

The Depictions of Dragons in Paolini's *Eragon*

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Abstract

This paper focused on the characteristics and depictions of dragons in Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* (2002) in order to understand the roles that dragons play in human culture and how human culture changes the ways in which dragons are depicted. Said's theory of oriental representation was used as theoretical framework in this study. The analysis revealed that Paolini's dragons were unique and different from the past dragons. Paolini humanized his dragons by giving them more regal appearances, diverse colors, higher intelligences and superior morality, all of which were not seen in past depictions of dragons which focused more on their animalistic and reptilian natures. The role of dragons was also changed from the past depictions which painted dragons as evil antagonists or side characters. Paolini instead introduced many of his dragons as both main and supporting characters as well as a deuteragonist character. Furthermore, Paolini's dragons were the driving force behind the plot conflict, contrary to the past depictions which saw dragons as only an object to be killed. In addition, unlike the depiction in the past which dragons were employed to present negative aspects of human nature, Paolini's dragons were the metaphors of various real-life historical events and the real human society. Lastly, the dragon depiction in the story suggested that different races could live together in harmony.

Keyword: dragons, *Eragon*, Christopher Paolini, fantasy

Introduction

The tales of dragons have always been a part of human's culture and civilizations since ancient times, ranging from the holy dragons of China in the Eastern kingdom to the terrorizing flying killing machines of the West, Andrew Forbes stated that the influences of dragons spread throughout the globe (Forbes, 2013). Donald G. McNeil supports this by stating that unlike many other mythical creatures, dragons have been part of human culture for a very long time, and only very later on have they been truly proven to be fictional. Furthermore, dragons appeared in various parts of the worlds in many cultures and for the longest of times, were thought to

have actually existed (Mcneil, 2003). Finally, Sara Lyn Huo's article makes another confirmation that dragons continue to be a major influence on human cultures across the globe, being one of the very few mythical creatures that are shared between various cultures due to their rich history (Huo, 2016).

Although fictional, dragons still play a major part in human society nowadays. In Maja Gajek's study, dragons have been recurring themes for many stories, designs and inspirations for many stories throughout history (Gajek, 2015). Various books, television shows, movies and video games portray dragons regularly, sometimes directly, sometimes subtly. Some of these examples include *Games of Thrones* (television show), *Eragon* (novel), *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (video games), and many more. Dragons are often used in fantasy stories as symbols or metaphors for many things, and the ways in which they are depicted constantly evolve.

While there has been research done in the past that looks into the depictions of dragons and how they represent societal views of the time, most analyze from older, more well-known stories such as that of Tolkien's *The Hobbits*. This research aims to analyze at a more recent depiction of dragons by looking at Paolini's work of *Eragon* in 2002 and compare how much has the views of dragon changed compare to the past depictions.

Orientalism

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is a theoretical framework that is used for this study. According to Said, Orientalism is a concept invented by the West to depict and describe "The East" or the Others/Orients. These "Others" cultures include Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Said claims that the West creates Orientalism as a way for the Western culture to justify their colonization, by creating a concept that depicts other cultures as inherently inferior and less educated than the West. The "Others" not only are made to be inferior in terms of academic tradition, but also worldview as well as political ideology. In his "Islam Through Western Eyes" of 1980, Said states that Orientalism is used by countries such as the United States of

America to classify Arabs or Muslims as “Oil Suppliers” or “Potential Terrorists”. Overall, Orientalism is seen as an Anti-Western or Anti-Imperialism to attack against the West’s prejudices and imperialism against other cultures.

Said’s work on Orientalism carries influence in the fields of literacy theory, human geography and cultural studies. In terms of literacy, the results of Orientalism cause various non-western literatures to be considered unimportant for study or preservation, or to be changed to accommodate western images. In terms of geography, it reveals the western stereotypes for other cultures such as Russians, where certain behaviors or cultures are being classified as being “Russians” in an effort to project inferiority against the western world in an exaggerated manner. Finally, Orientalism causes a surge in post-colonial culture studies. These studies focus on the continued dominance of western powers, in both academic knowledge and ways of intellectual enquiry or research. The theory provides a framework and method for the purpose of analyzing cultural representations of the “Orient” or “Other”.

In the past, most dragons were usually presented as the “Others” based on Said’s theory. Many past depictions of dragons such as Tolkien’s *The Hobbits* or McCaffery’s *Dragonriders of Pern* depicted dragons as the “Others”, being either destroyed or conquered by the humanoid races. Dragons have been depicted since medieval times by the Western Culture to be creatures that present all the evil nature of men, so it became natural for them to be depicted as antagonists that must be defeated.

However, the dragons depicted in *Eragon* appears to not have been presented as the “Others”. Paolini has made several changes to how his dragons are depicted that challenges many past stories. He gave many more humanizing traits as well as more impact on the overall plot to the story.

METHODOLOGY

This research was done using qualitative analysis through data gathering method done by the researcher. In order to study and

answer the research questions, multiple analysis on various literatures and works have been done. Once sufficient data have been gathered, the researcher used these data to analyze and provide conclusions to satisfy the research questions.

The materials used for the data gathering processes were made up of existing data such as related texts, documents, or images. The data must be related to dragons, fantasy narrative writings, Orientalism-related studies or similar research.

Once gathered, the data were analyzed using content analysis approach. This involved categorizing and discussing the meaning behind the texts, words or sentences of the data. Once processed, the researcher offered his own analysis using the data that was gathered.

Humanizing the dragons

Paolini make changes to his dragons by depict them with traits and attributes that humanize them. His methods range from changing how they look, how their morality and intelligence works or their level of literacy. When compared to past depictions, dragons in *Eragon* displays much greater range of traits that are human-like.

1. The More Regal Appearance

Dragons in the past stories usually have menacing appearances and animal-like facial features. Smaug from *The Hobbits*, for example, is depicted with furious and aggressive appearance. His expression makes him to be nothing more than a towering and ferocious beast. Although Smaug may display a level of higher intelligence than a typical animal, the way his appearance is depicted heavily paints the picture that he is a beast of destruction that the protagonist must defeat.

This is because past stories typically follow western culture's traditional concepts of dragons heavily. These stories paint the picture of dragons as powerful and fearsome creatures, who aligns

themselves with forces of evil. The dragons are given appearances that convey the image of something dangerous and evil. The dragons are represented as the “Others” in Edward M. Said’s theory of representation.

On the other hand, Paolini’s dragons in *Eragon* do not possess menacing appearances. Their horns are shorter, their bodies are not as spiky, and their eyes are much less menacing, sometimes depicted to be human-like with visible irises. An example of this is shown on the cover page of the book itself in which Saphira is drawn with a very calm and noble expression with her eyes gazing at the readers as if she’s calmly judging them.

This less-menacing, more regal design decisions for the dragons in *Eragon* are made to send readers the messages that the dragons in *Eragon* are not savage beasts. The less monstrous and more humane features make them look intelligent and noble. K. M. Weiland states that good fantasy stories have their designs rooted on reality so that they are relatable for the readers. Therefore, giving dragons with certain humanoid aesthetics make them more humane and less monstrous. For the dragons in *Eragon*, aspects that humanize them are used to present the dragons in a more positive manner, by depicting them with more regal, proud and less threatening demeanor. These designs give Paolini’s dragons the impression that they are noble, intelligent and not prone to anger and savagery like Smaug.

2. The Diverse Scale Color

Furthermore, many dragons of past stories such as Smaug tend to feature mostly darker tones to their skins and scale colors. They lack the variations in color, as well as the brightness in their designs. This makes them appear to be much less lively and whimsical, and also make them appear more like reptilian creatures with wings. The blackness in their color attributes them to various negative symbols in Christianity such as evil, fear, unhappiness, or anger; all of which are traits that best describe these dragons such as Smaug (Feisner, 2016).

On the other hand, dragons in *Eragon* have various skin colors ranging from white, yellow, blue, red, black or others. These vibrant and diverse scale colors that they possess give them a much livelier and whimsical feeling? to both Eragon and the readers. These colors are used as symbols to express the dragon's personality. Sapphire, a blue dragon is calm, collected, and majestic. Glaedr, a gold dragon, is wise, noble, and strict. Shruikan, the antagonist's black dragon, is like Smaug, filled with anger, hatred and sin. Paolini uses these colors to help further explore his dragon's identity by giving them colors that fit with their personalities and traits.

3. The Higher Intelligence and Literacy

Another aspect that is used to humanize Paolini's dragons is their high intelligence and literacy. According to Marder, one key aspect that defines us human is our capacity for higher intelligence and our ability to efficiently communicate to each other using verbal communications. While other animals may show signs of intelligence, or their own communication systems, only humans have the ability to do so with actual words. As a result, fictional stories can humanize other non-human races by depicting them with the abilities to communicate with humans.

In this case, dragons in *Eragon* are described by Brom, a wizard mentor to Eragon, to be very smart, stating that even Brom himself does not know all of the dragon's secrets. When Eragon tries to pick names for Saphira, she demonstrates high level of intelligence by rejecting names used by male dragons, as she is a female, showing that she is smart enough to understand her race's naming system. Furthermore, Paolini's dragons are also capable of learning other languages, as Saphira is able to speak with others verbally after only a short exposure to human language. Since Paolini's dragons are already intelligent and powerful, their relationships with humans and elves are more akin to real world's human from different country, who may come from different background but are all ultimately equal. Because dragons in *Eragon* are capable of intelligence and speech on

their own, they are arguably considered to not be part of the “Others” in Said’s theory. The dragons do not need human intervention to improve their lives, nor do they need elves or humans’ help.

On the other hand, *Dragonriders of Pern* (1968) written by Anne McCaffrey depicts dragons to be much less intelligent. In McCaffrey’s design, local fire lizards have been genetically augmented by human to be loyal to their masters, transforming them to become dragons. Although friendly to human, McCaffrey’s dragons are simply companion animals altered against nature to serve their human masters. While they are considered sapient, their intelligences relied solely on the human’s manipulation and their limited memory capacity makes them less intelligent than human. As a result, the relationships between human rider and dragons in McCaffrey’s story are more akin to masters and servants.

4. The Superior Morality

Many dragons in the past are usually depicted in this similar negative manner. They are generally evil antagonists or monsters with little to no morality. For instance, Smaug, although intelligent, is depicted to be extremely evil. In his depiction, Smaug is greedy and violent. He attacks and destroys the dwarves for their treasures and causes untold destruction with little regard for morality. He displays barely any more than animalistic instincts, driven purely by selfish desires.

While Smaug is intelligent and plays on human’s concept of greed, he has very little in common with other real-life human mannerism and nature. His only desire is to accumulate wealth of golds and treasures for his own vanity, even if they are totally useless to a dragon such as him who has no need for such treasures. Smaug is a solitary creature who pays little concern for the world around him and exists purely as an evil menace that has to be destroyed by the heroes. He is unwilling to cooperate or co-exist with other races. Furthermore, Smaug’s need for treasures also does not resonate well with readers who view him as he is unable to spend those treasures.

Smaug represents only a single aspect of human nature; that of greed. He is a reminder to readers about the negative impacts of excessive greed and violence of human nature. As a result, Smaug's entire story is that of a final enemy to be defeated by the heroes, akin to the "Others" in Said's theory that must be subjugated or destroyed by the Europeans.

Paolini, on the other hand, uses human's history as an inspiration to create the relationships between dragons and men. In his story, dragons are not depicted to be evil by nature and are capable of co-existing with other races. Initially, dragons are hostile to the elves, the first race to come into contact with the dragons. This is because the elves mistake the dragons as wild beasts and hunt them like other animals in the forest. The dragons would in turn raid and attack elven villages in retaliation (Eragon, 50). This animosity continues up until one day, where an elf by the name of Eragon (Not to be confused with the main protagonist Eragon who is a human) discovers a dragon egg and raises it to be her companion. Through their efforts, they are able to bring the dragons and elves together and establish an alliance. The dragon riders are then formed to keep the peace between all sides. The dwarves and human would later join this alliance.

Role of the dragons

Past dragon stories such as *The Hobbits* tends to depict dragons as the primary antagonist based on the second act of the three-act structure of Sophie Playle. For example, Smaug is the sole dragon in the story of *The Hobbits*. Tolkien based Smaug after the narrative poem *Beowulf* of English/Anglo-Saxon origin. Both dragon stories feature a single powerful dragon as the antagonist, and they would be the only dragon in the plot. This means that the confrontation and interactions between the protagonists and the antagonist dragon typically comes at the end of the story, which generally ends with the dragon's defeat and death at the hands of the heroes.

On the contrary, Paolini's dragons are not the major antagonist of the story. Rather, they are introduced as the means in which both

the protagonist, Eragon, and the antagonist, Galbatorix, need to achieve their goals. Eragon wishes to become a dragon rider and to restore peace to the land. Galbatorix wishes to use the dragons to further consolidate his position as absolute authority.

1. The Driving Force of Conflict

In Hero's journey plot structure, there is generally a conflict of interests or desires for good and evil. This conflict can be many things: objects of power, love interests or authority. According to Weiland, this conflict of interest is what creates motivations and struggles between the protagonists and their adversaries.

Because past dragons are usually depicted as the primary antagonists, they are not the driving force of conflict. They may instigate actions that cause protagonists to fight, but they play primarily as the opposing faction rather than the object of conflict itself. For example, the protagonists of *The Hobbit* do not fight Smaug because they want to tame the dragon or take his power, they simply do so because Smaug is the enemy who disturbs the peace. If Smaug runs away from the land, then the heroes will have no reason to pursue him.

Dragons in *Eragon* are, however, the center piece of the entire conflict of *Eragon*. Galbatorix the antagonist turns into a villain as the result of the loss of his dragon as explained by Brom who states, "Tragically, during the fight a stray arrow pierced his dragon's heart. Without the arts to save her, she died in his arms. Then were the seeds of madness planted." (*Eragon*, 32). The loss of his dragon drives Galbatorix to madness, and he seeks the powers of new dragons to take revenge on the dragon riders whom he believes to be responsible for his loss. To combat such adversary, Eragon has to learn to be the dragon rider and harness the power of dragons himself. Dragons are thus the focal point of *Eragon's* conflict and become the driving force for both the protagonist and antagonist's sides.

2. Dragons as Deuteragonist and Main Character

Many stories, in addition to a protagonist, may also contain a deuteragonist as well. Carmel Sealey, describes a deuteragonist as a protagonist's sidekick, a helpful companion either physically or intellectually. The stories often involve around the relationships and contrasts between characters and the relationship between protagonist and deuteragonist is amongst the most important. The relationships between these two characters will create focal points in which their relationships and give depth to the story. Therefore, a deuteragonist is best summarized as the second most important character, whose story is intertwined with that of the protagonists, and both are considered main characters (Sealey, 2017).

As for Paolini's story, Saphira plays an important role as *Eragon's* deuteragonist. Her importance as Eragon's bonded dragon makes her journey and development as important as Eragon's own story. The readers get to see her growth from the beginning as an egg to an infant to a proud dragon who stands alongside Eragon as he embarks on his quest to avenge his foster family. Like the protagonist, Saphira develops her personality and mentality, making her story as a character much more interesting than a simple loyal pet companion. In addition, her role as Eragon's bonded dragon also plays a major factor in developing Eragon's character as well.

Eragon and Saphira's relationships as a duo are what make the story special and unique. Saphira is able to communicate and express her feelings in regards to Eragon's decisions especially during his early days as a novice dragon rider. She sees the world on a more pragmatic fashion, such as believing that no mercy should be given to enemies, as surviving enemies will come back to attack them later. Her realistic approach to most situations acts as a foil to Eragon's more naive and human nature. Despite that, she stays loyal to Eragon and abides by his decision, no matter how foolish or naive the decision may be to her, and is willing to risk her life for him. Like Sealey's description, Saphira supports Eragon's journey, but maintains her own character and personality.

The use of dragons as deuteragonist was not typically found in dragons from other stories prior, as they tended to be portrayed as minor characters or antagonists instead. Because they were rarely given enough spotlight to develop, their characters suffered from a lack of depth or development. An example of this depiction can be found in *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. Martin, where dragons are depicted as intelligent, but do not grow much from their primitive, reptilian natures. They act mostly the same throughout their story, serving as their master's mount and living weapons, and do not participate in any important discussions, nor do they appear enough in the story to become more important characters.

3. Dragons as Secondary Characters

While main characters are the focus of the story, their goals, desires and fears are what drive the story forward. Secondary characters are also important because their stories support the depth of the main characters, and they may have dedicated scenes, sometimes even stealing the spotlights of the main characters, but the story is not about them. Secondary characters can be as memorable as the main characters (Weiland).

Because past stories focus on the role of dragons as primary antagonist, their narrative leaves little room to explore or introduce any secondary dragon characters that helps the protagonists. Smaug, being the only dragon left in the story by the time of the Hobbits, serves as the primary antagonist and appears only as the final objective for the heroes.

On the contrary, the surviving dragons in *Eragon* still play an important role as secondary characters. Paolini creates his other dragons to never look or act the same. They are given unique details, designs, and personalities. Each also has their own stories to tell and acts as supporting characters to both Eragon and Saphira.

Glaedr, for example, is a supporting character who plays significant role in the story. As an elder dragon, he acts as a mentor to

Saphira in the same manner as when Brom was Eragon's mentor. Glaedr teaches Sapphira the ways of the dragons, such as how to tame her fiery breath, and to properly fly. His role as a mentor allows Saphira to grow up as a character. Even after his physical death, Glaedr remains a spirit guide for the main characters, and further supports both Eragon and Saphira.

Conclusion

From the prior analysis, it can be concluded that Paolini has made significant changes to how dragons are depicted compared to the past. There is much less emphasis on the negativity imposed on his dragons when compared to previous works like *The Hobbits* or *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Paolini's goal seem to push dragons towards more positive light by introducing various aspects that differs from typical dragon's depictions as the "Others" in Said's theory.

It is possible that, because his work is published in 2002, Paolini has decided to incorporate many changes in human society at the time, and reflects them in his work. The globalization made by the internet, the massive change that happens after World War 2 and the following Cold War may have played their parts in motivating Paolini to craft a new, more refreshing story to the otherwise dark and gloomy dragon stories of the past.

Even now, we see dragons being depicted in many different styles. The advancement of computer graphics and continued development of human society allows new portrayals of dragons that branch out from the past. Globalization and rejection of the Orientalism may pave ways for future, more positive depictions of dragons that eliminate past stereotype conceptions. Perhaps in the future, we may expect to see dragons being represented as saviors of human or as their own nations. Further study is recommended.

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