

Anne Klaus

Child Saviours in English Fantasy Fiction
for Children and Young Adults

SALS

Studien zur anglistischen
Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaft

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Matthias Hutz, Eckart Voigts (Hg.)

Band 41

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Klaus, Anne: Child Saviours in English Fantasy Fiction
for Children and Young Adults / Anne Klaus. -

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014

(Studien zur anglistischen Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaft, Vol. 41)

Zugl. Diss., Universität Osnabrück, 2014

ISBN 978-3-86821-544-1

Cover Illustration: Marina Remark

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014

ISBN 978-3-86821-544-1

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Phenomenon

Stories involving saviours, who redeem a community or a whole world, account for a significant part of fantasy literature for children and young adults since the beginning of the 19th century. It is noteworthy that this phenomenon should be such a prevalent and central motif in fantasy fiction while it is virtually nonexistent in ‘realistic fiction’ for children and young adults. Ever since its origin in the Victorian Era the majority of English fantasy fiction for children and young adults has included these saviour figures. Among them are MacDonald’s Curdie, Tolkien’s Frodo or Rowling’s Harry Potter, all of whom seem to be at variance with the protagonists of ‘realistic fiction’ as their actions are marvelous and they are destined to rise above their fellows to fulfill fantastic, salvific deeds.

Fantasy fiction typically features a hero bestowed with strength and courage and celebrated for his or her¹ success. Some of these heroes and heroines exert those heroic deeds to save other characters, communities or even whole worlds from suffering and destruction.² In order to discuss this ‘saviour motif’ it is expedient to go into the motif’s history first. Tales about heroes and saviours have apparently always been dominant and persistent across time and cultures.

Verlyn Flieger figuratively speaks of the hero motif as the basic ingredients in the ‘soup of story’,

that rich mixture which has been simmering since man first told tales, from which stories have been ladled out to nourish the imagination in every age, including our own. Although the soup is a blend of many morsels, certain elements, certain flavors, stand out and evoke immediate response. These are the basics, the raw stuff of myth out of which folktale, fairy tale, epic, and romance are fashioned. They are the motifs which recur in all mythologies and which tale-tellers have used time out of mind – the hero, the quest, the struggle with monstrous forces of evil, the ordeal and its outcome. (Flieger 2004, 123)³

Literary heroes who act as saviours have existed since Homer’s *Odyssey* as well as the *Iliad*, or the Arthurian legends, for example of King Arthur or Perceval. From the 19th century onwards these tales have been promoted in stories written for child and young adult readers with children and adolescents as saviour figures.

¹ In the following, the generic ‘he’ will be used for matters of convenience.

² Cf. Kim who uses the term ‘saviour’ for someone who goes beyond minor heroic deeds as he reaches a transition of his world “from suffering, evil, guilt, ignorance, darkness, and death, to peace, liberation, forgiveness, enlightenment, light, new birth and eternal life” (Kyung-Ae Kim. *Quest for Salvation in Saul Bellow’s Novels*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994: 28).

³ Verlyn Flieger. “Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero”. In: Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs (eds.). *Understanding The Lord of the Rings. The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004: 122-145.

It is the aim of the present study to establish a poetology of the ‘child saviour’ motif in fantasy fiction for children and young adults⁴, to examine motifs connected to this basic pattern, to trace common tendencies and variations as well as intertextual and ‘metamythical’ links to pretexts⁵ and to ask the question which function the extended presentation of saviours serves and to what extent fantasy fiction for children and young adults differs from comparable works for adults.

Furthermore, this study will ask the question if there are connections between the texts and the putative ‘real life experiences’ of their young readers. The values, world views and messages transmitted by the texts will be investigated. This will raise the question to which extent those values correspond to the tradition of fantasy literature or to those of the environments in which they were written and if they correspond to those found in realistic fiction of the same time.

1.2 Previous Research

1.2.1 Mythological/Archetypal Literary Criticism

In order to define scope and method of the present study I should like to provide a survey of previous research on similar topics and/or similar texts as those which are the subject of the present study.

Motif analysis has often been linked to what Carl Gustav Jung refers to as ‘archetypes’. Jung gave the term its particular use as primordial image: a “universally recognizable element [...] that recurs across all literature and life” (Latrobe, Brodie and White 2002, 13)⁶. Based on Jung’s theories, ‘archetypal literary criticism’ assumes universality in literature by pointing to recurring motifs and structures that appear so deeply embedded in the human mind and its cultures that they seem to strike a responsive chord in every reader.

Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890-1915)⁷ can actually be considered a precursor of the study of archetypes. This work has been regarded as the “remarkable encyclopedia of world mythology that is still revered by folklorists and literary people” (Hardin 1989, 46)⁸. Frazer’s anthropological approach which explains “myth as a reflection of seasonal rituals” (Bell 2006,

⁴ In this book, young adult literature will be considered as “fiction written for, published for, or marketed to adolescents, roughly between the ages of 12 and 18” (Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James. *A Short History of Fantasy*. London: Middlesex University Press, 2009: 255) – in common with current Anglophone usage.

⁵ For a detailed outline of the approach of this thesis see chapter 1.3 ‘Aims and Methods’.

⁶ Kathy H. Latrobe, Carolyn S. Brodie, and Maureen White. *The Children’s Literature Dictionary*. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2002.

⁷ Sir James George Frazer. *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. 3rd edition. New York: Macmillan, 1951.

⁸ Richard F. Hardin. “Archetypal Criticism”. In: G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (eds.). *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989: 42-59.

120)⁹ and proves that the mythic world of seasonal ritual is still residually present in European rural life (cf. *ibid.*) was later carried over to literature.¹⁰

In his theory of the collective unconscious Carl Gustav Jung proposed ‘archetypes’ as primordial images, “first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul” (Garry and El-Shamy, “Introduction” 2005, xvi)¹¹ and seem to reside deep in the self or the civilization: One can assume that there are “‘autochthonous’ revivals independent of all tradition, and, consequently, that ‘myth-forming’ structural elements must be present in the unconscious psyche” (Jung (1959) 1984, 247).¹²

In Jung’s view, archetypes are “seemingly infallible, inarguably, psychic *imperatives*” (Powers 1991, 5)¹³. He located manifestations of the archetype in myth and fairy tale. Jung’s thesis suggests that certain works of literature derive their power to stir the reader from their appeal to inborn images, some of his chief archetypes being the shadow, the self, and the animus/anima.

While the Jungian theory focuses on the profundity of the emotional responses which archetypes might evoke in the reader and argues that archetypes trigger strong reactions due to their resonating images “already existing in the unconscious mind” (Herz and Gallo 1996, 64)¹⁴, other scholars, like Bodkin or Frye, refrain from speculating about the mechanics of how the archetype originates or operates in the human mind¹⁵.

Today, ‘archetypal criticism’ seeks to demonstrate basic prototypes and thus “offers some unusual opportunities for the enhancement of our literary appreciation and understanding” (Guerin et al. 1992, 180)¹⁶. One of the forerunners of this critical theory, Maud Bodkin, traced archetypal patterns in poetry in 1934 and interpreted them as

⁹ Michael Bell. “Anthropology and/as myth in modern criticism”. In: Patricia Waugh (ed.). *Literary Theory and Criticism. An Oxford Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006: 119-129.

¹⁰ Until now the theories of the so-called Cambridge anthropological school to which Frazer belonged are still “periodically resurrected like the dying and rising gods of which Frazer, Harrison, and Cornford were so fond” (Hardin 1989, 49). Northrop Frye comments: “*The Golden Bough* purports to be a work of anthropology, but it has had more influence on literary criticism than in its own alleged field” (Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*. 1957. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973: 109).

¹¹ Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy (eds.). *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature. A Handbook*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2005.

¹² C. G. Jung (1959). “The Psychology of the Child Archetype”. In: Alan Dundes (ed.). *Sacred Narrative. Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984: 244-255.

¹³ Meredith A. Powers. *The Heroine in Western Literature: the archetype and her reemergence in modern prose*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1991.

¹⁴ Sarah K. Herz and Donald R. Gallo. *From Hinton to Hamlet. Building Bridges Between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996.

¹⁵ In *Myths, Gods, heroes, and saviors* (Mystic: Twenty Third: 1991), Leonard J. Biallas even uses archetypes to show how myths can help in personal crises.

¹⁶ Wilfred L. Guerin et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

persistent cultural symbols that are passed down through generations. According to Guerin et al., “[n]o other critical approach possesses quite the same combination of breadth and depth” (ibid.).

Another famous representative of archetypal literary criticism is Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is preoccupied with the identification and classification of archetypes of (chiefly English) literature. He distinguishes four ‘modes’ of fiction which are organized around a Frazerian seasonal scheme of spring, summer, autumn and winter (each season is aligned with a literary genre: comedy with spring, romance with summer, tragedy with autumn, and satire with winter) (cf. Frye 1973, 158-239). Each mode is defined by the power assigned to the hero.

Frye attempted to organize a model of the whole literary tradition and to reduce the huge complexity and diversity possible in fiction to some main patterns, paving the way for structuralism. Frye’s endeavor anticipated the ‘structuralist approach to literature’ (cf. Newton 1988, 89)¹⁷ which also moves away from the interpretation of the individual literary work and is driven from the particular to the general, “towards understanding the larger, abstract structures which contain them” (Barry 2002, 40)¹⁸.

Since the unconscious is unknowable, Northrop Frye’s focuses on the cultural function of archetypal motifs rather than on their “unseen centre [from which they] spread out in conceptual space” (Frye 1972, 427)¹⁹. Frye dismisses Jung’s theory of a collective unconscious as “an unnecessary hypothesis in literary criticism” (Frye 1973, 112). He instead argues in favour of the literary critic to be concerned with “patterns which are actually in what he is studying, however they got there” (ibid., 109).

The heydays of archetypal literary criticism certainly lay in the 1950s and 1960s and the theory had long suffered from a decline of prestige (cf. Bell 2006, 119) and sunk into oblivion.²⁰ Yet, in the last decade archetypal criticism was revived: On the one hand, it is found in the field of Cognitive Poetics, especially in Patrick Colm Hogan’s *The Mind and Its Stories. Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*, in which the author argues that literary universals are “to a great extent the direct outcome of specifiable cognitive structures and processes” (4)²¹ and are, moreover, a “crucial sub-field for cognitive science” (4). And on the other hand, due to its value as an efficient classification tool, archetypal literary theory is frequently applied to a branch of litera-

¹⁷ K. M. Newton (ed.). *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory. A Reader*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988.

¹⁸ Peter Barry. *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.

¹⁹ Northrop Frye. “The archetypes of literature” (1951). In: David Lodge (ed.). *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman, 1972: 422-433.

²⁰ Archetypal criticism is not even listed in all recent surveys of literary theories any more: it is, for example, missing in Charles E. Bressler’s *Literary Criticism. An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (2007), in Robert Dale Parker’s *How to Interpret Literature. Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (2008), or in Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2009).

²¹ Patrick Colm Hogan. *The Mind and Its Stories. Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.