Dragons in Literature

Dragons have become a staple in the modern fantasy genre so much so that fantasy and dragons are almost synonymous concepts. Many well-known fantasy stories of today like *The Hobbit*, *Earthsea* series, and *Harry Potter* series have dragons with many of the characteristics that may be considered typical for dragons albeit with important variations from series to series. The typical characteristics of a dragon usually include a snake-like or reptilian body with wings, fire breathing abilities, and a level of danger and respect that comes with the size and power of the dragon. Though it may seem that many fantasy authors create their dragons from a similar mold, the variations in their dragons are enough to reveal that not all dragons derive from the same source of inspiration.

Historically, dragons or dragon-like creatures have been found in literature or mythology as far into the past as the time of Mesopotamia. The dragon, though a creature that does not exist in the real world, has become a predominant figure in the genre of fantasy, and many of today’s most popular fantasy literature has been, in one way or another, influenced by the historical archetypes of these creatures.

Early versions of dragons have existed in Western cultures dating as far back as 5000 BC, specifically in the civilizations of Mesopotamia. Creation myths found in these civilizations feature creatures that today are recognized as dragons. The ancient Sumerians believed in a serpentine dragon named Kur who lived in the sea and who
committed violence against humans. Kur, essentially an evil chaos dragon, was pitted against the forces of good, the gods in the Sumerian myths. A dragon closely related to Kur is found in the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*. This epic is another creation myth that includes a goddess named Tiamat who plays a pivotal role in the creation of the world when her slain body is used to create earth and heaven. Tiamat, in both the tablets in which the epic is inscribed and in other ancient pieces of art in which her entire body is carved, is often depicted with a serpentine body, a long snout, and horns. The body of Tiamat is a hybridization of animals that the people of Babylon would have been familiar with: goats, snakes, and lizards. Tiamat’s body also shares similarities to the features often attributed to dragons in today’s modern fantasy, especially the serpentine body and the long snout.

These early Mesopotamian proto-dragons that were portrayed as evil entities helped to spread the archetype of monstrous dragon-like creatures as harbingers of chaos. The archetype spread across the Western world, primarily through religious movements as Jews and Arabs interacted with Mesopotamian cultures. Eventually, as Ahmed K. al-Rawi states in his article “The Religious Connotation of the Islamic Dragon,” the Jewish people “adopted some of their myths, such as that of their dragon, sometimes called Rahab, Tannin, Leviathan, or Behemoth” (82). An example of dragon-like creatures found in religious Hebrew texts include the seven-headed sea monster, Leviathan, in the Torah. The Leviathan is further characterized in the *Book of Job* when it is given the ability of breathing fire.

In addition to the Mesopotamians, there were other civilizations across the world that came to believe in some form of dragon-like creature. These early civilizations had
no contact with outsiders, yet the draconic creatures in their literature, their art, or their architecture share similarities to what we consider dragons today. In what is today Mexico, around 1500 BCE, the Olmecs began a tradition of worshipping a creature whose image would carry on through the Mayans and Aztecs after them. The dragon of the ancient Mexican cultures is Quetzalcoatl, a long serpentine creature who, instead of scales, was covered in feathers and had a pair of wings. In Australia, around 6,000 years ago, many of the aboriginal tribes located on the landmass came to worship a dragon commonly referred to as the Rainbow Serpent. Like the Mesopotamians, the aborigines’ dragon was also a mixture of animal parts from what would have been common creatures on Australian land; the Rainbow Serpent had the body of a serpent, the head of a kangaroo, and the tail of a crocodile (Petty 247). In early Chinese civilization, art, which included tapestries, statues, and temple architecture, featured dragons. The Chinese dragon was usually a long and slender creature with four legs adorned with clouds around it. The Chinese did not have a centralized creation myth, but dragons were often believed as guardians of environmental powers such as rivers or the weather. An important similarity between these non-Western cultures of ancient America, Australia, and ancient China is that their dragons were often depicted as benevolent entities compared to many of the dragons of chaos in the West.

Two important pieces of literature from the Western world that had dragons as central elements and characters were the Volsung Saga, an Old Norse myth, and Beowulf, an Old English epic. In the Volsung Saga, a warrior named Sigurd confronts Fafnir, the dragon of the tale. The dragon displays the characteristics of archetypical dragons of today; Fafnir is a treasure-hoarder, reptilian in features, and able to expel fire. He also has
the characteristic weak spot of dragons on his underbelly. On top of these attributes, Fafnir displays a human nature in how he interacts with the hero, talking like a person and even speaking in riddles. The dragon in the epic of Beowulf shares many physical features with Fafnir. The dragon in the Old English epic is, like Fafnir, a treasure-hoarder and also a fire-breathing winged monster. The dragon and dragon-slayer of the Volsung Saga are mentioned in Beowulf, supporting the idea that Fafnir may have inspired the dragon in Beowulf.

Another classical work that contains a proto-dragon is the Greek “Hymn to Apollo” which is contained in the Homeric Hymns and dated to the seventh century. In the myth, the god Apollo seeks to create a sanctuary. A nymph tricks Apollo into claiming land where Pytho, a great she-dragon, guards a water source. Apollo defeats both the nymph that tricked him and slays Pytho. Again, the dragon is presented as a guardian like the treasure-hoarders in Beowulf and the Volsung Saga. Pytho resembles Eastern dragons in how it guards a location in nature, but the language used to describe it in the “Hymn to Apollo” contains negative connotations as is revealed in a 1914 translation; the dragon is described as a “bloated, great she-dragon, a fierce monster” who is “a very bloody plague (Evelyn-White).

Eventually, around the Middle Ages, all kinds of fantastical creatures like dragons, unicorns, and the phoenix had been so ingrained in cultural traditions that they persisted in bestiaries that featured them next to actual animals. In addition to bestiaries, fantastical creatures were also implemented into heraldic symbols where they would represent family names and houses. In Joe Nigg’s compendium, The Book of Fabulous Beasts, in which are compiled important pieces of literature that feature fantastic
creatures, Nigg supports the idea that “griffins, dragons, and other of nature’s ‘monsters’ [were] ensconced in coats of arms and handbooks of heraldry even as these animals of the imagination [appeared] in multiple literary genres in printed books” (201). Dragons survived even through the enlightenment period, an era where reason and logic were preferred over the imaginary and fantastical. The reason for their survival is summarized by Nigg when he states that many fantastical creatures were included “in new editions of classical and medieval works; others in contemporary travel books, alchemical writings, literary epics, novels, Shakespearean drama, and even in some natural histories” (201).

During the Middle Ages, chivalric romances were abundant, and they often featured dragons as obstacles in the way of heroic knights. Dragons in these stories were depicted as the usual brutish, fire-breathing monsters that had become the common image of the creature. Gradually, as the Enlightenment era approached, dragons moved from grand, imposing figures, to mere obstacles in a series of adventures, and finally moved out of favor in adult literary audiences altogether. The preferred audience for stories containing dragons became children who were told retellings of existing dragon and knight tales. A brutish fire-breathing monster was still the general outline of a dragon during this transitional period, however. It wasn’t until the end of the nineteenth century that the portrayal of dragons began to expand. In his article “Dragons in English: The Great Change of the Late Nineteenth Century,” Dominic Cheetham credits this change to experimental authors: “The size of dragons, their gender, age, eating habits, morality, intelligence, unlike traditional dragons…are remarkably variable in the modern dragon, allowing the dragon to take almost any narrative role an author wishes” (20). Examples of authors who helped in this development were Edith Nesbit and Kenneth Grahame. The
two authors created children’s tales of dragons, but their dragons had unique abilities that introduced the creature to modern readers. For instance, Grahame’s dragons were friendly, able to be befriended by the children of his stories, and Nesbit’s dragons were a variety of sizes and sexes and were defeated through intelligence and trickery not violence. Dragons in modern day literature now vary from J. R. R. Tolkien’s seemingly traditional Smaug to the dragons presented through unique narratives in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea world.

One of the most famous dragons in modern literature is Smaug who is featured as a central character in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Tolkien was clearly inspired by much of the established concepts of dragons in Western literature, mainly from the Old World epics like *Beowulf* and the *Volsung Saga*. One of the first descriptions of the dragon comes from a speech given by the dwarf king Thorin: “Dragons steal gold and jewels, you know, from men and elves and dwarves…They guard their plunder as long as they live (which is practically forever unless they are killed)… There was a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm called Smaug” (Tolkien 23). Through this early description, Smaug can be categorized right away as a treasure-hoarding chaos dragon, an archetypical dragon that his readers would be familiar with, but, like more modern variations of dragons, Smaug displays characteristics that separate him from the common portrayals of dragons. He displays an intelligence befitting a human. Smaug speaks in riddles and with clever, sometimes humorous dialogue, but the critical difference between dragons like Fafnir and Smaug is who they are talking to and their settings. Whereas *Fafnir* exists in the human world and confronts the heroic Sigurd, Smaug resides in Tolkien’s fictional realm of Middle Earth and confronts a small hobbit. Tolkien
might be inspired by the *Beowulf* and the *Volsung Saga*, but, with differences in setting and characters, he is able to create a unique conflict with an established archetype. As Ármann Jakobsson puts it, “he is not translating *Fáfnismál* directly to English, but he is translating its essence for inclusion in a modern novel” (5).

Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story, *The Rule of Names*, started Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, a collection of stories surrounding the fantastical world of Earthsea. The story introduces many of the central themes of the series and also gives a snippet of the general Earthsea world. One of the characters in the short story is a powerful dragon that disguises himself as a human, but, though just as fierce as Tolkien’s Smaug, Le Guin’s dragon is developed quite differently through its short narrative. At first, the dragon, named Yevaud, is disguised as an incompetent wizard whose jobs it is to help the village he lives in. Blackbeard, a vengeful wizard looking for treasure, goes to Sattins Island to fight Mr. Underhill who he believes stole the treasure; in reality, Mr. Underhill is Yevaud’s wizard form and Blackbeard eventually comes to expose him. Many of the characters and situations in *The Rule of Names* are clear references to Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* which in turn connects Le Guin’s dragon to the older European myths like *Beowulf*. Other than the treasure-seeking, vengeful characters like Blackbeard and Thorin’s group and the plump protagonists living inside hills like Bilbo and Mr. Underhill, a major component in *The Hobbit* and *The Rule of Names* are the dragons, Smaug and Yevaud. Like Smaug, Yevaud is also described as the typical scaly, fire-breather: “black wings darkened all the hill, steel claws reached groping, and from the dark, scaly gaping lips fire and steam shot out” (Le Guin 90). The lead-up to Yevaud’s true form is atypical, however, when compared to most other fantasy stories. Where
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Tolkien introduces smaller changes to the hero and monster formula, Le Guin goes further by making the dragon the central character in her story and by having Yevaud overpower the wizard who confronts him.

Le Guin returns to Yevaud in the first novel of the Earthsea series, The Wizard of Earthsea. In the novel, the main character is a wizard named Ged. After finishing wizard school, Ged assists a group of pastoral islands which are threatened by a group of dragons residing on a nearby island. Ged, desperate to get off the islands because of a larger, personal threat, decides to confront the dragons directly in order to move on with his adventures. On the island, he kills a few of Yevaud’s offspring right away and then confronts the dragon who has aged since the events in The Rule of Names. Le Guin again makes several references to the tactics used against dragons present in The Hobbit and in the myth of Fafnir. When Ged speaks to Yevaud, he knows that what he hears from the creature may or may not be the truth since dragons are known to play with words:

“[Yevaud] spoke… in the Old Speech. Although the use of the Old Speech binds a man to truth, this is not so with dragons. It is their own language, and they can lie in it, twisting the true words to false ends, catching the unwary hearer in a maze of mirrorwords each of which reflects the truth and none of which leads anywhere” (105).

Yevaud’s similarities to Smaug and Fafnir are apparent, but Le Guin diverges from those narratives again, this time in the manner in which Yevaud is defeated. In Le Guin’s Earthsea world, true names are secret pieces of knowledge that, if discovered, give a wizard great power over the person or creature whose name is revealed. In regards to Yevaud, Ged discovers his name and is able to defeat him by ordering him to stay in his
island. These strange circumstances Yevaud is placed in emphasizes the manner in which Le Guin’s dragons are incorporated in unique narratives.

Lauren Berman’s analysis of the dragons and serpents in *Harry Potter*, Berman summarizes that serpents, snakes, and worms are often considered “synonymous or closely related” by several texts like the Bible and by well-known authors like Tolkien; to contrast, Berman states that “J.K. Rowling makes a clear distinction in her series… The serpents in the *Harry Potter* books are mainly associated with the forces of darkness against which the hero and his allies are destined to fight, while the dragons in the series are not specifically allied to either side” (45). Several events in the series support Berman’s thoughts. Under the control of the series’ villain, Lord Voldemort, there are snakes that present danger to many of the protagonists. The biggest of these creatures, a basilisk is introduced in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Hermione is petrified by the monster’s powers, but she manages to find a description of it in a book from the Hogwarts library. The book, *The Most Macabre of Monsters*, points out that the “of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents” (Rowling 247). In Rowling’s series, serpents seem to take on the darker characteristics that dragons are regularly given in fantasy stories.

Dragons in *Harry Potter* are indeed less associated with evil and are also far less human than how dragons are presented in the fantasy series of Tolkien and Le Guin. In the *Harry Potter* world, dragons are more wild and feral than they are treasure-hoarders or riddle-speakers. They do retain many of the classic physical traits of the European chaos dragons as evidenced by one of the first dragons Harry Potter meets in *Harry
Norbert exhibits several characteristics that support the idea that dragons are not good or evil in Rowling’s world but act like wild animals instead. Like an untamed animal, Norbert eats whatever Hagrid, the school game-keeper, feeds it like brandy and chickens; the dragon bites Ron Weasley and Hagrid, and it bangs its tail on the walls of Hagrid’s house unintentionally as it grows (Rowling 235, 236, 239). Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, the fourth installment in the Harry Potter series, reintroduces dragons, but, again, they are depicted as wild and violent; the dragons are used only as challenges for the Triwizard Tournament, a tournament regulated and controlled by three wizarding schools including Hogwarts. Several species of dragons are included in the first tournament challenge, showing that Rowling wanted dragons to appear as if part of the natural world rather than as creatures of the Other like Smaug and Yevaud. Species that Rowling names in the fourth book include a Swedish Short-Snout, a Common Welsh Green, and a Hungarian Horntail.

Many of the texts within Rowling’s stories are reminiscent of the bestiaries from the Middle Ages. Hermione Granger, the character who first finds out about the basilisk in the second Harry Potter book, gathers her information from a text titled Most Macabre Monstrosities, and one of the required texts that Harry needs for Hogwarts is titled Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. These books recall the natural bestiaries from the Middle Ages that included both real creatures and fantastical beasts like dragons. Rowling likely weaved these bestiaries into her story to further develop her magical creatures as natural beings.

Dragons have often been characterized as evil, greedy, and imposing. From the myths in Mesopotamia to the Old Norse epics like Beowulf, these tales have dragons as
central characters. The evolution of the fantastic creature known as the dragon in literature is evident throughout history, especially in the modern popular stories of J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, and J. K. Rowling. These authors have created modern fantasy tales that have implemented many of the archetypal characteristics of dragons such as their reptilian features, their fire-breathing abilities, and their imposing aura, but, more importantly, their dragons have diverged from the norm in more than one way. Tolkien’s dragons are tinged with subtle human characteristics, Le Guin’s dragons exist in atypical narratives, and Rowling’s dragons have more in common with regular, wild animals. These modern authors have taken the concept of the dragon and used innovative techniques to refresh an established archetype for modern readers; this development only points to dragons remaining as central motifs in the fantasy genre.
Works Cited


