

UDC 821.111.09

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32589/2311-0821.2.2025.351959>

O. V. Tykhomyrova

Kyiv National Linguistic University, Ukraine

e-mail: [olena.tykhomyrova@knlu.edu.ua](mailto:olena.tykhomyrova@knlu.edu.ua)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9607-9005>

## SACRED AND SINFUL FOOD IN FANTASY FICTION: THE MOTIFS OF COMMUNION AND THE FALL

### Abstract

This paper explores symbolic and narrative aspects of food portrayals in fantasy fiction, focusing on the acts of consumption that acquire sacred or profane dimensions with regard to worldbuilding and the heroes' quests. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, as well as contemporary fantasy scholarship, the study examines how food-related hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred through food consumption) function across a range of fantasy texts. The research takes into account different approaches to fantasy worldbuilding that determine the degree to which recognisable primary world motifs and imagery shape narratives. Tolkien's *Legendarium* is shown to implement sacred food and communal meals as means of resacralisation and establishing symbolic fellowships within a desacralised age. In C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, the consumption of forbidden food establishes patterns of temptation and the Fall, directly echoing Biblical imagery. Terry Pratchett parodies these traditions through comic yet profound explorations of alimentary practices, destabilising rigid boundaries between the categories of the sacred and profane. R. F. Kuang and Philip Pullman expand the motif of Communion toward postcolonial and liberal frameworks: Kuang's "Babel" turns personal food-related memories into loci of identity and rebellion against the system, whereas Pullman's "His Dark Materials" transforms the original sin into an intimate and sensual Communion-through-Fall scene. Across these diverse narratives, alimentary discourse emerges as a nexus of memory, community and resistance, simultaneously grounding characters in cultural traditions and opening pathways to the numinous and the transcendental. The paper demonstrates the diversity of food-related hierophanies in contemporary metagenre of fantasy, rife with parody, reinvention and postcolonial re-imaginings.

**Keywords:** alimentary practices, communion, fall, hierophany, metagenre of fantasy, profane, quest, sacred.

### Анотація

У статті розглянуто символічні й наративні аспекти зображення їжі в текстах метажанру фентезі та простежено, як акти її споживання набувають сакрального чи профанного статусу залежно від світобудови та квестів героїв. Спираючись на теоретичні положення Рудольфа Отто та Мірчі Еліаде, а також на сучасні дослідження метажанру фентезі, авторка аналізує, як ієрофанії (прояви сакрального через споживання їжі) функціонують у різнопланових текстах. Описано, як різні підходи до моделювання фентезійних світів зумовлюють ступінь залучення впізнаваних мотивів та образності первинного світу. У легендаріумі Толкіна сакральна їжа та спільні трапези виступають як засіб ресакралізації та встановлення символічних співдружностей у десакралізовану добу. У дитячих романах циклу "Нарнія" К. С. Льюїса споживання забороненої їжі слідує моделям спокуси й гріхопадіння, що відсилають читача безпосередньо до біблійних образів. Террі Пратчетт пародіює подібні моделі через водночас комічні та глибокі інтерпретації харчових практик, розхитуючи жорсткі межі між категоріями сакрального й профанного. Р. Ф. Куанг і Філіп Пулман переносять мотив причастя в постколоніальний і ліберальний контексти: "Вавилон" Куанг перетворює особисті спогади про споживання їжі на локуси ідентичності та бунту проти системи, тоді як Пулман в "Темних матеріях" переосмислює мотив первородного гріха і створює натомість інтимну та чуттєву візію гріхопричастя. У різноманітних наративах дискурс споживання їжі постає як осередок пам'яті, спільноти та спротиву, водночас укорінюючи персонажів у культурних традиціях і відкриваючи шляхи до нумінозних і трансцендентних досвідів. У статті продемонстровано різноманітність ієрофаній у сучасному фентезі, насиченому пародіями, переосмисленнями та постколоніальними інтерпретаціями.

**Ключові слова:** гріхопадіння, ієрофанія, квест, причастя, профанне, сакральне, метажанр фентезі, харчувальні практики.

**Introduction.** The dichotomy of the sacred and the profane undergoes significant reinterpretation in contemporary fiction, as it becomes enmeshed in processes of constant recontextualisation. Within the fantasy metagenre, manifestations of sacrality form one of its central ideological nodes. This stems from the specific way in which fantasy appropriates traditional cultural and religious material, reshaping it to construct secondary worlds. At the same time, the genre's focus on the individual quests of heroes within these worlds generates highly personalised sacred experiences, often imbued with intimacy and emotional depth. Such experiences are frequently mediated through the examination and celebration of human fallibility, which is intrinsically linked to alimentary practices. This article focuses on the motifs of the Fall and Communion, ubiquitous within Western culture, elucidating the ways they are realised through food consumption in contemporary fantasy texts.

**Up-to-date critical literature review.** The study of the sacred was firmly established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the seminal works of Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Carl Jung, Northrop Frye, Mary Douglas and other influential thinkers. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars have increasingly scrutinised cultural patterns of secularised societies and their attempts to reinvent sacral and numinous experiences. For instance, Peter Watson's "The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God" (2014) provides a panoramic overview of secular "substitutes" for religion, including literary forms, yet does not address fantasy fiction. Similarly, the Ukrainian scholar Ihor Nabytovych has repeatedly engaged with the category of the sacred (termed *sacrum* in his works), connecting it to fractal theory (Набитович, 2008), though again without direct reference to the fantasy metagenre.

Fantasy scholarship itself has occasionally drawn upon the notion of sacrality and numinosity. Chris Brawley (2014) has explored the connection between nature and numinous experience through the lens of ecocriticism. A number of Ukrainian scholars (Жанчура (2012), Криницька, (2008), Філоненко (2018; Filonenko, 2023), Яремчук (2014)) have discussed the interplay of the sacred and profane in relation to particular authors of fantasy fiction. In my earlier article, "The Sacred in Fantasy Fiction" (Тихомирова, 2021), I attempted to propose a theoretical framework for examining the phenomenon. The sacred dimension of food and drink consumption, specifically within a Catholic context, has also been addressed by Guglielmo Spirito and Emanuele Rimoli (2011) in their study of J. R. R. Tolkien's works.

**Aim and objectives.** Despite the growing body of research, few attempts have been made to elucidate the connection between food consumption in fantasy fiction and the categories of the sacred and the profane. More generally, alimentary practices in literature have attracted much attention across such fields as philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology and linguistics, yet the metagenre of fantasy often remains absent from such surveys. **The aim** of this article is therefore to uncover the ways in which alimentary sacrality and sinfulness are narrated in contemporary English-language fantasy fiction and to place fantasy discourse within broader literary and cultural tendencies. **The objectives** of the research are: (1) to specify how the motifs of the Fall and Communion through food interact with worldbuilding and magical systems in fantasy texts; (2) to assess the extent to which the realisation of these motifs depends upon traditional material; (3) to define the role of these motifs in shaping the hero's quest.

**Research results and their discussion.** The emotion of perceiving the sacred, or the numinous, is seen as fascination or elation of overwhelming intensity, a psychological state opposed to the mundane experience, Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum* (Otto, 1980). Mircea Eliade introduces the term *hierophany* for the act of manifestation of the sacred

and once again emphasises the contrast that underlies this “mysterious act”, calling it “the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world.” (Eliade, 1987, p. 11). Eliade speaks of different degrees of hierophanies, ranging from a manifestation in an ordinary object to an incarnation of a god. The profane and the sinful ultimately depend on the sacred and can be defined only in conjunction with it. When discussing the scope of the sacred, Dino S. Cervigny includes transgression and guilt into the list, enumerating such manifestations of the sacred as: “the awareness of the mystery as something that goes beyond our human understanding; the desire of something that exceeds human expectations, such as salvation viewed as some form of life after our earthly existence; the awareness of fault that sets humans against the deity, one another, as well as against their own selves; the recognition of guilt, transgression, and/or evil; and the possibility of transformation, atonement, and redemption”. (2007, p. 12). In a secularised context, a perceived contact with a phenomenon beyond human understanding, resulting in mystery, awe and fascination, as well as in the awareness of guilt and transgression, but with a potential for salvation and redemption, also constitute the core of the hierophany.

While in the primary world numinous experiences are often conveyed in religious terms even in secularised contexts, in fantasy worlds, the modes of sacrality and its expression depend on the worldbuilding and the degrees to which the sacred penetrates narrative layers. Secondary worlds in fantasy fiction with their rich mythological backgrounds, pantheons of gods and a plethora of magic creatures offer unique platforms where authors can explore the origins and manifestations of numinosity and adapt it to the configurations of a particular world (Тихомирова, 2021). In this framework, food consumption with both sacred and profane connotations can assume original forms, but in most cases, there are still noticeable primary-world patterns that ensure their evocative power and emotional resonance. The moments of food-related hierophany should therefore be considered within the context of the secondary world, as well as its relation to the primary.

Stories that tend to lean towards primary world patterns rely on recognisable symbols that do not require extensive grounding in worldbuilding. For example, Narnia novels by C. S. Lewis famously use thinly disguised Biblical stories, among which is the Fruit of Knowledge, featured as the Fruit of Aslan’s Garden in “The Magician’s Nephew”. Visualised as shining silver apples, these fruits present a temptation that the hero (a boy called Digory) withstands stoically and then he is rewarded for his forbearance. Later Digory plants an apple-tree in Narnia and obtains an apple from it that can heal his ailing mother, with a moralising comment from Aslan that a fruit like this must not be stolen since it would still grant the wish but the consequences would be grave (Lewis, 1998). The sacredness of food here works as part of what Ann Alston calls a disciplinary project of children’s literature, realised through food (2008). A much more nuanced approach to the sacred food can be found in Tolkien’s fantasy texts, where the motif of Communion does not have explicit Biblical or liturgical overtones, but instead is rooted deeply in the mythology of the secondary world.

Tolkien’s prolific *Legendarium* encompasses multiple narratives about the secondary world of Arda, forming an alternative mythology for the primary world, a hypothetical mythology that could have evolved had the Norman Conquest of 1066 not happened (Тихомирова, 2003). While the First and the Second Ages of this world feature legends with the prominent presence of the sacred (cosmogonic myths, pantheons, high memetic heroes, etc.), Middle-earth of the Third Age, in which the events of “The Lord of the Rings” take place, appears as a largely desacralised epoch, particularly from the hobbits’ perspective. Although the quest of the Ring is aimed ultimately at diminishing the magic

presence and thus at a further desacralisation, a necessary stage of the quest is the symbolic resacralisation, accomplished through the renewal of the memory of the sacred. It takes many forms throughout the heroes' quests, in which the Communion motif plays a significant role. The Elvish waybread *lembas* performs this function on many levels, but even before it is introduced into the narrative, the food and drink consumed during the first encounter of the hobbits with the Elves constitute a hierophany, in which the effect transcends mundane experiences:

*"After eating with Gildor and the Elves, Pippin afterwards recalled little of either food or drink, for his mind was filled with the light upon elf-faces, and the sound of voices so various and so beautiful that he felt in a waking dream. But he remembered that there was bread, surpassing the savour of a fair white loaf to one who is starving; and fruits sweet as wild berries and richer than the tended fruits of gardens; he drained a cup that was filled with a fragrant draught, cool as a clear mountain, golden as a summer afternoon."* (Tolkien, 1993, p. 118).

Notably, this hierophany is given from the point of view of Pippin, the most profane of the four hobbits, while Frodo, a hobbit of a higher understanding of the sacred reality and already in contact with the One Ring, is more affected by the words in the Elvish language than by food and drink. Later in his journey, Frodo undergoes a gradual transformation, completely losing the characteristic earthbound nature of a profane hobbit. This shift is not only the result of his prolonged contact with the Ring, but also of his consumption of *lembas*, which functions as a counterforce to the artifact's destructive power. Therefore, both the Ring and the sacred bread may be understood as manifestations of magic in the secondary world, albeit with very different ontological statuses. The trajectory of *lembas* mirrors, in miniature, the mythological path of all sacrality in Arda. The corn for baking *lembas* was grown in Valinor, under the auspices of Yavanna, the nature goddess figure in Tolkien's *Legendarium*. From there, the corn was transported into the mortal lands, where it was difficult to grow it, yet Elves cultivated the corn and it was the privilege of a queen / ruling lady to bestow the *lembas*. Its connection with the immortal lands accounts for the fact that the Elves shared it with mortals only on rare occasions. To consume *lembas* meant not only to receive sustenance and renewal, but also to acquire a longing for the unattainable sacred:

*"For it is said that, if mortals eat often of this bread, they become weary of their mortality, desiring to abide among the Elves, and longing for the fields of Aman, to which they cannot come."* (Tolkien, 1997, p. 403).

When *lembas* is granted by Galadriel to the quest heroes in the Third Age, the act contributes to establishing of the fellowship between Elves and Men, mirroring that of the Valar and the Elves in Valinor. Fellowships and bonds, underpinned by gifts of food, hospitality and shared consumption, have a firm grounding in the mythos and symbolically reproduce sacred patterns. Even in the situation when the origins of food-givers remain deliberately mysterious (such as Tom Bombadil and Goldberry) and thus their sacred status is implied rather than explicitly shown, the impact of the meal produces a felt change in the heroes:

*"The drink in their drinking-bowls seemed to be clear cold water, yet it went to their hearts like wine and set free their voices. The guests became suddenly aware that they were singing merrily, as if it was easier and more natural than talking."* (Tolkien, 1993, p. 173).

The meeting of Merry and Pippin with the Ent Treebeard, whose place in the mythos is much better explained than Tom Bombadil's, includes their consumption of the Ent-draughts that are both food and drink for the Ents. Thus, while establishing a fellowship with the Ents, the hobbits share their main source of nourishment; in doing so they consume

both a physically invigorating substance and a symbolic entity, a quintessence of the forest and growth. As a result of that Communion, they transform physically, growing taller and more resilient, and retain a particular trace of the contact with the sacred that makes them stand out among hobbits, although not in such a dramatic way as Frodo did, after his prolonged exposure to the Ring, lembas and other magical experiences. Although “magic” is the word that is famously questioned in “The Lord of the Rings”, from the point of view of worldbuilding in fantasy, these manifestations of numinosity and sacrality, as well as their distortions (the case of the Ring) constitute the underlying magic system of Tolkien’s Legendarium.

The motif of Communion is parodied directly by Terry Pratchett in his Discworld novel “Going Postal”, in which the protagonist is making a show of publicly addressing prayers and pleas to all deities that are worshipped in the city of Ankh-Morpork. While making an offering to Offler, the Crocodile God, the hero engages in a conversation with the priest about the sanctity of food sacrifice:

*““As I understand it,” said Moist, “the gift of sausages reaches Offler by being fried, yes? And the spirit of the sausages ascends unto Offler by means of the smell? And then you eat the sausages?”*

*“Ah, no. Not exactly. Not at all,” said the young priest, who knew this one. “It might look like that to the uninitiated, but, as you say, the true sausagidity goes straight to Offler. He, of course, eats the spirit of the sausages. We eat the mere earthy shell, which, believe me, turns to dust and ashes in our mouths.”” (Pratchett, 2005, pp. 332–333).*

The goal of this parody reaches beyond creating the comic effect. As I showed in the article about the category of sacred in fantasy fiction, the traditional model of the sacred and the profane is systematically deconstructed by Pratchett to establish a firm connection of sacrality with the hero’s identity in the context of opposing ideologies and subverting the narrative imperative (Тихомирова, 2021). Thus, the Communion motif can be observed in situations when heroes become, metaphorically speaking, their own priests and choose their own sacrality, based on a deep understanding of their cultural roots, identity and personal choices. An example of this phenomenon is Death eating curry in “Mort” as an act of humanity and vulnerability that he consciously allows to be part of himself, embracing human emotions, such as sadness and anger (Pratchett, 2001). Paradoxically, the sacrality of food can come through in Discworld even within the framework of parody. Dwarf bread, an obvious parody of Tolkien’s lembas, represents, nevertheless, a truly sublime experience for a dwarf, since this bread is meant not for eating, but for, as the witch Granny Weatherwax puts it, “keeping you going” (Pratchett, 1992, p. 59). Joyful and hedonistic consumption of food is a daily statement of identity for the witch Nanny Ogg, while frugality and self-sufficiency is Granny Weatherwax’s *modus vivendi*, as well as part of her efficiency as a witch. Similarly, the young witch Tiffany Aching finds empowerment in the traditions and memory of the shepherd’s community in which she is born and raised, taking pride in her cheese-making skills.

Since food consumption relies on a profound connection with communities and lifestyles, the motif of Communion is often realised through the act of food sharing, either public or private. Family and communal meals establish the hero’s status within a group and reveal the underlying dynamics. As Ann Alston points out within the context of children’s literature, “the sharing of food acts as a metaphor for family relationships; to eat the same food emphasises a sense of belonging, it is an act of union” (2008, p. 109), which it can be applied more broadly. In fantasy texts, a shared meal may be sanctified through its symbolic reenactment of the mythic past or brought to a more elevated status through social dynamics and communal identity. As Anca Rosu notes in an article on food

aspects of G. R. R. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire", the Harvest Feast experienced by Bran is sanctified by the awareness of the sacrifice involved in the food production (2013). The food hierophanies from Tolkien's *Legendarium* mentioned above are mostly public acts, even when the context is more intimate, as in Tom Bombadil's case. But whether the meal is shared with the Elves or Ents, there is a sense of the act becoming the pact, sealing a fellowship. Hogwarts communal meals establish a strong sense of belonging for Harry – and by proxy, for the young reader. A more intimate fellowship is formed in "Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution" by R. F. Kuang, as the student protagonists bond over tea and scones in the imaginary Oxford.

A moment of hierophany may be juxtaposed to a situation of failed hospitality and ill-considered food sharing. This situation is realised in Pratchett's "Hogfather" through a parody of the famous Christmas carol "Good King Wenceslas". Based on a medieval Bohemian legend about King Wenceslas, the carol tells a story of the king and his page who bring food to a poor peasant on the Feast of Stephen in harsh weather conditions. Pratchett's parody attacks the inappropriate choice of food: in his novel, the king is doing "the right thing" for appearance's sake and expects gratitude, but he is not concerned whether the peasant will be genuinely gratified by his charity. The food he provides comes from the royal table and comprised dishes that the peasant has never tasted and has no personal attachment to. Unlike similar food offerings in Tolkien's texts, this food is unwelcome since it is alien to the poor old man and the whole charity framing is humiliating. The situation is rectified by Death who performs the function of Hogfather (an equivalent of Father Christmas / Santa Claus in *Discworld*). He substitutes the king's feast with the fare that appeals directly to the old man's sense of self:

*"There was a string of sausages. There was a side of bacon. And a small tub of salt pork. And a mass of chitterlings wrapped up in greased paper. There was a black pudding. There were several other tubs of disgusting yet savory pork-adjacent items highly prized in any pig-based economy. And, laid on the table with a soft thump, there was —*

*"A pig's head," breathed the old man. "A whole one! Ain't had brawn in years! And a basin of pig knuckles! And a bowl of pork dripping!"*" (Pratchett, 2006, p. 266).

The sacrality of the food the peasant finally obtains is rooted in his heritage, his poverty being part of "pig-based economy". The old man's memories play a crucial role: they suggest he had seen better days, in which food was more abundant than in the present. Characters' identities and individual trajectories of being included in or excluded from groups, their unique food histories inform the moments of their emotional resonance with a particular dish or product. Similarly, during the hero's quest, a personal choice often accounts for a simpler, more frugal option or even a sacrifice. Renouncing gustatory pleasures and willingly undergoing food deprivation remains a common feature both in traditional and more contemporary visions of the hero's journey. While Frodo and Sam in "The Lord of the Rings" follow a more classical pattern, the Ithilien episode (in which Sam cooks a rabbit) stands out as a personalised and identity-oriented moment. Frodo, who is far gone in the mythic sense of his quest, is reminded of his hobbit heritage, which is an empowering experience for him. Food deprivation is also central to the last volume of the Harry Potter saga, where Harry, Hermione and Ron are removed from Hogwarts' sumptuous meals. While Harry and Hermione continue to persevere, Ron cannot bear the frugality and temporarily abandons his friends, thus bringing us to the motif of the Fall.

So far, the term *profane* has been used in conjunction with *sacred*, in order to provide the background for the act of hierophany. To introduce the motif of the Fall in the discourse on food, it is necessary to frame it within the context of sin and transgression. Consumption of forbidden food or violating a food-related taboo acquires a *sinful* rather than *profane*

status, setting it in direct opposition to the act of Communion. While sinful in the religious framework of the primary world, the act can develop more connotations in the fantasy storyworld.

There are numerous ways in which food or substance consumption can become “sinful”, but in general terms, it is either the nature of the food itself or the way it is consumed. The motif of gluttony is ubiquitous in fantasy, as in many other genres. From Dudley Dursley who devours Harry’s birthday cake and is immediately punished for his “fall” to visions of social injustice in which food extravagance is a crime against the community (as in “The Ickabog” by J. K. Rowling), gluttony readily integrates into narratives. Next to gluttony, there are such moral transgressions – or deadly sins, in religious terms – as greed, pride and lust, all of which suggest consumption that goes far beyond the essential needs. The motif of the Fall rendered through the moral nature of food consumption features in Lewis’ Narnia, once again involving recognisable primary world imagery. The apples in Aslan’s garden that provide healing and grant the heart’s desire are a temptation that Digory withstands, while the evil queen Jadis succumbs to it. The shining silver aspect of the sacred apples is juxtaposed to the explicitly dark imagery of the sinful act:

*“Digory was just turning to go back to the gates when he stopped to have one last look around. He got a terrible shock. He was not alone. There, only a few yards away from him, stood the Witch. She was just throwing away the core of an apple which she had eaten. The juice was darker than you would expect and had made a horrid stain round her mouth.”* (Lewis, 1998, p. 149).

In “The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe”, one of the four protagonists, Edmund, commits a betrayal, being incapable of resisting the temptation of the sumptuous Turkish delight. Ann Alston points out the sensuous character of the language describing the dessert, as well as Edmund’s attraction to it that “suggests sexual and perhaps animalistic desire rather than nutritional need, subverting adult concepts of childhood asexuality and innocence” (2008, p. 115). Food can be demonised and presented as foul or sinful in itself, for example, the food that Orcs consume in “The Lord of the Rings”. In spite of his hunger in captivity, Pippin refuses to eat the meat given to him by an Orc, not knowing where it came from, which suggests, perhaps, immoral alimentary practices, such as cannibalism.

When magic is involved, it is the act of consumption itself that may be presented as sinful or villainous, while the consumed substance is, on the contrary, sacrosanct. An example of this is Voldemort’s drinking the blood of a unicorn in “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone”. The imagery in the Forbidden Forest chapter resorts to the contrast between the whiteness and purity of the unicorn and the dark ominous figure of Voldemort, while the centaur Firenze verbally reiterates the evil nature of the deed:

*“The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips.”* (Rowling, 1998, p. 188).

Voldemort’s acts of violence are systematically portrayed in the series as immoral / sinful with an emphasis on his loss of humanity. Interestingly, the moral premise of the unicorn episode is problematised in the cult fanfiction “Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality” by Eliezer Yudkowsky, where the question is asked whether consuming a unicorn is morally more “sinful” than consuming any other animal routinely used by humans for food:

*“Unicorns were equinoid, were not even partially humanoid, didn’t talk, used no tools, they were almost certainly just magical horses. If it was right to eat a cow to feed yourself*

*for a day, then it had to be right to drink a unicorn's blood in order to stave off death for weeks. You couldn't have it both ways.*" (Yudkowsky, 2014).

By making Harry think critically about the unicorn blood dilemma, the author subverts readers' expectations that stem from fantasy tropes and turns a conventionally sinful act into the act of caring (since Harry uses the blood to help his Professor). The motif of the Fall may be further complicated when it is combined with the traditional motif of fairy food that is perilous for mortals. Whether the consumption of fairy food is framed as sinful in a particular work of fantasy depends to a great degree on the worldbuilding, specifically, on how the Faërie itself is presented. In Hope Mirrlees' fantasy novel "Lud-in-the-Mist", a considerable narrative tension accumulates due to the ambivalence of the fairy fruit. As Olexandra Filonenko shows in her study of the novel, the state of Dorimare is a desacralised, bourgeois community that bans fairy fruit as its consumption may bring ecstatic states and induce visions and poetic urges. This is seen as highly dangerous because of the accompanying narcotic effect, uncontrolled ecstatic nature of the visions and a possibility of being integrated into the Fairyland without the chance of return. Filonenko argues that the heroes' quest results in changing the nature of interaction between humans and the fairy fruit. Since the hero undertakes a journey into the Fairyland that functions as a ritual and sanctifies the consumption of the fruit, the act of eating it becomes a controlled Communion that is available to all humans in Doremare without dire consequences (Філоненко, 2018). Here, as in some other fantasy texts, the motifs of the Communion approaches transgression and the Fall. The narrative union of these two motifs deserves a detailed analysis.

A notable development has been observed in fantasy fiction that transforms the Fall through the consumption of sinful food into a moment of hierophany. This is by no means found exclusively in fantasy. Food narratives have often played a crucial role in the clash between individual liberty and institutionalised authority. After all, it is the authority (dictatorship, ideology, dominant groups, etc.) that sets the rules, taboos or restrictions, defining which food is to be considered "sinful", while the heroes redefine it in terms of their quests, identities and free choices. Within the framework of liberal values of the contemporary Western world, such food narratives are ubiquitous and they accompany the rites of passage in a situation of personal defiance and liberation from a particular alimentary regime (Mentinis, 2018). Thus, from chocolate that Winston secretly consumes with Julia in George Orwell's "1984" to food deprivations willingly shared by the fellowship defying the Matrix ("The Matrix", 1999, directed by the Wachowskis), various meals and products have served as the rite of passage for the rebellious hero implicitly or explicitly defending liberal values against the oppressive system.

In fantasy fiction, this kind of sinful Communion is well represented. In stories that feature a challenge to a regime / tyrant, a cook may represent a figure of defiance that is not intimidated to confront the system, while the kitchen becomes a locus of resilience and opposition, as well as a sanctuary for the heroes. The examples include Brenda from the Discworld series, Mrs. Beamish from Cornucopia ("The Ickabog"), Molly Weasley in the Harry Potter series and many others. The instances of eating forbidden food in a way that suggests subversion, rebellion and ultimately, Communion are plentiful. Although not all of them involve magic or rely on extensive secondary worldbuilding, there are cases when such an act is deeply rooted in the magic and metaphysical configuration of the secondary world.

One of them can be found in Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy. In his sophisticated and richly intertextual imaginary world that comprises several parallel realities controlled by a theocracy, Pullman orchestrates a massive narrative buildup to the protagonists' sinful Communion, a reenacting of the original sin. Prolific allusions to Dante, Milton, Blake and many other mythopoetic taproot texts, are woven into the fabric

of the story to create a system in which the original sin will be perceived in the positive light, as a desirable event that will save the world and as an intense moment of hierophany. The young protagonists Lyra and Will transition from innocence to the original sin via another food narrative: the story of marzipan that the ex-nun Mary Malone tells them, thus performing the function of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. For Mary, the taste of marzipan bears a personal association with the unique experience of being in love, while the act of narrating this intimate story triggers in Mary's listeners an awareness of awakening sexuality. Lyra's offering a red fruit to Will during a picnic on the following day constitutes the climactic moment on which the destiny of the world depends and yet it preserves the intimacy of their hierophany:

*"The word love set his nerves ablaze. All his body thrilled with it, and he answered her in the same words, kissing her hot face over and over again, drinking in with adoration the scent of her body and her warm, honey-fragrant hair and her sweet, moist mouth that tasted of the little red fruit. Around them there was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath."* (Pullman, 2000, p. 466).

Even though the act is subversive in its nature, its intimate character colours the perception of the hierophany and its imagery: the sensuality of the mouth moist with red fruit, unlike in the case of "horrid" Jadis in Narnia, is depicted as both endearing and transcendental. Another remarkable case, where intimacy and connections with the memory are prevalent, is found in "Babel" by K. F. Kuang. The food hierophany also features at a critical moment of the novel; the imagery, however, is strikingly different. The protagonist, engaged in the open rebellion against the exploitative colonial system of the British Empire, decides to sacrifice his life in the hope of diminishing the power of the colonial state, giving a chance to others to overthrow it in the future. Within the final countdown to the destruction of the Tower of Babel, Robin's mind is flooded with sentimental memories, in which the shared food acts present metonymies for his most cherished friendships and experiences:

*"Twenty seconds.*

*The warm grittiness of a scone at Vaults. Mrs Pipe's sweet, floury hugs. Buttery lemon biscuits melting into nectar on his tongue.*

*Ten.*

*The bitter taste of ale, and the biting sting of Griffin's laughter. The sour stink of opium. Dinner at the Old Library; fragrant curry and the burnt bottoms of oversalted potatoes. Laughter, loud and desperate and hysterical."* (Kuang, 2023, p. 582).

Thus, the protagonist takes his final communion in his memory, justifying, at least in his mind, the colossal act of violence he is about to commit. Rather than sensuous, as in "The Amber Spyglass", the food imagery in this hierophany is viscerally realistic: the emphasis is on textures, not all pleasant (gritty, burnt, oversalted), with the highly evocative words "nectar" and "fragrant" acting as counterpoints. The bittersweet memory moment is framed as transcendental and humanising for the protagonist, the symbolism of the act being his own free choice. Kuang treats food acts as a locus of postcolonial sacrality, establishing through it intimate, embodied experiences of identity and redemption.

**Conclusions and implications for further research.** In his "The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God" Peter Watson traces the ways people have been finding transcendental and numinous experiences after Nietzsche and argues that in Proust's opus magnum the form of the narration itself "can be seen as a post-monotheistic phenomenon, a search for sacred, magical, transcendental moments" (Watson, 2014, p. 143). In the famous madeleine episode, Proust's protagonist experiences a transcendental joy that echoes the Catholic mass in its numinosity. Similar narrative hierophanies are experienced by the heroes of fantasy texts (mostly epic fantasies, as in

Tolkien's Legendarium) whose quests entail food consumption that symbolically reenact the mythic past and help establish a fellowship with a higher power or metaphysical entity. More recent cases of hierophany demonstrate that food in fantasy fiction often functions as a locus where sacrality meets transgression and participates in identity-formation, celebrating free will. All in all, whether framed through Communion, the Fall or a confluence of both, food-related episodes consistently acquire symbolic weight that exceeds mere sustenance. They become hierophanies in Eliade's sense: manifestations of a reality beyond the profane world, capable of transforming characters, cementing fellowships, challenging existing power structures and offering redemption.

One important conclusion is that food hierophanies oscillate between collective and individual registers. On the one hand, shared meals reproduce mythic patterns, establish bonds and anchor communities in tradition. On the other hand, intimate or transgressive moments of consumption often define personal trajectories, shaping identity and agency. The sacred and the sinful, the communal and the solitary, are in constant interplay, while fantasy fiction provides a particularly fertile ground for these negotiations. At the same time, the study reveals that the sacred status of food in fantasy is never static. It is constantly redefined by parody (Pratchett), by postcolonial re-appropriation (Kuang) or by liberal revalorisation of the Fall (Pullman). In this sense, food in fantasy texts becomes a powerful metaphorical tool for interrogating cultural memory, morality, ideology and resistance.

The topic has a great potential for future research, which can fruitfully expand this inquiry in several directions, including interdisciplinary approaches. Drawing on anthropology, cultural and religious studies, linguistics and cognitive science, fantasy scholarship could elucidate why food is such a powerful vehicle for experiencing the numinous in both primary and secondary worlds. A particularly promising direction of future research is in the realm of digital and fan cultures. Exploring how fanfiction and online communities (e.g., the fandom of "Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality") reimagine canonical episodes involving sacred or sinful food could uncover the mechanisms that create new hierophanies for the contemporary consumer of fantasy fiction.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **Use of Artificial Intelligence**

AI has been used to systematise the material and proofread the draft of the article. No artificial intelligence tools were used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or generation of original research content.

### **REFERENCES**

- Канчура, Є. О. (2012). *Моделювання текстуалізованого світу в романах-фентезі Террі Претчетта*. [Дис. на здобуття наукового ступеня канд. філол. наук, ЧДУ ім. П. Могили].
- Криницька, Н. І. (2008). *Фантастичні твори Урсули Ле Гуїн: онтопоетичні аспекти* [Автореферат дисертації на здобуття наукового ступеня канд. філол. наук, ДНУ].
- Набитович, І. Й. (2008). *Універсум саскрі'у в художній прозі (від Модернізму до Постмодернізму)*: Монографія. Дрогобич-Люблін: Посвіт.
- Тихомирова, О. В. (2003). *Міфічний квест у літературній спадщині Дж. Р. Р. Толкіна*. [Дис. на здобуття наукового ступеня канд. філол. наук, КНЛУ].
- Тихомирова, О. В. (2021). Сакральне в метажанрі фентезі. Виклики українського перекладу та теоретичні аспекти дослідження літератури фентезі. *Збірник*

- матеріалів наукових семінарів Центру з Дослідження Літератури Фентезі при Інституті літератури ім. Т. Г. Шевченка НАН України.
- Філоненко, О. Г. (2018). Фентезі як засіб внутрішньої еміграції у творчості Гоуп Міррліз. *Наукові праці ЧДУ ім. Петра Могили. Серія Філологія. Літературознавство*, 316(304), 104–111.
- Яремчук, В. В. (2014). *Міфопоетичні моделі світу в творчості представників літературного гуртка “Інклінгів”*. [Дис. на здобуття наукового ступеня канд. філол. наук, ЛНУ ім. І. Франка].
- Alston, A. (2008). *The Family in English Children’s Literature*. Routledge.
- Brawley, C. S. (2014). *Nature and the numinous in mythopoeic fantasy literature*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Mcfarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Cervigni, D. S. (2007). Literature, Religion, and the Sacred. *Annali d’Italianistica*, 25, 11–22.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24016154>
- Eliade, M. (1987). *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*. NY : Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Filonenko, O. (2023). The Great Mother Figures: Female Power and Authority in Tolkien’s Legendarium. *Hither Shore: Interdisciplinary Journal on Modern Fantasy Literature*, Volume 16 “Power and authority in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien”, 16, 106–123.
- Kuang, R. F. (2023). *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution*. Harper Voyager.
- Lewis, C. S. (1998). *The Magician’s Nephew*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Mentinis, M. (2018). *Psychopolitics of food: Culinary rites of passage in the neoliberal age*. Routledge.
- Otto, R. (1980). *The idea of the holy : an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. London; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pratchett, T. (2005). *Going Postal*. London: Corgi Books.
- Pratchett, T. (2006). *Hogfather*. London: Corgi Books.
- Pratchett, T. (2001). *Mort*. London: HarperTorch Publishers.
- Pratchett, T. (1992). *Witches Abroad*. London: Corgi Books.
- Pullman, P. (2000). *The Amber Spyglass : His Dark Materials*. Book III. New York: Knopf.
- Rosu, A. (2013). Food Fantasies in George R. R. Martin. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 24(3 (89)), 446–466.
- Rowling, J. K. (1998). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Spirito, G., & Rimoli, E. (2011). Simple Pleasures in Tolkien’s Poetry: Eating and Drinking and the Depth of Things. *Hither Shore*, 8, 242–260.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1993). *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1997). *The Peoples of Middle-earth*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Watson, P. (2014). *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God*. New York, Ny: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Yudkowsky, E. (2015). *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*. Chapter 102: Caring.  
<https://hpmor.com/chapter/102>

#### TRANSLITERATED REFERENCES

- Filonenko, O. H. (2018). Fentezi iak zasib vnutrishn’oi emihratsii u tvorchosti Houp Mirrliz. *Naukovi pratsi ChDU im. Petra Mohyly. Serii Filolohiia. Literaturознавство*, 316(304), 104–111.

- Kanchura, Ye. O. (2012). *Modeliuvannia tekstualizovanoho svitu v romanakh-fentezi Terri Pretchetta*. [Dys. na zdobuttia naukovooho stupenia kand. filol. nauk, ChDU im. P. Mohyly].
- Krynytska, N. I. (2008). *Fantastychni tvory Ursuly Le Huin: onto-poetychni aspekty* [Avtoreferat dysertatsii na zdobuttia naukovooho stupenia kand. filol. nauk, DNU].
- Nabytovych, I. J. (2008). *Universum sacrum'y v khudozhnij prozi (vid Modernizmu do Postmodernizmu)*: Monohrafiia. Drohobych-Liublin: Posvit.
- Tykhomyrova, O. V. (2021). Sakral'ne v metazhanri fentezi. *Vyklyky ukrains'koho perekladu ta teoretychni aspekty doslidzhennia literatury fentezi*. Zbirnyk materialiv naukovykh seminariv Tsentru z Doslidzhennia Literatury Fentezi pry Instytuti literatury im. T. H. Shevchenka NAN Ukrainy.
- Tykhomyrova, O. V. (2003). *Mifichnyj kvest u literaturnij spadschyni Dzh. R. R. Tolkina*. [Dys. na zdobuttia naukovooho stupenia kand. filol. nauk, KNLU].
- Yaremchuk, V. V. (2014). *Mifopoetychni modeli svitu v tvorchosti predstavnykiv literaturnoho hurtka "Inklinhiv"*. [Dys. na zdobuttia naukovooho stupenia kand. filol. nauk, LNU im. I. Franka].

Дата надходження до редакції 21.09.2025  
Ухвалено до друку 18.11.2025

#### Author information

<p><b>Tykhomyrova Olena,</b></p> <p>PhD in literary studies, Associate Professor at Kyiv National Linguistic University, member of the Centre for Fantasy Literature Studies at the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.</p> <p>e-mail: olena.tykhomyrova@knl.u.edu.ua</p>		<p><b>Fields of scientific interest</b></p> <p>fantasy fiction, cognitive linguistics, metafiction, humour, food and drink studies</p>
--	--	--



CC Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)