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"A BIZARRE MIRROR VERSION OF THE REAL WORLD"

Modernity in Three Mythic Fiction Novels by Emma Bull, Keith Donohue, and Tad Williams

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Abstract

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Abstract: Traditionally, fantasy literature has often been suspicious of modernity, typically portraying rural, pre-industrial communities as threatened by the destructive forces of modernisation. However, it has been suggested that more nuanced pictures may be found in fantasy works with contemporary settings. This paper examines constructions of modernity in three such novels: *War for the Oaks* by Emma Bull, *The Stolen Child* by Keith Donohue, and *The War of the Flowers* by Tad Williams. These novels all place fairy creatures drawn from Celtic folklore in modern urban environments, and the aim of this paper is to investigate the visions of modernity that emerge through these encounters. The paper is structured around three focus areas: the picture of the modern city and urbanisation, the effects of modernisation on the natural environment, and the transformation of society under modernity. Theories on modernity, supplemented with ecocritical theory and writings on urban literature, illuminate the discussion. As this paper demonstrates, the juxtaposition of the modern world and ancient folklore raises a range of fundamental questions about the essence of modernity, including the relationship between culture and nature, the place of history and tradition within modernity, and the relationship between the individual and society. Furthermore, by exploring the sometimes very different visions in the three novels, this paper refutes the claim of an inherent ideology of fantasy.

Keywords: Modernity, fantasy, fairy, mythic fiction, urban, environment, folklore, Emma Bull, Keith Donohue, Tad Williams.

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Introduction

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.
>
> – Marshall Berman

In his seminal essay "On Fairy-stories", J. R. R. Tolkien mounts a spirited defence of the fantasy genre. Central to his argument is the claim that fantasy offers respite from, as well as resistance to, the forces of modernity. By concentrating on "permanent and fundamental things" (70), fantasy can silently resist the "barbarity" (71) of the modern age and set up alternatives to "progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable" products (71). Making this argument, Tolkien aligns himself (and the fantasy genre) with one of two diametrically opposed poles in the discourse on modern life. Modernity is conceived of either as the liberator from constraining norms, the fresh wind bringing new possibilities of thought and creativity, or as the destroyer of stability and identity, the inexorable force which shatters ways of life and of making meaning.

Regardless of whether it is embraced or denounced, however, modernity is everywhere understood as standing in opposition to tradition.[1] In his *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, Brian Attebery asserts that "fantasy, as a literary form, is a way of reconnecting to traditional myths and the worlds they generate" (9). Likewise, Sylvia Kelso argues that whereas science fiction looks to the future to provide a "sense of wonder," fantasy looks to the past (15). If fantasy is thus intrinsically aligned with tradition and the past, does it then follow that it is, as Tolkien claims, by its very nature opposed to modernity? Traditional "high" fantasy has indeed often been suspicious of modernity (Kelso 21), a trend which Siobhan Carroll attributes to the enormous popularity and influence of Tolkien's fiction (311). In Tolkienian fantasy, harmonious, pre-industrial societies are frequently threatened by the evil, destructive forces of modernisation; the pretty fields and green hills of a Shire are juxtaposed with the hellish machines and grimy industry of an Isengard.

1 By way of illustration, a search in the *Corpus of Global Web-Based English* shows the most common collocate of 'modernity' to be 'tradition', occurring almost twice as often as the second most common collocate ('western'), and typically juxtaposed with modernity in constructions of the type "from tradition to modernity" or "between tradition and modernity" (Davies).

More nuanced pictures, however, might be found in other types of fantasy. Especially interesting to consider are those which leave behind the semi-medieval fairyland of much high fantasy and take the contemporary world as their setting. In this paper, I examine constructions of modernity in three such works: *War for the Oaks* by Emma Bull, *The Stolen Child* by Keith Donohue, and *The War of the Flowers* by Tad Williams. In their different ways, these three novels all explore the modern world by juxtaposing it with fairy creatures drawn from Celtic folklore. In *War for the Oaks*, set in 1980's Minneapolis, rock musician Eddi McCandry is drafted into a conflict between the Seelie and Unseelie fairy courts of the city. Similar in more ways than just its title, *The War of the Flowers* likewise features a rock musician protagonist, Theo Vilmos, who is made an unwilling pawn in a conflict between different fairy factions. Although mostly set in a magical secondary world[2], the novel is very much a contemporary fantasy[3]: the Faerie into which Theo is brought has undergone thorough modernisation and is dominated by a vast metropolis. The third work, *The Stolen Child*, is set in and around a small town in mid-20th century USA, and follows the fates of Aniday, a child stolen by a tribe of faeries[4], and Henry Day, the changeling who has taken his place in the human world. In their explorations of the modern age, these three novels engage with similar topics, using very similar motifs; yet, the conclusions drawn are sometimes vastly different. Studied together, the chosen novels thus represent a range of ways of thinking about modernity, as well as demonstrate the limitations and possibilities of using the fairy motif in such discussions. Furthermore, as they have hitherto received very limited critical attention, the potential of these works has so far gone largely unexplored.[5]

According to Attebery, the dividing line between myth and modern fantasy lies in the latter's "awareness of myth as something belonging to others, to the past, to unfallen primitives" (*Stories* 26). If the modern age is a non-mythical age, what, then, happens when it is confronted with ancient myth? "If the story is to do its work in the present," Attebery writes, "then not only must the existence of the Graal be explained but we must also see how it relates to the world of shops, motorcars, and newspaper headlines" (*Stories* 50). While

2 A secondary world is "an autonomous world or venue which is not bound to mundane reality" (Clute 847), as opposed to the primary world, i.e. the real world, or literary versions of it.

3 "Contemporary fantasy" here means a fantasy work **set** in contemporary times, not a work **written** in contemporary times.

4 "Faeries" is the spelling used for the supernatural creatures in *The Stolen Child*, and in this paper it will be followed in discussions of that particular novel. Otherwise, the more usual "fairies" is used for the creatures, while "Faerie" denotes the magical realm, the fairyland.

5 Hereafter, the novels will be referred to respectively as *Oaks*, *Flowers*, and *Child*.

Attebery's argument concerns all fantasy, the situation becomes even more palpable in fantasy works set in contemporary times, where the relationship between myth and the modern is often in itself a major theme. In the novels I examine, creatures from ancient folklore are brought straight into the modern environment, providing a contrast against which the characteristics of the modern age are highlighted. The purpose of this paper is to explore the visions of modernity that emerge through such collisions, demonstrating how contemporary fantasies can cause important questions regarding the essence of modernity to be raised. I also discuss the implications of the works' employment of folklore rather than newly invented fantastic elements. Folklore is "communal property" (Attebery *Fantasy Tradition* 15), and making use of such material, the writers have to take into consideration the symbolic content already inherent in the motifs of their stories.

Contemporary fantasies divide into a range of frequently overlapping subgenres, the definitions of which is a rather tricky business. Therefore a few words will be said regarding the terms used in this paper. The three novels examined here are categorised collectively as "mythic fiction". Mythic fiction works are fantasy works with "modern sensibilities, dealing with contemporary people and issues" (de Lint "Mythic Fiction"). They are distinguished from other types of contemporary fantasy through their reliance on existing folklore and myth rather than new inventions (Bazelli). A related term, more widely used but also more problematic to define[6], is "urban fantasy". When used in this paper, urban fantasy is understood roughly as defined by Alexander C. Irvine, who presents the following central features of the subgenre: "a city in which supernatural events occur, the presence of prominent characters who are artists or musicians or scholars, [and] the redeployment of previous fantastic and folkloric topoi in unfamiliar contexts" (200).

Not surprisingly, most previous studies of modernity in fantasy have concentrated on the works of Tolkien. In *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*, Patrick Curry discusses *The Lord of the Rings* as a piece of resistance to modernity. *Tolkien and Modernity*, a two-volume collection edited by Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger, examines modernity in Tolkien's works from a wide range of perspectives; and in *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*, edited by Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, the relationship between modern issues and Tolkien's medievalist scholarship is thoroughly explored. Other writers and other modes of fantasy have not achieved anything near the same amount of critical

6 For comprehensive discussions of the definitional problems surrounding "urban fantasy", see Irvine (200) and McLennon.

attention.

However, a few studies can be found which touch upon modernity in fantasy of the contemporary or urban variety. In one such study, Kelso discusses basic mechanisms and conventions of fantasy as they are manifested and transformed in several urban fantasy works, focusing on the concept of the "numinous"[7]. Urban fantasy, Kelso argues, disrupts such binary oppositions as man/nature and past/present (21-22). The disruption is not complete – "[n]ature and the past are still aligned with good" (22) – but nevertheless, Kelso writes, urban fantasy represents "a determined initiative to make [the] industrial world not only numinous, but worth fighting for" (28). In another study, focusing primarily on the construction of place and national identity in a number of urban fantasy works, Carroll similarly suggests that urban fantasies "reject the nostalgic turn toward a pastoral past" (312) of much high fantasy. The forces of modernity are still often depicted as threats, however; place and identity can survive in the modern urban landscape, but only if actively defended (313-316). Daniel Baker also briefly touches upon the topic, finding in the city of New Crobuzon, from China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, a reflection of "the commodity fetishism, vampiric capitalism, authoritarian legality, and social alienation" of Western modernity (445). Baker's study indicates that fantasy works can be highly critical of modernity without being written in the "nostalgic, conservative, pastoral, and optimistic" (Hartwell 5) mode of generic high fantasy. This, as we shall see, will be further confirmed in this current paper.

"[A] bizarre mirror version of the real world" (T. Williams 81). This is Theo Vilmo's early assessment of the Fairyland into which he has been dragged. This paper rests on the assumption that fantasy, through its use of the impossible, has a unique potential to act as such a "bizarre mirror", reflecting reality from unusual angles. For, as Kathryn Hume writes, "[d]eparture from reality does not preclude comment on it" (xii); writers can use fantastic elements in order to highlight or provide new perspectives on phenomena outside the fiction. The use of the fantastic mode can thus become, to borrow Shklovsky's term, a "method of estrangement" (163), a device creating "the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things" and increasing "duration and complexity of perception" (162). Tolkien calls this estranging property of fantasy "recovery" (67), and Attebery terms it "wonder" (*Strategies* 16).

Fantasy's estrangement effect is closely connected to its political potential. Another

7 Defined as "a sense of spiritual resonance" (Kelso 15)

central assumption of this paper is that, as Marek Oziewicz puts it, "[t]here are no ideologcally neutral texts" (3). Every piece of writing has political dimensions, and fantasy works, like any other, are permeated with overt or covert traces of the guiding assumptions and values of their authors and of the societies out of which they originated. Describing modernity is a project which is heavily politically charged; duly, considerations of ideology will have a prominent place throughout this paper. Various claims have been staked for the inherent politics of the fantasy genre, ranging from Carl Freedman's claim that fantasy is an "essentially ahistorical" mode of literature working to uphold the status quo (43), to Rosemary Jackson's assertion of fantasy as a "subversive literature", aimed at "dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient" (180).[8] However, as Baker points out, "[t]he ability to write the strange, the impossible, and the unreal is a means to many ends" (438). Concurring with Baker, I reject simple generalisations of fantasy as either conservative or subversive. As will be seen, fantasy can be a vehicle for vastly disparate ideological content.

For my understanding of the concept of modernity in this paper, I chiefly follow the writings of Anthony Giddens and Marshall Berman, at times supplementing their theories with ecocriticism and writings on urbanisation. Berman enumerates the following as defining features of modernity: scientific discovery, industrialisation of production, demographic upheavals, rapid urban growth, systems of mass communication, increasingly powerful national states, mass social movements, and a capitalist world market (16). Giddens, in addition, names "the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention" as a central characteristic of modernity (Giddens and Pierson 94). Both writers stress the turbulence of the modern age. For Berman, modern life is "a maelstrom" (15), and for Giddens, it "has the feeling of riding a juggernaut" (Giddens 28). I further follow Giddens in his rejection of a distinction between modernity and post-modernity. As Giddens points out, the current period is still governed by the major driving forces of modernity as listed above; there is no major discontinuity (Giddens and Pierson 116-117). In my analysis of the three novels, moreover, features associated with both earlier and later modern periods will be considered.

In this paper, I mainly focus on three aspects of modernity: In the first chapter, I

8 However, Jackson's definition of fantasy excludes the works of Tolkien as well as Lewis and Le Guin (9). Leaving out of consideration a whole class of works understood by most critics and readers as central to the fantasy genre, Jackson's theory is divested of much of its usefulness.

discuss conceptions of the modern city as found in the three novels, exploring the symbols inherent in the picture of the city as well as the effects of urbanisation. In the second chapter, I turn to the place of nature in modernity, examining the novels' treatments of environmental issues as well as their conceptions of the place of nature within the modern urban sphere. Finally, in the third chapter, I concentrate on depictions of social and political systems in the works, investigating how modernity is related to political change and also touching upon the place of the individual in modern society as portrayed in the books. Other aspects of modernity are briefly touched upon as they intersect with the above three.

Chapter 1: City

"By the middle of the nineteenth century", Raymond Williams writes in his seminal work *The Country and the City*, "the urban population of England exceeded the rural population: the first time in human history that this had ever been so, anywhere" (217). This event marked "the change to a new kind of civilisation" (217), a process which is steadily ongoing still: in 2009, the urban population outgrew the rural population globally as well (United Nations). The modern age is thus truly "an age of great cities" (R. Williams 217), and the metropolis is one of the most distinctive symbols of modernity.

In this chapter, I examine depictions of the modern city in my material, investigating the symbolic content with which the picture of the city is imbued. I further discuss the reasons behind and effects of urbanisation as conceived in the novels. Edward Timms, discussing the city in Modernist literature, asserts that the "metropolis ultimately becomes a metaphor – a dynamic configuration of the conflicting hopes and fears of the twentieth century" (4). In the works discussed here, the presence of fairies and other fantasy elements contribute to lending the city this metaphorical quality, and here, too, the city becomes a symbol of the conditions of modern life. As such, it is either a place to love or a place to loathe; for, as Leslie Fiedler remarks, the city has created "the Library, the Museum, and the University", but also "unprecedented human indignities" (114), and throughout history, the city as a symbol has been imbued with contradictory values and associations, serving as the setting for Heaven as well as Hell (115). Even so, Fiedler writes,

> though our poets and storytellers have striven valiantly to mythicize the city[...]; to make it a fact of the imagination as well as of geography, demography, and sociology – like the Sun, the Moon, the Desert, the Ocean, the Forest, even the King's Palace and the Peasant's Hut – it has proved oddly resistant to any mythic images except for certain negative, dark, infernal ones (114)

The modern city, Fiedler claims, remains alien to us because it has not been properly incorporated into human mythology, "the perceptual grid through which we see and understand our identity and destiny" (114).

For writers of urban fantasy, however, the challenge of mythicising the city is at the very core of their enterprise. If, as Attebery claims, the task of fantasy is to reclaim myth for the modern world (*Stories* 3-4), then the special task of urban fantasy is to "rediscover

folklore in the ultramodern labyrinth of cities" (Carroll 312). Kelso demonstrates how urban fantasies succeed in evoking the "numinous" from the most mundane urban environments (21), and among the many visions of the modern city offered by the urban fantasy subgenre and its close cousins, both lighter and darker versions abound, as can be seen both in Kelso's study and in this paper. Furthermore, if the cities of urban fantasy appear alien to us, the intent is only a temporary estrangement, all the better for us to "see and understand" the real cities in which we live and move.

In Bull's *Oaks*, loving homage is paid to the city of Minneapolis. "This city is alive with the best magic of mortal folk", the phouka, guide, guardian, and eventually lover of the protagonist, tells her. "The very light off the skyscrapers and the lakes vibrates with it" (71). With its setting in a specific and named city, *Oaks*, in Carroll's terms, "argue[s] for the continued survival of anthropological place" (312) in the modern urban environment. According to Marc Augé, coiner of the term, anthropological place "is formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, [and] the unformulated rules of living know-how" (101), in contrast to non-places, which are characterised by anonymity, homogeneity, and lack of history (77-78). In *Oaks*, each specific site in the city is named and imbued with its own clear identity, and the dialogue is interspersed with references to local peculiarities: "The joke goes that we have two seasons: road repair and snow removal. Or is that snow repair and road removal?" (110). Anthropological places, Augé writes, "are places whose analysis has meaning because they have been invested with meaning […] They want to be – people want them to be – places of identity, of relations and of history" (52). Augé is here on the verge of granting the anthropological place agency and intentions of its own. For Bull, too, the meaning with which people imbue a place is almost enough to make it a living entity:

> "At night," [Eddi] said at last, "this is the heart of Minneapolis. Uptown, where we were last night, is maybe its feet, where it dances. Hennepin Avenue is like an artery between them. […] When the suburban kids come in for Friday night, or the outstate kids come to the city, Hennepin is where they go. When the college kids want to play pinball, when the guys on the north side want to hang around and check out the women and when the women want to hang around and show off their new clothes, this is it, this is the place to do it. […] With all those people, all that energy and emotion and – well, *living*, this place ought to have a life of its own by now." (113-114)

The city consists of the people who inhabit it; it is given life through their living. Hennepin Avenue becomes an artery in the body of Minneapolis because the people of the city treat it as

such. In *Oaks*, thus, the city is primarily a social environment, an arena where meaning is made through meetings.

In the imagery of the passage above, traces can be seen of that which Kelso terms the numinous. As Kelso argues, *Oaks* claims the modern city as "a place numinous in its own right" (23), infusing everyday details of urban life with a dimension of mystery and spirituality. An even clearer example can be seen in this passage from the prologue:

> [L]ate at night, there's a change in the Nicollet Mall.
>
> The street lamp globes hang like a myriad moons, and light glows in empty bus shelters like nebulae. Down through the silent business district the mall twists, the silver zipper in a patchwork coat of many dark colors. The sound of traffic from Hennepin Avenue, one block over, might be the grating of the World-Worm's scales over stone. (13)

With street lamps like "moons" and glowing lights like "nebulae", Bull imbues the empty night-time street with the vastness and mystery of space. Hearing the World-Worm in the noise of traffic, she calls on ancient myth to lend depth and wonder to the setting, while at the same time staking a claim for myth's continued relevance in the modern world. Doing this, she also aptly prepares the reader to accept her tale of magical warfare in the city; if the World-Worm can be found in such an environment, surely it can easily accommodate fairies as well? The devices with which the numinous is evoked also contribute to the creation of urban pastoral, a concept which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

As we have seen, the city as conceived by *Oaks* is primarily a place where people meet. This idea of the city as a social arena is discussed by Irvine, who points out that the urbanisation process which brings together diverse people in the metropolis also creates niches for all types of subcultures, making the city a favourable environment for artistic activity (203). In Irvine's opinion, this property of the city is fundamental to the urban fantasy subgenre, for, he argues, the same mechanisms which make possible the development of subcultures also "creates the cracks through which can seep the fantastic" (203). It is therefore no coincidence that, in urban fantasy, the dominions of art and of magic tend to overlap.

In *Oaks*, too, the modern city is an environment which breeds creativity. Centred around the rock band which Eddi and her friends form, the narrative is interspersed with descriptions of their music and lyrics, and the events of the story largely move between the various spaces where the band rehearses, plans gigs, and performs. The city is a prerequisite for the band's existence; for Eddi, not native to Minneapolis, coming to the city and getting into contact with other musicians was the starting point of her musical career (109).

Furthermore, music becomes a crucial force for the fate of the city itself, with the final confrontation between the Seelie and Unseelie courts taking the shape of a concert in which the band *Eddi and the Fey* has to keep the people of Minneapolis dancing (301).

For, in *Oak*s, it is the fate of the city which is at stake in this diminished version of high fantasy's world-wide struggle between good and evil. "It's not just for you, it's for the entire seven-county metro area" (70), as Eddi puts it, or in Kelso's words, "[t]he city *is* The Land" (23). With its vision of Minneapolis, *Oaks* depicts the modern city as an environment infused with life and creativity. But this, the novel makes clear, is not the whole picture of urban modernity; were the Unseelie court to win the city, it would become:

> a city whose new buildings [look] tawdry, whose old ones [are] ramshackle, where the streets [are] grimy and the wind [is] never fresh, where money [passes] from hand to hand yet [benefits] no one […] a place where people fear their neighbors, where life drains the living until art and wit are luxuries, where any pleasant thing must be imported and soon loses its savor. (70-71)

Envisioning this grimy and unhappy city as a looming threat to the vibrant Minneapolis, *Oaks* juxtaposes the two age-old images of the city as Heaven or as Hell, concluding that the modern city may be either. Meaning and life can thrive within the city, but only if it is loved and defended.

Not very far removed from this dark vision of the city ruled by the Unseelie court is the vast and nameless Faerie City of Williams' *Flowers*. While Bull's fairies, though ancient, appear to get by comparatively well in modern Minneapolis, *Flowers* makes it clear that fairies do not rightly belong in the modern city. "What kind of fairyland [has] railroads, for God's sake?" Theo grumbles (81), and the narrative provides the answer: a fairyland in decline. A central characteristic of modernity is "rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth" (Berman 16), and in *Flowers*, urbanisation is a rapid and destructive force indeed (399). "[T]here was a time once when there was no City, when there was no servitude," declares goblin agitator Mud Bug Button (436), seeing in the city a symbol of the gross inequalities of Faerie society. The rigid class society of *Flowers* will be further explored in the third chapter of this paper; here it is enough to note that the city, through its very shape and structure, serves to reflect and uphold the class system. Spiral in shape, the city is extremely segregated (80), with its inner reaches occupied by the enormous clan towers of the nobility, each surrounded by its own little community of relatives and staff (82), while the outskirts house the working classes in "featureless" flatblocks (401) or even plywood hovels in "sprawling

shantytown[s]" (402). With this portrait of the city, *Flowers* calls to mind the segregation of numerous real-world modern cities, where the gulf between rich and poor is made glaringly apparent through geographic organisation and architecture. "Squalor and poverty have always been parts of human existence," Fiedler concedes, "but never somehow so visibly" as in the modern city (114).

Although the modern metropolis in *Flowers* is conceived as a dismal and oppressive place, it is nevertheless awe-inspiring in its immensity. Viewing the city from a distance at night, the vista of its lights appear to Theo "as though someone had spilled a wheelbarrow full of diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires across the ground, as though the stars through which he had flown earlier had drifted down from the sky and piled up like snowflakes" (239). The sight is "monstrous" but at the same time "majestic and stunningly beautiful" (239). The passage is an example of what Christoph Den Tandt terms "the urban sublime", picturing "cities as objects of fascination and terror" (127). A product of the Industrial Revolution, the discourse of the urban sublime emerged as an attempt to capture the conflicting sensations of modern urban life (128), and the mixed emotions which characterise the encounter with the sublime (127) can be clearly seen in Theo's reaction: "His heart was beating very quickly, and not simply from wonder: there was fear, too, at something both so monumental and so utterly indifferent to him" (239). Irvine argues that urban fantasy is in itself a version of the urban sublime, and in novels like *Oaks*, he claims, "the fey characters incarnate the sublime that the disaffected human protagonists desire" (202). In *Flowers*, however, sublimity is not achieved through the presence of the fantastic; instead, the mind-boggling immensity of the city makes it sublime in its own right. As it is also a place "of oppression, blight, and ruin" (Latham and Hicks 163), it is monstrous indeed, a malevolent entity threatening to swallow all of Faerie.

While perhaps not quite an urban fantasy, Donohue's *Child* is nevertheless a novel much concerned with urbanisation. Set between 1949 and 1979, it follows the development of a rural area into suburb, a process which, at the outset of the novel, has only just begun. At the farm of the Day family, into which the changeling protagonist has insinuated himself under the assumed identity of their son Henry, rural decay serves as an early sign of urbanisation: "An old barn, red paint souring to a dark mauve, now served as garage. The split-rail fence that fronted the property was falling apart stick by stick. The field, an acre or so that had flushed green with corn, lay fallow" (35). As farming becomes unprofitable, the former farmers "[sell] off homesteads and acreage to developers" (35) and the previously self-

supporting rural community is slowly turned into a commuter town for city workers.

Whereas the fairies of *Oaks* are quite at home in Minneapolis and the City of *Flowers* is built by and for the fairies themselves, urban spaces in *Child* are understood as exclusively human domains. "The modern city," Giddens writes, "is by far the most extensively and intensively artificial series of settings for human activity that has ever existed" (Giddens 166). Being forest creatures, the faeries of *Child* do not feel at home in this artificial urban environment, and although they may sneak into the nearby town to steal supplies, they are intimidated by its "neat corners and straight lines, the dead weight of walls, the clear boundaries of windows" (82-83), finding it "unreal and a bit scary" (84).

For the faeries, urbanisation is a steadily growing threat. "To the east is the city," the faery Smaolach tells his friends, "[a]nd I can only guess that the smell of the air means that the city is heading our way" (173). The environmental implications of urbanisation in *Child* will be explored in the next chapter; but for the faeries, urban growth also eventually robs them of their home, sense of security, and way of life, as their ancient campsite, which has "existed since the arrival of the first French fur traders" (170), is discovered by humans and subsequently developed into a suburban housing estate (231). "This is where it had all happened," Aniday muses, reminiscing about his years with the faeries while looking at the site of their former home. "But someone had erased all that, like a word or a line, and in that space wrote another sentence. The neighborhood of houses appeared to have existed in this space for ages. It made one doubt one's own story" (235). Urbanisation in *Child* is thus a threat to history, the signs of the past obliterated as the growing city demands more space. "Country living," says Henry's uncle Charlie, the businessman responsible for the development of the estate (208). But as *Child* makes clear, housing projects such as uncle Charlie's are simply extensions of city living, and under the pressure of suburban development, traditional ways of country living, whether for faeries or humans, can no longer exist.

In *Child*, however, the urban is not simply destructive. Although mainly set in the vicinity of a small town, *Child*, like *Flowers*, also features an unnamed city, although in this case not nameless "because it is the only one" (T. Williams 79), but rather because it is a generic, anonymous city. For Henry, hungrily embracing all that which is human after a century living in the forest, the city becomes an emblem of freedom and possibilities. As Henry encounters the modern city for the first time, his awestruck vision is a clear example of

the urban sublime: “On our approach to the city, the factories on the outskirts appeared first, great smokestacks exhaling streams of dark clouds, furnaces within glowing with hearts of fire. A bend in the road – then all at once, a view of buildings stretched to heaven (39)”. Henry’s initial wonder at the city is soon overcome, however, as he learns to negotiate the urban space, and his weekly trips into the city functions for him as “a tonic, away from farm and family and into civilization” (43).

As in *Oaks*, furthermore, the urban in *Child* is associated with creativity and culture. It is in the city that Henry regains his human skills at playing the piano, relishing the fact that he is “[n]o longer something wild, but a creature of culture” (43), and it is also in the city that he eventually studies to become a composer. Even for Aniday, the cultural, urban sphere can offer temporary release from the monotony of life in the forest, as he and his friend Speck construct a lair for themselves beneath the town library, steadily working themselves through the canon of Western literature (202).

In their engagement with the modern city, *Oaks*, *Flowers*, and *Child* present strikingly different pictures. In *Oaks*, the city is a creative environment, full of life; a place to cherish and to defend. The contrast is sharp between this image and the dystopian vision of *Flowers*, with its city permeated by injustice and strife. Whereas *Oaks* perceives the city as coming alive through the combined living of its inhabitants, *Flowers* conceives of the city as a monster, crushing and devouring those that come within its reach. *Child*, however, occupies something of a middle ground between these extremes. Like *Flowers*, *Child* pictures urbanisation as a threatening process; however, the urban environment in itself, although eerily unnatural, is also a creative space marked by culture and promising freedom.

Chapter 2: Nature

"Did it hurt?" Theo asks his friend Cumber, on the subject of having his wings cut off (T. Williams 397). In *Flowers*, winglessness is a status symbol: upper-class fairies do not have wings, and lower-class individuals keen to climb the social ladder can have theirs surgically removed. The novel thus paints a picture of a modern age where nature has to stand back for social concerns; if the natural conditions do not correspond to the current needs or fancies of society, they can be reshaped, adapted, or eliminated. Williams' novel here echoes Giddens, who argues that one of the main characteristics of modernity is that it is "non-natural" (Giddens and Pierson 102). Nature, Giddens claims, has been "socialised" (Giddens 136-137), its forces subjected to human activities to such a degree that "nature literally ceases to exist" (166). Pain, of course, is also a natural phenomenon: "Hurt?" Cumber replies. "No, no, of course not. This is the modern age. They can cut away your entire life and you'll never feel a thing" (T. Williams 397).

In this chapter, I discuss the effects of modernity upon the natural world as depicted in the three novels, examining the works' treatment of environmental issues as well as their conceptions of the place of nature within modernity. A recurrent issue in the novels is the relationship between human and nature, a relationship which is traditionally perceived as pure opposition – this view, of course, underlies Giddens' assertion of "the end of nature" (Giddens 137). However, as Stefan Ekman points out, "[a]re we not of natural origin and therefore part of nature ourselves?" (129). For Timothy Clark, modernity is not so much "non-natural" as an age in which the nature/culture distinction has become hopelessly obsolete. With the advent of the Anthropocene, "that era in the planet's natural history in which humanity becomes a decisive geological and climatological force" (79), natural and cultural phenomena have become so intertwined as to be inextricable from one another (80). However, regardless of whether one speaks of the Anthropocene or the "end of nature", the complex and unharmonious relationship between humanity and its natural environment is an issue of such staggering importance that it cannot be overlooked in any discussion of the conditions of modernity.[9]

9 It should be noted that "nature" is a highly problematic concept, notoriously hard to define and therefore easily made to serve a wide variety of agendas. For a comprehensive discussion of the problems connected to the term, see Clark.

In *The Comedy of the Fantastic: Ecological Perspectives on the Fantasy Novel,* Don D. Elgin argues that fantasy, through its affinity with comedy, is a genre especially favourable to the environment (22). Building on the work of Joseph Meeker, Elgin asserts that environmental problems are caused by the world view propagated by tragedy (24), whereas comedy as a literary mode advocates a relationship between humanity and the environment which is ecologically sound (30). Fantasy literature, Elgin claims, follows the comic mode (23); therefore, it has the power to "[offer] humanity a way to reintegrate itself into the natural world" (30). Elgin here is part of that branch of ecocriticism which engages in "affirming certain kinds of writing as enacting modes of thought or culture that are supposedly less antagonistic to or oblivious of the natural world" (Clark 78). As Clark points out, such practices are problematic because they build upon the highly questionable idea that certain forms of language or thought are more "natural" than others (78). Moreover, in claiming the tragic mode as the original cause of environmental degradation, Elgin attributes to literature an unreasonable amount of influence over human affairs, ignoring economical and other factors.

Nevertheless, although not in itself "ultimately ecological" (Elgin 22), fantasy still has distinctive qualities which make it particularly well suited to approach the question of humanity's relationship to its natural environment. Clark himself suggests that the fantastic mode may be especially apt in capturing the "bizarre kinds of action-at-a-distance, [the] imponderable scale, the collapse of distinctions between the trivial and the disastrous, nature and culture, and the proliferation of forces that cannot be directly perceived" which characterise the Anthropocene (81). Moreover, its close affinity to myth lends fantasy a further dimension which makes it interesting from an ecocritical perspective. Personifying environmental features, myths often depict the natural world as having "agency and identity and complexity" of its own (Callaghan 80). Fantasy, borrowing its materials from myths and folklore, frequently does the same: in fantasy stories, trees may walk and animals talk; rivers may have intentions and mountains opinions. In this way, fantasy has the potential to subvert the pervasive anthropocentrism of Western thought, inviting readers to consider the needs and perspectives of the non-human.

In the novels discussed in this paper, the effects of modernity on the environment are explored with the help of the fairy motif. In traditional belief, fairies are often associated with natural phenomena or environmental features. They may inhabit mountains, rivers, or trees

(Briggs 49-50), and, as folklorist Katherine Briggs writes, "there are few homely plants that were not, for health or danger, connected with fairies" (104). This close association of fairies with nature is also echoed in many works of mythic fiction. For example, the fairies of Charles de Lint's Newford reside in flowers, trees and parks ("Ghosts" 198-199); the elf lord who invades the protagonist's home in Tanith Lee's short story "UOUS" rapidly turns it into a forest; and even the otherwise technologically adept fairies of Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* series can "recharge" their magical powers only by planting an acorn picked at a certain site (72-73).

In *Child*, the tribe of faeries lives hidden deep into the woods, in a place where the trees are taller than elsewhere and the forest is "thick and impenetrable" (16). Sleeping in holes in the ground and sustaining themselves as hunter-gatherers and scavengers, these are down-to-earth faeries, their survival dependent on such knowledge as "how to fell a tree and not be crushed, the geometry and physics behind a deadfall trap, [and] the proper angle of chase to catch a hare on foot" (105). The book abounds in vivid descriptions of natural scenery and details of life in the forest:

> a pheasant craning its neck to spy on us from a thicket, a crow hopping from branch to branch, a raccoon snoring in its den. [...] Along the water's edge ice crystals grew, and listening closely, we heard the crack of freezing. A single duck paddled further down the river, and each snowflake hissed as it hit the water's surface. (30-31)

As forest creatures, with their existence largely determined by the forces of nature, the faeries are acutely aware of every change to their natural environment. Even in their remote hideaway, the impact of modernity can be felt in the shape of noise and pollution:

> "Pay attention. What do you hear?" [...]
>
> "Lots of cars?" I guessed.
>
> "Right. […] Lots of cars in the morning. That means it's a workday, not a Sunday. Sundays are quiet and not so many cars speeding by."
>
> She held her bare finger to the air and then tasted it in her mouth for an instant. "I think it's a Monday," she said.
>
> "I've seen that trick before. How can you tell?"
>
> "All those cars make smoke, and the factories make smoke. But there aren't so many cars on the road and the factories are closed on Sundays. You hardly taste any smoke at all. Monday, a bit more. By Friday night, the air tastes like a mouthful of coal." (62-63)

As the natural world becomes "more and more pulled into systems determined by socialised influences" (Giddens 166), the wind thus brings into the wilderness not only the sound of traffic and the taste of smoke, but also the modern human understanding of division of time.

In *Child*, wild nature is depicted as severely embattled by modernity. An early omen

can be seen in Aniday's encounter with a deer hit by a car (32-33); when expansive modernisation enters into nature's domains, wild things are pushed out of the way or crushed. The forces of modernity are impersonal and undiscerning; although the driver of the car does not wish it, her interests conflict with the deer's. At this early stage of the tale, the deer can be saved (33), but that is only a momentary delay of the inevitable. For, in *Child*, modernity **is** inevitable, inexorably pushing wild nature further and further into the margins. As the leader Igel tells the faery tribe:

> Your paradise is vanishing. Every morning, I hear the encroaching roar of cars, feel the shudder of planes overhead. There's soot in the air, dirt in the water, and all the birds fly away and never come back. The world is changing, and you must go while you can. […] For this will soon be gone. (155)

The invasion of human modernity into the forest can be seen in little things, such as the litter left behind by hikers (254), as well as in large things, such as the housing estate built at the faeries' former campsite (231). The faeries belong to the wilderness, and as the wilderness is destroyed, so is their habitat. Donohue's faeries exemplify how fantasy elements can be employed to subvert anthropocentrism and give voice to nature. When the faeries speak of their impending doom, they speak for all wild things:

> A hundred years ago, there were coyotes, wolves, lions in these hills. The sky blackened with flocks of passenger pigeons every spring. Bluebirds lived among us, and the creeks and rivers were fat with fishes and toads and terrapins. […] They come in, hunt and chop, and take it all away. […] Things will never be the same, and we are the next. (172)

Although human in shape and origin, the faeries perceive themselves as more akin to "coyotes, wolves, lions", fearing "no enemy but man" (19). This enemy has proved quite enough, however; like the passenger pigeons, the faeries might face extinction. Through their affinity with wild animals, Donohue's faeries call into question the idea of human beings as fundamentally different from all other animals, a tenet which, though absurd on biological grounds, is immensely pervasive in most strands of Western thought. The faeries' kinship with the natural world is echoed in their names. Many of them are named after forest animals, for example Igel (German for "hedgehog"), Luchóg (Irish for "mouse"), and Béka (Hungarian for "frog"). Others take their names from the plant kingdom, such as Onions, or Blomma (Swedish for "flower").

Despite its loving descriptions and fervent defence of nature, however, *Child* does not resort to pastoral in its depictions of the natural world. The faeries freeze and starve in the

forest during the harsh winters (60), and for Henry, the forest is a menacing presence, threatening to rob him once again of the human life he has regained (73). From Henry's human perspective, moreover, cars are symbols not of pollution, noise, and death, but of freedom, granting him escapades in the city (95) as well as private time with his girlfriend (178), and the highway is "a ribbon of pure energy flowing in both directions" (38). Thus, although *Child* emphasizes the environmental problems brought by modernity, it does not deny the social advantages of the modern technologies which cause those problems.

In *Flowers*, too, fairies are closely associated with nature, and Williams' modernised fairy society bears numerous traces of a former nature worship now abandoned. The fairies often have plant names (the "Flowers" of its title are the Faerie nobility, "Flower lords", with names such as "Daffodil", "Foxglove", and "Primrose"), and at the very centre of the City, a circle of gigantic trees, "big as office towers" (617), surrounds the resting place of Faerie's old king and queen, where the magic of the land has its source.

In *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, Attebery asserts that there is an "archetypal green world that underlies all fairylands" (186). His claim is echoed by Alfred K. Siewer, who traces depictions of nature in fantasy literature back through the writings of the Romantics and the Arthurian romances to the "natural yet magical" (31) green otherworlds of early medieval Celtic literature (42). Whether this archetype, characterised by "simplicity, harmony, and beauty" (Attebery *Fantasy Tradition* 186), is truly at the base of **all** conceptions of fairyland, I will leave unsaid. The Faerie of *Flowers*, however, clearly originates in exactly such a "green world". As Button tells it, Faerie used to be "a very beautiful land of forests and fields and rivers", where the "goats and cows and sheep grazed the hills that the sun warmed" and "the white stag came stilting out of the forest to watch the moon rise"(433), its forests so vast that a "black squirrel, leaping from branch to branch, tree to tree, could spend her entire life crossing Faerie without ever touching the ground" (434).

Contrasted against this Edenic vision, however, is the reality of modern-day Faerie, with its power plants and "boxy warehouses" (401). Most of the forests have been cut down in the process of urbanisation, leaving barren mudflats and "rocky hills" (404). Terry Gifford observes that the pastorals of the Romantic period sought to resist the industrial revolution by offering alternative images of idyllic rural life (20). Williams likewise offers pastoral as the antithesis of industrial modernity. He does not, however, rest in his pastoral vision; rather than allow the reader to escape into a harmonious green world, he uses it as a contrast to

accentuate the environmental problems of modernity.

In *Flowers*, modernisation is presented as a distinctly fatal process. The Moonflood river, which "used to be the lifeblood of the place", has been dammed and re-routed until nothing more than a "sluggish canal" remains (404). Like Donohue, Williams employs fantasy elements in order to give voice to nature. For trees in Faerie are not only ancient, gigantic and worthy of awe; they are also the homes and bodies of tree nymphs. When their trees are cut down, the nymphs are killed or made homeless, and in the Faerie City, those who listen carefully can "just hear the quiet moaning" of the few remaining tree nymphs as they mourn their kin lost in the process of urban expansion (295). Making trees into persons, and giving them voices with which to mourn and complain, Williams subverts anthropocentrism and heightens the horror of environmental degradation: in Faerie, deforestation is massacre.

The fatality of modernity can further be seen in the example of the power plants. One of the most burning issues of contemporary Faerie politics, and the major driving force behind Faerie's modernisation, is the shortage of magical power (165). The shortage is brought on partly by a declining belief in magic in the human world (164-165), and partly by the imprisonment of Faerie's ancient king and queen (627). Thus, in Williams' vision, secularisation along with the overthrow of monarchy mark the starting point of modernisation. In order to cope with the power shortage as well as meet the steadily growing needs (or greed) of the modernisation process itself, the Flower lords have established power plants, in which power is extracted directly out of those unfortunate citizens who work in them. Lower-class fairies are forcefully recruited to the power plants, where their inherent magical power is slowly drained out, leaving them to live out the rest of their lives as "shuffling and drooling" wrecks, shut away out of sight in "Retirement Hostels" (400-401). Here, fantasy elements once more call attention to the environmental problems of modernity. For, nota bene, the power produced is none other than the kind used to light the city, to warm houses and run factories, trains, and cars. Describing the horror of Faerie's power plants, Williams' novel depicts a modern society where the unquenchable thirst for energy is directly and concretely harmful, not only to nature, but to its inhabitants as well.

Instead of a rigid binary between culture and nature, Ekman proposes a gradual scale, distinguishing between "wild" nature, outside of human control, for example rainforests or ancient oak trees; and "tame" nature, that is non-human entities controlled by humans, for example wheat fields or pedigree dogs (132). In *Flowers*, this distinction is clearly made. In

the City, virgin forest has been cut down to make space for parks with "trimmed lawns" and statues (264), and in the countryside, the tiny plots of forest that still remain are fenced and used by the nobility for recreation and hunting (404). "That's not a real forest," says Cumber of one such area, "that's a rich man's preserve" (404). In Williams' conception, wild nature has no place within modernity, and the tame, trimmed "nature" which it allows is as hostile to the "real" thing as is any other feature of the urban (or sub-urban) landscape.

Ekman, writing about nature in de Lint's Newford stories, notes that in that city, the natural and the magical realms tend to intersect (145-146). This is true for the Minneapolis of *Oaks* as well; although its fairy creatures live in the middle of the modern city, they are still intimately associated with nature. In contrast to *Flowers*, however, *Oaks* does not distinguish between wild and tame nature. The fairy war concerns the "dominion over every natural thing in this place […] every park, every boulevard tree, every grassy lawn" (70), and among the magical sites of Minneapolis are counted both a naturally occurring waterfall and a park greenhouse.

Like Donohue and Williams, Bull sometimes uses the fairy motif as a vessel for environmental commentary. The brownie Hairy Meg was made homeless when the Scotland farm on which she used to live was torn down to make room for a motorway (154), and the phouka cannot stand cars. "I am a creature of earth and air," he tells Eddi. "Enclosed in a car, I feel sickened and weak, and as panicky as an animal that chews through its own leg to escape a trap" (94). These instances of environmental critique are not given a prominent place in the novel, however; neither are the problems depicted as very serious. Hairy Meg simply needs to adapt to the modern conditions by finding a new, American household in which to make her living, and the phouka, although he harbours a "mental block" or "moral objection" (94) to the idea of driving a vehicle with an internal combustion engine, is still happy to ride along with Eddi on a motorbike. Accordingly, in *Oaks*, modernity is not understood as necessarily opposed to nature.

Instead, the novel emphasizes the presence of nature **within** the modern urban environment. "[W]ilderness can be found in the overlooked cracks in city-life," Leo Mellor asserts, urging readers to rethink their notions of scale and pay attention to nature in the small format (116). In *Oaks*, glowing descriptions of nature in the city abound, both wild and tame, very small as well as larger in scale. On a drive through Minneapolis, Eddi notices "gardens planted under apartment house windows, and swollen flower buds on the lilac bushes" (137)

as well as “well-kept lawns” and “[o]ld elms” (138). Whereas *Flowers* conjures up images of a pastoral past as a contrast to urban modernity, *Oaks* integrates the two in an “urban pastoral”, an art which, according to Kevin R. McNamara and Timothy Gray, “inheres in ways of seeing that find or create within the city spaces or images conductive to pastoral moods” (246). Largely downplaying the environmental impact of modern society, *Oaks* depicts in modern Minneapolis “a balance between untrammeled nature and human community” (McNamara and Gray 246). An especially loving description is offered of one of the city’s lakes, a small piece of urban wilderness where “sometimes you can forget you’re in a city at all” (Bull 306):

> She described the quiet, almost rural lawns that bordered one bank. She told him about drifting in a canoe under the summer sun, past white, pink-throated water lilies the size of coffee mugs and wild iris hiding in the weeds like beautiful feral children. She remembered for him the red-winged blackbirds that dived at her when she got too close to the cattail thickets that sheltered their nests. She told him about the turtle she’d watched, soaking up sun on a floating log. (306)

Treated in similarly reverent tones is Minehaha Creek, the falls of which are chosen as the site for the first fairy battle. Running “through woodlands, through unreclaimed marsh, wild in culverts and well-behaved beside suburban backyards,” the creek embodies “the pure spirit of running water” and is “the city’s birthplace and its soul” (139). Thus, in *Oaks*, the modern city is conceived as **part of** nature, having “the pure spirit of running water” as its soul.

“All things that live are drawn to water, and arrange their lives around it,” the phouka tells Eddi. “Humankind is no different” (139). In this way, the phouka denies the divide between nature and culture, asserting the similarity of “humankind” to all other “things that live”, and stressing its reliance on its natural environment. Being a shapeshifter, moreover, the phouka puts the animal-human distinction further into question:

> “And you turn into a dog.”
>
> “And a man,” he grinned. When he was satisfied that he had startled her, he added smugly, “I have been credited with horse and goat as well, but I take no notice of it.” (32)

Here, the phouka makes clear that he is as much akin to dogs as to humans, neither of which fully represents his true essence as a fairy. The human is thus only one of a range of animal forms which he has the power to assume; it does not hold a special status.

In all the three novels studied in this paper, fantasy elements are used to subvert anthropocentrism, giving voice and agency to nature and asserting its importance. In *Child* as

well as in *Flowers*, this device is primarily used to put stress on environmental problems, and both works conceive of modernity as deeply antagonistic to nature. In *Oaks*, however, there is no such opposition. Instead of focusing on environmental problems, the novel emphasises the presence of nature within the modern urban sphere, and the place of the human within nature. As depicted in *Oaks*, modernity largely manages to coexist with nature.

Chapter 3: Society

At the core of much writing about modernity lies the word “change”. According to Berman, “perpetual upheaval and renewal in every mode of personal and social life” (94) are essential components of capitalist modernity, and for Giddens, similarly, the modern age is characterized by “more or less continuous and profound processes of change” (Giddens 28). For Berman, this constant change is so indispensable to modern society that it could not exist without it: “In this world, stability can only mean entropy, slow death […] To say that our society is falling apart is only to say that it is alive and well” (95).

In this chapter, I discuss social and political structures as they appear in my material, focusing especially on the works' depictions of political change as brought on by modernity. I further investigate the novels' visions of modern society and its potential, drawing out the ideological implications of those visions. Change can be menacing, threatening; Berman's descriptions of modernity are littered with words such as “severing”, “hurtling”, “cataclysmic”, and “drastically fluctuating” (16). However, change also entails possibilities. The processes of modernisation, Berman writes, “have nourished an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own” (16).

I also touch upon the relationship between the society and the individual. As Giddens writes, “modernity radically enters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience” (Giddens 1). As traditional frameworks and authorities lose their power, individuals are not only free to, but compelled to, choose their own lifestyle among a range of options (5). In modernity it is therefore the responsibility of the individual to define his or her own relationship to society. The search for self-identity is a question which is treated, in various ways, in all three novels examined in this paper, and in this chapter, I discuss how they relate it to the transition from a traditional society to a modern one.

Flowers visualises a modern society struggling with vast social problems and enormous inequalities. “Fairyland is in bad times”, Theo observes (219), a statement which could be used as a caption for the entire novel. In Williams’ Faerie, the majority of the

population lives to serve a small elite of nobles, who enrich themselves and plot against each other while their children spend their time and money in decadent ennui. Indentured labourers fill the factories and power plants (91), most people are not entitled to vote (119), and the brutality of the police keeps the poor in a state of perpetual fear (219). This dystopia, combining the least attractive bits of the totalitarian, the capitalist, and the feudal systems, is the result of changes which can certainly be categorized as "cataclysmic", taking their starting point in the imprisonment of the king and queen and usurpation of power by seven noble families known as the "Seven Blooms". Ushered in by these new leaders, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation have followed, shattering traditional communities in their wake and fundamentally transforming the way of life for a vast number of Faerie's citizens. As Heath the doonie tells it:

> We all used to be road-guardians – each family would have their own patch and they'd take care of it, live off small offerings, reward good or kind travelers and punish bad ones, like that. Then the Flowers up in the City decided to begin building the Inter-domain Highway System […] Now the roads belong to all of Faerie, they say. Whatever that means. It don't mean doonies, I'll tell you that for free (176-177)

The doonie community, robbed of its traditional role in society, has found a new niche under the modern regime as drivers for the nobility (177). This transition from self-sufficiency to wage-labour is typical for many ethnic groups in Williams' Faerie, mirroring the fates of numerous artisans and small-scale peasants during the Industrial Revolution (Tilly 44), and the development has contributed to a greatly widened gulf between the social classes.

For modern Faerie is a rigid class society. Furthermore, it is a class society based on race; despite the fact that there are hundreds of different types of fairies in the land, the Flower lords are all tall, wingless, human-like fairies, and an individual's possibilities and role in society is largely determined by the type of fairy to which he or she belongs. Although outwardly very modern – the fairies of *Flowers* are experienced users of gadgets such as cellphones and laptops – the class system of Faerie is in this way traditional still, resembling most of all the caste system of India. Despite heavy industrialisation, moreover, Faerie's economic system is feudal rather than capitalist, with the factories in the hands of the nobility.

The close connection between class and race limits the possibilities for self-actualisation. Although "there [is] no law in Faerie that [says] he cannot marry a commoner if he fell in love with one", the colleagues of the nurse with "large and pretty wings" still find her daydreams about the lordling Caradenus Primrose laughable (270). In theory, modern-day

Faerie allows an individual to bypass tradition. In reality, however, a social climber is instantly recognized as such, and the rigid class system punishes those who break its bounds. A case in point is Cumber the ferisher, who has chosen to pursue an academic career instead of working as a domestic servant, the expected occupation for members of his race. In order to fit in among his co-students, Cumber has had his wings removed, but even so, he tells Theo,

> even the first day I was at the Academy with Zirus and the rest, the other students knew. I was a ferisher, wasn't I, and ferishers are supposed to have little wings. They thought it was funny. Well, the nice ones did. Some of the others thought I was getting above my place and let me know it, regularly and forcefully. (396)

Moreover, despite his education, Cumber can hope for little more than to work as an assistant to a researcher from the nobility. Performing menial tasks such as fetching equipment and cleaning out sinks (274-275), Cumber is still a servant of a sort. *Flowers* thus rejects modernity's promise of self-actualisation as a chimera; despite the apparent abundance of possibilities, true self-definition remains the privilege of a select few. Giddens, recognising that self-actualisation is not equally open to everyone, writes: "Modernity, one should not forget, produces *difference*, *exclusion*, and *marginalisation*. Holding out the possibility of emancipation, modern institutions at the same time create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation, of self" (Giddens 6).

Although the caste system is traditional to Faerie, the vast inequalities of its current system are not. As Cumber tells it, "[i]n the old days, things were a lot simpler. Everyone had his or her patch, and everything just sort of went on. Boring, maybe, but you didn't see gnome children begging on street corners" (396). In this passage, the novel visualises the past as an endless stretch of sameness when "everything just sort of went on"; change and complexity belong solely in modernity. In its descriptions of the past, *Flowers* furthermore exhibits a fair amount of nostalgia for monarchy. "Watching over all" (435), the ancient king and queen loved all of their subjects equally well (435), and their reign guaranteed "an order that gave to each goblin and fairy and troll an equal share" (436). Williams does not lose himself in nostalgia, however. Despite its fit of royalist longing, there can be no return of the king in *Flowers*; as evil is conquered and the king and queen released from their bonds, rather than re-ascending the throne and taking charge of the rehabilitation of faerie, they simply disappear (657). In this way, Williams subverts fantasy conventions and insists that change for the better lies in the hands of the people. "[T]he dialectical motion of modernity turns ironically against

its prime movers, the bourgeoisie", Berman writes (21). In *Flowers*, this is certainly the case. For although modernity is painted in bleak colours, it still carries within itself the seeds of positive change, and the oppression of the Flower regime ultimately provokes a popular revolution, overthrowing the nobility. "It's a new world, and nobody knows what kind of world yet," says Cumber (657), but the novel ends on a note of hope that it will be a world governed by principles of democracy and equality.

In *Oaks*, too, modernity involves the chance to redefine social relationships and reform political structures. Here, fairy society represents the old order. The fairy monarchy is "an unbroken dynasty" with a "habit of rule cultivated over more than two thousand years" (184). Unlike *Flowers*, however, *Oaks* does not glorify this ancient monarchy. The queen and her relatives, known as the Sidhe, have ruled unchallenged for so long that they have "forgotten the Folk they govern, and how to feel for them" (184); power has made them egoistic and arrogant. In Bull's novel, too, the seeds of change are sown through the oppressiveness of the system itself. Feeling alienated from their rulers, the commoners of the Seelie Court look for guidance elsewhere; therefore, the new ideas brought to them by Eddi fall on fertile ground.

For in *Oaks*, unlike *Flowers*, the people of Faerie cannot emancipate themselves; this requires an external force, "a mortal, unhindered by ancient habits" (185). In intrusion fantasies[10] such as *Oaks*, Farah Mendlesohn writes, the protagonists typically "succeed by challenging the rules or changing them – usually in the face of the pessimism of their colleagues from the fantastical lands. This is of course the colonialist fantasy of rescuing the natives from themselves" (148). The fairies, with their age-old "habit of obedience" (184), will not revolt; instead, it is up to Eddi, representing human modernity, to bring reform to Faerie (183-185). It is she who disrupts fairy hierarchy by addressing the queen as an equal and humbling her with her own bravery, and it is she who puts an end to the bloodbath of the fairy war (300-301), eventually securing the victory for the Seelie court with the help of music instead of violence.

Eddi's rock band also becomes an arena where boundaries are disrupted and renegotiated. Having both human and fairy members, the band merges the two worlds and denies the rigid boundaries between them. For Willy, the young Sidhe lord who has always

10 An intrusion fantasy, according to Mendlesohn's taxonomy, is a fantasy in which the fantastic intrudes into, and disrupts, the normality of the protagonist's world, taking "us out of safety without taking us from our place" (xxii).

felt out of place in Faerie (280), the band offers an opportunity to construct an identity of his own. It is also a refuge from the Faerie class system. "You may have seen, my primrose," the phouka tells Eddi, "that the Fey Folk are the merest bit class-conscious" (183). In the band, however, Willy plays side by side and on equal terms with the lower-class fairy Hedge. For, in *Eddi and the Fey*, the members are primarily united by their urge to play rock n' roll, and each of them is judged only by their musical skills, as Eddi reminds Willy:

> Don't you ever fucking *dare* show that kind of contempt for anybody in this band. Do you play guitar better than Dan plays keyboards? […] Do you play better than Carla plays drums, or Hedge plays bass? No, I didn't think so. Then you better not care if they're fey, human, or little box turtles. They're your equals here, and you'll treat them that way. (191)

Unlike *Flowers*, however, modernity in *Oaks* does not bring revolution. "Things grow slowly in Faerie," the phouka explains (318), and falling short of democracy, *Oaks* appears content with having made the queen and nobles "a little more thoughtful" (184). Despite the novel's emphasis on equality, its political vision is thus ultimately deeply conservative. Furthermore, whereas *Flowers* emphasises the social problems created by modernity, *Oaks* downplays them. While it does make fleeting reference to issues such as unemployment (59) and racism (101; 103; 190), none of these are important concerns in the novel, and it does not investigate their causes or mechanisms. For in Bull's novel, the thriving of a place is dependent on the type of magic which governs it (71); social problems rise out of bad magic, not out of faulty systems. Portraying social problems as contingent on forces beyond human control, *Oak*s leaves its readers with very few tools for understanding the social mechanisms of their own societies.

In *Child*, as in *Oaks*, faery society represents the old order which is forced to accept change under the pressure of modernity. Although the original faery "society" in the novel consists of no more than a tribe of twelve people, it nevertheless has a clear and unambiguous form of government and follows an ancient and rigid set of rules. Its hierarchy is based on age: "Oldest to youngest. Igel makes all the decisions because he has seniority" (139). Life for the faeries follows the slow cycle of place changes. The oldest faery is entitled to find a child to impersonate, thus returning to the human world from whence he or she was stolen a century earlier, while the kidnapped child replaces him or her as the youngest addition to the faery tribe, last in line to eventually become a changeling too (123). "There's a natural order to our world that mustn't be disturbed," Luchóg explains, "One child for one changeling"

(123). Here, social order is equated with natural order. In traditional faery society, the political system is understood as eternal and unavoidable, not as contingent on the decisions of people. The rules cannot be changed; the only ways to escape from the system are through death or by leaving society behind entirely for a solitary life (120).

The rules of the faery tribe are viciously defended. Having accidentally encountered his human father, Aniday is savagely beaten for speaking to a human (118). Even Aniday's close friends take part in the punishment; upholding tradition is the joint responsibility of the entire tribe. "We're sorry," says Smaolach, "[b]ut the law has a ruthless logic" (119). For the faeries, following this ruthless law is not a matter of choice: "We had to do it," says Luchóg (119). "We were following rules," explains Speck (119), Aniday's closest friend and the one who reported his crime to the rest of the tribe. This rigorous adherence to rules is a propensity often associated with fairies. In *Oaks*, this can be seen, for example, in the fairies' strict code of courtesy (166), and even in *Flowers*, although its fairies are not remarkably tradition-bound, "Faerie has its rules" and "they work" (562).

In *Child*, however, the faery law, although seemingly carved in stone, cannot hold up against the forces of modernity. The first sign that tradition's hold is starting to loosen up comes when Igel, in breach of convention, brings the boy with whom he is preparing to change places to the faery camp, showing himself to the child (154-155). Ultimately, moreover, Igel abstains from making the transformation, releasing the child, and instead chooses to end his life. These actions set in motion a chain of events which forces the faeries to reorder their society in fundamental ways.

Giddens writes about risk as a concept central to modernity (Giddens and Pierson 101). In Giddens' theory, risk is not synonymous with hazard or danger (101); instead, it concerns "the active assessment of future hazards" (101). The need for such assessments grows as the influence of tradition dwindles (102); when tradition no longer dictates the course of action, more active decisions have to be made and the risks of each option weighed. When the faeries are made homeless and forced to search for a new home, risk assessment becomes an active part of their lives, weighing the safety of a remote location against the possibilities of loot from the human town, the need for water against the dangers of the river, and the certainties of known locations against the potentials of unknown ones (173-174).

As the pressures of modernisation start to weigh more heavily on the faeries, their adherence to tradition is shaken. Béka, the tribe's leader after Igel's demise, cannot command

the same unquestioning deference as his predecessor (172). Initially, Béka ferociously asserts his right to rule, "attempt[ing] to appear bigger than he [is]" (174), but the very fact that he has to do so is a sign of his uncertain status as the tribe's leader. When Speck assures him that "[n]obody questions the rules... or your leadership" (172), her very words introduce the possibility of putting such things in question, suggesting for the first time that rules and leadership are not "the natural order" but social conventions, subject to change. In *Child*, as in *Flowers*, modernity is the potential bringer of democracy. In Donohue's novel, however, no violent revolution is needed; having proved incompetent, Béka is "deposed […] with his consent" (230), and the tribe jointly elects their new leader (230).

As the tribe diminishes through the deaths or departures of one faery after another, further rules and traditions are relinquished. It has always been the custom of the faery tribe to urge its members to forget their human past (240), emphasising instead their new place within the faery society (119). However, when Aniday starts to ask questions about himself, the faeries gradually relent, allowing him to learn his background (272) as well as his real name (240). In modernity, the novel suggests, more room is made for individual identities or desires; a person is no longer only defined by his or her place in the collective. In the human narrative, too, the power of the individual to define his or her life is emphasised. Both Henry and his eventual wife Tess carefully consider various options for education, careers, and matrimony before making decisions (113; 191-192).

Another important break with tradition comes with the faeries' decision to stalk the adult changeling Henry. Any interaction with changelings have formerly been prohibited for security reasons, but, Anyday explains, "such concerns, once great, became less important to us. We were disappearing. Our number had diminished from a dozen to a mere six. We decided to make our own rules" (290). As this passage shows, the transformation of the faery society is chiefly brought on by desperation; in *Child*, unlike *Flowers,* there is no true hope for a better tomorrow. The faeries, "waiting for nothing" (252), abandon their search for human children with whom to trade places (253), a change of ways which most of all amounts to an acceptance of impending extinction. Although they may change to meet its demands, the faeries can ultimately have no place in modernity: "Don't believe in fairy tales," Tess sternly tells Henry (298). The faeries in *Child*, as in *Oaks*, are creatures of tradition. Unlike Bull's novel, however, Donohue's novel does not allow for modernity and tradition to coexist.

Flowers, *Child*, and *Oaks* all depict modernity as redefining social relationships and

bringing political change. These changes can disrupt an existing balance, bringing new kinds of oppression and deepened inequalities, as in *Flowers.* In all three novels, however, modernity ultimately works to undermine autocracies and empower the people. Nevertheless, the political implications of the three novels differ; whereas *Flowers* envisions the old order violently overthrown by a socialist revolution, *Oaks* pictures slow reforms inspired by the influx of fresh ideas, and in *Child*, reforms are desperate measures enacted by a society in slow demise, bringing no hope for the future. Moreover, whereas *Flowers* and *Child* both hint at versions of democracy as the modern form of government, *Oaks* is satisfied with an enlightened absolutism.

Conclusions

War for the Oaks, *The Stolen Child*, and *The War of the Flowers* all probe the modern age by populating it with fairy creatures out of ancient folklore and keenly observing the resulting collision. The contrast between the modern environment and ancient myth sheds new light on both, and the use of fantastic elements enables the writers to emphasise or provide new angles on various aspects of modernity. In their use of the fairy motif, the novels are all in some ways restricted by the traditional connotations of this motif, and indeed, as this paper shows, certain associations seem to be particularly persistent. However, despite their treatment of similar themes, using similar literary devices, the three novels reach sometimes very different conclusions.

Williams' *Flowers*, with its vision of modernity as a destructive, malicious force propelled by greed and devastating to people and to tradition as well as to the environment, perhaps comes closest to the convention of traditional high fantasy. In Williams' novel, as in Tolkien's writings, destructive modernity is contrasted with images of a pastoral past characterised by freedom, plenty, and harmony. In *Flowers*, however, the goal is not to defeat threatening modernity and return to this pastoral age, but rather to go on to an envisioned next stage. Recalling Hartwell's characterisation of generic high fantasy as "nostalgic, conservative, pastoral, and optimistic" (5), we can conclude that although *Flowers* is admittedly nostalgic and pastoral, it cannot be charged with conservatism, and if it is sometimes optimistic, it sets its hopes to the future rather than the past.

In sharp contrast to *Flowers* as well as to high fantasy conventions, Bull's *Oaks* depicts modernity as a liberating and creative force. The modern city is portrayed as a living environment imbued with meaning, where meetings take place and new ideas are tried out. Although the novel at times posits nature and tradition as contrasts to modernity, no true opposition exists; instead of juxtaposing modernity with a pastoral past, *Oaks* insists on the possibility of a pastoral present. Thus, while it is certainly pastoral and optimistic, and at times exhibits decidedly conservative ideas, *Oaks* is not in the least bit nostalgic, and therein lies the difference which allows it to affirm, rather than condemn, modernity.

In Donohue's *Child*, finally, a more dialectical vision is achieved as modernity is depicted on the one hand as violently destructive to both nature and tradition, on the other

hand as liberating for individuals as well as for societies. With its focus especially on environmental issues, *Child* launches a sharp critique of modernity without being either nostalgic, conservative, or pastoral. However, while its general air is far from optimistic, the novel nevertheless suggests that modernity's challenge of tradition may bring a greater range of possibilities for individuals. Modernity is, moreover, depicted as a distinctly impersonal process, operating not through the actions and decisions of people but through a force of its own. As such, it is inevitable; challenge or resistance is futile and there can be only adaptation and resignation. This conception of modernity differs both from the visions of *Flowers* and high fantasy, where forceful resistance to the destructiveness of modernity is urged (albeit in different ways), and of *Oaks*, where the actions of individuals are clearly instrumental in the process of modernisation.

From the example of these three novels, it is clear that there is no inherent ideology of fantasy; different world views can be propagated using very similar means. Moreover, it is also clear that there is no simple connection between the general political outlook of a text and its conception of modernity. In Tolkien's works and in those of his followers, a deep suspicion of modernity is coupled with highly conservative politics; however, in *Flowers*, a similarly negative position towards modernity is paired with a vision of socialist revolution, and in *Oaks*, essentially conservative politics coexist with a celebratory attitude towards the modern age.

In order to fully chart the relationship of the mythic fiction subgenre to modernity, a more comprehensive study, encompassing more works, would have to be conducted. However, the results of this study suggest some preliminary tendencies: when folklore creatures are juxtaposed with the modern environment, a range of fundamental questions regarding the essence of modernity are brought to the fore, including the relation between culture and nature; the place of history and of tradition in modernity; and the relation between the individual and society. Unlike modes of fantasy set in non-modern secondary worlds, mythic fiction works cannot evade this type of questions; with their contemporary settings, they must necessarily partake in the project of mapping the modern age.

In the last chapter of *Child*, Aniday considers the place of fairies in the modern age, concluding that they have become redundant: "Our kind are few, and no longer deemed necessary. Far greater troubles exist for children in the modern world, and I shudder to think of real and lurking dangers. Like so many myths, our stories will one day no longer be told or

believed" (318). However, the very existence of novels such as *The Stolen Child*, *War for the Oaks*, or *The War of the Flowers* prove him wrong. Apparently, myths and fairy tales can still help us make sense of the "real and lurking dangers" of the modern world.

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