Worldmaking In Fantastic World

[1] Akash R. Naik, [2] Dr. P.S. Subrahmanya Bhat.

[1] Research Scholar, [2] Professor
[1] Dept. of Studies in English,
[2] Dept. of English
[1] Karnatak University, Dharwad. India.
[2] Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad. India

Abstract: This article examines how Nelson Goodman's theory of worldmaking provides a productive framework for understanding the construction of fantastic worlds in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Drawing on Goodman's notion that worlds are created through symbolic operations the study explores how Tolkien's narrative practices systematically transform linguistic invention, mythic tradition and narrative structure into a coherent and meaningful fictional world. By analysing the symbolic systems, narrative patterns and mythopoetic strategies embedded in Tolkien's texts, the article demonstrates how Middle-earth exemplifies the philosophical principles of worldmaking. It reveals fiction's capacity to construct alternative realities that illuminate and enrich our own reality. Through this synthesis of philosophy and literature, the study highlights the creative and epistemic significance of Tolkien's legendarium within the broader discourse of world construction.

Index Terms - worldmaking, Middle-earth, composition and decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion and supplementation, reformation.

Paper

The fantastic occupies a central place in literary studies as a mode that disrupts ordinary experience and challenges the boundaries of what readers accept as real. The fantastic operates in the space between the known and the unknown. By destabilizing the sense of reality, the fantastic opens a space for new interpretations, imaginative possibilities and philosophical questions about the nature of truth, perception and belief. Eric S. Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976) remains one of the foundational theoretical works for understanding how fantastic narratives operate. According Rabkin, the fantastic arises not from the mere presence of magical or impossible elements but from a *transformation* within the narrative that overturns the reader's expectations of reality. He points out "The truly fantastic occurs when the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make a reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted" (Rabkin 12). Rabkin argues that a fantastic world is created when the text violates the reader's sense of the normal. This sudden break in expectation is what produces the fantastic world. In Goodman's terms, this is a moment of remaking a world through symbolic and cognitive shifts. When Rabkin's ground rules change, the reader is compelled to generate a new version of the narrative world, which brings out the process of worldmaking that Goodman describes.

Goodman's theory of worldmaking is a central idea in his 1978 book *Ways of Worldmaking*. In this work Goodman challenges the traditional notion of a single, objective reality. He argues that there are multiple worlds that are constructed through various symbolic and conceptual systems. The purpose of Goodman's worldmaking theory is to explain how humans construct, use, revise and compare the symbolic systems that shape our realities. It shows that meaning, knowledge and truth do not merely mirror the world but they make worlds. He points out "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking" (Goodman 6). Goodman asserts that we do not discover a pre-existing singular world; rather we construct worlds through our systems of understanding and representation. Goodman argues that there are different "versions" of the world which are created through symbolic systems such as language, art, maps or science. Each of these versions are a valid way of constructing a world. Fantasy literature construct internally coherent worlds using narrative as the symbolic system. In fantasy, maps are drawn, Languages are invented, cultures and politics are developed. These can be considered as central acts of world construction. In fantasy dragons and magic are real within that world-version, just as atoms and gravity are real in a scientific one. Each system has its own internal coherence and logic. J. R. R. Tolkien's works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates goodman's concept of "worldmaking".

According to Goodman there are five ways of worldmaking which helps fantasy writers to create alternative worlds. These five components serve as the fundamental process through which fantasy worlds are constructed.

1.Composition and Decomposition

The first component of the worldmaking is composition and decomposition They refer to the methods through which symbolic elements are combined or separated into parts. Goodman points out "Much but by no means all worldmaking consists of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly: a double reorganisation, both re-sorting the new realm of application and relating it to the old one" (Goodman 18-19). Composition refers to the creation of coherent symbolic structures such as scientific models, artistic forms or conceptual categories. Decomposition involves unpacking an established arrangement into smaller units to enable new interpretations or configurations. Goodman's emphasis on these processes affirms that the boundaries and unities within any world-version are not inherent but constructed. Tolkien's Middle-earth is the best example to illustrate Goodman's concept of worldmaking. His work exemplifies Goodman's concept of composition and decomposition, two key worldmaking operations. Tolkien's world is composed through carefully structured symbolic units such as languages, maps, genealogies, mythic histories and places. For example, in *The Hobbit*, one can see the composition in the description of a hobbit hole through these lines - "it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 13). This phrase introduces not only a location but a value system of a hobbit's domesticity and warmth. Goodman's theory can also be reflected in the composition of Mirkwood. Mirkwood is composed through selected attributes of danger, darkness and psychological distortion. Phrases such as "The nights were the worst. It then became pitch-dark" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 126) and "the forest was grim and silent" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 137) suggests a symbolic environment of peril and disorientation. Tolkien decomposes hobbits into symbolic traits. He gives the

description of a hobbit as "They are a little people, about half our height" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 13). One can see their traits when Baggins says "We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventure" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 15). These descriptions decompose hobbits into identifiable symbolic properties that can later be recomposed into complex character arcs. Tolkien constructs his world by reorganizing existing mythic and linguistic elements such as Norse sagas, Old English epics and Christian allegory into a new internally coherent universe. The Elves in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* resemble the semi-divine *álfar* of Norse myth. The Dwarves from these fantasy worlds are drawn directly from the Norse *dvergar*, who is the master craftsmen lived underground. Tolkien even borrowed their names from the *Völuspá* as Dwalin, Balin, Thorin. Tolkien decomposed elements of Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Finnish and Celtic mythologies and recomposed them into an internally coherent and distinct fictional universe. In Norse myth the gods themselves perish at *Ragnarök*. But in Tolkien's world the evil is ultimately defeated and good endures. Which is distinctly a resolution layered upon Norse framework of heroism and loss.

2.Weighting

Weighting highlights that worldmaking necessarily involves valuation. Goodman indicates the existence of relevant and irrelevant elements in fantasy literature, "worlds contain just the same classes sorted differently into relevant and irrelevant kinds" (Goodman 22). Not all features within a symbolic system carry equal importance. Some are emphasized, while others are minimized. Through weighting some symbols, events, values or traits become more significant than others, shaping how a world is understood. Through acts of weighting, individuals and communities establish criteria for relevance and legitimacy. Thus, worlds differ not only in content but in the evaluative structures that organize that content. Tolkien's worldmaking is characterized by distinctive weightings that set Middle-earth apart from our own world. Tolkien gives moral weight to virtues such as humility, pity, and perseverance which are qualities that shape the fate of the world. There are some instances in the novel which shows these attributes. For instance, Bilbo showing mercy in the novel as he chooses not to kill Gollum when he has the chance. "A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 82). This moment receives major narrative weight. Although it seems small in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien later confirms in *The Lord of the Rings* that this act of pity reshapes the destiny of Middle-earth. Goodman notes that weighting determines which objects count as significant. Tolkien heavily weights the one ring, making it the central symbolic object of the narrative world. Gandalf says "This is the Master-ring, the One Ring to rule them all" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 74). Goodman would describe this as symbolic weighting. The Ring carries a metaphysical and narrative importance that eclipses all other artifacts. History is weighted as a defining force in Tolkien's novels. The narrative unfolds over an extended period of time. It is composed by lineages, prophecies, cycles of loss and renewal. Tolkien weights certain kinds of knowledge such as genealogy, lore, prophecy as it is crucial to world structure. The narrative repeatedly depends on the weighted authority of characters who know the deep history behind present events. Tolkien produces a reality governed by symbolic and ethical principles rather than technological or economic ones. Goodman's concept of weighting illuminates how Tolkien constructs Middle-earth by assigning distinctive significance to certain moral qualities, artifacts, places and forms of knowledge.

3.Ordering

The third element of worldmaking is 'ordering'. Ordering refers to the arrangement of symbolic elements into meaningful sequences, hierarchies, taxonomies or relational systems. Goodman says "Order includes periodicity as well as proximity; and the standard ordering of tones is by pitch and octave" (Goodman 24). It can be linguistic grammars, biological classifications, historical chronologies or narrative structures. By imposing an order on elements whether temporal, logical or thematic, it establishes the relational coherence that enables comprehension. Tolkien orders events into sequential quests, arranges geography into symbolic directions, structures morality into ethical hierarchies and organizes mythic history into interconnected timelines. His works are exemplary in their use of ordering to produce coherence and depth. In *The Hobbit*, the quest is arranged as a linear progression as it begins with the familiar comfort of the Shire and moving through increasingly dangerous environments such as the Misty Mountains, Mirkwood and finally Erebor. Bilbo's encounters with Gollum in chapter five, the spiders in chapter eight and Smaug in chapter twelve gain significance because they occur in a structured sequence that mirrors his psychological growth. Likewise, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien creates a world with deep time by ordering centuries of history into coherent narrative accounts. Elrond's retelling of the forging of the rings, the fall of Númenor and Isildur's failure arranges diverse past events into a chronological structure that gives weight and meaning to the present crisis. Through such temporal ordering, Tolkien creates a world whose past, present and future are interlinked in a comprehensible and consequential sequence. Tolkien's Middle-earth is ordered along a fundamental east–west axis, with the west associated with preservation and moral order and the east associated with corruption and domination. The Shire, in the far west is introduced as a peaceful place where "they were a merry folk" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 26). Whereas Mordor in the East is depicted as a realm where the air was heavy with fear. Gandalf says "Alas! Mordor draws all wicked things" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 82). Tolkien's narrative techniques and annalistic histories further contribute to a layered system of order.

4.Deletion and Supplementation

Deletion and supplementation are the fourth element of worldmaking. Deletion involves the omission or removal of features from a symbolic system and supplementation involves the addition of new elements. These processes constitute reformative practices that continually reshape world-versions. Deletion and supplementation demonstrate that worldmaking is neither static nor final but proceeds through ongoing adjustments that refine or transform the symbolic resources through which we understand reality. Goodman identifies deletion and supplementation as central worldmaking operations. One can create new worlds by removing elements from our experience or adding new ones. Tolkien deletes aspects of modernity such as industrialization, mechanized war and others. He crafts a world where pre-industrial cultures and heroic ethics are dominant. Tolkien's first major act of deletion is the removal of modern industrial, technological and political life from Middle-earth. In *The Hobbit*, the Shire contains no factories or modern infrastructure. It is presented instead as a rural, pre-industrial world. This deletion of modernity clears conceptual space for Tolkien to supplement the world with ancient mythic structures such as dwarven kingdoms, elvish realms and dragon-hoards. This deletion produces the heroic cultures of Gondor and Rohan and the unspoiled realms of

the elves. At the same time, Tolkien supplements reality with entities that do not exist in the real world like dragons, wizards, Ents, Ringwraiths and magical artifacts. Goodman helps articulate how such supplementation is a constructive act of making a coherent alternative world rather than simply escaping the real one. Similarly, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien deletes modern geopolitics and instead supplements the world with a mythological history, revealed at the Council of Elrond which is explained as the forging of the Rings, Sauron's rise, and the long defeat of the Elves in chapter two of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This supplementation transforms Middle-earth into a world shaped by thousands of years of legendary events instead of modern historical processes. The eastward journey from the Shire to Mordor supplements a simple adventure map with a moral gradient. Tolkien has portrayed Shire as a place with prosperity and Mordor as a land defiled and diseased beyond healing. Tolkien deletes naturalistic or scientific explanations for events and supplements it with the world with mythic and metaphysical systems. For instance, Gandalf's powers have not been described through scientific principles or physical laws; instead, they are rooted in mythic origins. He draws his abilities from a higher, mystical source.

5.Reformation

The fifth component 'reformation' designates changes that alter existing symbols and structures without fully replacing them. Reformation can be observed in metaphorical extension, stylistic innovation or theoretical reinterpretation. Rather than constructing something entirely new reformation reshapes inherited forms. It is the process of editing, revising or reorganizing an already existing world-version. Reformation does not create something entirely new but it rather reshapes a previous structure by altering classifications, rearranging elements or revising perspectives. One of the clearest examples of reformation is the transformation of the world first introduced in *The Hobbit* into a more complex moral and cosmological landscape in *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Hobbit*, the world is presented largely as a children's adventure setting which is light, humorous and fairy-tale-like. Goblins, for instance, are mischievous antagonists described as "cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 62). But their threat remains within the boundaries of playful fantasy. However, in *The Lord of the Rings,* Tolkien reforms this same world into one characterized by ancient evil and metaphysical consequence. The reformation in the function of the ring is another example of reformation. In *The Hobbit*, the ring Bilbo finds is merely a ring that makes you invisible. As it is said "It seemed that the ring he had was a magic ring; it made you invincible!" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 81), the ring functions as a convenient magical device for adventures. There is no indication of its cosmic importance or vicious will. Tolkien reforms the ring in *The Lord of the Rings* into the 'One Ring', central to the fate of Middle-earth. It becomes an artifact of immense evil, with powers of corruption and domination. Tolkien says "One Ring to rule them all" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 74) which suggest the reformation of the ring. Goodman's operation of reformation is the transformation of existing symbolic systems into new configurations. Middle-earth reformulates elements of mythic and linguistic traditions into an original narrative world. Norse apocalypse narratives inform the Fall of Númenor and the Doom of the Noldor. Christian notions of grace, sacrifice and redemption infuse the moral fabric of the story. Medieval epic conventions are reformed into a modern novelistic structure. Tolkien reshapes a wide range of symbolic traditions into a unified mythic world, achieving originality through the way he transforms well-known motifs

into something new. This process directly reflects Goodman's notion that new worlds emerge from the modification of prior versions.

These operations demonstrate that worldmaking is a multifaceted and ongoing activity grounded in the manipulation of symbolic systems. Goodman's theory challenges the traditional realist assumption that symbols simply mirror a fixed reality. Instead, it asserts that what we call "worlds" are the results of deliberate, historically situated processes of construction, revision and negotiation. Goodman offers not merely an epistemological theory but a philosophical framework that accounts for the plurality, creativity and diversity of human world-versions. In light of Nelson Goodman's theory of worldmaking, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* reveal themselves as exemplary acts of constructing a symbolic world. Tolkien explains Goodman's five worldmaking processes by drawing together elements of myth and language, emphasizing meaningful symbols such as the Ring and the Shire, arranging events and histories into structured narratives, selectively withholding or expanding details and transforming traditional mythic patterns. Tolkien builds Middle-earth as more than a backdrop, but as a vibrant and meaningful world. Seen through this framework, Tolkien's work shows how fiction can construct alternative worlds that feel both authentic and profound which illustrates that worldmaking is simultaneously a philosophical endeavour and a creative act that shapes our understanding of reality itself.

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