

Faerian Drama, Without the Fairies: Two Post-Tolkienian Examples

Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you.
Your story matters. <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/49184/story/>

This work is the **AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL (AO)**

This is the author's original version of a work, which may or may not have been subsequently published. The author accepts full responsibility for the article. Content and layout is as set out by the author.

Citation to *this* Version: Croft, Janet Brennan. (2016). *Faerian Drama, Without the Fairies: Two Post-Tolkienian Examples*. Paper presented at Annual SWPACA Conference, 37th, Albuquerque (N.M.). Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T3P55QJS](https://doi.org/10.7282/T3P55QJS).



Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

Article begins on next page

Faërian Drama, Without the Fairies: Two Post-Tolkienian Examples (as presented at SWPACA, Albuquerque, February 10, 2016)

Janet Brennan Croft
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In one section of his influential essay “On Fairy-stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien introduces the concept of Faërian Drama: “plays” which the elves present to men, where the viewer feels he is “bodily inside [a] Secondary World” but instead is inside “a dream that some other mind is weaving.”

In a paper I published in 2014, I suggested that Tolkien may have been influenced in his development of this concept by medieval dream-vision writing, especially *Pearl* but also *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I examined some examples of Faërian Drama in Tolkien’s fiction and poetry, concentrating particularly on his final story, *Smith of Wootton Major*. Along the way I discussed Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, a familiar and modern source that might also have influenced his ideas.

Tolkien describes Faërian Drama this way:

Now “Faërian Drama”—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men—can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. [...] To experience directly a Secondary World: the potion is too strong, and you give to it Primary Belief, however marvellous the events. [...]

[This] potent and specially elvish craft I will [...] call Enchantment. Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside [...]. (“On Fairy-stories” [OFS] 63-64)

This is all well and good, but as Verlyn Flieger and Doug Anderson point out in their commentary, “no definition of what the faërian [drama] consists of [and] no examples of such ‘plays’ or ‘abundant records’ are given”; Tolkien’s description actually “does little to clarify the concept” (“Editors’ Commentary” 112) or show how the experience of Faërian Drama truly differs from an ordinary dream or vision.

However, as I said in my earlier essay, I think there is a hint here about the purpose of this art form that may set us on the right path. I believe the purposes of

fantasy, as outlined in Tolkien's essay, are also the purposes of Faërian Drama: in particular, Recovery of a fresh view of life and the Consolation of the happy ending.

I think there also clues to be found in Tolkien's commentary on his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tolkien points out that through Gawain's *aventures*, his temptations and reactions, "he becomes a real man" (Introduction 7) rather than a prig who is a little too proud of his own perfect courtesy and piety; he is "peculiarly fitted to suffer acutely in the adventure to which he is destined" (6).

And here is where I think we can see Tolkien pointing towards a moral purpose for the dream vision and thus Faërian Drama: Gawain's experiences were designed to lead him, specifically and exclusively, through a series of trials and temptations uniquely suited to expose his peculiar weaknesses and frailties, and chasten, strengthen, and mature him (Croft 37). Likewise with other examples: the experience is tailored to the recipient.

What I tried to do in the course of this earlier paper was expand and refine Tolkien's vague and preliminary definition by working backwards from several examples of what we might classify as Faërian Drama (because they appear to produce the effects which Tolkien describes), studying how they achieve their effects, looking at sources Tolkien was familiar with, and then examining how Tolkien uses the concept in some of his own works. Here is what I came up with:

1. The Goal: The artistic goal of Faërian Drama, like that of the fairy tale itself, is to awaken in the witness an openness to Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe [that is, the sudden joyous turn in the story where disaster turns into triumph]. The one essential goal within the experience is Recovery, the "regaining of a clear view" (OFS 67), which makes the participant receptive to the rest [...]. There is a specific moral teaching purpose designed for the chosen witness.

2. The Witness: must be in a liminal and receptive state: he or she must be troubled by something, [or] in need of intervention [...]. His or her resistance to the experience is typically broken down by "softening" events leading up to it. The participant may, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately seek out the experience.

3. The Techniques: The goal is achieved through a variety of artistic effects, the most basic of which is that the participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it. [...]

4. The Consequences: The experience of Faërian Drama cannot be dismissed as a mere dream; upon awakening, the participant must retain a sense that the events were real and "other[worldly]," with lasting consequences [...]. (Croft 43-44)

In today's talk I want to look at two more recent sources that I would argue exhibit the characteristics of Faërian Drama: the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day* and the 2008-2009 television series *Life on Mars*. In both cases, the central characters go through experiences that are clearly outside their normal day-to-day existence and yet feel

totally real while happening; experiences which leave them changed men, with a newly clear view of their lives. But neither of these sources offers an explicit explanation for the redemptive experience undergone by their heroes. Can you have Faërian Drama without the fairies? And if so, how do we need to adjust our definition?

Groundhog Day

In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays an arrogant, egotistical weatherman who is sent off for the fourth year in a row to cover the Groundhog Day festivities in Punxatawney, PA. Dismissive of the small rural town and its unsophisticated enjoyment of its yearly festival, condescending and even cruel to his co-workers, Murray's character Phil Connors begins his *aventure* in a liminal state, at the end of a long day of ego-fueled rage when a snow storm which he failed to predict prevents him from escaping the dubious charms of Punxatawney. He falls into bed, only to awaken and find it is February 2nd all over again. And again. And again. And again. Each day starts the same way; he is endlessly alone, starting each day as the only person reliving it. This continues until he begins spending his days free of ego: in service to his fellow human beings, developing and sharing his intellectual and artistic gifts for the sheer joy of it, and loving unselfishly.

Phil starts from a position of cynicism: miserable, self-centered, and friendless. Once the time loop begins, he initially reacts with alarm and disbelief, but then takes refuge in hedonism, using the consequence-free terms of his situation to indulge all his fantasies (at least as far as possible in Punxatawney). But unable to seduce his charming and kind producer, Rita, Phil falls into depression, anger, and a long series of suicides. The futility of this course of action as he reawakens each morning anyway leads to a stage of resignation; a conversation with Rita causes him to consider that perhaps his condition is not a curse, but that it all depends on how he looks at it. Phil moves into a period of acceptance and growth, turning "the curse into a blessing" (Daughton 149), helping other people, developing his talents, and viewing Rita as someone to be "respected, admired, and emulated" (149). When the sequence finally breaks, he has become a person that Rita herself admires and pursues.

"The changes that take place in Connors's character encourage viewers to make the enthymematic leap that he was finally judged by some greater force to have 'gotten it right'" (151). But in contrast to the similar situations in *It's a Wonderful Life* or *A Christmas Carol*, where an actual guide grants the main character an explicit opportunity to see what the world would be like if he continued on his present path or never existed, there is no figure telling Phil what the recurrence is all about or why it ends. "

The viewer has no indication as to how long Phil lives the day over; we see a minimum of 34 separate days (Goldberg), but the original story mentions 10,000 years. And there is also no reason given why Phil should even bother to perform the good deeds he does for others if the day simply resets each time. Does each repetition work

off a bit more bad karma (Knowles 100)? “The best thing about *Groundhog Day* [...] is that it doesn’t explain” (Kaufmann).

So how does *Groundhog Day* fit the definition we developed? First, the goal. Phil is certainly awakened to Recovery, gaining a clearer view of his past life, his present situation, and what “a life made meaningful” (Kupfer 52) can be like. He learns, in his “acceptance and growth” phase, to view his predicament not as a catastrophe but as a eucatastrophe, giving him a chance to make things right.

As a witness/participant, Phil is in a liminal state at the beginning of his experience, battered by the frustrations and humiliations of the day and direly in need of an intervention to bring him face to face with his failings as a human being.

The artistic technique of this particular instance of Faërian Drama is quite simple; no matter what happens, the day resets at 6:00 a.m., the clock radio playing Sonny and Cher’s “I Got You, Babe,” Phil waking up under the covers in the Punxatawney bed and breakfast. Phil is an active participant; his actions have an effect that day, on himself and others. He has no reason to think this is “just a dream.” But the contradictions inherent in the way the repetition works (like muscle memory from learning piano or ice carving being retained the next “morning”) can best be explained if this is a deliberate example of Faërian Drama and he, as the subject, is meant to retain and build on skills that will lead him to the conclusion.

The consequences are quite clear. On finally awakening to Rita beside him, reaching over to turn off the clock radio, Phil realizes it is February 3rd and he has been granted a whole new life and a chance to start over. The events of his final February 2nd have had real and lasting consequences; he has his love, and a new understanding that, in the Platonic sense, “living virtuously is the good life” (Kupfer 36).

Life on Mars

If the Faërian Drama aspects of *Groundhog Day* find their roots in *It’s a Wonderful Life* and ultimately *A Christmas Carol*, *Life on Mars* in both the BBC and ABC versions find them in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (itself a prime example of Faërian Drama), from which they borrow imagery, music, and themes. In both versions, Sam Tyler’s deepest wish is to return home—but does he really understand what home is, what people and relationships are essential to his sense of home, and why he wants to be there?

Life on Mars started as a British series aired in 2006-2007. Sam Tyler, a police detective in 2006, is investigating a case when he is struck by a car and flung back into 1973. He is beset by odd phenomena—TV programs talking about his medical condition, people in 1973 who seem to know all about 2006, and so on. At the end of the series, he is revealed to have been in a coma. Upon awakening and finding his 2006 world stale and flat and lacking in the kind of personal relationships he developed in the past, he commits suicide and returns to 1973. In the follow-on series *Ashes to Ashes* (2010), the 1973 world is revealed to be a subdivision of Purgatory specifically designed

for police “to sort out their demons” (Becker 181) and managed by his 1973 commanding officer Gene Hunt (Lacey and McElroy 13-14).

Ever since I was old enough to catch on to what C.S. Lewis was up to with the Narnia books, I’ve been wary of science fiction and fantasy premises that turn out, in their final twist, to have been thinly veiled religious allegory. For myself, I prefer the “bonny road” that leads to “fair Elfland” (trad; quoted in OFS 28-29). Which is why I personally, in defiance of the vitriol aimed at it by nearly all of the critics I have read, find the American version of the series quite satisfying.

When this Sam (Jason O’Mara) awakens back to reality, it turns out that his 2008 life was as unreal as his 1973 one. The main characters are actually the crew of a Mars mission in 2035—which explains many of the peculiar clues about his condition that Sam has received, from miniature Mars lander robots spying on him to his flighty next-door neighbor Windy nicknaming him 2B.

The crew all entered their own individual “neural stimulation programs” early in the mission as a way to keep their brains active while their bodies rested in suspended animation during the trip. Here we have a Faërian Drama-like state sought out more or less willingly, with technical assistance, for purposes of entertainment and mental health. Different crew members have chosen different programs. A meteor shower they encounter causes a hiccup in Sam’s program, which was originally designed to insert him in a police drama in 2008; instead, he is pushed further back, to 1973, and he retains the overwritten 2008 scenario as his primary memories. His 2035 crewmates play roles in the program leading to one of the most foregrounded parallels with *The Wizard of Oz*—his moment of “And you guys were all there!” upon awakening (“Life is a Rock” 1.17).

As Dorothy’s experiences in Oz did for her, the drama has enabled him to work through deep psychological issues. His 1973 experience ends after he has declared his love to policewoman Annie Norris, and embraced his boss Gene Hunt after deliberately rejecting an opportunity to go back to 2008. By experiencing this program as real, Sam has role-played resolving his rivalry and difficult history with his father and fellow crew member “Major Tom” Tyler, and overcoming a fear of commitment and admitting his attraction to his real-life commanding officer, Colonel Annie Norris. He is now ready to do the same in the real world.

But why is his program altered in this specific way? This is where the potential to read it as a true Faërian Drama comes in. Are the resonances with Sam’s real 2035 life part of the reason why he chose this program, consciously or unconsciously? Or is the program so interactive and responsive to his needs that it picked up on Sam’s issues and helped him work through them? Is it possible that something much deeper was happening to Sam? If the series had continued, or if the writers had had the chance to end it more slowly and deliberately, we might have found some answers. But it was cancelled midway through the season, and in the rushed final episode, all we see as

viewers are the first few minutes of Sam's disorienting reawakening, living his confusion along with him.

So how does *Life on Mars* fit our definition? Judging from the results, the goal of Sam's dream-vision was to help him gain a clear view of his life through role-playing around two major issues: father-rivalry and fear of commitment. Sam is receptive, entering the program he chose voluntarily, but not expecting the sudden twist as it jumps back to 1973.

As far as technique, the 2035-vintage neural stimulation program is a fully immersive artistic experience; we see no indication that 2008 Sam realizes he's from 2035 in the opening few minutes of the first episode, before the program goes haywire. It feels unquestionably real to Sam, emotionally and physically. In 1973, he knows he's not in his proper world, and this sense of displacement is essential to his "cure"—but he doesn't know his proper world is one level further removed.

Upon awakening, he questions the earth mission commander: "What did you do to me? My trip got trippy" ("Life is a Rock" 1.17). He clearly retains the knowledge that it was out of the ordinary. Does the experience have lasting consequences? We see him starting to change his life already, telling his father he no longer wants to fight and hinting at his interest in Annie to one of the other crewmembers.

Conclusion

Can we call *Groundhog Day* and *Life on Mars* examples of Faërian Drama? and if so, what does this do to my definition?

We can probably bypass the lack of a known designer by simply saying that one may be there in these examples, but neither we nor the characters have knowledge of them. We share Phil and Sam's mystification.]

Significantly, though, in both *Groundhog Day* and *Life on Mars* there is a clear purgatorial element—the witness/participant must live through certain things and learn certain lessons before being released. Phil is in a "purgatory of his own making" (Knowles 99) but not choosing. Sam is caught in a self-chosen interactive narrative but not self-aware inside it. But neither of these places is actually Purgatory, because both Phil and Sam return to their mortal lives with the chance to mend their ways. Purgatory does not allow this—as Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol* tells us, the individual soul in Purgatory cannot make actual amends to the people it wounded on earth:

"[I]f that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world [...] and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!" (77-79).

Yet Marley is at least able to arrange a Faërian Drama, the visits of the three Spirits, in an attempt to save Scrooge from suffering a similar fate.

So it's clear that we need to add "Not Purgatory" to the definition of Faërian Drama. The return from the vision (bearing a boon, as Joseph Campbell would have it in his description of the Hero's Journey) is essential

The "bonny path to Elfland," the way of fantasy leading to neither heaven nor hell, leaves the person who has witnessed and participated in a Faërian Drama free to think and act upon its revelations in real life. For us, the audience once removed, depictions of Faërian Drama also serve to help *us* "to see the world afresh" (Poliakoff, qtd. in Lacey and McElroy 2). We can open ourselves to the possibility that such a clear view, and such a radical re-assessment and re-alignment of our own lives, is possible this side of Purgatory, and that one may have a chance to resume one's mortal life—in Punxatawney or on Mars—after such revelations and do it right this time around.

Works Cited

- "And the Point of Salvation." Writ. John Rogers et al. Dir. Jonathan Frakes. *The Librarians*. Season 2, episode 8. TNT. 13 Dec 2015. Television.
- Baumgarten, Murray. "Bill Murray's Christmas Carols." *Dickens on Screen*. Ed. Glavin, John. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 61-71. Print.
- Becker, Christine. "Off Goes the Telly: Writer Discourse on the *Life on Mars* Franchise Finales." *Journal of Screenwriting* 6.2 (2015): 173-88. Print.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973. Print.
- Croft, Janet Brennan. "Tolkien's Faërian Drama: Origins and Valedictions." *Mythlore* 32.2 (#124) (2014): 31-45. Print
- Daughton, Suzanne M. "The Spiritual Power of Repetitive Form: Steps toward Transcendence in *Groundhog Day*." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 138-54. Print.
- Dickens, Charles, and Michael Patrick Hearn. *The Annotated Christmas Carol*. New York: Avenel Books, 1976. Print.
- Flieger, Verlyn and Douglas A. Anderson. "Editors' Commentary." In *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. Expanded edition, with commentary and notes. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. 85-121. Print
- Fowkes, Katherine A. "*Groundhog Day*: No Time Like the Present." *The Fantasy Film*. Ed. Fowkes, Katherine A. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 92-103. Print.
- Gilbey, Ryan. *Groundhog Day*. BFI Modern Classics. London: British Film Institute, 2004. Print.
- Goldberg, Jonah. "A Movie for All Time: Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, *Groundhog Day* Scores." *National Review* 14 February 2005. Print.
- Goldsmith, Jeff. "Lost Scenes: *Groundhog Day*." *Creative Screenwriting* November/December 2010: 75-76. Print.
- Groundhog Day*. Perf. Bill Murray et al. Dir. Harold Ramis. Columbia Pictures, 1993. Film.
- Hermann, Martin. "Hollywood Goes Computer Game: Narrative Remediation in the Time-Loop Quests *Groundhog Day* and *12:01*." *Unnatural Narratives—Unnatural Narratology*. Eds. Alber, Jan and Rüdiger Heinze. *Linguae & Litterae* 9. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2011. 145-61. Print.
- Holdsworth, Amy. *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Inception*. Perf. Leonard Di Caprio et al. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Warner Brothers, 2010. Film.
- Kauffmann, Stanley. "Fantasy and Fandom." *The New Republic* 15 March 1993: 24-25. Print.
- Kupfer, Joseph H. *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film*. Boulder CO: Westview, 1999. Print.

- Lacey, Stephen, and Ruth McElroy. "Introduction." *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York*. Eds. Lacey, Stephen and Ruth McElroy. Contemporary Landmark Television. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012. 1-15. Print.
- Lavery, David. "The Emigration of *Life on Mars*: Sam and Gene Do America." *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York*. Eds. Lacey, Stephen and Ruth McElroy. Contemporary Landmark Television. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012. 145-52. Print.
- Life on Mars: The Complete Series*. Dir. Michael Katleman et al. Perf. Jason O'Mara et al. ABC Studios, 2009. Dist. Buena Vista Home Entertainment. Television.
- Makai, Péter Kristóf. "Faërian Cyberdrama: When Fantasy Becomes Virtual Reality." *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010): 35-53. Print.
- Marcovitch, Heather. "Memories of Mars: Life on Mars and the Discursive Practices of Memory." *American Remakes of British Television: Transformations and Mistranslations*. Eds. Lavigne, Carlen and Heather Marcovitch. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 173-92. Print.
- Moore, Grace. "From Bedford Falls to Punxsutawney: Refashioning a Christmas Carol." *Godly Heretics: Essays on Alternative Christianity in Literature and Popular Culture*. Ed. Di Paolo, Marc. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc, Publishers, 2013. 221-38. Print.
- Nelson, Robin. "Life on Mars." *The Essential Cult TV Reader*. Ed. Lavery, David. Essential Readers in Contemporary Media and Culture; Variation: Essential Readers in Contemporary Media and Culture. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 142-48. Print.
- Palwick, Susan. "Suspending Disbelief: Story as Political Catalyst." *Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles*. Ed. Timmel, Duchamp. L. Seattle: Aqueduct, 2010. 152-59. Print.
- Pecotic, David. "From Ouspensky's 'Hobby' to *Groundhog Day*: The Production and Adaptation of *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*." *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*. Eds. Cusack, Carole M. and Alex Norman. Leiden: Brill, 2012. 331-48. Print.
- Racicot, William. "Anything Different Is Good: Incremental Repetition, Courtly Love, and Purgatory in *Groundhog Day*." *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*. Ed. Marshall, David W. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2007. 186-97. Print.
- Simon, John. "Frail Fantasy, Forceful Fiction." *National Review* 12 April 1993: 63-65. Print.
- The Thirteenth Floor*. Dir. Josef Rusnak. Perf. Craig Bierko et al. Columbia Pictures, 1999. Film.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. Introduction. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*. New York: Del Rey, 1975. 1-22. Print.
- . "On Fairy-stories." In *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. Expanded edition, with commentary and notes. Eds. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. 27-84. Print.
- Walters, James. *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema: Resonance between Realms*. Bristol: Intellect, 2008. Print.
- Wickham-Crowley, Kelley M. "'Mind to Mind': Tolkien's Faërian Drama and the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*." *Tolkien Studies* 12 (2015): 1-29. Print.
- The Wizard of Oz*. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Judy Garland et al. Warner Brothers, 1939. Film.