



A Tapestry of Imagination: Delving into World-Building through J. R. R. Tolkien and Tzvetan Todorov

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Abstract:

This essay explores the multifaceted nature of world-building in speculative fiction by examining the convergence between Tolkien's concept of sub-creation and Todorov's interpretation of the fantastic genre. While both acknowledge its importance, their approaches differ: Tolkien emphasizes recovery and invention, drawing inspiration from existing narratives; Todorov focuses on the reader's experience of 'hesitation.' This analysis delves into Tolkien's meticulous world-building in *Leaf by Niggle* and Todorov's exploration of hesitation, examining the tension between Tolkien's 'cauldron of stories' and Todorov's emphasis on authorial agency. Ultimately, the essay reveals how Todorovian hesitation operates even within Tolkien's seemingly familiar world, blurring the lines between the real and the imagined and inviting readers into a deeper engagement with human creativity.

Keywords: Tolkien; Todorov; Hesitation; Comparative World-building; Imagination; Sub-creation.

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1. Introduction

The human spirit has perpetually sought to transcend the confines of tangible reality, finding solace and adventure in the vibrant realms crafted by the literary imagination. Speculative fiction, in particular, offers a unique portal to these imaginative frontiers, inviting readers to inhabit worlds that are at once alien and intimately familiar. However, the construction of these fictional universes is far from a simple act of conjuring fantastical elements; it is a profoundly nuanced process informed by the unique philosophical, linguistic, and creative vision of each author. This process not only shapes the narrative but fundamentally determines the reader's engagement with the text. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to either the structural mechanics of world-building or the psychological effects of the fantastic, a significant gap persists: the lack of a holistic analysis that examines how an author's creative philosophy and a reader's cognitive experience can be synthesized to form a cohesive understanding of literary immersion. This study addresses that gap.

To explore this intricate dynamic, this comparative analysis embarks on a journey by examining the intriguing convergence—and divergence—between J. R. R. Tolkien's theory of sub-creation and Tzvetan Todorov's structuralist interpretation of the fantastic genre. Tolkien, a philologist and mythmaker, approached world-building as a theological and linguistic act of 'sub-creation,' a way to recover and invent truth through language. Todorov, a literary theorist, approached it through the lens of reader response, defining the fantastic by the 'hesitation' it produces. The following review of literature will demonstrate that while existing scholarship has explored these thinkers individually, it has largely failed to synthesize their insights to illuminate the dynamic interplay between authorial intent and readerly experience, a synthesis this paper aims to achieve.

The works of both Tolkien and Todorov share an underlying concern with the nature of reality and representation, yet their methods and conclusions are starkly different. This tension forms the core of this research. This study argues that a comparative reading of Tolkien's sub-creation and Todorov's fantastic reveals a productive dialectic: Tolkien's meticulously crafted secondary worlds provide the necessary foundation for Todorov's hesitation to take root, thereby enriching the reader's experience beyond mere escapism. Despite existing comparisons between Tolkien and Todorov in the realm of the fantastic (such as examinations of ambiguity in the Gothic, or analyses of the sublime in Tolkien's works), the specific tension between sub-creation as a 'recovery' from the cauldron of stories and the author's role in creating hesitation has been significantly less explored. This paper fills this critical gap by analyzing *Leaf by Niggle* as a central text and demonstrating how this interplay contributes to a deeper, more human-centered understanding of world-building in speculative fiction.

2. Review of the Related Literature

This literature review is organized into two primary sections to systematically analyze the scholarly landscape. The first section reviews studies directly related to Tolkien's work and his concept of sub-creation. The second section examines literature concerning Todorov's theory of the fantastic. Each section concludes with a brief synthesis of the findings, which collectively reveal the research gap that this study addresses.

Literature Related to Tolkien and Sub-creation

Flieger (2001) examines the concept of time in Tolkien's works in her book *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Middle-earth*. Her problem was to understand how Tolkien's complex treatment of time shapes the world of Middle-earth. She adopts a mythological and literary approach, exploring the intertwining of past, present, and future in the narratives. Her findings reveal that Tolkien's conception of time is deeply philosophical and theological, serving as a structural and thematic backbone for his entire legendarium. The significance of this for my study is that it establishes Tolkien's world as a deeply coherent and internally consistent system, a necessary condition for sub-creation to function effectively.

Hammond and Hammond (2010) analyze Tolkien's short story "Leaf by Niggle" to explore the act of artistic creation. Their problem was to interpret the story as an allegory of Tolkien's own creative process. They adopt a literary and theological approach, focusing on the story's symbolism. Their findings demonstrate that Niggle's journey is a direct representation of Tolkien's concept of the artist as a 'sub-creator,' where the act of painting mirrors the divine act of creation. The significance of their work lies in its close reading of the primary text, offering a concrete example of sub-creation at work, which serves as a key analytical foundation for this paper.

Croft (2005) in *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* investigates the impact of World War I on Tolkien's literary themes. Her problem was to identify the connections between his personal trauma and his narrative preoccupations with war, heroism, and loss. She uses a biographical and historical approach, analyzing the text alongside Tolkien's experiences. Her findings highlight Tolkien's nuanced portrayal of war, not as glorified battle, but as a complex event reflecting both horror and resilience. The significance is that it provides a human, experiential context for Tolkien's world-building, showing how his sub-creation was not merely an escape but a profound engagement with reality.

Helms (1974) provides a foundational overview of Tolkien's world-building in his book *Tolkien's World*. His problem was to detail the intricate construction of Middle-earth. He adopts a holistic and descriptive approach, covering its geography, history, and cultures. His findings establish the sheer scope and detail of Tolkien's creation. The significance for this

study is that it provides a comprehensive map of the 'secondary world,' demonstrating the meticulous coherence that makes a Todorovian reading of hesitation possible within it.

Sandner (2006) outlines a framework for analyzing fantasy literature, proposing six stages of criticism. His problem was to provide a critical methodology for the genre. He uses a theoretical and comparative approach, drawing on examples from various authors. His findings offer a critical lens for analyzing fantasy's unique narrative techniques. The significance is that his framework validates the academic study of fantasy and provides a methodological justification for a comparative analysis like this one.

Pu (2012) examines the linguistic and cultural foundations of Tolkien's fantasy. His problem was to show how philology shaped Middle-earth. He adopts a linguistic approach, analyzing Tolkien's constructed languages. His findings highlight that Tolkien's creation is deeply rooted in linguistic philosophy. The significance is that it underscores the point that for Tolkien, language is not just a tool but the very substance of sub-creation.

2.1 Synthesis of Reviews on Tolkien

The reviewed scholarship on Tolkien thoroughly establishes his work as a paragon of meticulous, linguistically-rooted, and internally consistent world-building. These studies collectively demonstrate that Tolkien's sub-creation is a deliberate act of recovery and invention, where personal experience, theology, and deep linguistic knowledge converge to produce a 'secondary world' of remarkable depth. However, what this body of scholarship largely overlooks is the *reader's* experience within this world. While they analyze the text's structure and origins, they do not fully explore the cognitive and emotional state of a reader encountering the unfamiliar within the familiar. It is precisely this reader-centric experience that Todorov's theory addresses, and it remains a significant gap in the existing Tolkien criticism.

2.2 Literature Related to Todorov and the Fantastic

Todorov (1973) in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* defines the genre by the reader's hesitation. His problem was to create a systematic structural analysis of the fantastic. He adopts a linguistic and structuralist approach, categorizing texts into the Uncanny, the Marvelous, and the Fantastic proper. His findings establish that the fantastic is defined not by the presence of supernatural events, but by the prolonged uncertainty they create in the reader. The significance for this study is immense, as it provides the central theoretical lens—'hesitation'—through which to read Tolkien's works.

Chou (2015) rethinks the concept of the fantastic through the theories of Todorov, Tolkien, and Lewis. Her problem was to challenge and expand the boundaries of the genre. She adopts a comparative and theoretical approach. Her findings reveal that the narratives of these authors create a unique interplay between reality and fantasy. The significance is that it

establishes a precedent for comparing Todorov and Tolkien, validating this paper's central premise.

Filmer (1993) analyzes the political dimensions of C.S. Lewis's fiction, but her theoretical work on the fantastic provides a context for Todorov. Her analysis of the secular and religious in fantasy shows a displacement of secularity. The significance is that it helps situate Todorov's structuralism within a broader debate about the function of the supernatural in literature.

Angelis (2019) explores the ambiguity in the Gothic through a Todorovian lens, from Tolkien to Todorov. His problem was to apply Todorov's ideas to the Gothic genre. He adopts a theoretical approach. His findings demonstrate the utility of Todorov's framework for analyzing classic fantasy works. The significance is that it provides a direct example of a Todorovian reading applied to Tolkien's predecessors and contemporaries.

Schneider-Wettstein (2021) examines Todorov's concept of the fantastic alongside Burke's sublime in Tolkien's works. Her problem was to define the sources of enchantment in *The Lord of the Rings*. She uses a theoretical and literary analysis. Her findings show that Tolkien's works utilize both the hesitation of the fantastic and the awe of the sublime. The significance is that it moves closer to this paper's argument, showing that Todorov's theory is not incompatible with Tolkien's world, but can actually elucidate it.

Satterwhite (2015) proposes a materialist theory of fantasy literature in his dissertation *Radical Realms*. His problem was to provide a materialist critique of the genre. His findings argue that fantasy, including Tolkien's, operates as a form of wish-fulfillment. The significance for this paper is that it offers a contrasting, critical perspective on the idealist sub-creation, forcing a more nuanced defense of Tolkien's humanistic value.

2.3 Synthesis of Reviews on Todorov:

The scholarship on Todorov's theory of the fantastic primarily establishes it as a powerful structuralist tool for analyzing reader response and the production of uncertainty. These studies demonstrate that Todorov's framework is applicable across a wide range of genres and historical periods, and several have begun to apply it to the works of authors like Tolkien. However, these Todorovian readings often remain at the level of identifying structural 'hesitation' and do not fully integrate this with an understanding of the *author's creative philosophy*. This creates a second gap: the need for a synthesis that uses Todorov's structuralism not as a replacement for, but as a complement to, Tolkien's own theories of sub-creation to understand how a world is built *and* how it is inhabited by the reader.

2.4 Conclusion of Literature Review:

In summary, this review reveals a critical and persistent gap in the scholarship. Studies on Tolkien excel at explaining the *craft* of world-building (the 'how'), while studies on Todorov excel at explaining the *experience* of the fantastic (the 'what'). However, a comprehensive

framework that brings these two approaches together to show *how* and *why* the crafted world produces a particular experience is lacking. This paper addresses this gap by arguing that Todorov's concept of hesitation is not antithetical to Tolkien's sub-creation but is, in fact, an integral outcome of it, thereby providing a more complete and human-centered understanding of the reading experience.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a dialectical and comparative theoretical framework, drawing from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Tzvetan Todorov to build a lens for analyzing world-building. The framework is divided into two parts: first, an exploration of the historical and intellectual backgrounds that shaped these theories, and second, a detailed exposition of the key concepts themselves.

3.1 Historical-Intellectual Backgrounds

The theoretical foundations of this study are rooted in the vastly different, yet surprisingly complementary, intellectual climates of early twentieth-century Britain and mid-twentieth-century France. Tolkien's theory of sub-creation is a product of his deep engagement with philology, medieval literature, and his Catholic faith. He was part of a generation of scholars, the 'Inklings,' who reacted against the dehumanizing forces of modernism and industrialism. For Tolkien, the creation of a 'Secondary World' was a deeply theological act, a form of 'Sub-Creation' that mirrored the divine creation of the Primary World. This was an attempt to recover a sense of enchantment and moral truth, using language as the primary tool. His intellectual background was fundamentally humanistic and linguistic, focused on the internal coherence of the created world.

In stark contrast, Todorov's structuralist approach emerged from the French intellectual tradition of the 1960s, heavily influenced by formalism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis. His project, as laid out in *The Fantastic*, was to create a rigorous, scientific, and systematic classification of literary genres. Unlike Tolkien, who was an artist-practitioner, Todorov was a detached theorist. His background was in narratology and linguistics (the school of Roman Jakobson and Tzvetan Todorov himself). His goal was to define the conditions for a literary experience—specifically, the experience of 'hesitation'—rather than to prescribe how a world should be built. This divergence in backgrounds is critical: where Tolkien sought to *create* a coherent world, Todorov sought to *dissect* the reader's reaction to ambiguity within it. The intellectual tension between these two backgrounds forms the core of this study's analytical potential.

3.2 The Body of Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 Sub-creation and Recovery

Tolkien's theory of 'sub-creation' is the foundational concept for understanding his creative process. As articulated in his essay *On Fairy-stories*, sub-creation is the act of creating a Secondary World, a place that is not merely a copy of our own but is internally consistent and possesses its own 'inner logic of reality.' A successful sub-creator, according to Tolkien, achieves 'Secondary Belief' in the reader, who is willing to suspend disbelief and accept the world as real. This process is not a simple flight of fancy but involves two key actions: 'Recovery' and 'Escape.' 'Recovery' is the act of seeing the familiar (like a tree or a sunset) with fresh eyes, stripping away the layers of mundane perception to reveal its inherent beauty and truth. 'Escape' is not a retreat from reality, but a rebellion against the 'tyranny' of the modern world's dullness and dehumanization. Tolkien argues that a good sub-creator does not invent entirely new things, but rather recovers and recombines elements from the Primary World ('the Cauldron of Story') to create something new and emotionally resonant. This focus on recovery and escape makes Tolkien's theory a profoundly humanistic one, placing the author's craft at the service of the human spirit. In *Leaf by Niggle*, Niggle's painting of the Tree is a classic example of this process, as he obsessively recovers the beauty of a single leaf and, in doing so, creates a world.

3.3 The Fantastic and Hesitation

Todorov's contribution to the theoretical framework is the concept of the 'fantastic' genre, defined not by content but by a specific readerly experience. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov argues that the fantastic occupies a liminal space between two other genres: the 'uncanny' (events that can be explained by natural laws) and the 'marvelous' (events that are entirely supernatural). The fantastic is the moment of *hesitation* experienced by a reader who is confronted with a supernatural event and is uncertain whether to explain it rationally or supernaturally. This hesitation is the fundamental condition of the fantastic; without it, the text falls into one of the other two categories. Todorov is not interested in the psychological state of a particular reader but in the structural condition of the text that produces this hesitation. This structuralist focus shifts the analytical lens from the author (Tolkien's project) to the *text's effect* on the reader. Todorov's theory provides the crucial vocabulary to analyze how Tolkien's meticulously constructed worlds can, paradoxically, generate the very uncertainty that defines the fantastic. The Balrog in the Mines of Moria in *The Lord of the Rings* serves as a prime example, where the reader hesitates: is this a demon of the ancient world (Marvelous), or a mythological figure that can be understood within the world's internal logic (fantastic hesitation)?

3.4 The Dialectic: Cauldron and Agency

An intriguing point of tension emerges when we consider the relationship between Tolkien's 'Cauldron of Stories' and Todorov's emphasis on authorial agency. In *On Fairy-stories*, Tolkien posits the 'Cauldron' as a timeless storehouse of narrative elements, where stories are cooked and re-cooked. Authors dip into this cauldron to find ingredients (themes, archetypes, plots). Todorov, however, emphasizes that the author's *agency* is paramount in creating the specific effect of hesitation. An author must *choose* to deploy ambiguity. At first glance, these ideas seem contradictory: Tolkien suggests stories are pre-existing, while Todorov sees the author as a strategic manipulator of structure. However, this paper argues that these are complementary. The Cauldron provides the material (the familiar mythologies and archetypes), and the author's agency (in Tolkien's case, through meticulous linguistic and narrative choices) uses that material to create the uncertainty (the unfamiliar). The act of sub-creation, of building a coherent Secondary World, provides the very foundation upon which hesitation can be constructed. Without a coherent world, there is no 'familiar' to be questioned; without authorial agency, there is no 'hesitation.' This dialectic creates a richer, more human understanding of the creative act as both a discovery and an invention.

3.5 Integrating the Framework

The theoretical framework for this analysis, therefore, is not a choice between Tolkien and Todorov, but an integration of both. Tolkien's concept of sub-creation provides the model for understanding the *construction* of the fictional world. It tells us how the world is built (through language, recovery, and internal consistency). Todorov's concept of the fantastic provides the model for understanding the *experience* of that world. It tells us what the reader feels (hesitation, uncertainty) and how that feeling is structurally produced. By synthesizing these two approaches, we can analyze not just *what* Tolkien created, but *how* that creation functions on the human mind. This synthesis allows for a reading of *Leaf by Niggle* that sees Niggle's creative process as an act of sub-creation (Tolkien) that, in its incompleteness and the questions it raises about reality, inevitably generates a moment of hesitation (Todorov). This human-centric approach bridges the divide between authorial intent and readerly experience, providing a more complete picture of the literary transaction.

4. Discussion:

4.1 The Architect's Quill and the Artist's Brush: Language in Tolkien's Sub-creation

Tolkien's concept of 'sub-creation' transcends the construction of mere landscapes; it is a transformative act intimately tied to language. Unlike an architect merely sketching a building, Tolkien wields language as a tool not only to delineate the contours of his world but to breathe life into it, imbuing it with internal logic, history, and emotional depth. This meticulous

attention to language as a cornerstone of world-building is strikingly evident in his novella, *Leaf by Niggle*.

In *Leaf by Niggle*, Tolkien uses language as a conduit for sub-creation, transforming it from a descriptive tool into a medium for shaping the very essence of his world. Niggle, the protagonist, mirrors Tolkien's own belief in language's transformative power. As a painter struggling to complete his magnum opus—a majestic tree and its landscape—Niggle unwittingly embodies this concept. He meticulously crafts the details of his ever-evolving painting, constantly refining and enriching it. He gives mountains specific names and histories, imbuing them with a sense of individuality and depth that transcends mere geographical features. This focus on language transcends mere description; it becomes an act of creation, a meticulous sculpting of the very fabric of reality on his canvas. According to Helms (1974), Tolkien worried about completing his own artistic creation before his death, so he crafted this allegorical story to assure himself that genuine artistic creations are everlasting.

Furthermore, the novella itself serves as a testament to Tolkien's belief in the 'recovery' aspect of sub-creation. The story draws inspiration from existing mythological themes, echoing concepts of creation and redemption. However, Tolkien does not simply replicate these themes; he recovers their inherent truths through invention, transforming them into a unique narrative. According to Ateş (2015), imagery and fantasy dominate the visual level of the story, but recovery reaches readers on a deeper level. The use of language becomes the key to this transformation, allowing Tolkien to reimagine and imbue these borrowed elements with fresh meaning. This act of recovery and invention through language exemplifies the transformative power of sub-creation, fostering a profound connection between the author, the world, and the reader.

4.2 Unveiling the Labyrinthine Hesitation: Todorov's Fantastic and the Reader

In stark contrast to Tolkien's meticulously constructed worlds, Todorov focuses on the liminal space of the reader's experience. His central concept is 'hesitation,' a state of unsettling uncertainty arising when the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar become blurred. For Todorov, this is not a fleeting moment but a prolonged state of cognitive dissonance that forms the foundation of the fantastic genre.

Todorov dissects the genre into three categories: The Uncanny (the unsettlingly familiar), The Marvelous (the accepted supernatural), and The Fantastic proper, which lies at the heart of his exploration. In the Fantastic proper, the reader is thrust into a narrative where fantastical elements are introduced, yet their nature remains ambiguous, defying explanation by the known laws of reality. This prolonged hesitation forces the reader to reconcile the familiar with the unfamiliar, challenging their worldview and questioning their perception of reality. As Todorov asserts, "the reader's hesitation is therefore the first condition of the fantastic" (31).

A compelling illustration of this hesitation can be found within Tolkien's *Leaf by Niggle*. As Niggle embarks on his painting, a sense of uncertainty arises: is the tree he paints merely artistic, or does it hold a deeper meaning? Is the world he creates solely a figment of his imagination, or does it hint at a larger reality? These questions resonate with the hesitation central to Todorov's genre. While Tolkien ultimately provides resolution, the narrative journey evokes uncertainty, inviting the reader to contemplate the nature of reality and the power of artistic creation. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the encounter with the Balrog generates hesitation; the reader is suspended between familiarity with real-world mythologies and the unfamiliarity of Middle-earth's specific cosmology. This tension is fused with Tolkien's sub-creation to produce profound emotional depth (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*).

By examining these contrasting approaches, we gain a richer understanding of world-building. Tolkien focuses on crafting intricate worlds that provide order and familiarity, while Todorov delves into uncertainty, inviting readers to navigate the fantastic and confront unsettling questions about reality. This exploration enriches our understanding of the genre and compels us to critically engage with the world around us.

4.3 Unveiling the Creative Furnace: The Cauldron of Stories and Authorial Agency

The tension between Tolkien's 'Cauldron of Stories' and Todorov's emphasis on authorial agency adds further complexity. Tolkien suggests stories pre-exist in a timeless realm, awaiting discovery and reshaping by authors. Authors draw inspiration from this wellspring of archetypes, breathing new life into them. Tolkien states, "the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits" (*Tolkien on Fairy-stories*). In contrast, Todorov emphasizes the author's deliberate orchestration of hesitation: "The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions... the reader's hesitation" (31).

This tension is dramatized in *Leaf by Niggle*, where Niggle draws inspiration from the cauldron yet shapes it through his own agency, generating hesitation about the ontological status of his artwork. By drawing upon pre-existing narratives, authors create familiarity within the fantastical world. However, by simultaneously subverting these expectations through their unique voice, they introduce the unfamiliar, creating the very hesitation that defines the fantastic. The cauldron serves as a springboard for authorial agency, providing a foundation upon which authors can build worlds that resonate with the familiar and challenge our perception of reality. This interplay between inherited tradition and creative manipulation is central to the fantastic effect (Svoboda).

Ultimately, examining these perspectives allows us to appreciate the multifaceted nature of world-building. The dialogue between pre-existing narratives and authorial agency highlights the complex interplay of inspiration and invention. This understanding allows us to appreciate fictional worlds not as static spaces, but as vibrant tapestries woven through the

collaborative efforts of generations of storytellers, each adding their unique thread to the ever-evolving cauldron of stories.

5. Conclusion

This research embarked on a comparative analysis of two seminal yet divergent theories concerning the creation and experience of fictional worlds. The study was framed around J.R.R. Tolkien's concept of 'sub-creation,' a philological and theological model of world-building rooted in recovery and linguistic invention, and Tzvetan Todorov's structuralist theory of the 'fantastic,' which centers on the reader's experience of 'hesitation' in the face of the supernatural. By juxtaposing these two frameworks, the analysis aimed to move beyond a simple comparison of their differences. Instead, it sought to demonstrate a productive dialectic: that Tolkien's meticulously constructed Secondary Worlds provide the necessary internal coherence for Todorov's hesitation to function. The primary text for this analysis was Tolkien's novella *Leaf by Niggle*, contextualized with examples from his larger legendarium, including *The Lord of the Rings*. The overarching goal was to bridge the gap in existing scholarship between author-centric studies of craft and reader-centric studies of effect, offering a more integrated and human-centered understanding of literary immersion.

The findings of this study are threefold. First, the analysis confirmed that Tolkien's sub-creation is a deliberate act of 'recovery' and 'invention.' Through a close reading of *Leaf by Niggle*, it became evident that Tolkien uses language not just as a descriptive tool, but as the very substance of creation. Niggle's artistic process mirrors this, as he meticulously imbues his painting with detail and personal history, grounding his fantastical landscape in a sense of 'Secondary Belief.' Second, the application of Todorov's framework revealed that moments of profound hesitation are present even within Tolkien's seemingly familiar world. Niggle's struggle with his painting, and the ontological questions it raises about the relationship between art and reality, generate a Todorovian uncertainty. This uncertainty is a direct result of the very coherence of the Secondary World; the more believable the world, the more unsettling its ambiguities become. Third, the study identified a dynamic interplay between Tolkien's 'Cauldron of Stories' and Todorov's emphasis on authorial agency. The Cauldron provides the familiar archetypes, while the author's creative choices in sub-creating these elements generate the unfamiliar, thereby producing the hesitation. This finding challenges the view that these theories are contradictory, instead revealing them as complementary components of the creative and receptive process.

The significance of these findings is substantial for the study of literature and human cognition. By demonstrating that Tolkien's world-building (sub-creation) and Todorov's reader-response theory (hesitation) are not at odds but are interdependent, this study provides a new, integrated model for analyzing speculative fiction. It argues that the most profound literary experiences occur when the author's crafted world is both coherent and ambiguous, a space

where the reader is both at home and perpetually questioning. This synthesis offers a more nuanced understanding of the 'human' element in reading: it acknowledges the reader not as a passive recipient of a constructed world, but as an active participant in constructing meaning, a process that is as much cognitive and emotional as it is structural. Furthermore, this research encourages an interdisciplinary dialogue between literary theory, philosophy, and cognitive science. Tolkien's theory of sub-creation lends itself to philosophical inquiry into creativity, myth-making, and the human need for transcendence. Todorov's focus on hesitation aligns with cognitive approaches to reader response and the psychology of perception. The intersection of these perspectives suggests that speculative fiction is more than mere entertainment; it is a cognitive and cultural practice that engages the human mind in profound acts of meaning-making. It challenges us to understand how fictional narratives shape and reflect our understanding of self, otherness, and the nature of reality itself. By bridging these intellectual traditions, this study ultimately affirms the enduring power of speculative fiction to not only transport but also to transform the human spirit.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is derived from a master's thesis titled "A Todorovian Reading of the Fantastic in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Mythopoeia*, *Leaf by Niggle*, and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*," which was defended under the supervision of the corresponding author in the field of English Language and Literature at Arak University.

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