

FROM SECONDARY WORLD TO POSSIBLE WORLD: WORLD-BUILDING
AND READER PERCEPTION IN FANTASY LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This paper examines the relationship between two important theoretical concepts in the study of fantasy literature: J. R. R. Tolkien's Secondary World and Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible World. Fantasy literature is based not only on magical elements, but also on the construction of coherent fictional realities that function according to their own internal laws. Tolkien's concept of the Secondary World explains how the author creates an internally consistent fantasy world and encourages the reader's secondary belief. Ryan's possible worlds theory, on the other hand, explains how fictional texts construct alternative realities and how readers mentally reconstruct these realities during the process of reading. The paper compares these two concepts and argues that they represent two connected but different aspects of fantasy literature: authorial world-building and readerly reconstruction. The analysis shows that the Secondary World focuses mainly on the creative structure of the fantasy world, while the Possible World focuses on the semantic and cognitive perception of fictional reality. Therefore, studying these concepts together provides a deeper understanding of how fantasy literature creates, organizes, and communicates imagined worlds.*

Keywords: *fantasy literature, Secondary World, Possible World, Tolkien, Marie-Laure Ryan, world-building, reader perception, cognitive poetics.*

Introduction

Fantasy literature is one of the literary genres in which the creation of an imagined world plays a central role. Unlike realistic literature, fantasy does not only describe events, characters, or conflicts; it often constructs a separate fictional reality with its own geography, history, rules, cultures, and internal logic. Therefore, the study of fantasy literature requires theoretical concepts that can explain both the author's creation of a fictional world and the reader's perception of that world. One of the key concepts in fantasy theory is J. R. R. Tolkien's idea of the Secondary World. Tolkien argues that a fairy-story is not simply a story about fairies, but a story connected with Faërie, an imaginative realm where magic and wonder are treated seriously within the logic of the narrative (Tolkien, 1938). In this sense, the Secondary World can be understood as a fictional world created by the author, where the reader temporarily accepts the internal truth of the imagined reality. Tolkien also emphasizes that Faërie is not limited to fairies or elves, but includes a wider magical realm with its own atmosphere and laws. Another important concept is the Possible World, which is widely used in narrative theory

and cognitive poetics. Marie-Laure Ryan explains possible worlds in relation to fiction, narrative structure, and textual universes (Ryan, 1991). According to this approach, a fictional text can be understood as a system of worlds that differs from the actual world but remains meaningful within its own structure. Peter Stockwell also connects literary reading with cognitive processes and shows that readers actively construct meaning, context, and mental representations during the act of reading (Stockwell, 2002). The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that Secondary World and Possible World are closely related but not identical concepts. The Secondary World mainly refers to the author's act of world-building, while Possible World theory focuses more on the semantic, cognitive, and interpretive construction of fictional reality. Studying these two concepts together can help clarify how fantasy literature functions both as an artistic creation and as a reader's experience.

Thus, we want to examine the relationship between Tolkien's concept of the Secondary World and Possible World theory in the study of fantasy literature. It argues that fantasy worlds are not only created by authors, but also reconstructed and experienced by readers through cognitive and imaginative processes.

The concept of the Secondary World is mainly connected with J. R. R. Tolkien's theory of fantasy. In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien explains that fantasy is not simply a story about fairies or magical creatures. For him, a true fairy-story is connected with Faërie, a special imaginative realm where magic is accepted as a serious part of the story's reality. Tolkien argues that the fantasy writer acts as a "sub-creator," meaning that the author creates another world inside literature. This world is not the primary reality in which we live, but a Secondary World with its own rules, laws, history, and internal logic. For Tolkien, the success of fantasy depends on the internal truth of this Secondary World. If the author builds the world well, the reader can believe in it while reading. Tolkien calls this effect secondary belief. It does not mean that the reader thinks the fantasy world is real in everyday life. Rather, it means that inside the story, the world feels true and believable. Tolkien explains that if a writer builds a "little world" successfully, then it is "true in that world". Therefore, the Secondary World is primarily related to the author's creative act of world-building.

The concept of the Possible World, on the other hand, is strongly developed in Marie-Laure Ryan's narrative theory. In *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Ryan uses possible worlds theory to explain how fiction creates alternative systems of reality. She defines a textual universe as the image of a system of reality projected by a text. In such a system, one world can function as the actual world of the text, while other worlds may exist as alternative possible worlds. This means that fiction does not simply present unreal events; it creates a structured world that can be understood according to its own logic.

Ryan's theory is especially useful for explaining the reader's experience of fiction. According to Ryan, when readers enter a fictional text, they behave as if the world

described by the narrator were the actual world of that text. She explains that readers know the textual universe is imaginary, but during reading they agree to treat it as if it were real within the fictional game. In this sense, the Possible World is related not only to the author's creation, but also to the reader's mental reconstruction of the fictional world. The difference between these two concepts is important. Tolkien's Secondary World emphasizes the author's ability to create a complete and believable fantasy reality. It focuses on world-building, internal consistency, and the reader's secondary belief. Ryan's Possible World focuses more on the semantic and cognitive structure of fiction: how a text presents an alternative reality and how the reader understands this reality as a world. Ryan also argues that fiction involves a process of recentering, where the reader mentally moves from the actual world to the fictional world and treats that world as the center of the narrative reality.

Thus, the Secondary World and the Possible World are closely connected, but they are not the same. The Secondary World explains how the fantasy world is created by the author, while the Possible World explains how this fictional world functions as an alternative reality and is reconstructed by the reader. In fantasy literature, both concepts are useful because fantasy depends not only on magical elements, but also on the creation and perception of a coherent fictional reality. Therefore, Tolkien's and Ryan's theories can be used together to analyse how fantasy literature builds imagined worlds and how readers enter, understand, and experience them.

Comparison: Differences between Secondary World and Possible World Although Tolkien's Secondary World and Ryan's Possible World are both connected with fictional reality, they explain fantasy literature from different theoretical perspectives. The first difference is connected with origin. Tolkien's concept of the Secondary World belongs to fantasy theory and is mainly explained in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*. He focuses on the writer's ability to create an imaginary world with its own laws, logic, and internal truth. For Tolkien, the author is a "sub-creator" who builds a world that the reader can enter through imagination. Ryan's concept of the Possible World, however, comes from narrative theory and possible worlds semantics. She uses this concept to explain how fictional texts create alternative systems of reality and how readers understand them. The second difference is their main focus. The Secondary World mainly focuses on authorial creation. It answers the question: How does the writer create a believable fantasy world? Possible World theory focuses more on textual structure and reader interpretation. It answers the question: How does the reader understand the fictional world as an alternative reality?

The third difference is related to belief. In Tolkien's theory, the important idea is secondary belief. This means that while reading, the reader accepts the truth of the fantasy world inside the story. The reader does not believe that the fantasy world exists in real life, but believes in it within the limits of the narrative. Ryan's theory is more connected with fictional recentering. This means that during reading, the reader mentally moves from the

actual world into the textual world and treats that fictional world as the center of the story reality.

The fourth difference is in their scope. Tolkien's Secondary World is especially useful for analysing fantasy literature, because fantasy depends on detailed world-building, magic, and internal consistency. Ryan's Possible World theory is broader. It can be used not only for fantasy, but also for fiction in general, including realist novels, science fiction, historical fiction, and other narrative forms.

The fifth difference is their function in analysis. If we use Tolkien's concept, we analyse the structure of the fantasy world itself: its geography, rules, magic system, history, cultures, and internal logic. If we use Ryan's concept, we analyse how the fictional world works as a textual universe: what is actual inside the story, what is possible, what is imagined, what is desired, and how the reader reconstructs these worlds. Therefore, Tolkien's Secondary World can be seen as the created fantasy world, while Ryan's Possible World can be seen as the theoretical model that explains how this fictional world exists, functions, and is mentally reconstructed by the reader. Together, these concepts help us understand both sides of fantasy literature: the author's creation and the reader's perception.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concepts of Secondary World and Possible World are important theoretical tools for the study of fantasy literature. Tolkien's concept of the Secondary World explains how the author creates an independent and internally consistent fantasy reality. In this world, magic, supernatural events, and imaginary places are not accidental elements, but natural parts of the fictional system. If the world is created successfully, the reader accepts its internal truth through secondary belief.

Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of the Possible World, however, explains fiction from the perspective of narrative theory and reader perception. According to this approach, a fictional text creates an alternative reality, or textual universe, which the reader mentally reconstructs during reading. Through this process, the reader temporarily moves from the actual world into the world of the text and understands its events according to the logic of that fictional reality.

Therefore, the main difference between these concepts is that Tolkien's Secondary World is mostly related to the author's world-building, while Ryan's Possible World is related to the textual and cognitive construction of fictional reality. However, both concepts are closely connected because fantasy literature depends on both creation and perception. The author builds the fantasy world, and the reader reconstructs and experiences it through imagination.

Thus, studying Secondary World and Possible World together helps us understand fantasy literature more deeply. These concepts show that fantasy is not only a genre of magic and imagination, but also a complex literary form that creates meaningful, believable, and structured fictional realities.

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