The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever Short Guide

The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever by Stephen R. Donaldson

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BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Donaldson's trilogy (Lord Foul's Bane, The Illearth War, The Power That Preserves, all published in 1977), pits good against evil, and in this elaborately drawn cosmos he introduces many interesting and entertaining characters. Most complex, of course, is Thomas Covenant himself, who, Donaldson says, is a man "torn between the impossibility" of believing that the Land is true, and the impossibility of believing it false: It is unreal and irrefutable. He comes into his power when he learns to affirm the paradox itself."

Part of what has troubled Covenant results from his illness: He no longer has a sense of connectedness with those around him. Living in an imposed isolation has driven him to the brink of suicidal despair; the fantasy world of the Land offers him a way to give his life meaning — if he will only learn to accept it as being as "real" as the world he has left behind. The Land demands much of Thomas Covenant, but it gives him priceless gifts in return: a renewed sense of self-worth, the ability to feel responsible for and to give willingly to others who need his strength, and the power to say "no" to despair.

But this answer is one that Covenant will take a long time to learn, and still longer to accept. For, in order to save himself and the Land, his fate must be freely chosen. Covenant prefers to believe that what happens to him is out of his control. He characterizes himself as a victim in both worlds, yet Donaldson makes it clear that he has free will, that he has the power to deny or accept this dream as being real. As long as he refuses to believe, he is powerless.

Another powerful figure in these books is Lord Foul, whom Donaldson has cast in the style of all good fantasy villains — larger than life and embodying twisted values easily recognizable as having real-world equivalents. Foul wants to force Covenant to give in, to admit that he cannot assert his will against Foul's; in that regard, he is a fantasy world equivalent of Covenant's real world sense of worthlessness and abandonment — the feelings that have driven him to despair. The metaphor is clear: Covenant must defeat Lord Foul, not only to save the Land from his corruption, but also to overcome the spiritual leprosy that has been corrupting his own life. The Land, Foul and the other characters that he meets there represent those things that Covenant must deal with back home. That he is eventually able to do so indicates that he has become a hero: he releases the Land from Foul's threatened dominion and saves his own life by refusing to give in to despair.

But before Covenant can fight against the evil of Lord Foul and the sickness that devours his soul as well as his body, he must accept the Land. It is ironic that in his real world Covenant desperately wants to act but is prevented from doing so by his disease and by people's horror of his leprosy; yet in the dream reality of the Land he refuses to commit himself by acting, even when it becomes clear to him that he must play a central role in determining the fate of all with whom he comes in contact. Covenant carries Despite within himself, as all people do, and his despair, mirrored in his refusal to accept the Land, is his most basic sin. Donaldson characterizes this trilogy as a study of

choice because the choices one makes so intimately define who one is. The lesson that Covenant must eventually learn is that it is possible to triumph over doubt and despair by choosing to do so, by choosing action over capitulation, by saying "yes." But until he does, until he says "yes" to the dream of the Land and allows himself to participate willingly in the conflict that keeps drawing him back from "reality," he will remain out of control. And, until he gains self-control, he will be unable to act for the good of those in the Land who look to him as their only hope.

Social Concerns

Although Donaldson's fictive world of the Land is alien to readers, the ideas which he explores there are not: they are the standard ones addressed in all good fantasy. In the Land people live in harmony with their environment, taking sustenance from it, giving reverence and respect in return. Unlike people of Covenant's world, they have pledged fealty to the Land and live in service to it. Covenant must learn to share this respect and accept this obligation. Furthermore, Covenant must come to terms with his disease — leprosy (which, interestingly enough, is "cured" in the health-giving Land).

This illness itself mirrors his spiritual erosion, and Donaldson explores what it takes for a person to choose to be "well," physically, emotionally, spiritually, and communally. In his "real" world Covenant has opted out, forsworn or been denied any but the most minimal of forms of human contact; in contrast, in the Land, Covenant must learn to accept his connections with those around him; he must learn to believe that what he does will make a difference and that his actions can hurt other people. In short, he has to stop pinning the blame for all the pain in his life on sources external to himself.

Once he abandons his egocentric cave of despair, not only will he himself be on the way to spiritual and physical health and stability, but he will also be able to make the choices that are needed in order to insure the safety and health of the people and of the very Land itself. In these regards, the concerns of these three books closely mirror those of Donaldson's other major works: The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant as well as the most recent Mordant's Need (The Mirror of Her Dreams, 1986; A Man Rides Through, 1987) series.

Techniques

The transformation of the central figure from ordinary to heroic stature is a standard pattern in many fantasies, from Bilbo and Frodo Baggins in Tolkien to Thomas Covenant in Donaldson, and the quest becomes the means by which this transformation is accomplished. In many cases the quest assumes religious or mystical proportions: The conflict becomes emblematic of the war between good and evil, and the journey becomes a search for the way in which to overcome the dark forces.

Themes

A key theme of this trilogy centers around the question of health. Not only has Covenant's leprosy destroyed his body, it is also an apt metaphor for the spiritual and moral decay that has eroded his ability to act in the cause of good. He no longer believes that he can make choices, take charge of his life or give it meaning; furthermore, he does not believe that he holds the power to do these things for others. Thus Covenant's forced journeys to the Land serve as much to teach him the value of responsible living as they do to block the inroads made by the evil necromancer, Lord Foul. In addition, Covenant is also forced to learn to accept the fact that others, more weak than he, depend on him for guidance; he must accept the burden of their trust. In the "real world" Covenant may be able to refuse to confront his problems, in the Land he is compelled to find answers — even though he continues to insist that this strange place is only a nightmare, a bad dream that will end if he can just make himself wake up.

The Land becomes the arena in which Covenant learns to overcome the most deadly of sins, despair. In his real world Covenant had lost everything he valued most: his wife, son, and the companionship of neighbors — all because of his disease, something over which he has no control. Thus Covenant is sent, or more correctly is dragged, into the Land where he gradually overcomes his self-pity and where he learns the virtue of self-sacrifice.

This first trilogy also examines the nature of divinity and the meaning of good and evil. Through Thomas Covenant and by means of the conflict in which Covenant plays an integral part, Donaldson explores and explains the nature of the threat to the Land, and, by extension, the way in which he perceives the "real" universe to work.

Good and evil exist in both realms; the answers Covenant learns in one world have validity in the other. Covenant's quest is really an attempt to give meaning to his life in both worlds.

Although the Land is not an existential universe, its Creator will take no active part in the battle that rages there between good and evil. Like Covenant, people of the Land must choose to throw off evil; they must be strong enough in their own right to overcome the power of Lord Foul.

In all of his long fiction, as well as in most of his short stories, Donaldson continues to explore a central theme: the meaning of heroism and the process by which even the most unwilling — and usually the most unlikely — individuals are transformed into true heroes. In this regard, Donaldson has justifiably been compared to the fantasy great J. R. R. Tolkien in his abilities to create a believable fantasy world as well as write an engrossing adventure story.

Anger and hatred — in Covenant, in Lord Foul — are aspects of Despite/ Despair. Once Covenant learns to control his passion, he can also control his anger and his despair,

but he must will himself to see himself as he really is, as healthy in the Land. His anger at having lost both his health and his family prevents him from reacting in any way but violently, and it keeps him from caring in the least what effects his actions will have on others. Despite is selfish, despair is too. Self-pity and its companion anger isolate Covenant from what he needs most, the affection of others. Instead of accepting compassion, he angrily rejects it as unwanted pity; instead of receiving the affection of another, he responds violently and rapes a woman who has only offered him help. In order to return affection, however, a person must care, must believe that both he and things other than himself have value. At the beginning of this first trilogy such a perspective is not possible for Covenant. He must learn to believe in himself, in the Land, and in the power of love and compassion to heal despair and overcome Despite.

Literary Precedents

J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings was an important influence on Donaldson's perceptions of what fantasy literature is all about, as were Frank Baum's Oz books, Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy (1967), C. S. Lewis's Narnia series (1950), and Frank Herbert's Dune (1965). Each of these authors exemplifies aspects of the genre that play important parts in the construction of Donaldson's own fantastic realms. In the Baum books a child, Dorothy, is transported to another world where she unwittingly becomes a hero. Like the abhorred figure of the leper, Thomas Covenant, a child too is powerless against the forces of the adult world. In Oz Dorothy must discover her inner strength and use her wits to overcome the wicked witch of the West, a figure somewhat similar in nature to that of Drool Rockworm, Covenant's first adversary in Lord Foul's Bane. In both cases, the protagonists believe themselves to be helpless, yet because of their quests, both characters learn just how powerful they can be against the forces of evil. Like Dorothy, Covenant is an unwilling guest/ participant in an alternative fantasyworld — she snatched to Oz by a Kansas twister, he knocked into the Land by a police car. Both characters must learn to survive in the new lands. Dorothy adjusts to Oz; Covenant, on the other hand, fights against the "reality" of his new situation. A similar theme repeats itself in the second trilogy in the person of Linden Avery, no physical leper but certainly an emotional cripple.

In the works of all these writers, the quest is a central motif. Like realistic fiction, fantasy seeks to find answers, to show readers characters in the midst of conflict, adventure and change, and to explore the nature of heroism and the importance of what the author identifies as an ethical value system.

Fantasy is especially well-suited to these ends since it provides readers with a "safe" means by which to explore the more disquieting aspects of human nature. Because the setting is an "impossible" where and when, the uncomfortable becomes easier to consider than it would be if it were to take place in the house next door. In Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy, for instance, Titus Groan explores the puzzling world of Castle Gormenghast, leaves the confines of home and grows to be a young man. Readers follow him as he matures into a hero in much the same way that they watch Thomas Covenant learn to accept the reality of the Land. More importantly, readers see him adapt to fit the roles that he must play, roles which require him to sacrifice himself to the demands of the greater good: restoring the health of the Land.

Dorothy in Oz, Frodo at Mount Doom, Asian in Narnia, and Covenant in the Land: All must choose to make sacrifices; they must learn how to vanquish a foe. Donaldson has said that his fiction explores the nature of evil — what he calls Despite, "the ability or willingness to hold Life (other human beings, the environment . . .) in contempt." In fact, like Lewis's Narnia series, Donaldson views the essential issues of his Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever series and the solutions it offers as being religious in nature, for it studies the ways in which characters who are at first inadequate to the demands of the tests they must meet grow until they are able to overcome adversity.

Donaldson, like the authors he favors, tests his characters, pushing them far beyond the boundaries they have set for themselves. In the character of Covenant, for instance, as in Dorothy, the Cowardly Lion, or Bilbo, lie hidden reserves of strength of which he is initially unaware. And the books as much chronicle his self-deception and ultimate self-discovery as they do the battle with Lord Foul for control of the Land.

From his many encounters with the various peoples of the Land, Covenant also learns something about living in harmony with his environment. He comes to accept the responsibility he shares for the Land's fate, struggle as he might to refute its existence. To deny the Land his aid would mean that he would be forced to accept the blame for abandoning it to the ravages of Lord Foul. Whether he likes it or not, Covenant must participate in the dream-nightmare-reality of the Land; he must learn to have faith that what he sees (or thinks that he dreams he sees) has validity. He must learn to believe and, by doing so, he must choose to fight for the principles of good in the war against Lord Foul.

In this respect the trilogy mirrors themes propounded by Frank Herbert in his Dune series. The reverence the Fremen hold for the earth, for Arrakis, is an attitude that Paul Mua'Dib must learn in order to become the savior of the land and the people who respect it.

Similarly, Covenant first must accept the reality of the Land, must believe that it is something more than a dream, and then must accept his part in winning its salvation. Both Paul and Covenant redeem their lands, and both are destroyed in the process. Yet Herbert and Donaldson both strongly suggest that only through this process of complete surrender to and acceptance of their fate can these characters rise above themselves to be transformed into something new, something truly heroic. Both authors also imply that by their self-sacrifice for something greater — Dune/the Land, Paul and Covenant insure the life of those who trust in their power to save these worlds. In each case the protagonists shift from their initial unwilling or violent rejection, as in the case of Covenant, to a transcendent acceptance of their role as savior. Similarly, in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings Frodo Baggins is "only" a hobbit, yet without him Middlearth would have perished; similarly, like it or not, the Creator chose Thomas Covenant to save the Land because he possessed qualities that he himself could not see until he had been taught to do so.

The idea that one makes oneself into what one is is one repeated as a central theme in another of Donaldson's favorite writers, Joseph Conrad, whose monomaniacal Kurtz discovered the horror within, his heart of darkness. In much the same way, Donaldson forces his characters to see themselves as they are inside: naked, leprous, unclean. They can choose to alter their interior landscape, to make themselves well, to sacrifice themselves for a greater good, as do Covenant, Saltheart Foamfollower, and Atrianen Trell-mate. Or they can give in to Despite/Despair and become engines of destruction as in the case of Drool Rockworm, the Ravers, and, most particularly, Lord Foul.

Kurtz is what Covenant would have become, was on the way to becoming before he was first yanked into the Land. Covenant also resembles Jim in Conrad's Lord Jim

(1900), a man who runs away from his responsibility, who damns those around him by failing to act.

Donaldson treats the same issues as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams: the nature of goodness and the ways in which characters learn to assert themselves against the forces of darkness, or what Donaldson terms Despite. Referring to himself, Donaldson observes that, "I do conceive of myself as a religious writer, and I think that the themes I'm dealing with in these books are religious ones." One of Donaldson's key concerns is the religious idea of an individual growing able to meet a challenge, as in the cases of Covenant. This theme certainly is central to the quest motif popular in so much ethical or religious fantasy, a quest that frequently involves characters who are subjected to tests that measure their moral strength, if not their power of faith. Frequently these characters start out as less-than-heroic figures who grow in heroic stature primarily as a result of the ordeals they face while on their quest. Like Covenant, many of these characters — such as the unwilling Bilbo Baggins or C. S. Lewis's Ransom (in Out of the Silent Planet) — are reluctant participants in the adventure. Yet, once they are involved in the situation, they face it as bravely as they are able. Donaldson states that: the secret opportunity hidden in every burden is the chance to rise rather than sink. Therefore we don't do our fellow human beings any favors when we try to protect them from pain, responsibility, need, or guilt: instead of helping them, we limit their humanity, which is surely one of the besetting sins of our civilization ... . If "there is a purpose behind all things," it is probably the purpose of opportunity: "sink or swim."

This necessary testing, this pushing past or through what one had perceived to be one's physical, emotional or moral limitations, is certainly a controlling theme in Donaldson's fiction and reflects a perspective he shares with another writer whom he admires, William Blake. Like Blake's concept of a necessary "fall" from innocence into experience, Donaldson's characters must submit themselves to the forces at play in the world around them. They cannot wall themselves off from pain or temptation, for to do so denies their humanity and their power to choose their salvation.

Related Titles

Although Donaldson appears to take up where he left off with the start of the second Thomas Covenant trilogy— The Wounded Land, The One Tree, and White Gold Wielder — he does so with the addition of another spiritually wounded hero: the physician Linden Avery, who takes the place of Covenant as the person who must come to accept the reality of the Land as well as to believe in her own powers to overcome despair. Even more dramatically than Covenant's affliction in the first series of novels, Avery's "leprosy" is a disease of the soul rather than of the body: she must overcome the misplaced guilt she feels for her father's suicide as well as for having helped her terminally ill mother obtain a welcomed release from her pain. Unlike Avery, Covenant now believes in the reality of the Land and has come to accept the part of savior that he is forced to play there. In this trilogy Thomas Covenant goes willingly to the Land by sacrificing himself to save his wife, Joan, who was about to be murdered by a weird sect. Thus this trilogy shows another character who must grow dramatically in order to fulfill the expectations held of her; at the same time Donaldson explores the effects that the transformation have on Covenant, a man who now actively fights for the survival of the Land, even though it will demand his life.

In The Mirror of Her Dreams (1986) Donaldson takes up the same theme of the unwilling hero in the character of Terisa Morgan, a lonely young woman who is transported to an alien fantasy realm known as Mordent. The inhabitants of this world — in which magic really works — expect Morgan to provide them with a way to save their kingdom. Like Covenant and Avery before her, Morgan is a baffled and resistant hero, yet as she is forced more and more to rely on her own resources, this self-effacing woman who was shunned by both her parents and who has no real friends in her own world, learns the meaning of love as well as the rewards of taking an assertive part in what goes on around her.

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