Fictional Realities

With the chaotic temperament of day-to-day life, an escape from reality is deemed necessary by most individuals. An escape from reality can consist of a movie, nap, or reading a well-written novel by a fire. For centuries, novels have been a consistent form of escape for people whether it’s immersing themselves merely for pleasure, or escaping from something hostile or unpleasant. The two best examples of genres that enable escape consist of science fiction and fantasy. Both of these types of works have been present since the ancient Egyptians, but have recently began to become more universally popular since the 17th and 18th centuries. Science fiction and fantasy are both two widely diverse and unique genres, which has resulted in authors creating numerous definitions of each. Applying certain definitions to science fiction or fantasy works can help to explain why or how an author wrote the way that he did. The novels *The Time Machine* and *The Last Unicorn*, written by science fiction and fantasy authors, can be defined, explained, and understood by their genres.

Out of the two genres, fantasy requires a more fantastic imagination that is not rooted by facts. A direct synonym of fantasy is “the creative imagination.” Fantasy is typically originated “by highly fanciful or supernatural elements” that could potentially have come from an author’s daydream (Def. of Fantasy). These fanciful or supernatural elements are typically drawn from a desire to fulfill a wish or intellectual need of the author.
Following the definitions from the Webster Dictionary, the Oxford Dictionary also consists of similar ideas of fantasy. Fantasy is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as any fictitious idea that is universally accepted by a group of people. By having fanciful elements and fictitious ideas in a novel, the reader is able to escape to a new world. Author Susan Cooper argues, “Fantasy goes one stage beyond realism; requiring complete intellectual surrender, it asks more of the reader, and at its best may offer more” (Def. of Fantasy). Cooper is stating that a reader of fantasy must forget all about reality and allow the novel to take them to a different place that does not require thought process or total understanding.

Author Brian Attebery takes a different approach to fantasy in his definition: “Fantasy exists when there is some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law. Fantasy as a genre may be approached as ‘fuzzy sets,’ meaning that they are defined not by boundaries but by a center. From what center do we perceive it radiating?” (Def. of Fantasy) The answer to Attebery’s question is that he believes the center of fantasy derives from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, which is known to be the novel to compare all other fantasy books to. Attebery is also arguing Tolkien’s point that in order to keep alive the magic of fantasy, an author must be able to make the reader believe what he is writing to be true (Def. of Fantasy). Making an unbelievable scenario seem possible is the goal that all fantasy writers strive to accomplish.

The novel *The Last Unicorn* embellishes on most of the ideas of using creative imagination. Creative elements can be found within the entire novel with the imagery used to create lush landscapes, fictional creatures, and a world filled with magic. Peter S. Beagle uses the concept of transporting a novel through different worlds with his creation
of different realms. He was inspired by childhood fairytales, stories, and mythology, which are the basis for the different elements in the story’s plot. The novel begins in the world of magic with Mommy Fortuna’s carnival, then to the world of Robin Hood, and finally ending in the world of knighthood.

Incorporating all of these places that have history behind them makes for a more realistic fantasy story. Knights, carnivals, and Robin Hood are all familiar pieces of history that allow a reader to believe the unreal story unfolding before them. Author Cooper’s idea of fantasy going one stage beyond realism is present within Beagle’s descriptions. Character Mommy Fortuna, a conniving witch, says to her companions while trying to capture the last unicorn;

“The only rope that could hold her would be the cord with which the old gods bound the Fenris-wolf. That one was made of fishes’ breath, bird spittle, a woman’s beard, the miaowing of a cat, the sinews of a bear, and one thing more. I remember—mountain roots” (Beagle, p.19).

Although the items deemed necessary for capture are unrealistic and essentially impossible to retrieve in reality, the manner in which it is told is logistic and somewhat plausible. Beagle is constantly treading on the fine line of reality versus fantasy, and he does so in a playful manner that allows for the fanatical ideas in the novel to seem slightly realistic.

In addition to the humor elements that add realism to The Last Unicorn, Peter S. Beagle also incorporates the idea of immortality versus mortality. Initially, the unicorn begins as an immortal, beautiful creature, but is changed into a woman by Schmendrick, the wizard, as an attempt to save her from the Red Bull. Immediately after her unwelcomed transformation, the unicorn says, “I am myself still. This body is dying. I can feel it rotting all around me. How can anything that is going to die be real? How can
it be truly beautiful?” (Beagle, p. 150). The unicorn views mortal things as temporary elements of her world that can never be considered truly beautiful since they are dying from the moment that they enter existence. All of the other mortal characters share her same beliefs as they worship and admire the unicorn for her exceptional, immortal beauty. This idea of immortal beauty could be Beagle’s own opinion on what he bases his definition of beauty on, and whether or not he himself wished for immortality.

The second genre of “escape”, science fiction, did not have as early of a start as fantasy. Science fiction came about in the late 17th century after works were published during the era of vast modern science development (The Pander). Authors began to combine different genres with science motifs that truly caused science fiction to flourish as a genre. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, science fiction is defined as “imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries of spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel” (Def. of Sci-Fi). The concept of time travel is a main theme for the majority of science fiction works, as it combines the two concepts of science and a technological desire.

In the novel, The Time Machine, the concept of time travel is introduced with a time traveler having the ability to travel back and forth from the present to the future. The time traveler is able to travel to the fourth dimension, and return to the present to discuss his findings with friends. Time travel is a non-existent idea, but is made realistic by author H.G. Wells with his descriptions and facts. For example, the time traveler tries to explain time travel by incorporating science and facts into his discussions with friends by saying:
“It is simply this. That space, as our mathematicians have it, is spoken of as having three dimensions, which one may call Length, Breadth, and Thickness and is always definable by reference to three planes, each at right angles to the others. But some philosophical people have been asking why three dimensions particularly-why not another direction at right angles to the other three?-and have even tried to construct a Four-dimensional geometry. Professor Simon Newcomb was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago” (Wells, p.4).

The inclusion of this description and the inclusion of a math society makes the impossible idea of time travel appear like a claimed scientific finding.

Most science fiction works involve partially true laws or theories of science that help to build a realistic or plausible future world (read, write, or think). Science fiction is based on creating a realistic world that is believable, yet unique enough to bring a reader to another world. Isaac Asimov states “modern science is the only form of literature that consistently considers the nature of the changes that face us, the possible consequences, and the possible solutions. That branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon humans” (Def. of Sci-Fi). Author H. G. Wells creates a unique world in The Time Machine that explores a potential futuristic time of social regression.

In the futuristic world, the time traveler discovers two different races of creatures; the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Eloi are a naïve and lazy upper societal class who fear the savage-like Morlocks. The society in which they live in is advanced, yet deteriorating since the need for intellect has diminished over the centuries due to technology. Neither the Eloi or the Morlocks possess qualities that could progress their society, which causes the time traveler to fear what the future holds for all of humanity. They do not have a need for fear since no outside forces provide any danger, and therefore they have no need for intelligence. The time traveler describes the future society
by saying, “But even on this supposition the balance civilization that was at last attained
must have long since passed its zenith, and was now far fallen into a slow movement of
degeneration, to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence” (Wells, p. 42).
This futuristic society is a warning to present societies that too much technology and control could ultimately cause the demise of the human race.

The time traveler than continues his predictions of societal downfall by relating the Eloi to the upper aristocratic society of his present life. He related most to the sophisticated style of the Eloi, as he came from a well-off, upper class household. The Morlocks symbolized the lower-class, that because of the Eloi’s laziness, became the powerful class of the futuristic society. The powerfulness of the Morlocks could be a warning that the lower classes have the potential to rise up and over power higher classes that have suppressed them over the centuries, which follows writer Isaac Asimov’s idea of science fiction being used as a warning for the future.

Science fiction and fantasy both incorporate the basis for escape from reality. Science fiction incorporates the idea of transporting a reader to a futuristic or unique world through the inclusion of plausible scientific hypotheses. Fantasy contrasts science fiction by using details and descriptions of an imagined world so unique that it is plausible. The Time Machine provides a scientific and fictional outlook on the dangers of too much technological advances, and the potential societal damages that could result from a dependence on technology. The Last Unicorn creates a fantastic adventure story with the theme of love being possible between any creature. Both novels incorporate far-fetched, incredible ideas, but are made plausible and enjoyable to read by remaining close to reality and idealism.
Works Cited

