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Is Storytelling Dead?: Finding Walter Benjamin's "Story" in the Modern Fantasy Genre

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Salem State University

The Graduate School

Department of English

Is Storytelling Dead?:

Finding Walter Benjamin's "Story" in the Modern Fantasy Genre

A Thesis in English by

Jeanne Clifton

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I. Introduction

The Odyssey, *Beowulf*, and the Arthurian legends are all epics from long ago that still strike a chord with people today. With numerous retellings as books, movies, and television shows, these stories clearly still touch the modern audience, despite the changes in society over the last millennia. What is it about these types of works that still draws an audience? While many theories have been proposed, this paper will argue that there are specific elements common to these works which give them their universal appeal. Specifically, the elements identified by literary critic Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay, "The Storyteller." In it, Benjamin identifies the quintessential elements of a style of writing he terms the story, which is contrasted to the modern novel of his time. While Benjamin believed that this form of narrative was dying out, this paper will prove that this narrative is still in existence today, merely under a new name: the fantasy genre.

In his essay "The Storyteller," Benjamin examines the ways in which people view and absorb narratives. Benjamin believed that the way people were experiencing stories was fundamentally changing, and for the worse. Benjamin stated that this superior form of the narrative, the story, seen in classical works such as epics and folk tales, was being replaced by the modern novel despite the fact that the novel failed to engage the reader the same way a true story can. Through this close reading of Benjamin's essay, we see that the primary identifiers of a story are the emphasis on universal human experience over an individual's psychological presence within a piece, and an element of usefulness; a moral advice, or a greater meaning in the piece which implies some aspect of universality or universally applicable wisdom. Benjamin believed these elements were in a decline, and understandably so. In the early 1900's the novel has been clearly cemented as the popular form of narrative. One of Benjamin's contemporaries, Siegfried Kracauer even stated that "the kind of thinking that Benjamin embodies today

has fallen into oblivion" (Kracauer 264). However, while this way of sharing stories was in fact dying out in the mainstream culture of Benjamin's time, it has since experienced a revival within the new type of narrative, the modern fantasy genre, a genre that was only barely coming into existence at the time of Benjamin's death.

While fantasy as a specific genre is a relatively modern concept, it grows out of the types of narratives that Benjamin considered stories: folk or fairy tales and epics. Writers of modern fantasy often credit these older stories as the inspiration for their works, and the similarities in tone and style between classical stories and modern popular fantasy are very clear. Not all works of modern fantasy exclusively follow the narrative structure of the older works, but many of the most popular books and well-known examples in the genre incorporate the essential components ascribed to Benjamin's storyteller.

This is seen clearly in some of the most well-known books in the genre. New York Times bestsellers like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*, and Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World* all have strong elements of the story present within them. The popularity of these works is important in that it proves that the modern storytelling in the fantasy genre is not a small throwback to an earlier time, but an active medium being used by today's storytellers. Benjamin referred to the novel catching hold in the middle class as the measuring point of its flowering, as such this paper will likewise judge the hold of the story on the modern middle class (not academia) as the benchmark for measuring the current role of the story and the storyteller within our modern culture.

Through a careful examination of Benjamin's argument, the fantasy genre, and modern examples of popular fantasy, this paper will clearly prove that Benjamin's storyteller is firmly alive and

thriving within the modern fantasy genre.

II. Walter Benjamin and his Philosophy of "The Storyteller"

In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin stated that "the art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (87). However, is this true? Tastes certainly have changed and printing has made solitary appreciation of stories more convenient than group storytelling, but there is more to Benjamin's distinction between story and novel than just the format in which the story is received.

What did Benjamin believe constitutes a "story" versus a novel? In the easiest sense, format. "What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book" (87). Benjamin believed that there was an essential difference between the process of reading a book and the process of listening to a story. However, this is almost a minor detail in his larger theory. The process of how a person listened or engaged with the text affects the type of entertainment which they will be drawn to, but even when both are read, Benjamin believed there is a distinct difference in how we interact with novels versus stories. "A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of the novel however, is isolated, more so than any other reader" (100). Benjamin wrote that there is an inherent difference in the way a person reads a novel versus a story, even when both are read alone, in that the reader treats the novel more jealously and devours it.

Benjamin believed that a reader seeks to discover a moral a "meaning of life" as it were, within the novel but can only do so through either the death of a character within it, or the symbolic "death" of the character when the book is finished. This is because creating or telling an actual meaning of life is not the purpose of the novel the novel can show merely a search for meaning, and one which is based not on a universal truth but an expression of the confusion about his purpose that the reader faces in his

daily life (99). 'What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of wanning his shivering life with a death he reads about" (101). This would seem to be a very dismissive and pessimistic view of the novel and readers of the novel, but it is based on the idea that humans seek a moral, lesson, or definitive meaning in the things with which we interact. With the loss of this element in popular entertainment, readers seek to create one through creating meaning of their own from the novel, even if one is not intended.

This concept is also seen in the book *The Theory of the Novel* by George Lukacs. Benjamin quotes LulGics during his section regarding time and meaning within the novel, but many of Lukacs's other ideas regarding the novel and the epic (Lukacs focuses on the epic rather than the story, but many of the themes carry over) parallel Benjamin's writings (99). In his chapter titled "The Epic and the Novel" Lukacs also works from this idea that this lack of meaning and purpose plays an integral role in the soul of the novel "The novel is the epic of an age in which the excessive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still tlllnts in terms of totality" (LulGics 56). This idea that man searches for meaning through the novel (yet not finding any universal truth within it) because of a lack of accepted meaning in his daily life seems also to be one of the ideas that drives Benjamin's belie:IS of the superiority of the story, which has this element of truth that man seeks so avidly.

Benjamin and Lukacs both seem to work from the premise that the modern novel's allure as a replacement from the story was not in fact due to a progression from a poorer-quality form of writing to a superior form, as some of their contemporaries were arguing. Rather, Benjamin and LuldcS believed that this change was due to a shift in popular ideology. In older "stories" there is a more consistent worldview; certain traits are to be valued, certain behaviors are bad, and a strong moral is

often presented that the audience can agree is valued in the reader's daily life. As the philosophy of the world shifted from a more communal society with more consistently shared religious and social values to the more individualized and less communal Industrial Revolution period, this element of universality of morals was not as applicable and fell out of favor.

This necessity of some sort of moral or meaning is one of the central differences between a novel and a story according to Benjamin. A real story must have a use or purpose, whether it is "a moral" "some practical advice" or "a proverb or a maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers" (86). It is this element of advice or a moral which connects people to the story, creating a sense of universality. Benjamin believed that a purpose is necessary, and central to our basic desire to find meaning. This is why he held fairy tales as being an essential part of the storytelling tradition. "The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it" (102). In Benjamin's theory, the story (and the fairy tale) draw people to the piece because of this element of counsel

So why then has the story fallen out of use when it is something which has such a strong attraction to us? While children are still given fairy tales to teach them to obey their parents or follow certain traditions, Benjamin believed that this shift in adults in valuing the individual over the communal caused them to lose interest in the ideological elements of stories. Benjamin blamed this on the devaluing of counsel of shared experience, because of a decrease in the communicability of experience. This caused society to value a more individual entertainment which does not require the shared experience seen in the story and experienced in earlier time periods.

In Benjamin's theory, the novel is based in the isolation of the author, while the story is dependent on the shared experiences of the storyteller and those the storyteller listened to. In

Benjamin's theory the writer of the novel is writing only from his own experience, which is a smaller world that the reader is less-inclined to be able to interact with. The basis of the novel is a specific individual which lessens the impact of the novel as it is not as accessible to all (Steiner 128). The story however is based on the universal experiences of both the storyteller and the people the storyteller listened to, which creates a more accessible story based on the wider human experience, not just the experience of one individual seen within the novel. For this idea of universal themes and shared experiences to be valued though, the reader must value the knowledge and traditions of a greater culture as being bigger and more vast than his own personal experience, something Benjamin believed that the "modern man" of his time did not desire to do. In his conclusion Benjamin states that when a storyteller tells a tale about his life he incorporates not only his own experience, but also "the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own" to give counsel for many people and situations, which provides a more universal connection between the story and the reader (108).

Many critics would argue with this idea of the novel not being based on shared experiences. The novel is certainly more individualized and focused on the psychology of the main characters compared to the more plot and theme-driven story, but does that necessarily mean that no morals or maxims can be discovered within the novel to provide this element of a lesson, and that no greater societal wisdom can be gained from them? According to Benjamin, this is an essential difference between the novel and the story. However, part of the argument by Benjamin is this idea of use, and if the moral counsel or advice is missed and not passed on, then part of the inherent value of a piece is lost. This emphasis on the psychological and individual element seems to make up much of Benjamin's argument, not only that it makes for a less engaging story, but also that the use of psychology and precise details can limit how

well the piece is absorbed. In section VIII of "The Storyteller" Benjamin describes in detail his argument that a good story is dependent on the "chaste compactness that precludes psychological analysis" (91), where the simplicity is required for the listener to appreciate and remember the story.

Why has this change in human interest to universal versus personal experience occurred? "Experience has fallen in value" according to Benjamin (84). The person who can combine the experiences of many into his stories "has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant . . . the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (83). Benjamin stated that the decline of the storyteller is not a "symptom of decay" of the modern world, but a demonstration of gradual loss of the narrative from our ways of speaking (87). There has been a change in communication, in the way we use language (Weber 118). It has been a slow loss, taking hundreds of years after the first creation of the novel to catch hold in the middle class, but the way people view language in entertainment or knowledge has changed.

In information, Benjamin claimed, there is no mystery, no reason to ponder, and it only has value in the moment it occurs, whereas the story can be interesting and relevant a millennium after its creation. Benjamin wrote that a story "does not aim to convey the essence of a thing, like information or a report" but goes deeper (91). This shift from an interest in stories to informative texts is not only due to an ideological shift in the value given to human experience, but also due to a shift in how people listen.

According to Benjamin, in pre-industrial times there were handcrafts done while people listened to stories, which changed the element of engagement by the listener (Leslie 5). Benjamin claims that the weaving and spinning done while listening to stories created a different sort of listener who was more interested in broad themes and experiences than in precise or psychological details (91). If a person is

engaged in a handcraft (whittling, spinning, anything requiring slight focus) their level of engagement with the piece will be different. Specific details become less important (as they might be missed by the person crafting) and the focus must therefore be more on larger themes and concepts which better grab people's attention, rather than individual details which will not.

Bejamin believed that storytelling is a unique form of communication that was centrally tied to this idea of artisans and craftsmanship (91). The master craftsmen and traveling journeymen combined the 'fore of faraway places . . . with the lore of the past" which created the perfect nourishment for stories based on this concept of sharing experience (85). Benjamin even credits this change in people's ways of listening as the primary cause of the downfall of the story, saying that craftsmanship is the "web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled" and that its loss is what led to the death of storytelling (91).

Professor Ann Taylor of Salem State University described in a lecture on understanding the Mabinogion, a collection of oral Welsh tales, that the difference between listening to a story being told out loud and reading a modern piece to yourself is the difference between floating on a tube down a river versus paddling to a destination. While listening the listener is less inclined to focus on specifics (such as numbers of tasks the hero is sent on, or if the story has changed since the last time the listener heard it), but when reading the modern audience focuses more on these details, possibly losing sight of the theme in the search for these somewhat unimportant facts. This is very much in line with Benjamin's idea of people absorbing the story as a whole instead of processing the novel

Benjamin described the "incomparable aura" of a true storyteller as a contrast to the author of mere novels (109). When discussing Nikolai Leskov (a Russian author who wrote fables and Benjamin's example of a true storyteller) in the beginning of his essay, Benjamin stated that "viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define a storyteller stand out in him, or rather,

they become visible in hiin" (83). This is because the broad universal themes and elements of the story are not designed to be just viewed word by word, but experienced as a whole (Steiner 129). In some ways, a novel is a high-resolution photograph. It depicts a specific and individual scene in extreme clarity and detail. A story is a painting by Monet, where the beauty lies not in the individual flecks nor in close observation, but in the overall impression. While a photograph of a table represents a specific table, a table by Monet or Van Gogh can be any table. In some ways, it is this distance, this slightly blurred quality of the picture it paints which allows the story to be so universal where the novel is exact.

There is clearly still an allure of the true storyteller with these theme-driven epics and fairy tale stories, which are still appreciated by modern popular culture. Benjamin's criteria for what constitutes a "story" have been applied to many other texts. However, while Benjamin's essential elements are occasionally found in modern mainstream literature, they can be seen almost universally in the genre of modern fantasy literature.

III. The Modern Fantasy Genre: Its Nature and Development out of the Story

Bertjamine's elements of the story are seen in the modern fantasy genre in part because the genre was derived from the folk tales and epics which Bertjamine considered stories. But is this sufficient to prove that Bertjamine's storyteller is still at work today in that genre? To answer this question we will need a more thorough analysis of fantasy; what it is, where it came from and how it works today. This section will analyze the history of the genre, focusing on the changes which were occurring around Bertjamine's lifetime and after his death. This analysis will provide an insight into the key elements which make a narrative "fantasy" and how this term has shifted over the years. While the genre is not defined exclusively by Bertjamine's elements of morals and purpose, it still primarily involves a type of narrative that evokes the older works which Bertjamine described as "stories." As such, the prevalence of these books in the fantasy genre prove that Bertjamine's storyteller has not fallen away, as Bertjamine feared, and is in fact still an active presence in modern society within this genre.

One way to examine the connection between Bertjamine's folktales, fairy tales, and epics and modern fantasy would be to look at how people define the genre. If it specifically evokes these older forms of narrative or relies on the inclusion of Bertjamine-esque elements this would make a strong case that the Bertjamine story plays a major role in the fantasy genre. Unfortunately, the modern fantasy genre seems to defy definition in some ways. *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* states that "fantasy is not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses . . . there are shared walls, and a certain consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal decor can differ wildly, and the lives lived in these terraced houses are discrete yet overheard" (James and Mendlesohn 1). While many critics have tried to create a clear and systematic definition for what separates fantasy from the rest of literature, no one single definition has been acknowledged as a true and complete description of the genre.

The man considered by many critics to be the father of the modern fantasy genre, J.R.R. Tolkien, states in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" that "most good fairy-stories are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches" (38). Even here though there he says only "most," not "all" Tolkien's description here refers to the idea that most fairy stories involve the activities of mortals within a magical environment. This does seem to connect with Benjamin's theories in some way. The locus of the plot is external to the main character; it is not a psychological or internal issue which must be resolved, but rather a problem external to the main character (ie., a monster to defeat, a person who must be saved, an item which must be attained) which must be solved. However, this alone is not sufficient to prove a connection to Benjamin, nor is this definition of fairy-tales (which Tolkien does not separate from modern fantasy) entirely complete or accepted by academics.

Looking at the etymology of the word "fantasy" gives a surprising connection to Benjamin.

Fantasy is also from a Greek word, *phantasia*, meaning "representation" or "appearance." It comes to English as a technical philosophical word in Aristotle and Augustine, then in later Latin writers. Its technical use was usually epistemological or psychological to distinguish between objects as they exist in the world and their representations in our minds or understanding. (Dickerson and O'Hara 50)

This early use of "fantasy" to mean a platonic ideal or representation of a concept actually connects strongly with Benjamin's theory that what distinguishes the storyteller are the "great, simple outlines" and use of broad universal "truths" (Benjamin 83, 86). The use of these platonic ideals and archetypes is a common trait of both the folk tale and epic as well as modern fantasy: the simple farmer, the evil witch, and such. Good fantasy holds up a mirror to ourselves through its universality. A good fairy-story according to Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" has "the very taste of primary truth" (89). This concept

that good fantasy, ancient or modern, should show us a truth about ourselves or the world around us is the same element which Benjamin highlights as essential to the story: a 'moral' a 'proverb,' some element of "the epic side of truth, wisdom" (Bertjamen 86-87). While neither of these definitions necessarily proves that modern fantasy contains Benjamin's style of storytelling, they both show that there are consistent links between the modern fantasy genre and Bertjamen's stories.

So then how shall we define "fantasy"? Perhaps the most accurate definition is that given by the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*: "a group of texts that share, to a greater degree or other, a cluster of common tropes which may be objects but which may also be narrative techniques" (James and Mendlesohn 1). These tropes and techniques, such as use of archetypes, morals, and traditions, do share some connections to Benjamin and suggest the presence of the storyteller in the modern fantasy genre, but the connection is made more firmly when you examine the history and development of the fantasy genre before and after Bertjamen's time.

The history of fairy-tales is perhaps "as complex as the history of human language" according to Tolkien (47). Fantasy as a distinct genre is relatively recent in the history of literature. Prior to the 20th century, the types of stories now labeled fantasy were not so delineated. The folk tale and epic which Bertjamen wrote about were not originally a separate genre, but were simply the ways that people shared narratives. "The fantastical in the broadest sense had been a dominant characteristic of most world literature for centuries prior to the rise of the novel" (James and Mendlesohn 11). However, this style of sharing narratives began to change, beginning in the 17th century with the narrative *Don Quixote*, the book first recognized as novel

In the Enlightenment period the novel bloomed into the popular consciousness, eclipsing the fantastical elements of previous narratives and replacing them with science and psychology. "Readers

and writers in a period dominated by science and by a rationalistic world-view face problems in entertaining such concepts (as fantasy)" (Drabble). The idea of the superiority of the novel over works of the fantastic was also encouraged by the philosophy of progressivism, "that art, like technology, progresses from more primitive to more sophisticated forms" (James and Mendlesohn 10).

This was not universal as there were resurgences of earlier forms as seen by the popularity of published folk tales, such as the works of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Andrew Lang. The rise of the gothic genre is an example of this resurgence, but one that also shows the inherent judgement against these fantastical elements: the term "gothic" to the Victorians connoted barbarism and superstition (Harris 19). Additionally, while many of these works contained fantasy elements, many eschewed the style of the story in favor of the psychological focus of the novel

But while Romantic poets and their critics could undertake debates about the nature of imagination as revealed through literary art, and while Romantic narrative artists such as Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Walter Scott could begin to construct theoretical examinations of the nature of their craft . . . critics in the major English journals remained sceptical of the uses of the fantastic in works of fiction, and within a few decades the currency of the fantastic had been devalued once again (James and Mendlesohn 9)

The criticism of the period makes it clear that Benjamin's belief in the fall of the story seemed justified; the older forms of storytelling were steadily falling out of popularity and out of the popular consciousness due to the shifting philosophies of the time.

C.S. Lewis in his preface to the epic *poem Paradise Lost* described the epic as possessing "a quality . . . which moderns find difficult to understand . . . In an age when every one puts on his oldest clothes to be happy in, you must re-awake the simpler state of mind in which people put on gold and

scarlet to be happy in" (17). Lewis believed that the reason the epic did not have the hold in his time that it did in history was that, like Bertjarnin thought, people have changed in how they value experiences. Lewis believed that a loss of appreciation for that which is high or ceremonious was the cause of this change in culture:

We moderns may like dances which are hardly distinguishable from walking and poetry which sounds as if it might be uttered *ex tempore*. Our ancestors did not. They liked a dance which *was* a dance, and fine clothes which no one could mistake for working clothes, and feasts that no one could mistake for ordinary dinners, and poetry that unblushingly proclaimed itself to be poetry. (Lewis 21)

This philosophical shift had certainly occurred, and Bertjarnin's belief that the story had fallen out of favor because of this shifting view of "experience" is echoed in Lewis (Bertjarnin 83).

While the stories which Bertjarnin admired had reigned for centuries as the primary form of narrative, a distinct change took place after the creation of the novel. Beginning with *Don Quixote* in 1605, over the next three centuries the novel began to replace the epic and the folk tale as the most common form of narrative in Western culture (Drabble). This explains why Bertjarnin was so certain of the story's decline; at the time it was quite accurate to say that "storytelling began quite slowly to recede into the archaic" (Benjamin 88). However, this began to change with the rise of Tolkien and Lewis and their reintroduction of storytelling elements into a separate new genre, fantasy.

Edward James, one of the editors of the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, says of Lewis and Tolkien that they "stand together at the modern origins of fantasy, mediating the fantasies of earlier generations and both, in their own very different ways, helping to give modern fantasy its medievalist cast" (James 62). Similarly, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* calls Tolkien

"the greatest influence within the fantasy genre" (Drabble). Tolkien, and to a lesser extent, Lewis, are credited with creating the fantasy genre as it is now viewed, and as such their inspirations and philosophies have left a strong imprint on the entire genre.

Critical examinations of Tolkien's work show many connections to the themes seen in Benjamin. For example, Tolkien scholar Professor Peter Kreeft writes in his book *The Philosophy of Tolkien* that one of the most important elements seen in *The Lord of the Rings* is that the characters are often saved by advice and tradition from the world around them "Tolkien's heroes are humble and therefore look to the past, to the wisdom that they have been given. His villains and fools are proud and therefore scorn tradition and look only within themselves for their wisdom" (135). This highlights an essential element of Benjamin's theory of the story versus the novel that a true story must have a "moral" "practical advice," or "a proverb or a maxim" (Benjamin 86). *The Lord of the Rings* is considered to be the quintessential work of modern fantasy. That this theme is still a major element of the work is strong evidence that these essential elements Benjamin valued are still very much incorporated into the genre. Similarly, Kreeft writes that Tolkien believes that "no community can exist without common unity" (135). This likewise connects to one of Benjamin's essential elements, the importance of universality or truth within a true story.

Writing primarily in the 1920's and 30's, Benjamin is briefly a contemporary of Lewis and Tolkien, who both were writing in the 30's, with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* being published in 1937. However, *The Hobbit* was still a children's story, following in the pattern of fantasy being reduced to the schoolroom. It was not until Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the 50's that this new genre starts to emerge for adults, separate from retellings of older myths or children's tales.

While various books and magazines began to emerge in the early and mid-20th-century, the

genre took off on its own in the 1970s (James 74). Authors such as Terry Brooks, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Anne McCaffrey began to write what was distinctly fantasy, grown out of the works of Tolkien and Lewis, as well as drawing on the older epics. Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* is an Arthurian romance, based partially on the themes in Chretien de Troyes. Into the 80's came Terry Pratchett, followed by J.K. Rowling and Robert Jordan in the 90's, all featured on best-seller lists alongside non-fantasy novels. While Rowling's *Harry Potter* series was young adult or children's literature, they show a transition away from the exclusive hold of the novel amongst the average reader (James 76). The fantasy genre had begun to take a solid hold in popular culture, and is showing no signs of fading away again.

However, this is not to say that the entire, or even the majority of the modern fantasy genre follows exactly the narrative style of Benjamin's pre-novel story. While many works include these elements, aspects of the modern novel have seeped in. Some works, classified as fantasy, have followed the path almost entirely of the modern novel except in setting and minor plot points. For example, the well-known *Game of Thrones* series, now also a popular television show on HBO, is technically listed as fantasy. While it does contain dragons, kings, and witches, the method in which the story is told bears far more resemblance to the modern novel than to the old epics. A great deal of focus is on the psychology of the characters, rather than more broad themes or archetypes. As one critic notes, "Yes, there are fantasy elements that appear, but they are always secondary to the main story" (Hanks). Likewise, while Patrick Rothfuss' fantasy work *Name of the Wind* incorporates many of Benjamin's elements, there are clearly still aspects of the novel present, such as a greater focus on the psychology of the main characters than would be expected in Benjamin's type of story. However, there still seems to be a strong tendency in the genre to ignore this modern focus on the psychological and instead focus on

the archetypes and ideals of earlier stories, which sometimes leads to condemnations.

Critics such as Richard Jenkyns have criticized the lack of psychological depth to the characters in these modern fantasy works as being outdated and not in keeping with the style of the novel. *New York Times* reviewer Judith Shulevitz criticized what she claimed was the pedantic and outdated nature of Tolkien's literary style, writing in a review that Tolkien "formulated a high-minded belief in the importance of his mission as a literary preservationist, which turns out to be death to literature itself." These criticisms of *The Lord of the Rings* describe exactly the elements which Benjamin found essential to the story, and are representative of many of the critiques that people make regarding the genre still. Many of the critiques used against fantasy (it's simple, it's cliché, etc.) are not valid if you consider the modern fantasy narrative to be outside the frame of the novel. The epics and folk tales Benjamin defined as "stories" are the ancestors of modern fantasy and demonstrate the distinct tropes and methods of storytelling that Benjamin valued so highly in a narrative.

Benjamin's elements of the story are clearly seen in two popular fantasy books, *The Name of the Wind* and *Eye of the World*. *The Eye of the World*, first published in 1990, is the first book of a fourteen-book series named *The Wheel of Time* by author Robert Jordan. While it follows the mythic tradition of Tolkien, the ideology stems also from Eastern influences, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. This overarching philosophy serves as a background for the goings-on with the plot, but also features as a major plot element. The idea of the cyclical nature of time helps provide the feeling that the world is rich with experience and depth, a key feature of Benjamin's theories. There is also a grounding in death, such as Benjamin speaks of in connection to a story by Johann Peter Hebel where he focuses on the depth added to a story by ingraining it to the natural history of a world (Benjamin 95). Likewise, Jordan uses the wars and deaths of the several ages in his chronology to create an epic setting.

The Name of the Wind, by Patrick Rothfuss, incorporates many elements identified by Benjamin as central to a story. The format of the book is the traditional coming of age story where a boy becomes a man and a hero, and the book borrows heavily from folkloric themes, such as the presence of fœ creatures, monsters, and magical women, along with elements of the travel narrative. However, there is a strong psychological element as well. While many books within the modern fantasy genre are obviously more written as novels rather than stories (such as George R.R. Martin's popular series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, also known by the title of the first book, *A Game of Thrones*, which as mentioned previously focus on a more gritty and realistic medieval-esque world), *The Name of the Wind* is a new style which combines the thematic and mythic draw of the story with the psychological interest of the novel. While Benjamin may have decried the details of the piece, it still falls within Benjamin's theories of a story.

While it may not follow the exact forms of the works Benjamin hailed as stories, the modern fantasy genre is a haven for the types of narratives that grew out of this tradition, and still hold onto many of the key elements that Benjamin valued. "Modern fantasy literature, especially the deeper and better kind, is steeped and rooted in ancient myth, medieval heroic, and miry tale" (Dickerson and O'Hara 16). Tolkien wrote in his essay "On Fairy Stories" "Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent" (69). This "potency" and "purity" in fantasy come from the archetypes and universally applicable morals or truths that Benjamin championed in the story. While the genre may not be exclusively made up of stories, and many may include aspects of the novel in some ways, the modern fantasy genre is a place where Benjamin's storyteller has both survived and thrived in the modern world.

IV. Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*

Patrick Rothfuss' trilogy *The Kingkiller Chronicles* is relatively new to the fantasy genre, with the first book, *The Name of the Wind*, published in 2007. Even so, it has already taken the genre by storm. Many of the fantasy genre's best known authors, such as George R.R. Martin, Ursula K. Le Guin, Orson Scott Card, Anne McCaffrey, Terry Brooks, and Kevin J. Anderson have given the book highly positive reviews. While the book does have a greater focus on psychological specifics than Benjamin may have liked, the entire story is strongly connected to the same themes Benjamin found key. The entire plot revolves around the power of folk tales and legend and their usefulness within the world. Rothfuss blends elements of both the story and the novel to create something with both the universal impact Benjamin sought and some of the psychological depth he distrusted. The themes Benjamin held most dear, the valuing of usefulness and meaning in a story, are clearly seen within this text. Additionally, the structure of the text follows is based around stories the main character hears, and so the world within the text consistently proves the usefulness and truth of fairy tales and folktales and the primary plot is revealed as a story being told by a master storyteller. There are also numerous trappings of and nods to traditional European folklore, and Rothfuss repeatedly credits traditional folklore, not fantasy, with the inspiration for much of his writing. With the recognition the book has received as potentially the next great fantasy trilogy, on par with *Lord of the Rings*, it is an excellent book to show the presence of Benjamin's storyteller in the modern fantasy genre.

Perhaps the clearest proof of the connection between Benjamin's philosophy of storytelling and Rothfuss' style of writing is that the central theme in *The Name of the Wind* is that folktales consistently provide useful information to the characters about the world around them. Benjamin's entire concept of the purpose of the story (to be useful) is constantly reaffirmed within Rothfuss' work. The storytellers

are valued as keepers of advice, and children's songs and simple proverbs are shown repeatedly to be true and necessary to survival

The very first chapter begins with a description of the Inn where the story starts, and the connection between storytellers and advice is clear. "It was Felling night, and the usual crowd had gathered at the Waystone Inn. Five wasn't much of a crowd, but five was as many as the Waystone ever saw these days, times being what they were. Old Cob was filling his role as storyteller and advice dispensary. The men at the bar sipped their drinks and listened" (3). Before we have any description of the decoration, size, or location of the Inn where the story takes place, we first learn that it is a place where people gathered and listened to stories and advice. This sets the tone for the entire story ahead. The power of folklore and the importance of the storyteller are key themes which appear constantly throughout the work, and in fact create the entire premise of the book.

The book is mostly a story within a story. The keeper of the inn, seemingly simple Kote, is discovered to actually be Kvothe of legend: Kvothe the Bloodless, Kvothe the Arcane, Kvothe the Kingkiller. Throughout the book we learn that in his own lifetime stories are told of him in the same way we tell stories of Paul Bunyan or King Arthur, and that many people consider him to be a myth. A Chronicler tracks down Kvothe and asks to transcribe his story, the true story, of his life. The book then shifts between the scenes in the inn and Kvothe relating his story through flashbacks. *The Name of the Wind* is the first day of this tale, and covers Kvothe's childhood and how he came to learn the name of the wind, a magic he had thought only existed in legend. It includes the early steps in his rise as a hero, and follows a pattern any reader of fantasy has seen before. His parents die tragically, which motivates him to seek vengeance, and along the way he has adventures. This tale distinguished itself both in the beauty of the writing and in its awareness of the fact that it is a story.

This is because the main character, Kvothe, is at his heart a storyteller. "I am of the Edema Ruh. We were telling stories before Caluptena burned. Before there were books to write in. Before there was music to play. When the first fire kindled, we Ruh were there spinning stories in the circle of its flickering light" (56). This line sets the stage for the importance of storytelling to the plot, and the awareness that Kvothe has that while what he is telling is :actually true, it is also a story because of the way he tells it.

This line also bears a striking resemblance to the passage Benjamin quotes by Johann Peter Hebel BerUamin states that good storytelling must be embedded in natural history and death, and shares a quote from Hebel as an example of how a master storyteller shows the passage of time in a way that people will feel deeply, "The City of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake, and the Seven Year's War came and went . . . Napoleon captured Prussia, and the English bombarded Copenhagen, and the peasants sowed and harvested" (qtd. in BerUamin 95). This combination of the major events (Caluptena in Rothfuss and Lisbon and Napoleon and such in Hebel) alongside the lives of the simple people (the Ruh at the fire and the peasants sowing and harvesting) is what draws people to the story; both the epic and the everyday together, and the power of this type of story is reinforced throughout the book.

The importance of stories to our daily life is affirmed by the structure of the plot. It is always a story that leads the main character to move from one place to another within the book. The narrative first moves from the people and places around the Way:fu.ir Innas Kvothe tells the Chronicler about his childhood traveling with his parents and wandering performers. The next change in location is caused by Kvothe's futher, who is looking to write an epic song. He researched stories about a creature most often referenced in songs sung by children as a game.

When the hearthfire turns to blue,

What to do? What to do?

Rlll outside. Rlll and Hide.

When his eyes are black as crow?

Where to go? Where to go?

Near and far. Here they are.

See a man without a face?

Move like ghosts from place to place.

What's their plan? What's their plan?

Chandrian. Chandrian. (28)

As Kvothe's father researches this, he finds more and more evidence to support that the Chandrian did in fact exist. He finds information in fairy stories and legends, but believes there is truth behind them. Suddenly, Kvothe's entire family and troupe are killed while Kvothe is wandering the woods. When he returns, he finds men around his fire, surrounded by the bodies. One whose eyes are pure black tells him that "Someone's parents have been singing entirely the wrong sorts of songs" (127). The enemies are driven off by an unknown force and without being named, but Kvothe knew the signs from stories and rhymes of children; iron near the camp had turned to rust in a hour, the flames nearby burned blue, and the man's eyes were black, as in the song. Here again, the character finds useful knowledge for his life and survival from the myths and folktales he grew up with. His family was killed by :fairytales monsters just for looking into the legends around them, leaving Kvothe alone.

Kvothe then becomes a street urchin in a city, struggling to survive. After several years, he hears tell of a man, Skarpi who tells stories in a bar every week. Eager for this connection to his past, Kvothe seeks the storyteller out. After listening to Skarpi speak about men connected to the Chandrian, Kvothe asks the man if the story was true. "All stories are true," Skarpi said. "But this one really happened, if that's what you mean" (203). This connects to Benjamin's idea that a true story may not be factual but must still contain "the epic side of truth, wisdom" (Benjamin 87). For Rothfuss as well as Benjamin, a story's "truth" is not always dependent on facts, but rather the essence of the advice or counsel the story gives. For Kvothe, hearing this story, told by a master storyteller, reawakens his interest in learning who killed his parents, and sets him off to seek a place in the University where he can try to discover more about the Chandrian.

Much of the rest of the first book takes place at the University, where Kvothe earns admittance and meets the characters expected in the story of a young man growing up; a bullying enemy, several friends, and of course a love interest. Once again though, the major climax of the book occurs when Kvothe hears of a wedding in a nearby town where every person was killed after a vase was uncovered which told a story in pictures. Kvothe recognizes the signs of the Chandrian from the children's poem, and sets off to discover what happened. Rothfuss clearly agrees with Benjamin regarding the power of a well-told story, in that it has a "wealth" and universal appeal that makes the reader or listener respond to it with deep emotions. Kvothe's life and the lives of the people around him are constantly shaped by the stories they listen to, and the truth and value of stories is seen over and over again.

Throughout the book, the power and usefulness of stories is constantly reaffirmed, both in the format as discussed above and through the actions and ideas of the characters. When Kvothe finds out a man at university can control fire like the heroes of legend, he is shocked. "But those are just stories,"

I protested. He gave me an amused look. 'Where do you think stories come from, E'lir Kvothe? Every tale has deep roots somewhere in the world'" (498). This idea that there is always truth in some form to stories, no matter how distant from our reality they may seem, strongly parallels Bettjamin's belief that stories always contain some form of wisdom within them. The characters in the book who heed the wisdom found in folklore and stories find protection and aid, whereas those who ignore it are always shown to be wrong.

Both the storyteller and traditions are clearly valued by the various characters for their advice on how to live. When demons seem to be attacking the town, everyone knows from lore that iron harms demons and begin carrying it with them (10). When Kvothe (still in hiding as Kote at this point) kills one in front of the Chronicler he states they will need several types of wood in the fire to burn them before they bury them. 'Chronicler gave a laugh, slightly hysterical. 'Just like the children's song: *Let me tell you what to do/ Dig a pit that 's ten by two! ash and elm and rowan too-*' 'Yes indeed' the bundled man [Kvothe] said dryly. 'You'd be surprised at the sorts of things hidden away in children's songs'" (39).

This aspect of usefulness is confirmed in that even when the factual basis of a story is known to be false, inevitably the advice is still true and valuable. At one point Kvothe had earned answers from a powerful man, Elodin. Kvothe wants to ask what the peculiar man is doing, but stories remind him of why he should not. 'But I kept the tip of my tongue firmly between my teeth. I didn't ask 'Where are we going?' or 'What are you looking at?' I knew a hundred stories about young boys who squandered questions or wishes by chatting them away," (336). Kvothe's memories of folkloric wisdom, both those based in fact and those which simply offered advice for life, straighten his path amongst the various perils he encounters. This reinforces both to us, the reader, of the wisdom of these tales, and to Kvothe

that these stories have power and purpose.

When the main character strays from tradition and the wisdom of children's rhymes, it inevitably leads him astray. Early on in the text we hear a proverb about the value of tinkers' advice, "a tinker's advice pays kindness twice" (5). At one point in Kvothe's tale, he meets a tinker on the road. They trade a few items and the tinker offers Kvothe a bottle of wine as part of a deal Kvothe refuses, as he does not see its usefulness. Later on, when a bottle of wine would have been exactly what Kvothe could have used, he mentions this to his companion, who then rebukes him "Well that's what you get for not listening to a tinker on the road," she chided, her eyes drowsy. 'Clever boy like you has heard enough stories to know better'" (587). Throughout the book, the importance of the wisdom found in stories is seen time and time again, mirroring Benjamin's literary philosophy on the value of stories

Perhaps the best proof of this is that the character is first and foremost defined as a master storyteller and lover of stories. As quoted previously, Kvothe's opening lines of his personal tale begin with the history of his people as storytellers. It is also seen frequently through the text, as Kvothe gains renown for his abilities as a bard.

While at University Kvothe enters a performance competition, desperate for money. He sings the song of Sir Savien and Alaine, a renowned epic of that world and it touches everyone, including Kvothe. While on stage a string breaks, making his hand bleed and bringing back memories of how he played a broken lute as a child in the days after his parents death. "I buried my face in my hands and wept. Not for a broken lute string and the chance of failure. Not for blood shed and a wounded hand. I did not even cry for the boy who had learned to play a lute with six strings in the forest years ago. I cried for Sir Savien and Alaine, for love lost and found and lost again, at cruel fate and man's folly" (404). Members of the audience are brokenhearted from the tale. One of Kvothe's friends is left

speechless, and another found red-eyed from tears. Kvothe wins his prize and is acknowledged as a superb bard. As a storyteller, Kvothe recognizes the power in both the narrative itself and the way it is performed, an appreciation of the oral tradition that Benjamin claimed distinguished the style of the novel from that of a story, as mentioned previously (Benjamin 87).

Beyond the Benjamin-like focus within the text on the usefulness of stories, there are many aspects of traditional European folk tales and heroic epics which create the world in which the book is set. Here is where *The Name of the Wind* is an example of the types of elements and trappings seen in the majority of traditionally-styled works in the modern fantasy genre. Unlike Robert Jordan's *Eye of the World*, Rothfuss' world is primarily founded in European and classical mythology, and many of the folklore and traditions carry through. In an interview Rothfuss describes his background with folklore and its effects on his writing.

A long time ago, maybe 12 years or so, I read about every folktale I could get my hands on. I wasn't thinking, "This will help me develop my fantasy novel a decade from now"; I just liked them. I was curious about their shapes, their common threads, and what they revealed about the cultures they came from. It was only afterwards that a lot of those elements ended up in the book. (Allen)

The world of *The Name of the Wind* is filled with elements from the folklore and mythology of our own, growing out of the story tradition.

For example, early on in the book a local man near the inn is attacked by a mysterious creature. The townsfolk quickly bought iron to carry around with them just to be safe, as they all knew demons feared cold iron, despite the fact that the idea of demons showing up in your own life is "ridiculous" (10). Iron was also key in European superstitions as something which would repel demons, ghosts, f

and such from the bearer. This is how a horseshoe came to be a symbol of good luck, as it was a piece of iron relatively easy to acquire and place above your door to prevent evils from entering. By building on this shared cultural background, Rothfuss connects the stories of our world to the stories of his.

As already noted, another element seen often in folklore is tinkers, the "sweet, amusing vagrants" found in English tales especially (Arnold 213). Rothfuss makes several mentions of tinkers and the traditions around them within his book, but also discusses their importance in traditional folldore in a section of his website. "There are many theories as to why the Tinker plays such a pivotal role in folldore . . . The truth of the matter should be siniple for any clear thinking individual: Tinkers are a sign of civilization. Where the roads are safe, Tinkers travel freely, bringing welcome news" (Rothfuss, "The Tinker"). This connects strongly to Berzjarnin's belie:fS that travel is one of the key elements to traditional storytelling. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," is a traditional German proverb quoted in Berzjarnin (84). ■ as Berzjarnin states, storytelling grows partially out of travel, then it makes sense that tinkers, who thrive on travel and safe passage, often feature in these same stories.

The power of words is a theme seen extensively in both folklore and *The Name of the Wind*. The title itself shows the importance in the book: the first book is the story of how Kvothe learned the true name of the Wind. Much like in the story of Rumpelstiltskin, knowing the name of the wind gives Kvothe power over it. It is a magic that within the world seemed to exist more in stories than in reality, until Kvothe learned the line between stories and reality was not so clear. "He called the wind and the wind came. It was magic. Real magic. The sort of magic I'd heard about in stories of Tamborlin the Great. The sort of magic I hadn't believed in since I was six. Now I didn't know what to believe" (70). It is to learn the name of the wind that motivates Kvothe to attend the University Arcanum There he meets the master of such magics, Elodin, and eventually calls the wind like the heroes of his childhood

stories.

The connections to traditional European folklore are sprinkled throughout *The Name of the Wind* and help build a feeling of shared experience between the characters of our world and the characters in the text. This is important as there is a distinct difference between the framing of the older stories and the modern fantasy genre. In folk tales and legends, the story is always set in the same world as the reader. It may be a far off land and may have talking animals or magic constantly appearing, but it is still theoretically the same world as the listener. In contrast, in modern fantasy there is rarely the conceit that these adventures took place in the same world as the reader (though certain genres where this is the norm, such as urban arcana, are gaining in popularity). Through incorporating these folkloric elements into the narrative, Rothfuss allows the reader to build upon this shared experience (which Ber:Yamin maintains is at the crux of the value of the story) between the characters and him- or herself to help the reader better engage with the protagonist.

As mentioned previously, not all works labeled fantasy use the Benjamin elements of storytelling. However, critics have noted the difference between Rothfuss and such writers, and have placed Rothfuss still with the traditionalists. Critic Farren Miller states "writers like George RR Martin and Gene Wolfe are old hands at revitalizing old tropes, giving fantasy the depth and humanity of the great literary novels" (an astute observation of the difference in writing styles between traditional fantasy and the more novel-esque works of Martin), but states that Rothfuss "sets out to retell what should be the most familiar tale of all," the rise of a hero, and yet still "make(s) it fresh again"(Miller). This is an excellent description of the difference between fantasy novelists like Martin, for whom the fantastic elements are a backdrop, not a way of writing, with the more traditional fantasy authors like Tolkien or Jordan, who use these same "tropes" that come from the old folk tales and epics but imagined in

different ways. While Rothfuss does often focus on the :flaws, weaknesses, and psychological elements of his characters as we would find in a novel it is all shaped and fanned within the style and feel of the story.

In an interview by Peter Hodges, Patrick Rothfuss discuss this element of storytelling as distinct from the novel in his works:

Hodges: I have read many books in which the characters and/or the settings are interesting, but the story feels :flat. There's something intangible and magical in works of fiction such as yours. Can you put your finger on it?

Rothfuss: Hmm. When you put it that way, my guess is that what you're enjoying is either the storytelling or the language. The truth is, I'm not necessarily a great novelist. . . I'm good at telling stories. Sometimes you can make a story novel shaped, and that's what I've done with this first book. Story is different than plot. Story is older and wilder. It appeals to some of us in a much more intangible way. (Hodges)

Rothfuss is an avid reader of fantasy and captures the quintessential elements of good storytelling that Tolkien held in such high esteem, but within the format of the modern novel. This is why, though his characters sometimes act unheroically or irrationally (as we would expect in a novel not a story), the larger character arcs and plot are clearly based in the background of the story.

Rothfuss is a lover of folktale, and it shines through in his writing. Throughout *The Name of the Wind* these elements of folk tales and fantasy are clearly seen, from the format of the story to the archetypal characters to the importance of lore to the focus on the power of words. Rothfuss creates a world which consistently asserts the value of Benjamin's theories about the importance of the story.

In some ways *The Name of the Wind* is both a story and an ode to proper storytelling. The main character, while telling his tale, often compares what is happening with how it would have worked in the storybooks. For example, when describing how he first earned the name "Kvothe the Bloodless," his friend asks why he delayed seeking vengeance.

'Think of all the stories you've heard Bast. You have a young boy, the hero. His parents are killed. He sets out for vengeance. What happens next?'

Bast hesitated, his expression puzzled. Chronicler answered the question instead. 'He finds help. A clever talking squirrel. An old drunken swordsman. A mad hennit in the woods. That sort of thing.'

Kvothe nodded. 'Exactly! He finds the mad hennit in the woods, proves himself worthy, and learns the names of all things, just like Tamborlin the Great. Then, with these powerful magics at his beck and call, what does he do?'

Chronicler shrugged. 'He finds the villains and kills them' (333)

Kvothe then continues to explain how different his life was from this simplified story: how he had made new enemies he must still deal with, how he still did not have the powers he sought, and how his parents' deaths did not consume his every moment. Yet even Kvothe admits that the larger arc of his story eventually follows this path. "'But for all that, we still see that even the most fanciful stories hold a shred of truth, because I did find something very near to the mad hennit in the woods.' Kvothe smiled. 'And I *was* determined to learn the name of the wind'" (333).

Likewise, when Kvothe first describes Denna, the primary love interest, this difference between the novel and story are seen. Kvothe describes her as perfection.

'There was something intangible about her. Something compelling, like heat from a

:fire. She had grace, a spark -"

"She had a crooked nose Reshi,¹" Bast said, interrupting his master's reverie.

Kvothe looked at him, a line of irritation creasing his forehead. "What?"

Bast held his hands up defensively. "It's just something I noticed, Reshi. All the women in your story are beautiful. I can't gainsay you as a whole, as I've never seen any of them. But this one I did see. Her nose was a little crooked. And if we're being honest here, her face was a little narrow for my taste. She wasn't a perfect beauty by any means" . . .

Kvothe stared at his student for a long moment, his expression solemn. "We are more than the parts that form us." (418)

Here again we see the contrast between the fact as we would find it in the novel (that Denna had several flaws in her appearance) versus what is important to the story (that Denna was perfect to Kvothe).

Benjamin states that straight information (such as Denna's exact appearance) lacks persistent value, while the broader strokes of the story concentrates the strength of the narrative (Benjamin 90).

Benjamin's theory is supported by Kvothe, who maintains that all other description is pointless. He asks the chronicler to write "she was beautiful, through to her bones, she was beautiful, despite any flaw or fault" (420). Here we clearly see that the specificity of the novel through present in some form, is shown within the book to be passed over in favor of the story, as only the storyfied version will truly describe who Denna was to Kvothe. Where the novel succeeds at showing the "parts" that make up a character, it is a well written story that can show us who they truly are, in a way we can immediately empathize with.

¹ "Reshi" is the nickname that Kvothe's friend Bast has for Kvothe.

Yet, inevitably his tale progresses as a proper fairy tale must, and in the end it always ends up a true story. Kvothe sums it up well. "Oh it's just the same thing you've heard a hundred times before" (655). He kills a dragon, saves a village, and returns for more adventures. As this is not purely a story, the dragon is not mythical in nature, but rather a lizard called a draccus. However, as it is giant and breathes fire, and the purpose the creature serves is the same as anything mythical beast the hero must stop, the storyteller Kvothe feels inclined to call it a dragon (592). It is this incorporation of both the psychological specificity and feeling of realism alongside the universal appeal of these tropes and methods which creates this work. The author states in an interview that "while telling his story, Kvothe makes it clear that he's not the storybook hero legends make him out to be. But at the same time, the reader sees that he's a hero nonetheless" (Thompson). This dichotomy is a key element to the themes of the narrative that Rothfuss is creating. In many ways *The Name of the Wind* is an excellent example of a modern fantasy novel. It is at the same time both clearly realistic in its portrayal of pain and human weakness as a novel while still bringing in these classic elements of storytelling which describe good fantasy.

While Kvothe may be undergoing an experience we in this world will never live ourselves (studying magic to control the elements), the broad strokes which Rothfuss uses to paint the story and which Benjamin credits as a mark of the true storyteller, show experiences that anyone can empathize with: falling in love, dealing with both petty bullies and powerful enemies, the importance of good friends.

In one of the final scenes of the first book, after accidentally calling the name of the wind, Kvothe asks what exactly "names" mean. Elodin describes the purpose of mundane names, such as Elodin and Kvothe, the color blue, and such as simply words.

Words are pale shadows of forgotten names. As names have power, words have power. Words can light fires in the minds of men. Words can wring tears from the hardest hearts. There are seven words that will make a person love you. There are ten words that will break a strong man's will. But a word is nothing but a painting of fire. A name is the fire itself (672-673)

In some ways, the novel is like words. It gives specifics relating to the material, actual world. It thrives on information and accuracy. A story is a name. It may not give the detail in description of what something is, but it gives the soul or essence of it. Novels certainly have power to make the reader feel and care, but in a different, slightly more detached manner than the raw and simplified story.

What then is *The Name of the Wind*? Is it story or novel? In the same scene as above, Kvothe asks what exactly happened when he called on the name of the wind. "But what does that mean? And what do you mean by *name*? Is it just a name like 'Kvothe' or 'Elodin'? Or is it more like 'Tamborlin knew the name of many things?'" (670). Elodin simply replies "like both." In the same way, Rothfuss' work is in some ways both a story and a novel. It contains the trappings, style, and plot of the story, but it is alongside the flaws and psychological specificity that Benjamin credits as exclusively a part of the novel. While these fantastical and old-fashioned elements may make modern literary scholars discount Rothfuss' work from being considered "literature," Rothfuss is perfectly content to trade it for a different label.

As far as having my book recognized as literature? Why would I want that? I mean, have you read *Great Expectations*? Gech. Why would I want to be invited into their little club? Give me Tim Powers and Phillip K Dick. Give me Le Guin, Gaiman, and Pratchett. Give me McKillip and Whedon. These are the storytellers. These are our

modern mythmakers. Our oracles. Our dreamers. I want to be on that team ("Interview with Patrick Rothfuss")

Rothfuss identifies first and foremost not with the author of a classic novel but with the writers of fantasy and science fiction. Rothfuss, like Kvothe, is first and foremost a storyteller, and an excellent example of the legacy of Benjamin's story in the modern fantasy genre.

V. Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World*

While *The Name of the Wind* does an excellent job of championing the art of storytelling, many other pieces within the modern fantasy genre incorporate Benjamin's concepts of storytelling in different ways. For example, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series examines the role of a pre-industrialized world, such as Benjamin idolised in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (14). Likewise, renowned fantasy author Terry Pratchett creates a world in his *Discworld* series in which it is a known fact that people and fate will follow folkloric conventions and people should learn from them, a key aspect of Benjamin's theory discussed above with Rothfuss. One of the biggest names in the fantasy genre for the last twenty years, Robert Jordan, created a world heavily inspired by the traditional folklore and epics treasured by Benjamin in his series *The Wheel of Time*.

The Eye of the World is the first book of Robert Jordan's fourteen-book high fantasy series called *The Wheel of Time*. Originally published in 1990, the book is an established piece within the modern fantasy genre that many reviewers consider to be the *Lord of the Rings* of this generation. The *New York Times* states "But now there really may be an heir of sorts to Tolkien, in attention earned if not achievement: Robert Jordan. In his saga, *The Wheel of Time*, . . . Mr. Jordan has come to dominate the world Tolkien began to reveal" (Rothstein). The comparisons to Tolkien make sense, as the series clearly grows out of the same mythical traditions Tolkien drew upon and which make up the key elements of modern fantasy: prophecies, a shepherd who becomes a hero, a great evil seeking to destroy the world. However, while most works in the modern fantasy genre are based primarily in European mythology, as discussed above Jordan is heavily influenced by Eastern philosophy as well. The mythology of the world incorporates elements from across numerous cultures from our world, including religious and philosophical concepts from all over the globe. This incorporation of both

non-Western and traditional storytelling elements makes *The Eye of the World* an excellent example of the presence of Benjamin's story in the distinctly modern fantasy genre.

Perhaps the most common trope of fantasy is drawing on elements of cultures from our own world to add flavor and depth to a fictional setting. Tolkien is famous for the Nordic influences in his series; in Lewis the world of Narnia is literally created in part from people from England; and Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* is set in a place very reminiscent of medieval England. Such settings seem to be a constant allure of the fantasy genre (Dickerson and O'Hara 2009). By using these older cultures as the setting, the author creates a world that is both new yet relatable to the reader. This element of relatability is key to Benjamin's concept of the story, that for it to touch the reader the story must "give material form to the invisible . . . and thus to render it capable of being experienced," meaning that by making specific examples of ideas (justice, courage), a story can make these concepts or "truths" able to be experienced by the reader in a more direct way (Benjamin 14). By building on the experiences of others, the storyteller grounds himself in truth and is therefore better able to share this experience with others (87). Therefore, even if the piece is fiction, by incorporating so many elements from our experience of our own world, the story can still have this element of realism, making us more likely to empathize with the characters and accept the morals and lessons in their stories. By drawing on the cultural heritage of the folklore and epics before him, Jordan is able to function as a Benjamin storyteller: taking those experiences which we recognize from our own cultural history and using them to create a "true" story.

The inclusion of non-European and therefore more modern aspects seems at first to contradict certain pieces of Benjamin's philosophy. Benjamin regarded the push towards globalization and modernity as destructive and ugly.

Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of its feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what had been smashed . . . His storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. His storm is what we call progress. (257-258)

His dislike of the modern culture comes through frequently in Benjamin's works, as does his moderate dislike of non-European cultures, including America (17-18). He claimed that Paris was more home-like to him than his native Germany because it was "profoundly European" (20). Can a global work then truly be counted as a Benjamin story?

Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series could seem to be a modern or novelistic piece, pushing away from Benjamin's more culturally-specific love of the European tradition and towards globalization. However, Benjamin's ideas of traditional culture were heavily influenced by his own culture. His overarching philosophy throughout his essays looks at the importance of a universal truth, with Benjamin fearing that the "consistence of truth . . . has been lost" (*Schriften* I.146, qtd. in Arendt 41). Translator Hannah Arendt describes the underlying philosophy seen throughout Benjamin's canon.

Tradition transforms truth into wisdom, and wisdom is the consistence of transmissible truth. In other words, even if truth should appear in our world, it could not lead to wisdom, because it would no longer have the characteristics which it could acquire only through universal recognition of its validity. (41)

If Benjamin's philosophy is at its center based on the importance of this "universal recognition of validity" of truth and wisdom, which certainly seems to be seen frequently throughout his works, then one

can assume that this element of universal appeal is far more important to Bertjamen's philosophy of storytelling than that a piece be based exclusively in European cultural traditions.

Had Benjamin lived today, I believe his specific appeals to the supremacy of European culture would not be nearly so present within his writing. The essential element of Bertjamen's story, that it possess "the epic side of truth, wisdom" and "counsel for his readers," is actually improved by enlarging the audience that can relate to the piece and consider the truths within it to be valid (87, 86). There is a problem for the modern audience with the examples that Bertjamen provides within his piece *The Storyteller*. While Bertjamen is calling for a work that has universal appeal he references exclusively traditional European examples, such as Leskov, Hebei Herodotus, and Homer. Another example of his Eurocentrism is seen in "The Storyteller" where Bertjamen looks at the craftsman/journeyman dynamic common in medieval Western Europe which he claimed encouraged a sharing of experience, "Such an interpretation was achieved particularly by the Middle Ages in their trade structure" (85). Here Bertjamen classifies the entire time period of 500-1500 by Western European culture, predominantly German and English, while not even considering to explicitly state that he is referring to Europe. This shows an instinctual bias in his methodology of thought towards European culture. While this is understandable based on his education and when he wrote, now in the 21st century it is no longer appropriate to assume that the average reader comes from the same cultural background and possesses the same (or at least a similar) set of moral and personal values as the storyteller. As such, if we try to limit storytelling to only a single cultural background we are losing the sense of universality that Benjamin claims is so essential to the true story. By using both traditional elements of culture and philosophy as well as elements from around the globe, Robert Jordan creates a true story, but updated in tradition to fit the modern world. Benjamin's philosophy of storytelling goes beyond the provincial biases underlying

much of his writing. The elements of great storytelling within Jordan are clear, especially this sense of universally recognized truths and cultural connections, which makes *The Eye of the World* an excellent story by the definitions of Berzjamin, despite the inclusion of non-European elements.

Elements of universality are seen extensively in the world that the "Wheel of Time" series takes place in. While it is distinct from our own in many ways, it clearly incorporates elements from numerous cultures from around the globe. This is seen in the dress and customs of the various cultures of the series: there are civilizations reminiscent of various European cultures and dress, such as the Romani (in the book referred to as the tinkers, described wearing bright colors and traveling the world [367]); Asian cultures like Japan (in the book a place called Shienar, where the men wear topknots and show strong social similarities [695]); and many more, including traits from African, Native American, and Middle Eastern cultures. Within each group we see the stories and traditions of these people mirroring many elements of the reader's world and experiences. This connects with Berzjamin's belief in the importance of a shared experience between the reader and the main character, which makes the moral truth, or wisdom of a story applicable to any reader, not just descendants or aficionados of Western culture (Berzjamin 87).

More importantly though, Jordan incorporates massive amounts of philosophy from different cultures, not just physical or sociological descriptions. Regardless of the system of belief held by an individual reader, some philosophies or elements of religion are pervasive enough to have worked their way into the awareness of the larger human population. While an individual American may not identify as Christian, Christianity's prevalence in early American history means many Americans are affected by the Judea-Christian system of ethics. Therefore, when fantasy writers incorporate aspects of the entrenched philosophies into their worlds, the morals and ideals that the narratives espouse are more

likely to be viewed as accurate and worthy of considering as valid advice (ie., folk-tales teaching children not to tell lies, or that evil is an actual entity that must be fought). This is exactly what Benjamin identifies as the mark of a true storyteller, that they take these morals and "universal" truths and share this experience with the reader or listener, that "the moral of the story" comes through (Benjamin 99). Jordan is a master of this technique, using elements from both Eastern and Western philosophies and religions to create the foundations of his world. In this way, Jordan uses these same principles as Benjamin to write a useful and relatable story.

Perhaps the largest incorporation by Jordan of philosophies from our world is the very concept of the "wheel of time," which the series is named for. This is the philosophy that time is cyclical and made up of repeating ages, which occur over and over again in sequence. This is found primarily in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, where it is also termed Kalachakra. Within the books, this philosophy is pervasive. Each book begins with the same line, "The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again . . . There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time" (1). While this is not a traditional Western philosophy, it serves several purposes in making *The Eye of the World* a Benjamin-style story. First, it breaks cultural boundaries of European influence on the genre. This means that the narrative has elements that are based in the cultural heritage and experience of those of the Eastern world, creating a much stronger case for the existence of the "universal recognition of validity" seen in the narrative, so representative of Benjamin's philosophy (Arendt 41). Second, the world itself validates many of Benjamin's other philosophies of the purpose and importance of the storyteller. As time is cyclical and the ages stories and legends come from will come again, this emphasizes the importance of listening to the advice seen in myths: we must learn from

the past as it we will face these situations again This is a very strong statement in favor of the Benjamin philosophy of the necessity of the storyteller imparting this "train of tradition" for the betterment of man's life (Benjamin 98). While much of current popular modern fantasy is based on the European tradition, by incorporating this element into his world, Jordan helps move beyond this Western limitation while still keeping the elements of cultural heritage and a relatable moral or truth which are essential to the fantasy genre.

Jordan also borrows (perhaps unintentionally) from Christian mythology. This may be due to the influence of Tolkien on the genre, who, as discussed previously, combined both Nordic and Christian mythology into his world. Much of modern fantasy incorporates these Christian elements. Within Jordan's world, there is a clear creature of evil, the Dark One (similar to Tolkien's concept of Sauron or the Christian concept of Satan). While he was bound by the Creator to Shayol Ghul, not on the same plane as the people live in, his influence spreads throughout the world as he seeks to free himself and make himself lord over creation (14). This is quite similar to Christian mythology where Satan was placed in Hell, yet still tries to escape to rule the world. The Dark One possesses various demonic traits, such as his constant desire to corrupt the innocent through offering power to them. This concept has proved popular within modern fantasy, as it provides a clear evil for the hero to face off against, and sets the stage for an epic battle for the fate of the world. By using it within this series, Jordan creates a bridge between the ideals of many modern readers (while other religions and atheism have gained popularity, much of the Western world is still heavily influenced by Judea-Christian concepts of morality) and the story. By building on this shared cultural experience of Christian mythology, Jordan imparts advice and morals (such as "do not give in to temptation") which can be appreciated by the majority of readers.

Overall, Jordan's incorporation of philosophies and religious concepts from our world into his own creates a strong connection between the reader and the world; the lessons that come through the piece ring true to our own modern concepts of ethics and ideals. This is such a common element in the modern fantasy genre because it is so essential to creating a great story. Professor Peter Kreeft describes this drawing on past culture as a necessity in good fantasy, saying that the greatest fantasy writer "is implicitly asking his readers, his culture, to remember their links with their own ancient wisdoms - pagan, Jewish, and Christian. Few lessons, however indirectly taught, could be more socially relevant than this one" (135). By drawing from the philosophy and culture of numerous different places over the entire globe, Robert Jordan goes beyond the standard European bias and creates a work Benjamin would recognize as a story, containing truly "universal" wisdom, able to impart truth to any reader, no matter their what cultural background is.

Within *The Eye of the World*, Jordan creates a relatable and in many ways realistic world that even goes beyond simply sharing elements of the mythology and philosophy of our own world, by also incorporating aspects from other classics of modern fantasy and folklore. This builds on the Benjamin principle that a true story shares both broad truths as well as the "image of collected experience" to bring the reader to a more direct connection to the narrative (Benjamin 102). Jordan uses many of the tropes of traditional folklore and the epic, the types of writing which Benjamin specifically hails as examples of the true "story" (91, 95, 98). Benjamin states that the reason a storyteller has so much experience to share is because he relates the experiences of others; the stories and traditions passed down to the storyteller through other great stories (108). Jordan is a true storyteller, taking the shared great stories of the last millennia and more and incorporating them into his work, drawing on both the simple folk or fairy tales and the grander epics which have been passed down throughout the

generations, creating a piece :firmly entrenched in the storytelling tradition.

Jordan borrows extensively from both the folktale of the everyman and the larger epic of nobles and wars, which allows him to make use of a broader collection of experience to share. Queens and generals are met and fought, battle lines change, and the full of countries are shown, but alongside the smaller concerns of a blacksmith learning to talk to wolves or a country girl finding adventure. By taking elements of storytelling and common tropes from both of these types of stories, Jordan creates a world that feels both full of tradition and action, but still relatable to our personal experiences of daily life.

There are many elements of traditional folldore and :fuiry tales present within *The Eye of the World*, borrowing especially from European and Eastern folldore. These are the experiences more traditionally associated with the lower classes - stories of woodcutters, children, animals, and such. As touched on previously, what distinguishes the folktale from the epic is usually that the focus of the folktale is on the everyman: "a folktale is a traditional narrative which tends to appeal to the underdog" (De Luce 203). It is not the tale of knights or lords, but rather craftsmen and travellers. It is the folktale especially that Benjamin connects with, as it most often is directly accessible to the corrnnon listener. "A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people" says Berrjamin, speaking of the importance of the everyman in stories (101). These elements of traditional folklore are incorporated in Jordan extensively, and help build the connection between modern :fantasy and Berrjamin's story.

Starting with a very common :fantasy trope, Jordan incorporates gypsies heavily into his stories. Though handled differently compared to Rothfuss' methods, both worlds build on the folldoric concept of tinkers or gypsies as storytellers and holders of information, somehow separate from the rest of society. The tinkers are also known as Tuatha'an, which they say means "the Traveling People." The word "tuatha" is in our world an old Irish word which means "people," though primarily seen in the

phrase "Tuatha de Danann," a race of people from Irish mythology. Here again, Jordan touches on elements of our world to make the world seem connected to ours, continuing this incorporation of shared experience within the piece. The tinkers of Jordan's world seek what they call "the song," something that they believe will bring peace again to the world. They collect stories and songs, and their information helps to set the heroes on the path to their first victory against the Dark One at the end of the book (375). The tinkers of European folklore, especially seen in English folklore from the 1500s and on, share this role of the friendly outsider, vagabond, and traveller (Arnold 213). Benjamin focuses extensively on the role of the traveler in storytelling, as he believes that the traveler brings the "lore of faraway places" to their storytelling, increasing interest and again continuing this idea of the importance of shared experience (Benjamin 84). The tinkers of Jordan serve as reminders of the importance of information brought from far away. Within these modern fantasy works we see Benjamin's ideals coming through so strongly with characters like the tinkers because of this deeply steeped background in folklore from the genre.

Another examples of Jordan's use of folklore is the importance of animals within the narrative. Animals are seen as part of the great war between the Creator and the Dark One, with certain species tied to one side or the other. Rats and Ravens both are known to be the spies of the Dark One. Early in the book the hero Rand learns that the local vermin may have been spying on him, "The Dark One's minions often find spies among creatures that feed on death. Ravens and crows, mainly. Rats" (107). In folklore of many cultures, crows and ravens are often attached to the dead because of their role as carrion eaters, though not always seen as evil (Hardy 117; Briggs 24). While these specific animals do not always display human-level intelligence or have the ability to speak, as their folkloric counterparts might, they still function to set animals within the story as beyond the simple creature we would assume

them to be (Briggs and Tongue 85). One of the main characters, Perrin, discovers that he is able to communicate with wolves. While these wolves do not speak in a verbal language, they do communicate through telepathy and dreams. The wolves at one point save Perrin, similar to the myth of Romulus and Remus, as well as the Chinese legend of Kill-mo (Jordan 446; De Luce 203; Jila 161).

Anthropomorphized animals are a common element of folklore, seen across effectively all human cultures, and incorporating them into the narrative lets Jordan connect to this idea so deeply ingrained in our cultural identity (Uther 151; Briggs 13). Bertjamine champions their importance in storytelling, saying that "in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of a child in the fairy tale [the story] shows that nature not only is subservient to the myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man"(102).

Another example of folklore is Mat's corruption by a magical artifact. While the group of main characters are travelling through a deserted and possibly haunted ancient city, one of Rand's friends, Mat, meets someone who appears to be an old man looking for help to remove some of the ancient treasure from the city. When offered this opportunity for gold and jewels, Mat agrees, regardless of his friend's concerns (288). The old man is eventually revealed to be a powerful sorcerer, bound to that city, who sought to free himself and kill them through his manipulations. This is very similar to the original story of Aladdin from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, where Aladdin is lured into the cave under a promise of treasure by an evil sorcerer, looking to further his own ends and plans the boy's death. While Mat escapes, he takes with him a dagger from the place, which slowly corrupts Mat, similar to Tolkien's "one ring," the ring of Gyges in Plato, or the sword of Kullervo in the Finnish saga the Kalevala. This sub-plot shows the same cautionary tales seen in many stories: don't be greedy, don't trust strangers. In the same way that these morals were taught to people through stories, Jordan continues these same morals through *The Eye of the World*, serving the same role as a storyteller that

Benjamin considered so essential the giver of advice.

Numberous other traditional aspects of folk tales appear within the narrative. The demon-like creatures called myrddaal hate passing over running water, similar to older tales of ghosts, demons, and vampires in European lore. Similarly, female magic users have an affinity for cats, similar to both the traditional trope of witches with cat familiars and the Norse legend of Freyja, goddess of (among other things) sorceress magic and cats. All of these elements keep the world feeling familiar to our own experiences of stories, especially fairy tales and children's movies which are such a major part of our childhood experiences.

Throughout the book, these elements of folklore serve two main purposes. First, these folk tales and stories of counsel are often seen to warn the main characters of danger through their awareness of their own folklore, or to show a moral to the reader through the consequences of the main characters' actions. The boys of the book remember stories of how to protect themselves from the Dark One and use it to help themselves, or we the reader watch as the characters fall to foolish choices and see the moral of the scene. This strongly mirrors Benjamin's idea that for a narrative to be of value and interest it must have some advice, counsel or moral (Benjamin 86). These elements run so strongly in folklore it is no surprise that in fantasy novels which draw on these older stories we see these themes of Benjamin play out to such an extent.

Second, by using traditional elements of folklore from our own world, Jordan helps the reader feel that this book could be a part of our world as well. It builds on this concept of shared experience to make a world that, while in some ways clearly different from our own, has clear connections to our own lives and experiences. By tying into the philosophy, mythology, and traditions of so many cultures, Jordan creates a narrative that is universally accessible such that he can take this world of fantasy and

can make any reader feel a part of the world. Benjamin states that "this distinguishes [the novel] from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (87). By taking these elements of folklore and turning them into a world to share with the reader, Jordan creates what is certainly a story by every definition of Benjamin, save the medium

These elements of folklore help to create a connection between the reader and the world, which creates the shared experience that Bertjarnin so greatly valued. By making these allusions to our own world, there is an implication that the morals and advice from the narrative are applicable to our own lives. But, as many works of modern fantasy do, *The Eye of the World* goes beyond a focus on just these elements of folklore and incorporates numerous elements of the epic as well.

In some ways, *The Eye of the World* is more closely connected with the realm of the epic than the folktale. It draws many elements of the narrative and character archetypes from numerous mythologies and classical epics, primarily Greek, Eastern, and Christian. It also incorporates numerous references to the Arthurian legend, something sometimes considered to be the mythology of England. These more epic elements are traditionally found in high fantasy, as described earlier, and focus on the actions of kings and queens, great wars, nobles, and generals. While they are not as connected to the everyman as the folktale, they still rely on the concepts of universal ideals and morals that Bertjarnin holds as essential to the true story. Hence the fact that Lukacs ties the epic to this concept of the story versus the novel: "the epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within" (Lukacs 60). Within his chapter "The Epic and the Novel" Lukacs posits a theory similar to Bertjarnin's, that the difference between the story (or epic for Lukacs) and the novel is this role of the meaning of life in a narrative, "the novel is the epic of an age in which the excessive totality of life is no longer directly given"

(56). Be1 amin ties the epic to his idea of the story through the Greek muse Mnemosyne, who was the Muse of epic art, was also called "the rememberer," stating that the epic grew from the "record kept by memory" (97). For Beamin, the key here is that the epic can "absorb the course of events" (history and experience) and make it a shareable experience, passing the "memory" of truth on to other people (97). Within Robert Jordan, the archetypes and epic elements within *The Eye of the World* help create a story where there are epic truths to be known about the world, and epic characters who represent ideas as much as they show a realistic person, creating a story in the epic tradition.

A major element of the narrative is taken from both European mythology and modern fantasy. The great force of evil, the Dark One, turns the weather into perpetual summer with great heat and little rain, creating famine and terror throughout the world. This is seen with variations in Norse mythology, where the great battle for the fate of the world, Ragnarok, is preceded by three years of harsh weather, called Fimbulvetr, or the winter of winters. Likewise, this is seen in Lewis' first and best-known book of the Narnia series, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, where the White Witch, Jadis, keeps Narnia in a state of eternal winter. This concept that evil can force the land to turn against the people may not create the knee-jerk reaction of fear in a modern audience as it would have to a more agrarian society, but there is still a cultural awareness of this concept, as seen by modern fanatics claiming hurricanes, global warming, or earthquakes are punishments for our sins.

Jordan also makes numerous connections to the created mythology of England, the Arthurian legends. Characters in the lore of the world, such as Artm Pendraeg and Arthur Pendragon, as well as many of the main characters, the knights Galad and Galahad, the princess Elayne and lady Elaine, the evil being Mordeth and Arthur's evil son Mordred, Queens Morgase and Morgause, and many more, take their names and more from Arthurian legend (Lacy 18, 203, 148, 394). Several of the main

characters fit the archetypes that match their names, such as the wise old man and master storyteller Thom Merrilin, similar to Merlin, who likewise serves as the advisor and mentor to the hero (382). The use of Arthurian elements holds interest for several reasons. First, it continues to build on the Benjamin-ian concept of the storyteller as one who retells the stories of others in new and different ways; Jordan builds on the writings of Malory and the Welsh oral storytellers to create his story. Second, as discussed earlier the world of *The Wheel of Time* series is based in a cyclical view of time where events and people live their lives over again in multiple ages. Jordan stated in multiple interviews that the world of his series is written to be "both our past and future," including references to the Cold War and historical and modern persons such as Queen Elizabeth, Mother Theresa, Ann Landers, and John Glenn. These are all considered mythic figures and legends within Jordan's world, but based in truth, "Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend" as the books begin (1). By including Arthurian characters reborn into this world, Jordan implies the truth of the Arthurian canon

There is also a classic element seen especially in Greek mythology; the main character of seemingly humble birth is discovered to have a secret great heritage. The shepherd boy, Rand al'Thor, was raised to think of himself as the son of a farmer. However, he soon discovers that his father, Tam, found him as a baby on a battlefield in a far off land during a great war (88). Throughout the books it is eventually discovered that he is the child of a princess, who left her homeland to fulfill a prophecy, married a warrior and died just after giving birth to him. This is a theme seen repeatedly throughout numerous Greek myths and epics, such as Oedipus, Paris of Troy, and Theseus. The archetype also appears in King Arthur, as well as in the Christian tradition of Jesus raised as a carpenter. This background for Rand cements the traditional "rise of a hero" archetype he follows within the first book, a very common storytelling trope.

There are numerous other elements borrowed from classical epics, especially prophecies. For example there are numerous prophecies regarding the characters, especially the character Rand who is revealed as the prophesied Dragon Reborn. The prophecies are used throughout the *Wheel of Time* series in the same way they are used in Greek epics such as in Oedipus, where often by trying to stop the prophecies people make them come true. In *The Eye of the World* though, they tend to mostly foreshadow events to come, such as Thom reciting the prophecies of the Dragon Reborn describing the fall of a great city, which occurs in later books. There is also a woman who is something like an Oracle, named Min, who sees the future in people but is often not believed, similar to Cassandra from *The Illiad*. These epic and mythic elements often serve to warn of the consequences of bad or good choices, but also reinforce the idea that there is a larger plan to the world. This is an essential difference between the novel and the story. Professor Kreeft asks what is the difference between modern works (novels) and the older ways of telling stories, saying:

Is it a story, with meaning, or it is 'just one damned thing after another'? To see the difference, contrast two famous poetic expressions of the two opposite answers. One is the Hobbits' humble Walking Song, which sees life - the life of the individual of the community, and of the larger community of communities that is the world - as a Road, that 'goes ever on and on,' that has an objective nature and meaning and direction of its own, and presents us tasks so that 'I must follow if I can.' (Kreeft 130).

Kreeft continues to contrast the story seen in the fantasy work *Lord of the Rings* with modern works by authors such as Faulkner, where the worldview is that "there is no story at all" because there is no defined worldview to create a frame around the piece. Kreeft, like Bertjamen, believes that there needs to be a sense of universal understanding within a story, ideas of good and evil and the meaning of life,

for the work to have a purpose. When discussing the story though, Kreeft however draws on examples both from classical literature, such as Shakespeare, and on modern fantasy, especially the works of Tolkien. This is because these fantasy pieces share the elements of the story that both Benjamin and Kreeft believe to be so essential: that they contain "the epic side of truth" (Benjamin 87). By using prophecies within his narrative, Jordan reinforces the Benjamin idea that there is a purpose and a meaning to life and to the story; the characters must follow the path that is laid out for them to finish the story.

However, Jordan is not limited to drawing only on older tales and epics. Jordan also has strong roots in Tolkien. In *The Wheel of Time* series there are many references to *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, such as the inns named "The Nine Rings" and "The Nine Horse Hitch," a subtle reference to the nine Nazgul, the men made monsters through the nine rings given to them, who sought the One Ring at an inn in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Other places also are references to Tolkien, such as the Mountains of Dhorn (similar to Mount Doom), and the Mountains of Mist (similar to the Misty Mountain). As stated previously, Tolkien's roots are based firmly in the stories of Benjamin, the folk and fairy tale and the epic. Jordan, like many authors in the fantasy genre, follows in the path of Tolkien, drawing on the stories of the past. This makes a strong case that Jordan's *The Eye of the World* is a Benjamin story, as it builds on so many great storytellers of the past..

Benjamin perhaps explains the importance of these incorporations best: "For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained" (91). By repeating the stories of old, of Greek epics, English fairy tales, and Norse myths, alongside modern storytellers like Tolkien and Lewis, Jordan is entrenching himself in the storytelling tradition. He repeats these stories in new ways, while keeping the essence of the story still "All great storytellers have in

common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder" writes Bertjamen (101). Jordan is a master of this, drawing on the experience of the greatest storytellers in the world and making it into a new story.

We have already seen that Jordan shares the elements of having showing great truths and a consistent world view that Bertjamen held as essential to a true story. Jordan also draws on the experiences of past storytellers, incorporating them into his work and worldview of the piece. In addition to these facts though, Jordan also, like Rothfuss, demonstrates the power that well-told stories can have throughout the plot of *The Name of the Wind*.

While *The Eye of the World* is not a direct commentary on storytelling in the same way that Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* is, Jordan still touches upon many such elements. By having characters within the story address the idea of the power and importance of stories, Jordan aligns himself unintentionally with the theories of Bertjamen. This is seen especially in two instances in the book where stories are told and talked of by two of the main characters, Thorn and Moiraine.

Early in the book the events, people, and enemies faced are foreshadowed by the tales of the bard, the gleeman Thorn Merrilin.

"You want stories?" Thorn Merrilin declaimed. "I have stories, and I will give them to you. I will make them come alive before your eyes." . . . "Tales of great wars and great heroes . . . Artur the High King, who once ruled all the lands from the Aiel Waste to the Aryth Ocean, and even beyond. Wonderous stories of strange people and strange lands, of the Green Man, of Warders and Trollocs, of Ogier and Aiel" (50-51)

All of these "strange people and strange lands" are seen within the first few books of *The Wheel of Time* series, and most before the end of the first book. By having these creatures appear first in grand

stories, Jordan reinforces the idea that just because something is a story that does not make it unreal. This is a key theme of Benjamin, where stories must contain "something useful . . . some practical advice" (86). While these stories the bard tells at first appear to be only fiction, they are shortly revealed to all be based in truth, emphasizing the necessity to learn from stories. As the narrative progresses and the protagonists discover these monsters out of their bedtime stories are real and will kill them if they can, the heroes recognize the truth to the many stories they heard as children. "All the stories are real" says one character (91). This sets them on the path of looking at stories as truth, containing advice about the weaknesses of monsters and who or what they should trust.

As a proper story should, according to Bertjamine, these tales the heroes have heard now guide them in their adventures. The lady who at first seems open and benevolent is eventually discovered to be using the three young boys at the center of the narrative for her own ends. The boys recognize that they should not trust her because of the stories they have been told of her kind, the Aes Sedai

Rand muttered, trying to make the woman who had smiled at him fit the stories. Help from an Aes Sedai was sometimes worse than no help at all, so the stories said, like poison in a pie, and their gifts always had a hook in them, like fishbait. (99)

By following the truths hidden in their stories, the boys are able to survive and triumph over the enemy of the first book.

Another way Jordan show the power of stories is how the woman Moiraine controls a crowd simply by telling a story. The woman had first introduced herself as "a collector of old stories," though she is revealed to be a sorceress (29). Shortly after her arrival to the village a horde of monsters, the Trollocks told of in Thom's stories, attack and destroy much of the town, killing and wounding many. Though the sorceress helped force the monsters back and then used her powers to heal many of the

would have thought to be beyond help, people looked for someone to blame. An angry mob was formed to run her and her companion out of town, or kill them if they would not leave (129). Instead of driving them off by force, which she had the power to do, she used a story to change the hearts of the people in the mob.

"Is this what Aemon's blood has come to?' The Aes Sedai's voice was not loud, but it overruled every other sound. 'Little people squabbling for the right to hide like rabbits? You have forgotten what you were'" (131). She tells the story of the massive city and people who had once lived in this place, many centuries before, and how they held fast against the Dark One for two hundred years. "Sing of Manetheren, that would never bend knee to the Shadow. Sing of Manetheren, the sword that could not be broken." (132). However, a strong push was made by the enemy when a great force came against them. The army knew they could not defeat the enemy, but they swore to hold the line for as long as they could to allow the other people of the land to escape to safety.

But some did not flee. First in a trickle, then a river, then a flood, men went, not to safety, but to join the army fighting for their land. Shepherds with bows, and farmers with pitchforks, and woodmen with axes. Women went to, shouldering what weapons they could find and marching side by side with their men. No one made that journey who did not know they would never return. But it was their land. It had been their fathers' and it would be their children's, and they went to pay the price of it. (133)

Though the entire force was killed, their sacrifice provided time for the others to escape, the children who became the ancestors of the people of the small town.

[the survivors] had paid such a price in blood and hope for their land as had never been paid before, and now they were bound to that soil by ties stronger than steel. . . Never

again did Mantheren rise. Its soaring spires and splashing fountains became as a dream that slowly faded from the minds of its people. But they, and their children, and their children's children, held the land that was theirs. They held it when the long centuries had washed the memory of it from their memories. They held it until, today, there is you.

(135)

Suddenly the angry mob fell apart. Men who had been willing to burn those new to town were filled with shame at their cowardice and fear. The story of their history inspired bravery and courage, and also foreshadows the heroic behavior the entire town is eventually led to in later books.

The power that this story has is immediate and powerful. Men who had been looking to set fire to the travellers suddenly felt shame at their actions. "My [son] Will is walking because of you, and for that I am ashamed to be here" says one member (135). The others of the mob quickly fell away. "Others began to mutter then, offering shamefaced penitance before they, too, slipped away one by one" (135). The narrative Moiraine told had power to end a mob because it was a true story, and the truth within it, that they could be strong and noble and brave as their forefathers were, could be shared with the townsfolk.

The power of well-told stories is a key part of *The Eye of the World*, and shows the importance of such stories and how they can affect our lives. This directly espouses the ideas of Bertjarnin, that stories serve a purpose and have power over how we view our own experiences and live (Benjamin 87). By showing this explicitly, Jordan, like Rothfuss, unintentionally aligns himself with Bertjarnin's philosophy of the story, and helps solidify Jordan's place as a Bertjarnin storyteller.

The Eye of the World is clearly a Bertjarnin story because it contains the most significant elements which Benjamin held dear, universal truths and morals, while also espousing the primary

philosophy of Benjamin, that stories have power and purpose. Robert Jordan firmly establishes himself in the storytelling tradition by drawing on archetypes and tropes of great storytellers such as Herodotus, who Benjamin called "the first storyteller of the Greeks" (89). Like Leskov and the other storytellers Bertjamen so highly prized, Jordan is quite clearly "grounded in the classics," a trait Benjamin considered essential to becoming a storyteller, as seen by Jordan's extensive use of mythology, folklore, and epics.

The tale that unfolds in *The Eye of the World* follows the pattern described by the bard Thom: "the adventures of men and women, rich and poor, great and small, proud and humble" (52). This combination of the epic and the folk tale, the king and the everyman, connects so strongly to Bertjamen's concept of the story. Jordan is both "rooted in the people" with his characters of farmers and blacksmiths, while also incorporating the "captivating" elements of grand myths (Bertjamen 101, 103). This combination creates a narrative which feels both epic and personal, captivating the reader and drawing them into the work to share in the experiences of the characters. This allows for the most important aspect, the morals and wisdom found within the story, to greatly impact the reader.

Robert Jordan said in an interview that the reason he loved fantasy was because it lets people look at moral questions:

There are lots of value systems in this country. But I think that a lot of people want to believe in something, and they want a set of rules in life, or guidelines for life and behavior for what's right to do, or what's wrong to do and they may argue among themselves about whether this or that is right or wrong, but they want to believe in those things. (Lilley)

Jordan connects fantasy with this quintessential element of Benjamin, the need for a moral within the story, but ties it not only to his own work, but to the fantasy genre itself. As one of the leading fantasy

writers of the modern era, this makes a powerful statement about how Benjamin's story has taken such a strong root in the modern fantasy genre. In that same interview Jordan states that he writes fantasy because it fits with his mindset, spurning the "moral relativism" of other literature, to state, "There is right and there is wrong and there is good and there is evil, and sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. But it's worth to try to tell the difference...you don't just flip a coin" (Lilley). The fantasy genre as seen by Jordan is a haven for the types of narratives Benjamin termed stories: those with morals, those showing a universal "truth" about life and how we should be (Benjamin 86, 87). Benjamin writes that "The storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel - not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage" (108). Jordan is a storyteller, with advice for us both within his story, *The Eye of the World*, and in his statements about the essence of the fantasy genre.

VI. Conclusion

Despite a reputation for being "childish" or "merely a work of entertainment," fantasy still grabs the attention of people today, in part because it carries on the tradition of so many classic tales (Sheppard 62). In an interview, Rothfuss answered the question "do you believe that the fantasy genre will ever come to be recognized as veritable literature?" in an important way.

The lion's share of old-school literature IS fantasy, they just pretend it isn't. The Odyssey is full of gods and spells. Oedipus Rex has a sphinx and a prophecy. There are witches in Macbeth, faeries in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and a ghost in *Hamlet*. Dante's *Inferno*? *Beowulf*? All looks like fantasy to me. I think a lot of people read and respect fantasy storytelling. A lot of the more forward-thinking colleges offer classes studying it, though they usually call it speculative fiction or magical realism to make themselves feel better. We all know the truth though: it's fantasy. ("Interview with Patrick Rothfuss")

The modern fantasy genre, grounded in the epics and folklore of old, is steadily growing, and gaining more recognition as the descendant of earlier classics of literature.

Since Beamin's death there has been a massive resurgence in this style of narrative. It is true that these "story"-esque works make up a smaller percentage of modern literature than in pre-industrial literature, but within the niche of the modern fantasy market there is an abundance of these story-based books, and it is spreading to other media as well. This increase of interest in the story is why we have a major star like Angelina Jolie in a big-budget *Beowulf* movie, two separate Arthurian fantasy television shows on air (*Merlin* and *Camelot*), and numerous fairy tale-based television shows currently running (*Once Upon a Time*, its spin-off *Wonderland*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Grimm* are just a few) with several

more in production for the Fall season. Even the superhero trend in movies seen in the last few years draws on stories, the blockbuster series based on Marvel's *The Avengers* includes two characters originally taken from Norse mythology, Thor and Loki. These types of narratives are clearly still striking a chord with people today, but it is not limited to the classic epics and folk tales.

When we look at works based in modern fantasy, this trend continues. *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are some of the bestselling books in the world, with over 150 million copies of *Lord of the Rings* sold to date, fifty million of which were sold in just the last decade. The movie version of the trilogy won seventeen Academy Awards. While *Harry Potter* is classified as young adult (a category where fantasy has been more common), its presence in popular culture rivals *Lord of the Rings*. The "allure of the storyteller" which Benjamin spoke of can clearly be seen in the way modern society still gravitates to these types of narratives.

Looking at the examples given by Benjamin in "The Storyteller," the storytellers Herodotus, Poe, Leskov, as well as the numerous folk tales and adventure stories, "The Steel Flea," "Unexpected Reunion," and the tale of Psammenitus, we see the philosophy of what Benjamin called "the story"-works which anyone could identify with and learn from, which were timeless and still poignant. Benjamin mourned the passing of this style of narrative that was fading from his world and replaced by the novel but by tracking the elements of storytelling from their original narratives, these pieces of folklore and grand epics, through the writers like Tolkien and Lewis who used them as inspirations for their own works, we can see how these stories still survived. While numerous people have added to the genre created by these first fantasy storytellers, by examining the books hailed as popular modern fantasy with an eye for these elements and philosophies of Benjamin it is clear that much of the fantasy genre still incorporates the essential principles of his "story." Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* is

almost a love letter to the ideas of Benjamin, praising the art of storytelling and demonstrating its use and importance in our lives. Jordan's *The Eye of the World* is a quintessential story, built out of the ideas and tropes of folklore and epics from across the globe.

While Benjamin's story was in decline during his lifetime, it has come alive again in the modern fantasy genre. Modern writers like Rothfuss and Jordan draw on Tolkien and the works he drew on, *Beowulf*, the Arthurian tales, and fairy stories. This tradition of retelling is so essential to the argument of Benjamin. "For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained" (91). The modern fantasy genre is filled with retellings of stories, both directly like with modern Arthurian romances, and through tradition, like with Jordan and Rothfuss, who take tropes and archetypes of old and use them in new ways. While they most likely will not supplant the novel as the primary type of entertainment enjoyed by every person, the story and the storyteller are certainly not dying out as Benjamin feared and are in fact thriving within the modern fantasy genre.

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