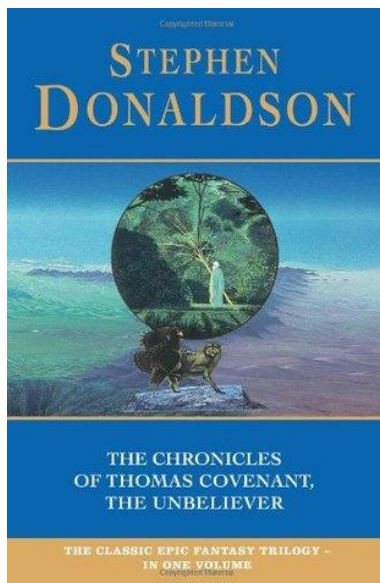


Intertextuality in Thomas Covenant and The Lord of the Rings



'The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever' by Stephen Donaldson.

Stephen Donaldson's trilogy of fantasy novels were published in the late 1970s. Like all fantasy books of the late 20th century, they were written in the not inconsiderable shadow of JRR Tolkien's seminal work, 'The Lord of the Rings', published less than twenty five years before.

Every work of art is inevitably ingrained with references and influences of every kind. Every discourse is composed of traces, echoes, signposts, pieces of other texts that help constitute its meaning. We can detect the intertextuality between Tolkien and Donaldson's later works in several different ways.

Every text is affected by all the texts that came before it, and the first, and most obvious, way in which we can see the intertextuality of Donaldson's works is that they clearly belong to the 'fantasy novel' genre. This, we can say, is a genre that in many senses didn't exist before Tolkien's 'Hobbit' and 'Lord of the Rings'. Tolkien's inspirations were not other fantasy novels but rather ancient mythologies and legends, many learned from his studies as a Professor of Old English literature. He was driven by a desire to create an imaginary mythology for his native England, one that was largely absent, certainly in comparison to the rich legends of Greece, Scandinavia or Celtic cultures.

Therefore, as a fantasy writer, we can expect Donaldson to follow many of the norms of the genre established so firmly in Tolkien's work. Indeed, we can see a great many of these tropes repeated in Donaldson - a secondary world (similar to but significantly different to our own), a pastoral ideal, magical creatures and powerful characters.

Theories of 'Intertextuality' tell us that everything we have ever seen or read sticks somewhere in our memory and affects our understanding of and engagement with the world. They are the building blocks of our specific worldview which, in turn, determines how we write or create art. Having presumably read and been inspired by Tolkien - the cover of the original publications proclaims 'Comparable to Tolkien at his best!' - Donaldson would have set out to create his own fantasy world deliberately and intentionally adopting some of the features of the genre.

We can also see that there are other more specific elements to Donaldson's story which might suggest an even stronger 'Latent' intertextuality. Even when an author isn't deliberately employing

intertextuality, it is still there. Very strongly so in the case of Donaldson. Interestingly, the elements which we will mention do not necessarily appear in later fantasy novels, ones which are further removed from and perhaps less influenced by Tolkien.

In both Tolkien and Donaldson we can see a (seemingly hopeless) mission to destroy a dark lord. In both works, the present time represents a regression and degradation from the greater powers of previous heroes and manifestations of the world's society. In both works, the forests are controlled by mysterious, powerful wardens who ultimately turn the tide in the favour of the heroes. Most centrally, both works are centred around a 'ring of power' which may be either a curse or a blessing.

Of course, since we can't read an author's mind, it's not always easy to know the difference between deliberate and latent intertextuality. Although, we find such a strong similarity between elements of the two texts, we have no way to know whether it was deliberate or accidental and the similarities do not detract from the quality of Donaldson's work which have value in their own regard. It is valid to note that Donaldson's second trilogy of Thomas Covenant books bore far less structural similarities to Tolkien's work.

