the "best next thing" (286).

These replenished stylizations, then, acknowledge the act of storytelling itself—
they are stories about stories. As such, there is a movement in replenishment towards
questions of ontology. Postmodernism and what can be labeled postmodern then deals
heavily in the question of what literature itself "is" and its nature as a "living" and ever-
changing thing. While using "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Jorge Borges as an
example, McHale explains in his 1992 study that Barth's theories of exhaustion and
replenishment are brought forth within postmodern works through their questioning of
reality—both fictional and nonfictional:

> The 'new and lively work' which Barth promises arises from the play of
> ontological levels, the way in which a story's fictional world is reflected by its
> actual mode of existence in the real world…the story turns its disadvantageous
> situation at the tail-end of a long literary tradition, when 'original' stories

apparently can no longer be written, into a positive advantage, thereby

contributing to something genuinely 'new and lively' after all. (*Constructing* 27)

When McHale discusses "ontological levels," he is using Thomas Pavel's definition of

"ontology" as a "theoretical description of a universe" (*Postmodernist* 27)—that is,

something that may exist within some reality. Epistemological questions found in

modernist work dealt with issues of wondering how one knows what they know to be true

as "true" and the limits of knowledge, whereas the postmodern ontological questions are

ones breaking down the very notion of the ideas of "truth" and "reality." According to

McHale, this is where the modernists and the postmodernists are truly divided: while the

modernists asked epistemological questions, the postmodernists ask ontological

questions. In other words, the main shift between modern and postmodern is "from

problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*" (*Postmodernist* 10). It is not to say

that a postmodernist work cannot ask epistemological questions, rather, that the

dominant—what Roman Jakobson calls "the focusing component of a work of art: [what]

rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (qtd. in McHale,

Postmodernist 6)—remains focused on this ontological questioning of reality. McHale

further explains postmodernism's ontological dominant in *Constructing Postmodernism*:

"Postmodernist fiction…is fiction organized in terms of an ontological dominant, fiction

whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the mode of being of fictional worlds

and their inhabitants, and/or reflect on the plurality and diversity of worlds, whether

'real,' possible, fictional, or what-have-you" (147). A postmodernist work, then, deals

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with these questions of ontology in relation to the idea of "fiction" versus "reality" within

what McHale calls the constructed "heterocosms" (*Postmodernist* 27) created by an

author. Just as McHale defines our world and history as "a kind of collective fiction,

constructed and sustained by the processes of socialization, institutionalization, and

everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language" (37),[1] the

heterocosm—what Tolkien would describe as a "subcreation"—becomes a reality when

the reader engages with it. "All fictional texts…project worlds, of course; this is one of

the necessary conditions…for identifying them as fiction," McHale notes, "[b]ut not

every fictional text is *about* world-projection; not every fictional text reflects on its ways

of world-making" (*Constructing* 175; emphasis added). It is this ontological questioning

of the very nature of literature and how it creates new realities that replenishment can

happen through a reconstruction of old heterocosms.

Written realities, of course, are accomplished through language. Like

postmodernism, language itself does not reveal a clear reality. It is an ontological

question in-and-of-itself. Ihab Hassan offers a list of contrasting attributes between

modernism and postmodernism. According Hassan, modernism invokes the "signified"

through its epistemological questions, whereas postmodernism's ontology invokes the

"signifier." This language comes from the study of structuralism, specifically how the

natural/imagined formation of language is examined in Ferdinand de Saussure's

foundational book, *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure defines the function of

language in identifying the "signified"—that is, the image created in one's mind when

one hears or reads a word (the "signifier"). He calls this relationship "arbitrary" and

states that, "It is clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us

to conform to *reality*, and we disregard whatever others might be *imagined*" (Saussure

139; emphasis added). The fact that the word "apple" puts the image of an apple within

our mind is not based in any sort of defined reality. While people need language to

categorize their thoughts, the words chosen could have been anything. "Apple" could

have just as easily been "orange." "Postmodernism" could have just as easily been

"modernism." Saussure further argues that, given its arbitrary nature, language is thus

subject to change: "Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces

which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified

and the signifier" (144). This vulnerability to re-conceptualization is further explored by

Propp, who describes language as a resilient reality that is, at the same time, made up of

arbitrary "rules." He states, "A living language is a concrete fact—grammar is its abstract

substratum…not a single concrete fact can be explained without the study of these

abstract bases" (15). As grammatical rules are not immutable, language can resist but

never negate change. Language is fact, and Saussure would argue that thoughts do not

exist without language—and yet language is still this obscure, arbitrary thing. Language

is both real and an illusion. The discourse surrounding the term "postmodern" itself gives

way to one of its key aspects in this regard: its use as a proper signifier can only be

defined if what is being signified by it is agreed upon, but this is arbitrary. The debate

around postmodernism is itself the understanding of the ontology of language and literature found in postmodern sensibility.

How this ontological questioning of creation through language is achieved, however, is not confined to one clear set of "rules." McHale and Hassan offer lists detailing the various methods postmodern authors use to explore these ontological issues, but a text does not need to possess all these methods or elements to receive the label "postmodern." More than this, a clear following of a set of rules would not be a study in postmodernist thought, if the very basis of postmodernism is a questioning of modes of being. While postmodernism does seek to reinvent and rework older models of storytelling, McHale explains, using language from Mikail Bakhtin, that this can come in the form of parody or stylization. A parody reverses the "evaluative 'direction' or 'orientation' of the parodied model," whereas stylization "retains the original 'orientation,' taking care, however, to keep the original and its stylization distinct" (*Postmodernist* 21). McHale further explains that "in a stylization, the dominant of the original (the model being stylized) is preserved, while in parody it is not" (21). Postmodernism does need to play with its material and make it its own, but it does not always have to be a critique. A postmodern work can explore its ontological questions through either parody or stylization—it can critique the style it uses, or it can use that style to explore its own, newly created world. A work can be postmodern while still adhering to the "rules" of the model it works within. This is how a postmodern work

would aid in replenishment, rather than "parody and travesty" as critics of Barth had claimed before.

Despite the lack-luster term, we can use these ideas to come to a specific, "postmodern" lens through which to examine a novel: A postmodern story is one that presents ontological questions of being in relation to the very nature of storytelling and language. It invites the reader through metafictional and absurdist elements (among others) to question what is "real" and what is "fiction" by entering a universe that mixes and blurs these lines through complicating the usage of language and what it signifies. This exploration comes in the form of a stylization[2] of a genre of storytelling, in which the postmodern work becomes both a member of that genre and its own new version. In this new stylization, the genre explored is replenished.

Real Myths and Imaginary People

In the previous chapter of this study, *The Last Unicorn* was defined as a proper fairy tale. In this way, then, it is a postmodern stylization rather than a parody because it "retains the original 'orientation'" of its model (*Postmodernist* 21). Perhaps Beagle's work was as misunderstood by the fantasy critics presented in chapter one as Barth's "Exhaustion." Beagle has stated that *The Last Unicorn* was written in an effort to "somehow make that whole tradition [of fairy tales] [his] own for a moment" (qtd. in Tobin 19). In her essay, "'A Myth, a Memory, a Will-o'-the-Wish': Peter Beagle's Funny Fantasy," Jean Tobin remarks that Beagle's writing style creates a "self-mockery of artists" (22). While Tobin does not use McHale's language of "world-projection," her

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description of Beagle's work invokes the sort of ontological metafictions described in *Constructing Postmodernism*. Foust provides a similar description, believing the metatextual relationship between art and the artist within *The Last Unicorn* to be a statement on the need for magic in the reader's decidedly non-magical world. While he believes the novel to be superior to postmodern "parody," he argues:

> [Beagle] uses devices of obvious artifice to reify the reader's always tenuous sense of the fabulous. Its artifice thus remythologizes the barren world of fact upon which, however, fantasy relies for its effect. It is within this complex dialectic between fact and not-fact that meta-fantasy has its being. The theme of *The Last Unicorn* centers upon the possibility of "magic"—of wonder, heroism and beauty—in a skeptical, demythologized world. (9)

This art of "remythologizing" through a restructuring of fairy tale elements allows for Barth's theory of replenishment. We have discussed how Beagle reorders the "rules" of a fairy tale while still following them. The meta-acknowledgement of this through the characters, especially Schmendrick, is postmodern, and has the narrative purpose of aiding in this revitalization of the fairy tale. The reader of a postmodern story is invited into sub-belief the same way the reader of a fairy tale is—and in metafantasy, the notion of the "real" and "unreal" "oscillate with each other constantly and there is no distinct gate or escape" (Aichele, "Two" 57). This blurred ontology is the basis of *The Last Unicorn*'s story, particularly within Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival and Captain

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Cully's camp, which present the metatextual relationship between the characters and the act of writing—the usage of language to create new realities/worlds—itself.

In the Midnight Carnival, the real and the imaginary—the signified and signifiers—are mixed under what Schmendrick describes as Mommy Fortuna's "spells of seeming" (*Last* 27). The crowd is presented a menagerie of mythical beasts, that are, in reality, only normal animals locked in cages. The tour guide Rukh describes the battered animals as mythical monsters to the carnival patrons, and thus the patrons see the animals as the monsters they represent. A starved dog and lion become Cerberus and a manticore, a spider becomes Arachne, etc. Schmendrick describes the magic as such: "she can give a lion the semblance of a manticore to eyes that want to see a manticore there—eyes that would take a real manticore for a lion…And a unicorn for a white mare" (27). The unicorn and Schmendrick act as the reader's guide for reality, as they can see what is a lion and what is a manticore—what is real and what is not. The unicorn states that she does not understand what the carnival patrons are seeing, but when Schmendrick tells her to look again as Rukh continues his speech, the figures change:

> [T]he unicorn began to perceive a second figure in each cage. They loomed
> hugely over the captives of the Midnight Carnival, and yet they were joined to
> them: stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth. So there was manticore—
> famine-eyed, slobber mouthed, roaring, curving his deadly tail over his back until
> the poison spine lolled and nodded just above his ear—and there was a lion too,
> tiny and absurd by comparison. Yet they were the same creature. (25)

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Here is one of the earliest instances in the novel of what McHale calls the "fundamental ontological discontinuity between the fictional and the real" (*Postmodernist* 14). The carnival goers are invited—convinced—to believe in things that are not truly real, and yet they become "real" in the sense that the creatures can be seen and are given names. This is the power of fantasy—the essential element of a fairy tale explored in the previous chapter—to invoke belief. It is what McHale calls "the ontological confrontation inherent in the fantastic" (*Postmodernist* 77) that the postmodernists emphasize. Just as the "collective fiction" of reality and history was constructed through language, here the myths are constructed into a fictional reality. The lion is "tiny and absurd" compared to the fictional manticore because the manticore has become more real than the lion. Its fictionality *does not matter*. Miller describes the scene in the following way: "The initial 'action' of the episode is a series of fumbled problems in knowing: the rubes encounter disguise, delusion, projection, illusion, reality, and epiphany. So strong is their desire for plenitude that they see a monster in every cage, *whether it's there or not*" (210). The carnival patrons see only the illusion—the illusion that has morphed into a reality because of Mommy Fortuna's seeming spell. Like the postmodern authors who create "pseudo-learned commentary on other texts—texts which exist, however, only in [their] own imagination[s]" (McHale, *Constructing* 27), the Midnight Carnival is Mommy Fortuna's heterocosm. She has taken other "works" (the animals) and morphed them into something brand new that her patrons (readers) now believe in. Beagle presents an

ontological narrative through this character, and the carnival is a commentary on world-projection.

Even stranger, the unicorn and the harpy, Celaeno, are true, mythical creatures—but Mommy Fortuna still must place a spell on them as well for the carnival goers to see them as such. Mommy Fortuna tells the unicorn, "Did you really think that those gogglers knew you for yourself without any help from me? No, I had to give you an aspect they could understand, and a horn they could see" (*Last* 38). She gives a similar message right before she is killed by the harpy: "'Not alone!' the witch howled triumphantly at both of them. 'You never could have freed yourselves alone! I held you!'" (53). Mommy Fortuna proclaims in both of these passages the power she holds over language, and thus perceived reality. Without her spells, which are made of words, it is almost as if the creatures are lost—like unwritten history. Just as McHale explains that the collective fiction of reality must be sustained through "socialization [and] institutionalization" (*Postmodernist* 37), the creatures—real or not—need to be made real through the invitation of belief via language. It is the suspension of belief as well as disbelief, the jigsaw puzzle of "linguistic categories" (32). Saussure explains the "value" of language using chess pieces as an example: "Take a knight, for instance. By itself is it an element in the game? Certainly not, for by its material make-up…it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real, concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it" (166). With a structural understanding of language, then, the mythical creatures have the same limitations as the knight: a unicorn is not a unicorn until the value, the image, has been

wedded to it—even if she is real.[3] Raymond Olderman believes this need to convince the

carnival goers to believe in fictional creatures when they cannot identify a real creature to

be evidence of their corrupted view of the world around them. Because they are ruled

over by the evil King Haggard and his Red Bull who has stolen away all the world's

unicorns, humans have no frame of reference for the good sort of magic unicorns possess.

He states: "The humans who come to the Carnival and almost all the humans that the

unicorn meets can see these unhappy illusions, but they cannot see the unicorn. Because

of the Red Bull, because of fear, they see nothing but the possibilities of death, and so the

land is wasted and wonder, when it does appear, cannot be recognized" (319). The

humans have no frame of reference for the signifier "unicorn," and thus the signified has

been transmuted and lost. The basic concept of "unicorn" is there, as they are spoken of

as things long gone, but they are not easily identifiable without Mommy Fortuna's spell.

Through her "spells of seeming" (essentially, language), Mommy Fortuna artificially

creates the signified to match the signifier—as if translating an ancient language into a

modern one. The unicorn is a mare until there is a word to match what she is. Not until a

fictional reality is created by Mommy Fortuna is there the opportunity for the unicorn to

be recognized in the socialized reality of the carnival goers. Referencing Roman

Ingarden, McHale states that the ontology of fiction "depends on the interaction between

the *reader* and the artwork" (*Postmodernist* 31). Mommy Fortuna's spells, then, require

this interaction from her "readers." As Schmendrick states, her spells only work because

of "the eagerness of those gulls…to believe whatever comes easiest" (*Last* 27).

This question of fictional ontology and belief is further explored with perhaps the saddest case in the Midnight Carnival: the spider. The spider is said to be Arachne, and her act is the most convincing of all because the spider, unlike all the other animals, actually *believes* she is Arachne—she has interacted fully with Mommy Fortuna's "art." Schmendrick explains, "Belief makes all the difference to magic like Mommy Fortuna's. Why, if that troop of witlings withdrew their wonder, there'd be nothing left of all her witchery but the sound of a spider weeping. And no one would hear it" (*Last* 29). Indeed, when Mommy Fortuna is killed by Celaeno and the unicorn leaves with Schmendrick, a sound "followed them into the morning on a strange road—the tiny, dry sound of a spider weeping" (54). Miller explains that "Mommy's pet spider has denied any distance between herself and an archetype…but she has chosen the wrong archetype (Arachne was not really a spider) and then mistaken herself for it. The spider is a character freely bound by her own epistemological fantasy in a world that is ontologically firm" (213). The spider is made to shift and question her modes of being. While Miller calls her identity crisis an "epistemological fantasy," it works well within the ontological questions presented within the carnival itself: what makes something real, and what makes something fictional? The line here is blurred. Miller also states that, "If *The Last Unicorn* were not ontologically based, the unicorn would not say to the harpy, 'You are like me'…By which she clearly means 'You're real too'" (210). The spider, unlike the harpy and the unicorn, is not a mythical being without Mommy Fortuna's seeming spell, but her belief was strong enough to make her into one—until that belief was shattered.[4] Her mode

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of being was forcibly shifted, and she was thus thrust into an ontological crisis. What was

real in the constructed reality of the carnival is no longer real outside of it, just as the

constructed reality of a book only exists within the pages of that book and the reader and

author's imagination. Once that text escapes the author's mind, it ceases to exist.

To be a "real" unicorn or a "real" harpy is inherently contradictory, however. The

suggestion here is that myths are more real than reality, or at least can become so if they

are properly socialized *into* a reality, either through the means of "history" or through the

heterocosms created by a writer (in this case, Mommy Fortuna, or even Molly and

Schmendrick who see the unicorn as she is because they believe in her). When Molly

asks Schmendrick what the unicorn's role in their story is, he replies, "We are in a fairy-

tale, and must go where it goes. But she is real. She is real" (*Last* 128). Yet, Schmendrick

also calls her, with just as much joy and conviction, "a myth, a memory, a will-o'-the-

wish. Wail-o'-the-wisp" (66-67), and she is said to only exist in "books and tales and

song" (3). The unicorn, then, appears to be a hybrid: a real, imaginary creature—a factual

myth. When she is forced out of her mythical status and turned human, she suddenly has

to abide by the rules of the narrative. Schmendrick tells her "You're in this story with the

rest of us now, and you must go with it…The story cannot end without a princess" (151-

52). In this way, the unicorn is forced into different modes of being. As a human—more

specifically, as the princess archetype—she must act as what she signifies just as she did

when she was a unicorn. Miller states that "[i]n ontological fantasy, the single most

important piece of information about a character…is the category of being to which she,

he, or it belongs" (211). As a postmodern story, it follows the path of ontology and modes of being, and as a stylization, it follows the rules and archetypes of the model it works within. It is for this reason that the unicorn's motivations are forced to change when her state of being changes—and this is directly, metatexually, brought up.

Still, there is a sense that as a human she is less "real" than she was as a unicorn. George Aichele Jr. explains, "the unicorn points to an outside of the story, an *extratextual reality*…the story invites the actual reader to find the timeless magic of the unicorn in the primary world about us—in the breakers on a seashore, the quiet of a forest glade, or even one's own heart—that has in fact happened" ("Two" 58-59; emphasis added). Indeed, McHale states that reality is not merely mirrored within a story, but "incorporated" (*Postmodernist* 28). Not only are reality and fiction blurred together within *The Last Unicorn*, but there is an idea that stories are more real than reality because of what they signify. They are spoken into existence through their language.

This ontology of collective, real fiction is exemplified in the Captain Cully and Robin Hood incident. After Schmendrick leaves the destroyed Midnight Carnival to join the unicorn on her quest, he is captured by a band of outlaws led by self-proclaimed folk-hero Captain Cully. In order to gain Cully's favor, Schmendrick guesses at his narrative—telling a grand tale of his life with his "merry men" who "lead a joyous life in the forest" (*Last* 78). The narration explains that "Schmendrick had never heard of Captain Cully before that very evening, but he had a good grounding in Anglo-Saxon folklore and knew the type" (78). Here the reader sees Beagle using metafictional

language to address the "line between." Cully is acknowledged as an archetype—one that follows certain rules and structures, just as the novel does itself. This is pushed even further when the delighted Cully becomes convinced that Schmendrick is Francis James Child—an actual folklorist known for collecting English and Scottish ballads. Once again, the fictional and real are blended together. It is unclear if the universe of the novel exists within the reader's universe, given this real, historical figure and references to *American* folk heroes like John Henry within this medieval-esque fairy tale world (88). McHale states that "to juxtapose or superimpose different languages, registers, or discourses is to place different, perhaps incommensurable worlds in tense confrontation" (*Constructing* 153-54).[5] This "transworld identity," as Eco refers to it, once again opens up questions of ontology that contribute to Beagle's "line between" presented in *The Last Unicorn*. Our primary reality is once again mixed with the fictional heterocosm.

Cully's goal is to become a myth, and all the songs he has his men sing are ones he has written himself. All his ballads tell of heroic acts he and his men never actually did. One of his men complains: "Captain, if we're to have folk songs…then we feel they ought to be true songs about real outlaws, not this lying life we live" (*Last* 83-84). In her article, "Peter S. Beagle's Transformations of the Mythic Unicorn," Weronika Łaszkiewicz states that "Cully surrounds himself with a facade of lies because of his paradoxical desire to become more real than the mythic Robin Hood" (56). If Robin Hood never truly existed, however, does it matter that Cully creates his own myths? After all, a man who never even existed cannot, by definition, be a "real outlaw," just as there

cannot be any such thing as a "real" unicorn. Why can he not be like the spider and just

believe himself to be Arachne? Why cannot a pawn be called a knight in a game of

chess? It is because Cully, no matter how much he wishes to, cannot force the change in

language or sub-belief. Saussure states the following:

> The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that
>
> it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses
>
> it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language
>
> could be replaced by no other…No individual, even if he willed it could modify
>
> in any way at all the choice that has been made. (141-42)

Cully has no power to convince his men otherwise because they—unlike the carnival

patrons—refuse to participate in his ontology of fiction. There is no interaction between

reader and artwork, no sub-belief, and no socialization of Cully's constructed reality.

Cully is thus *less real than a myth*. This speaks to the ontological questions postmodern

metafictions present with the fictions they create—the fictions *all* stories create. Foust

explains, "The reader is being asked to accept as 'real' the unicorn, the harpy, the Red

Bull—and indeed they are as real as old Karamazov, as uncle Toby, Madame Bovary,

Huck Finn, or Jake Barnes" (14). It makes sense, then, that Cully would search for

validity in "Mr. Child," a collector of myth and words. He is acting as Humbert Humbert

when he begs the reader to imagine him—for he does not exist otherwise.

Cully's failure is further evidenced when Schmendrick creates the illusion of

Robin Hood, his men, and Maid Marian in the camp. When this vision wanders deep into

the forest, Cully's band quickly abandons him to chase after it. Cully attempts to dissuade

them, calling: "Fools, fools and children! It was a lie, like all magic! There is no such

person as Robin Hood!" (*Last* 89). Molly Grue—a failed Maid Marian archetype to

Cully's failed Robin Hood—retorts: "Nay, Cully, you have it backward…There's no

such person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are the

legend!" (89). Molly's stabbing statement is left at that, as if it is some sort of known

truth. Once again, fiction is proven more real than reality. It does not matter that what his

men chase is only an illusion—what matters is what Robin Hood signifies and their

interaction with Schmendrick's artwork/heterocosm. Cully has become the captive lion at

the Midnight Carnival: tiny and absurd compared to the fantastic. John Pennington reads

this scene in the following way: "The Captain, for all his poems and legends, is not the

real thing, and Schemendrick calls up the real Robin Hood to show Cully precisely this.

Myth again becomes reality within a fictional creation" (13; emphasis added). Cully does

not exist as part of the collective fiction, because his work only exists within his own

heterocosm and not the social reality as Robin Hood does. Cully, however, refuses to

understand. He gives the following, sad rant to Schmendrick after his men are gone:

> You know very well that Robin Hood is the fable and I am the reality. No ballads
>
> will accumulate around my name unless I write them myself; no children will
>
> read of my adventures in their schoolbooks and play at being me in school. And
>
> when the professors prowl through the old tales, and scholars sift the old songs to
>
> learn if Robin Hood ever truly lived, they will never, never find my name. (91-92)

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While Cully acknowledges that he is indeed no myth and thus less real than one, he still holds onto this impossible hope that he can become as real as Robin Hood. His understanding of literary history and academia once again shows the postmodernist understanding of the collective fiction and the reality of myth. The quest for Robin Hood's authenticity makes no difference in the long run—what matters is that, as a myth, Robin Hood has more power as a signified construct of language than Cully ever will as a mere, real man. No, Robin Hood never "existed," but the concepts of justice, heroism, and the archetypal figure of Robin Hood *does* exist because it is part of the collective conscience. He is both real and not real—the fictional "real outlaw" Cully's men wish to sing of and believe in.

Foust argues that "Cully and his band are 'merely' real (fictively) and are, thus, parodied since they are not real in the important, or mythic, sense…Beagle's use of parody to lampoon parody is at the service of his vision of the permanent and changeless reality of archetype" (15). Foust is correct in his assessment that Beagle is, through his metafictional storytelling, upholding the tradition of the fairy tale, rather than mocking it. However, Cully's ontological struggles are not a callout to the postmodernists or Barth's exhaustion, as Foust implies earlier in his essay. In fact, the scene upholds Barth's argument. It is true that Cully fails because he is a parody, but this fits well with Barth's examination that one cannot simply repeat what the old greats have already done. Cully is not attempting to do anything new, rather, he just wants to be seen as a mythic hero without putting in any of the needed effort. Barth writes that it is possible to make

something beautiful and "rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature," but only "if one goes about it in the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to" ("Exhaustion" 31). He clarifies in "The Literature of Replenishment" that the ideal postmodernist "has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back" (283). Just as Tolkien warned against enchantment being "carried to excess" (370), an obsession with attempting to *be* the old greats rather than making something new results in a downfall. Cully is not as real as Robin Hood not only because he fails to be a proper signifier in language, but also because he fails to be an interesting writer.

There is, however, another ontological boundary broken by Cully, and that is the fact that he exists within in *Beagle's* heterocosm. In all his foolishness and failures to write himself into a fictional world within his reality, within the reader's he has become real. No, he has not reached the mythical status of Robin Hood, but children *do* read his story. Scholars *have* written on him and studied his tale. Ironically, his failure to become a real fiction is the very thing that caused him to meet that goal. He exists as long as *The Last Unicorn* exists, even if his men have left him. Cully is, then, a sort of ontological abomination: existing and not existing in pseudo-reality.

Therein lies the metatextual statement of the *The Last Unicorn*: storytelling has the power to make things a reality, and everything is only as real as it is perceived to be. As we have found in the previous chapter of this study, the novel follows the fairy tale structure quite closely and works within its logic. It is not as if reality is entirely arbitrary within *The Last Unicorn*, but rather that the moniker of "real" is only given to things like

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unicorns and heroes—myths that have become more real than the average person. Fiction gains its place in reality when it becomes part of the collective conscience.

Schmendrick has a similar role to Mommy Fortuna and Cully, but his relationship to world-projection is quite different. He explains his role as a magician as such: "The magician calls, but the magic chooses…I am a bearer…I am a dwelling, I am a messenger" (*Last* 145). Being the first man able to see the unicorn for what she truly is, Schmendrick is a weaver of words. Olderman describes him as such, acknowledging his lack of will over word magic: "Schmendrick is not an artist in control of his craft" (309). Olderman goes on to argue that Schmendrick's quest to control his magic comes with bringing wonder into a corrupted world. "Before Schmendrick becomes a true artist he is troubled by the practical value of his art," writes Olderman, "[h]e wants magic to be useful" (309). Once Schmendrick abandons this view, Olderman argues, he is able to be more in tune with his craft. In this way—given that Schmendrick is the character who knows the most about archetypes and states which characters need to be taking which paths—Beagle uses Schmendrick as a stand-in for artists, creating a metanarrative in his character arc. Like Mommy Fortuna, who takes creatures that already exist and invites her patrons to believe they have morphed into something new through her seeming spells, Through Schmendrick, Beagle acknowledges classical, fairy tale tropes and uses his magic to reinvent said tropes and change characters' modes of being. Even his arc is a reinvention of his mentor Nikos's, as Nikos became the greatest magician ever known by turning a unicorn into a man. Schmendrick becomes even greater than Nikos (*Last* 259)

through doing one better: transforming a unicorn-turned-human back into a unicorn.

Schmendrick's magic also surpasses Mommy Fortuna, because he is truly able to turn the

unicorn into a human—not an illusion of one. Perhaps this is because, unlike Mommy

Fortuna, who insists that she has control over language and what is real and what is not,

Schmendrick acts as postmodernist and acknowledges the arbitrary nature of language

and reality. His calling card throughout the novel is to ask his magic to simply "do as it

will." Tolkien, while of course not a postmodernist, acknowledges that there is a magic in

the written word, and that it has an arbitrary relationship to what is real and what is

fictional: "The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction,

sees not only green-grass, discriminating it from other things…but sees that it is green as

well as being grass. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced

it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent"

(335). Words are spells, and the reality conceived by the heterocosms of fantasy create a

reality that invites its reader to believe in this strange "line between" the real and unreal.

Beagle, like his magic users, creates a novel that succeeds in this invitation through

playing with the ontology of fictional people and real myths.

<center>Playing by the Rules by Breaking Them</center>

Throughout his study on the literature of the time period, Raymond Olderman

describes the 1960s as a "wasteland," and argues that *The Last Unicorn* is a stand against

this wasteland. To Olderman, Beagle works towards "unearthing our own enchantment

with the world" (297). This "unearthing" would give way to a necessary replenishment.

<center>75</center>

Perhaps Foust and Miller are right then to say that Beagle's fairy tale stands out among the cynicism of its time period. However, it is through its postmodern elements that it is *able* to stand out. Barth clarifies his point on exhaustion in the following way: "the number of splendid sayable things…is doubtless finite, it is also doubtless very large, perhaps virtually infinite" ("Replenishment" 285). While Beagle follows the conventions of a fairy tale, he also follows the reinvention and twisting model of a postmodern story. In doing so, he contributes to this infinite landscape of splendid things. Perhaps if Beagle merely repeated the old ways, like Barth says is impossible, he would only have been a Cully and not a Schmendrick. Through this reinvention, this stylization, Beagle creates something brand new.

> In reference to his first draft of *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle writes:
>
> The story was originally conceived…as a sort of James Thurber-esque self-aware fairytale spoof, employing traditional fairytale characters like unicorns, witches, outlaws, wicked kings, and kingly princes—and then do something very else with them. I believe they call that sort of thing metafiction today…It's perfectly legitimate, but it's tricky work, and you can only get away with it if you're born satirist. I'm not, but I didn't know that then. ("Afterword" 135-36)

It is clear, then, that if this idea of parody was done away with in the first draft, that final novel is not parody, but stylization. Still, the final work takes these old concepts and does something new with them. Beagle does claim here, however, that he has not made a metafiction. Not because it was not his intention or that he dislikes them (as Tolkien

abhors any criticism calling his work "allegory"), but because he does not view his work as a satire. However, the terms are not synonymous. Beagle has made a metafictional story that is not satiric, and it is revealed not only through the mixing of the real and the unreal, but through the metatexual relationship between author and fiction. Just as a reader of a fairy tale has a metatextual relationship with the enchantment experienced by the protagonist, Beagle becomes part of his fictional world and the characters who attempt to create their own—"puppet master behind puppet master *ad finitum*" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 30). Beagle has compared himself to the butterfly in his story, the one who only speaks in "quotations, whether from great literature, old movies, songs of very vintage quality, radio commercials, or the strange private jokes that Phil [an artist and friend of Beagle] and I were cracking ourselves up with in the summer of 1962" ("Afterword" 137). It is this self-portrait—this image of the old, exhausted greats that exist in the subconscious of new artists—that apparently told Beagle the purpose of the Red Bull in the story: "anything I may have said about the Red Bull, ever—that damn Butterfly told me everything I know about him…And I'm grateful" (138). The butterfly is then Beagle's fictional-self that has enchanted and pulled him into fantasy. Beagle has also compared himself to Schmendrick in a similar fashion:

> I feel sometimes like Schmendrick, when the first time he actually casts real
> magic summoning up the shades of Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and the Merry
> Men…people who never existed, really they're myths, and yet there they are. And
> at that point he falls on his face, picks himself up, and thinks: "I wonder what I

did…I did something…” which is very much the way I feel about *The Last*

Unicorn. (qtd. in Golden)

Just as Schmendrick lets his magic “do as it will,” Beagle allows his writing to become

real on its own. It is the writing, the myths, who are spoken into existence and allow for

character, reader, and writer alike to all be enchanted.

In this regard, *The Last Unicorn* is not metafictional simply in the way that it

makes references to being a fairy tale or even in its playing with reality and fiction, but in

the way that it does what a fairy tale is meant to do three fold: the characters, reader, and

author are all linked in enchantment and asked to believe in the fantastic, and the skill of

creating this enchantment—this world-projection—is discussed and critiqued on an

ontological level through characters like Mommy Fortuna, Captain Cully, and

Schmendrick. What Beagle achieves in writing a postmodern work, then, is creating a

perfect fairy tale.

Notes

1. McHale is referencing Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's T*he Social Construction of Reality* here.

2. It is not to say that a postmodern story *cannot* be a parody or cynical, but rather that it is not a defining trait of the postmodernism. My goal in this definition is to explore The *Last Unicorn* as a postmodern stylization and to refute the claim that postmodern storytelling is *required* to be parodic.

3. In this regard, it is interesting that the unicorn is fully motivated to begin her quest when the butterfly states the definition of "unicorn" as "Unicorn. Old French, unicorne. Latin, unicornis. Literally, one horned: unus, one, and cornu, a horn. A fabulous animal resembling a horse with one horn," and she is delighted "to hear her name spoken at last" (*Last* 14). A word, etymology, and definition acts as direct proof to the unicorn that her kind still exists. Value has been given to her as a signifier.

4. A similar invitation to belief happens when a skull acting as Haggard's sentinel is given wine in exchange for information on the Red Bull. Schmendrick is unable to turn the bottle of water Molly gives him into wine—all he manages to do is make the bottle empty. However, the skull is convinced that it is real. He "drinks" from the bottle and says "that was the real stuff, that was wine! You're more of a magician than I took you for" (237). It does not matter that the bottle is empty, or even that the skull has no way of truly tasting or drinking wine. Here, the reality

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of the empty bottle and lack of taste buds matters less than what is signified by the word "wine." The skull, like the carnival goers, has been invited by Schmendrick to believe in a fiction because he was willing to. Wine becomes real for the skull because there is a want of wine, a belief in wine, and thus a signified for the signifier of "wine." It is real enough for the skull.

5. This is in reference to the anachronisms used by Umberto Eco in both *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*.

HER PEOPLE ARE IN THE PRIMARY WORLD AGAIN: THE PURPOSE AND

INFLUENCE OF REPLENISHMENT

And thus *The Last Unicorn* has been defined as a postmodern fairy tale—that is, a fairy tale stylization that does not degrade or refute its origins, but revitalizes them. The question remains, however: why is this a useful tactic? If an author aims to keep the fairy tale world alive, why not just write a fairy tale that follows the structure verbatim? Why create a stylization/reinvention?

Going back to Barth, such a goal would be impossible, as his theory of exhaustion determines that there is a certain "used-upness" of the forms and possibilities of art if artists merely continue attempting to emulate the old greats ("Exhaustion" 29). "[T]he number of splendid sayable things…is doubtless finite," writes Barth, yet he continues on to say that "it is also doubtless very large, perhaps virtually infinite" ("Replenishment" 285). Art must be pushed to be new and not simply repeat its past because a repetition would be just that: merely repetition, a mirror of once great things, as Barth's critics claimed was all the postmodernists could do. An acceptance of exhaustion and a goal of replenishment—striving for that "best next thing" (286)—is a lifeline for good art to continue.

This, however, is where the fairy tale fits perfectly. Fairy tales are not meant to be stagnant. They exist in "amazing multiformity," and are built to be reformed and retold

through constant renovation (Propp 21). More than this, they assist their reader in

understanding our confusing, primary world. Raymond Olderman explains the shift in

how American literature reacts to the "wasteland" of the modern world in the fifties

versus the sixties in the following way: "It is as if Holden Caulfield's quest in *The

Catcher in the Rye*, ending in an insane asylum, signaled the end of American quests for

the pure Utopia. Now the novel of the 'sixties begins where Holden left off—at the end

of adolescence and in the waste land asylum, hoping to move beyond" (39). It is in his

final chapter, where Olderman writes on *The Last Unicorn*, that he argues that the fantasy

novel provides a transition from the wasteland to "fable-land" not through simple

escapism—as Tolkien and Bettelheim explain is *not* the goal of escape in fairy tales—but

through an understanding that the world is corrupted, while still wishing to search for

hope within it. Olderman writes:

> Man, as the unicorn points out, is not a meaningful creature and nothing he does
>
> will matter, but he can choose, nonetheless, to create and to understand that being
>
> human might mean living in a world of wonder. The choice will not restore
>
> Eliot's poet-prophet, or Prospero's brave new world, but Beagle maintains it can
>
> at least help us *re-see* the world, and in that there might be a rebirth beyond the
>
> waste land, a rebirth for us all since we can be filled with the wizard's wonder just
>
> by learning to see. 'That is most of it,' Schmendrick tells us, 'being a wizard—
>
> seeing and listening. The rest is technique.' (311-12; emphasis added)

Olderman is right to say that *The Last Unicorn* is a step towards this revitalized sense of American utopianism, but with an acknowledgement of its imperfection. Here then we see the purpose of viewing fairy tale logic through a postmodern lens. The Enlightenment, as modernists would argue, has failed us: our world is corrupt and man has no inherent beauty, no inherent truth, no inherent goodness of character. No, we will not find the brave new world, but that does not mean humans do not still strive for it. Perhaps beauty is as unreal as a unicorn—but one can still search for both. In fact, the postmodern sensibilities found in *The Last Unicorn* accept their unrealness and go beyond it. Through its ontological questioning, the novel makes these unreal things real—at least as real as they can be. It is Beagle's postmodernist sensibility that aids in what Olderman calls "re-seeing," what R. E. Foust calls "remythologizing" (9), and Barth calls "replenishment"—it moves beyond the real, un-wonderful world. The previous chapter described Schmendrick as a postmodernist in this regard—he sees and listens and applies new technique to aid in wonder, all while acknowledging that magic is not really his to understand, that it simply does "as it will."

To bridge this gap of utopianism and harsh reality, both the fairy tale and the postmodern work deal with questions of ontology. The "realism" of the work is irrelevant. Tolkien writes, "[Fantasy] is not only a 'consolation' for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, 'Is it true?' The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): 'If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world'" (387). Tolkien further explains that if a fairy tale was found

to be "'primarily' true" there would be great joy between author and reader, but that this joy is not difficult to imagine because "one is not called upon to try and conceive anything of a quality unknown. The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the 'turn' in a fairy-story gives: such joy has the very taste of primary truth" (388). While the postmodernists question the notion of a definite, primary truth as Tolkien does (McHale states that objective truth cannot work when there are many constructed realities (*Constructing* 2)), there is a connection here with the ontological barriers being broken. Within a fantastic heterocosm, there is a constructed truth that calls upon the real feelings and desires of human beings. The idea that a myth "never really happened" is an argument that defeats itself—as fairy tales are concerned with emotion, creation, and the invitation for readers to believe in them, even if they know they do not "exist" in our primary world. Through cultural impact and being added to the "collective fiction" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 37), however, myths and fairy tales break across Beagle's ontological "line between." It does not matter if Robin Hood never existed in the primary world—what he *signifies* exists, and he exists in the collective heterocosm of cultural myth. Fairy tales are not simple, childlike abandonments of logic and reason, and postmodern works are not nihilistic abandonments of hope—they are stories that invite readers to question the very notion of "reality" and wonder if there are things that are more real than simply what we see.

Here is why Beagle's commentary on the "line between" what is "real" and what is "fiction" must combine postmodernism and fantasy: when melded together, they give

way to an ontological dominant. George Aichele Jr. argues that *The Last Unicorn* "invites

the actual reader to find the timeless magic of the unicorn in the primary world about

us—in the breakers on a seashore, the quiet of a forest glade, or even one's own heart—

that has in fact happened" ("Two" 58-59). The reader is as much a part of the unicorn's

story as the unicorn herself, and this is achieved not only through the inherent

metafictional structure of fairy tales, but through the ontological barriers that are broken

by characters such as Mommy Fortuna and Schmendrick offering commentaries on

world-projection/subcreation. There is an invitation in *The Last Unicorn* to believe not

only in the consolation provided by the tale, but in the importance of fairy tale structures

and the very act of creating them. The novel is a story about quite literally saving fantasy

through writing new versions of old tales.[1]

<center>Tale, Writer, and Reader</center>

When the unicorn begins her quest, she is shocked to find herself in a world

where she is not recognized as a mythical, immortal being, but as a white mare. Before

she meets Schmendrick, Molly, Lír, and Haggard, no human in the novel is able to see

her as anything more than that. This causes her great distress, and she sees this as proof

that her people have truly disappeared: "men had changed, and the world with them,

because the unicorns were gone" (*Last* 11). The world of man is the wasteland of the

modern world that Olderman describes: a world that has lost wonder and denies magic

and myth—that which they deem to be "untrue." The novel begins with the hunters

debating her existence, the more skeptical of the two stating that "unicorns are long

<center>85</center>

gone…If, indeed, they ever were" and that the only information they have about unicorns

are from "books and tales and songs" (3). Even the unicorn questions the existence of her

people in this new, un-enchanted world, as she wonders if the butterfly recognizing her

proves nothing "except that somebody once made up a song about unicorns, or a poem"

(16). Her quest is one of questioning her own existence and searching for those who still

believe in her.

But just like Cully, who does not exist as a myth in the novel yet awkwardly

becomes one to Beagle's readers, so does the unicorn. Aichele states that "the

pretransformation unicorn is not in the story: 'She is real'…But of course we can see her

in the story, for the implied reader also can recognize a unicorn; thus the unicorn points

to an outside of the story, an extratextual reality" ("Two" 58). The unicorn exists in our

primary world the same way any myth (historical or fictional) exists within the collective

fiction. She is an expression of the mirror that postmodernism holds to reality, but that

reality, as McHale describes it, is plural (*Postmodernist* 39). She is described as a

creature of books and tales and songs, yet her kind are said to have existed at some point

or another. The hunters say that their great-grandmothers had seen unicorns, and Nikos

turned one into a man. More than this, if the book proposes through the Captain Cully

chapter that myths are real in both Beagle's heterocosm and our primary world, the

unicorn is real in the sense that readers interact with her. Perhaps the unicorn is more than

just a living reality in the world of her novel, but a representation of the unreal becoming

a reality for those who accept her as such. Schmendrick tells her, "We are not always

what we seem, and hardly ever what we dream. Still I have read, or heard it sung, that unicorns when time was young, could tell the difference 'twixt the two—the false shining and the true, the lips' laugh and the heart's rue" (*Last* 40). Indeed, the unicorn is able to tell which creatures are myths and which are animals under Mommy Fortuna's spell, but this does not matter as much as belief. Reality is defined by how it is viewed, and unicorns must be accepted by reality. She expects Schmendrick to recognize her as a unicorn because "there has never been a world in which [she] was not known" (40).

This new reality, however, is *not* one where she is known, and she must remind the world that she exists. She must remind it of fantastical structures, but her old ways are not working as she is going unrecognized by the common man. She needs a character like Schmendrick, a postmodernist, to reinvent and morph her character so that she can save her people through changing her mode of being—that from the role of a unicorn in a story to the role of a princess in a story. In doing this, Schmendrick replenishes a fairy tale. He takes a remnant of art's past and literally transforms it into a "new and lively work" (Barth, "Replenishment" 285). When the Red Bull corners the unicorn and Schmendrick must allow the magic to transform her into a human, he is acting as an artist confronting the "intellectual dead end" described by Barth ("Exhaustion" 31) and preventing the death of a fairy tale through replenishment. At the end of the novel, though he fears he has corrupted the unicorn through the transformation and "done [her] evil," the unicorn assures him that this was the correct course of action, telling him, "My people are in the world again. No sorrow will live in me as long as that joy" (*Last* 289).

The unicorn, the fairy tale, could not stand on her own in the modern, wonderless world by simply repeating the old ways—the fairy tale needed to be replenished in order for the wonder to return. Schmendrick's actions, then, reflect Beagle's own as the writer of a postmodern fairy tale.

If Schmendrick is the postmodernist writer and unicorn is the model being stylized, Molly is the reader that benefits from this relationship. Olderman describes Molly as "Beagle's point of view for the reader" and argues that she offers "a layman's view of the world's wonder, and what better proof of the possibility of magic in the world than to be convinced of that possibility by poor, past-her-prime, not-very-special Molly Grue" (316). Urban fantasy writer Carrie Vaugn offers a similar reading of Molly's character in her preface to *The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey*: "Generation X…is said to be cynical, but I think we're cynical in the same way Molly is cynical. We so desperately want to believe but instead we so often run into Captain Cullys and King Haggards and we're getting old and we got tired. But by God we see the unicorn for what she is" (v). In her youth, Molly was enchanted by Cully, who proves himself to be no more of than imitator of the old greats. She is then enchanted by the unicorn, who comes to her as an unconventional myth—as unicorns are meant to come to young, virginal women, not old, jaded ones. It is through this morphing of tradition that Molly receives her consolation. Where the imitators of old myths who do not acknowledge exhaustion have failed her, the subverted unicorn saves her. She is the American wasteland resident that still seeks wonder and beauty despite her disillusionment, and she does not care

about what is labeled "real" and what is labeled "fiction," no matter how childlike Cully

deems that to be. Molly breaks across an ontological barrier in her willing sub-belief not

only when she tells Cully "[t]here's no such person as you, or me, or any of us" (*Last* 89),

but in her undying trust in the unicorn—her trust in wonder.[2] In chapter one, Molly was

described as the embodiment of the need for fairy tales expressed by Tolkien—but I

expand that here to say that she also embodies the need for the *replenishment* of fairy

tales. She, the common reader who still seeks wonder in the terrible world, needs not only

the fairy tale unicorn, but the postmodern Schmendrick. Perhaps this is why Molly

follows him at the end of the tale—if there is nowhere new to go in the world of

literature, if all those roads have been long since exhausted, one "might as well [take] a

road that a unicorn has taken" (*Last* 292).

<p align="center">The Unicorn's Road</p>

Through Schmendrick, Beagle has metatextually brought the unicorn's people

back into not only the world of his heterocosm, but into our primary world. While his

novel has seemingly gone under the radar of literary criticism, it is no doubt an impactful

work for its influence on the modern fantasy genre—specifically postmodern fairy tales

that take after *The Last Unicorn*. More than this, Beagle's unique stylization of the fairy

tale has influenced many works within both the literary sphere and popular culture. The

postmodern, fourth-wall-breaking fairy tale has become a staple in American media.

Publishers Weekly credits *The Last Unicorn* and its popularity for this surge in fairy tale

stylizations, stating in a 2011 review of the comic book adaptation that the novel has

"inspired everything from *The Princess Bride* to *Stardust*" ("Comics"). This inspiration is clearly evidenced by the questions of ontology made in these subsequent, postmodern fairy tales that affirm the reality of myth. Even if creators do not directly acknowledge the influence of *The Last Unicorn* in their work, this push towards a more postmodernist sensibility assists the continued replenishment of the fantasy genre.

In a 2014 interview, Beagle stated that he was delighted to learn that William Goldman, author of *The Princess Bride*, was a fan of *The Last Unicorn* because "*The Princess Bride* is one of the things I mention when I talk about writing something that set out to be both a fairy tale, and a spoof on fairy tales at the same time…And one of the very few books I know that does that is *The Princess Bride*" (Golden). Here, Beagle compares *The Last Unicorn*'s duel definition of fairy tale and postmodern to Goldman's novel, and the comparison is not at all far-fetched. He uses the term "spoof" which has negative connotations, but this is not done to label either work as a cynical parody, but rather as works that combine traditional fairy tale conventions while, as Barth describes, "deploy[ing them] against themselves" to create something new. This is accomplished in Goldman's novel through metatexuality. Just as Beagle's characters (especially Schmendrick) acknowledge the fairy tale setting in order to break the ontological line between, *The Princess Bride* crosses that same barrier through the strange ontology of the book itself.

The Princess Bride is presented as an abridgement of a historical satire written by S. Morgenstern, based on the "good parts" the abridger's father would read him as a

90

child. The "good parts" in question are the parts containing action and romance, effectively reworking the adult, political satire into a children's fairy tale. The book is interrupted occasionally by abridgement notes, bringing in more personal history from the abridger's relationship with his father as well as "historical" annotations on Florin, the country the tale is set in and where his father immigrated from. He points out that certain things that could be seen as anachronisms are actually historically accurate (for instance, a reference to golf). More than this, the abridger insists that the fairy tale is a true story, and that—despite Morgenstern's satire and insistence that it did not happen— "if you read back into Florinese history, it did happen. The facts, anyway; no one can say about the actual motivations" (Goldman 43). The trouble is, Morgenstern is not a real person, Florin is a not a real country, and *The Princess Bride* is not a real book. The "good parts" are the only parts that exist. However, because Goldman *has* written these good parts, *The Princess Bride* is now indeed a real book. In a sense, a new reality has been created where a version of the book does exist. The motivation here is to question the ontology of fiction. Because Goldman's novel and screenplay have become such an important part of popular culture, there is no getting around the fact that this not-real story has *become* real the very same way that myths like Robin Hood are viewed in *The Last Unicorn*. Goldman's abridger persona states that "true love and high adventure" were things he believed in once, even if there is no love and adventure "left anymore" in the world (32). All that matters is what the reader "does" with the story (32), and at the end of the novel he proclaims it is the reader who has to "answer it for [themselves]" if

the story ended happily (364). Just as Beagle does in *The Last Unicorn*, Goldman uses

postmodern replenishment to reinstate those old, unreal ideas of "true love and high

adventure" into the primary world by proclaiming the metafictional relationship between

text, author, and reader as more real than our reality.

The work of Neil Gaiman also takes clear inspiration from Beagle. More than just

Stardust as *Publishers Weekly* stated, Gaiman has directly referenced Beagle as a source

of inspiration for his many of his fantasy works. On a blog post encouraging his fanbase

to read *The Last Unicorn*'s short story sequel "Two Hearts" the year of its release,

Gaiman states that Beagle's essay on *The Lord of the Rings* is what led him to discover

Tolkien, and that *A Fine and Private Place* and *The Last Unicorn* were books he loved as

a teenager ("Beagles"). In a follow-up post responding to his readers on the subject, he

states the following: "I almost never mention Beagle in a list of influences, but I know

that Matthew the Raven was a descendant of the raven in *A Fine and Private Place*, and

that the Death in 'Come, Lady Death' was definitely somewhere in the back of my mind

when I decided that Death had to be a girl" ("O Hell").[3] This subconscious inspiration is

clear in his own postmodern fairy tales, especially his comic series *The Sandman*, in

which ontological barriers are broken and the reality of fairy tales and world-projection

are acknowledged in a strikingly similar fashion to *The Last Unicorn*.

Centered around Dream (also called Sandman and Morpheus) and his sister

Death, Gaiman's *The Sandman* explores the interactions between mythical figures and, as

they refer to each other in universe, "anthropomorphic personifications" (201) in the

"real" world and the dreamscape. In *Preludes and Nocturnes*, the first trade paperback

collection of the series containing issues one through eight, dreams are explored in the

same way as myths and fairy tales are in *The Last Unicorn*: they are presented as being

more real than primary reality. After obtaining a ruby that can control and create dreams,

John Dee—the primary antagonist of *Preludes and Nocturnes* based off of an actual

historical figure—puts the theme plainly: "People think dreams aren't real, just because

they aren't made of matter, of particles. Dreams are real. But they are made of

viewpoints, of images, of memories and puns and lost hopes" (133). Dreams are the same

as Beagle's Robin Hood vision and Goldman's Florin: constructed realities that become

real through what they represent.

It is fitting then that Dream is not only the personification of dreams, but also the

Lord of Stories. He is able to bend and construct new realities by using the dreams and

ideas of others. Like Schmendrick, he is acting as a postmodernist by literally

transforming established mythos. More than this, there is a desire for—as Goldman put

it—true love and high adventure found in the exploration of the ontology of dreams. In

issue four of *Preludes and Nocturnes,* Dream ventures into Hell to search for his stolen

helm. It is there that he enters a battle of wits against the demon Choronzon, playing a

game of "reality," which is referred to as "the oldest game" (109). In the game, where

"all is real, nothing is real" (109), the two players must create beings that defeat each

other through simply speaking them into existence. For example, one would say "I am a

fly" and the opponent would say "I am a spider," and the game continues from there. The

game eventually gets to the grand scale of planetary bodies, Choronzon thinking he has won because he creates "anti-life, the beast of judgement…the dark at the end of everything. The end of universes, gods, worlds…of everything" (111). To this, Dream replies, "I am hope" (111), winning the game. Hope has no visual, no vivid description, it is simply the arbitrary and unreal concept of a dream that nothing can disprove the existence of nor defeat. Dream asserts the power of dreams and stories one last time before leaving Hell, telling Lucifer: "What power would Hell have if those here imprisoned were not able to dream of Heaven?" (114). Here again is the influence of Beagle's postmodern fairy tale: there is the assertion that, just as the unicorn was real while everything else a myth in comparison, dreams—hope, stories, beauty, the invented worlds of mankind—are real in a truer sense than the primary world. This appeal to hope, even within Hell itself, speaks to that goal of remythologizing found in *The Last Unicorn*.

While there is not a directly stated influence, the film *Shrek* uses many of the same tools as its predecessors and is both a fairy tale and a postmodern stylization. Much like Beagle's characters, the characters of *Shrek* acknowledge that they live in a fairy tale world. At the beginning of the film, Shrek is seen reading a book containing Fiona's story: a cursed princess locked in a tower guarded by a dragon that must be saved by a knight and true love's kiss. Later, Shrek knows he will find Fiona in "the highest room in the tallest tower" because he "read it in a book once" (*Shrek*). Fiona is disappointed by every aspect of her rescue because things are not done in the proper order: Shrek does not defeat the dragon before rescuing her, he crudely uses her favor to wipe dirt off of his

face, and his "noble steed" is a donkey. Still, Fiona is forced to accept the broken order in the same way Lady Amalthea must. Shrek must also break out of his role of ogre. Used to being the monster a knight must overcome, Shrek must instead take the role of knight in this unconventional fairy tale. He is as resistant as the unicorn when she becomes a human, but it is a role each character must take because they are essentially forced into a fairy tale.

Much like *The Last Unicorn*, *Shrek* subverts fairy tale tropes, yet still follows them. In typical fashion, Fiona is still saved from her curse by true love's kiss. However, it is revealed that her curse is actually an inversion of what is expected. She is a human princess by day and an ogre by night, and true love's kiss turns her fully *ogre*. Her curse, then, was not being an ogre, but being human. Thus, the fairy tale read at the beginning by Shrek is followed and stylized; it is just that it was a story about ogres, not humans. *The Last Unicorn* is perhaps stricter in its following of the "rules," but *Shrek*'s simultaneous inversion of and following of the fairy tale order shares an end result with Beagle's novel: that being a metafictional relationship with its audience and with storytelling. While the film has a more negative relationship with the model it is stylizing than *The Last Unicorn*, the metafictional acknowledgment of tropes and the "order of things" shared by both *Shrek* and Beagle's novel create a revitalization of fairy tales for a (at the time of each) modern audience.

There are many more examples of postmodern fairy tale stylizations than these three: Bill Willingham's *Fables*, Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, Gregory Maguire's

Wicked, etc. The influence of the specific postmodernist sensibilities utilized within *The Last Unicorn* on modern fairy tale stylizations clearly reaches far across the realm of literature and popular culture, each of these works discussed going on to directly inspire others: *The Princess Bride*'s novel and film becoming culturally iconic and inspiring other stories with similar humor, *The Sandman* becoming heavily influential to other graphic novels, and *Shrek* spawning dozens of animated fairy tale spoof films. Each of these reach different audiences—some more mainstream than others—and each has a mixture of critique and hope. As Gaiman implies, however, Beagle's influence on postmodern fairy tales lays dormant, like a dream—but dreams are quite real. If the goal of *The Last Unicorn*—or any postmodern work participating in Barth's theories of exhaustion and replenishment, for that matter—was to breathe life back into the fairy tale genre in a way that would be relevant for a modern, changing world, these influences are evidence of that goal succeeding.

Notes

1. It is not to say that a fairy tale that is not postmodern cannot be successful in its goal of recovery, escape, and consolation. This chapter simply aims to explore why Beagle uses a postmodern stylization and why it was successful through the context of Barth's "Literature of Exhaustion."

2. A similar trust and resulting disregard for ontological barriers is shown by Prince Lír. When Schmendrick questions how he was able to simply walk through the clock without even considering the puzzle, Lír replies, "What was there to know? I saw where she had gone, and I followed" (*Last* 242)

3. Both characters said to be inspired by Beagle's work referenced here are featured in *The Sandman* series.

CONCLUSION: "OUT OF THIS STORY AND INTO ANOTHER"

In his conclusion to "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien declares that "[s]tory, fantasy, still go on, and should go on" (389). Stories are something humans absolutely require, and to continue on they must—like any living thing—adapt and evolve to survive. If Barth's theory of exhaustion and the "used-upness" of creative thought is true, then it is also true that it is "not a cause for despair" ("Exhaustion" 29): the exhaustion is simply a motivator for a writer to create new work and to assist this continuing on. No matter how fruitless the quest for truth with a capital T may be in the current world where Romanticism has seemingly failed mankind, man will never end that quest—at least not what that quest signifies. The postmodernist acknowledges that the "reality" of Romantic ideals is more than just what can logically exist within the world, because none of it can. However, through an exploration of ontology, a postmodernist work (especially a postmodernist fairy tale) acknowledges the power of storytelling to create worlds where these ideals can be observed and, in some cases, reevaluated and transformed. Beauty, true love, and high adventure are all things that can be created within one's sub-creation/heterocosm, and in this world-projection, they are made *real*. They are real in the sense that mankind will always seek them. Stories, myths, fairy tales, novels—they are more real than they are fiction, and the act of story-telling is a sort of magic, an act of

creation, that invents new realities that are not simple reflections of our primary reality, but of a new reality as real as we believe it to be.

The Last Unicorn is a member of these stories that still go on and must continue to go on, and it has allowed for the replenishment and evolution of tales through its influence. The novel's critics believed it to be a failure in simply repeating the past without taking it seriously—as Barth described the inaccurate assumptions made about postmodernism, *The Last Unicorn* appeared to only be "feebly following a hard act to follow" ("Replenishment" 276). This study has shown that is not the case. Beagle does not simply repeat the strict format of Tolkien's high fantasy, or even the satirical foundation of a James Thurber fairy tale. Beagle moves beyond his influences. He takes the exhausted forms of the past—the unicorns alone and forgotten in their lilac woods— and through a postmodern, metafictional retelling, he revitalizes and generates an ever-growing collection of new and lively work that his influences continue to morph and twist into something new and new again.

Despite its importance, however, *The Last Unicorn* and its author have seemingly fallen under-the-radar of literary criticism. Perhaps this is not just due to it being misunderstood in its time, but also as a result of poor management. In a 2014 interview, Beagle's former manager, Connor Cochran, stated that while authors like Neil Gaiman had done well at making sure they are "the star, and the works are the works of the star," that "[n]obody was doing that for Peter…There's a lot of people who know the book but don't even know he wrote it" (qtd. in Goldman). It is ironic that Cochran ultimately

contributed to Beagle and *The Last Unicorn*'s obscurity, when Cochran signed over

Beagle's intellectual property rights to himself under the guise that Beagle was mentally

unfit to run his own finances, claiming he had dementia, of which there was no evidence

(Superior Court of California). After a long legal battle beginning in 2015, on the 23rd of

March, 2021, it was announced by the newly formed entertainment company now

partnered with Beagle that he has finally reclaimed full rights to intellectual property lost,

including "newer works that have never been seen by the public" ("Returns"). Much in

the theme of replenishment, Beagle's work has a chance at rebirth after an artificial

stagnation while being mired down by legal and financial turmoil. Beagle is currently

working with his legal team to form an estate, as well as new projects based on these

regained properties—including a planned stage musical and live-action film of *The Last

Unicorn*. "I'm going to be working. For me, that's perfect," said Beagle, "[t]here are so

many possibilities. This feels like a rebirth. I'm not only still here, I'm more still here"

("Returns").

     In the coming years, then, fans of Beagle's work can hope to see a resurgence in

attention for *The Last Unicorn* after a long period of silence, both in literary and

entertainment spheres. More than these prospects and legal justice, however, it is

important to know *why* Beagle's work still matters and why it matters that Beagle is still

here. A fairy tale is always needed to make sense of the strange, cruel world we inhabit.

A postmodernist tale, in turn, is always needed to use that strangeness against itself for

the same purpose. It does not matter what context this thesis was written within—though

I am sure the year will speak to my fixation on absurdity and questioning reality—because the world will always be corrupt, cruel, and above all, strange. To answer the question posed in the novel's first chapter, "would you call this age a good one for unicorns?" (*Last* 5), I say, yes.

It always is.

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