

## Mythonyms and Symbolic Representation in Children's Fantasy

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the role of mythonyms – proper names derived from or modelled on mythological traditions – and their function as instruments of symbolic representation in children's fantasy literature. Drawing on a corpus of canonical and contemporary works including those of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, and Ursula K. Le Guin, the study analyses how authors deploy mythonyms to encode cultural memory, construct fictional cosmologies, and scaffold young readers' ethical and philosophical reflection. The research combines literary onomastics, intertextual analysis, and cognitive narratology to draw out the layered meanings embedded in character names, place names, and the names of mythical creatures. The findings indicate that mythonyms in children's fantasy operate simultaneously on three registers: the aesthetic-phonological, the intertextual-cultural, and the ideological-didactic. The discussion considers how these three functions interact and what implications they carry for the development of children's symbolic thinking and literary competence. The article concludes that mythonyms are not merely ornamental features of fantasy texts but constitute a core mechanism through which children's literature transmits cultural values, fosters imaginative engagement, and initiates readers into broader mythological and philosophical traditions.*

**Keywords:** *mythonyms, children's fantasy, symbolic representation, onomastics, intertextuality, literary names, cognitive narratology, cultural memory, fantasy literature, proper names*

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## Uşaq fantaziyasında mifonimlər və simvolik təmsil

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**Xülasə.** *Bu məqalə mifonimlərin rolunu - mifoloji ənənələrdən götürülmüş və ya onlardan nümunə götürülmüş xüsusi adlar - və onların uşaq fantaziya ədəbiyyatında simvolik təsvir alətləri kimi funksiyasını araşdırır. J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman və Ursula K. Le Guin, tədqiqat müəlliflərinin mədəni yaddaşı kodlaşdırmaq, uydurma kosmologiyalar qurmaq və gənc oxucuların etik və fəlsəfi düşüncələrini inkişaf etdirmək üçün mifonimləri necə istifadə etdiyini təhlil edir. Tədqiqat personaj adlarında, yer adlarında və mifik varlıqların adlarında yerləşmiş laylı mənaları üzə çıxarmaq üçün ədəbi onomastika, mətnlərarası təhlil və koqnitiv narratologiyayı birləşdirir. Tapıntılar göstərir ki, uşaq fantaziyasındakı mifonimlər eyni vaxtda üç registrdə fəaliyyət göstərir: estetik-fonoloji, mətnlərarası-mədəni və ideoloji-didaktik.*

*Müzakirədə bu üç funksiyanın necə qarşılıqlı əlaqədə olduğu və onların uşaqların simvolik təfəkkürünün və ədəbi səriştəsinin inkişafı üçün hansı təsirləri olduğu nəzərdən keçirilir. Məqalədə belə bir nəticəyə gəlinir ki, mifonimlər fantaziya mətnlərinin sadəcə bəzakli xüsusiyyətləri deyil, həm də uşaq ədəbiyyatının mədəni dəyərləri ötürməsi, təxəyyül həvəsini artırması və oxucuları daha geniş mifoloji və fəlsəfi əhəmiyyətə sövq edən əsas mexanizmdir.*

**Açar sözlər:** mifonimlər, uşaq fantastikası, simvolik təsvir, onomastika, mətnlərarasılıq, ədəbi adlar, koqnitiv narratologiya, mədəni yaddaş, fantastika ədəbiyyatı, xüsusi adlar

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## Introduction

Names carry worlds. In the long tradition of Western literary thought, from Plato's *Cratylus* to twentieth-century semiotics, proper names have been understood as more than mere labels – they are sites of meaning, contested and overdetermined, saturated with the cultural assumptions of the communities that coin and transmit them. Few literary genres make this dimension as visible as children's fantasy, which has consistently exploited the resonance of *mythonyms* – names drawn from or modelled on mythological traditions – to construct immersive secondary worlds and to invite young readers into forms of symbolic thinking that extend well beyond the pleasures of narrative.

The term *mythonym*, as employed in contemporary onomastics, refers broadly to proper names that originate in, allude to, or creatively adapt names from mythology, folklore, legend, and related traditions of oral and written narrative (Superanskaya, 2004). In children's fantasy, mythonyms are pervasive: from the Norse-derived nomenclature of Tolkien's Middle-earth to the classical echoes that animate the naming practices of J.K. Rowling's wizarding world, from the daemon-names of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* to the archipelagic place-names of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*. These names do not simply identify characters and locations; they encode value systems, signal intertextual affiliations, and participate in the transmission of cultural memory across generations (Abduolimova, 2025).

Despite the breadth of this phenomenon, sustained comparative analysis remains scarce: existing scholarship has more often addressed mythonymic naming within individual authors or single national traditions than within an integrated theoretical framework (see Section 2). This article seeks to address that gap by proposing a systematic framework for the analysis of mythonyms in children's fantasy – one that attends simultaneously to their phonological and aesthetic properties, their intertextual and cultural functions, and their ideological and didactic dimensions.

*Literature Review. Literary Onomastics and the Functions of Proper Names.* The study of proper names in literary texts – literary onomastics – has matured over the last two decades into a substantive subfield positioned between linguistics and literary studies. Hough's (2016) treatment in *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* maps the terrain across personal names, place names, and naming systems, providing a foundation upon which much subsequent work has built.

Honegger and Turner (2017) draw a useful distinction between *onomastics* – the analysis of pre-existing names – and *onomaturgy* – the creative act of name-formation – a distinction particularly salient for fantasy literature, where authors function simultaneously as analysts and creators of

naming systems. Wheeler (2018), approaching personal names from a methodologically innovative angle, demonstrates how names carry life-narratives and identities that exceed their referential function, an observation that resonates with the symbolic densities of mythonymic naming. Taken together, these contributions establish that names in literary texts are systematically meaningful and warrant the same close analytical attention as other elements of textual organization.

*Children's Fantasy Literature: Cultural and Cognitive Perspectives.* Children's fantasy as a generic and cultural category has received increasingly serious scholarly treatment. Levy and Mendlesohn's (2016) historical and theoretical introduction situates the genre within longer traditions of fairy tale, romance, and mythopoeic writing, arguing that fantasy for younger readers functions as both an aesthetic mode and a vehicle for cultural transmission. Orazbek and colleagues (2025) extend this comparative perspective by examining the mythopoeic dimensions of fantasy across Western and Kazakh traditions, demonstrating that the deployment of mythological material in children's writing is a cross-cultural phenomenon with locally inflected aesthetic and pedagogical functions. From a cognitive perspective, Babelyuk and colleagues (2021) apply possible-worlds theory and cognitive narratology to fantastical fiction, arguing that readers' engagement with imagined worlds activates symbolic resources central to the genre's effects. Taken together, these contributions suggest that children's fantasy is best understood not as escapist or pedagogically inert but as a site at which cultural, symbolic, and cognitive operations converge.

*Names, Cognition, and Symbolic Development in Children.* A growing body of empirical work has begun to examine how children process fantastical and name-laden texts. Hopkins and Lillard (2021) report experimental evidence that fantasy contexts can facilitate the learning and transfer of cognitive skills, supporting the view that imaginative engagement carries developmental as well as aesthetic value. Weisberg and Richert (2022), in a review of the literature on fantastical stories in early childhood, find that such texts may support, rather than impede, learning, provided their fantastical features are sufficiently distinctive to be recognized as such. Kuzmičová and Cremin (2021) further show that different fiction genres prompt children to retrieve and reorganise different kinds of memory, indicating that genre conventions – of which mythonymic naming is one – have measurable cognitive correlates. From a semiotic and developmental angle, Zlatev and Andrén (2016) trace the role of proper names in children's emerging intersubjectivity and mimetic capacity, drawing out implications specifically for fantasy literature. Thomas and Samjose (2022), through a content analysis of multicultural picturebooks, demonstrate that names function as carriers of identity and belonging from the earliest stages of children's literary experience.

*Mythonyms in Fantasy: State of the Art and Research Gap.* Within this broader landscape, sustained attention to *mythonyms* as a distinct category remains uneven. Recent works lexical-semantic analysis of mythonyms in the Harry Potter series indicates the productivity of focused onomastic enquiry on individual fantasy corpora (Abduolimova, 2025; Qosimov, 2025). However, comparative accounts that situate mythonymic naming within a unified framework – attentive simultaneously to its aesthetic-phonological, intertextual-cultural, and ideological-didactic dimensions – remain scarce. Most existing studies privilege one of these dimensions over the others, or address mythonymic naming as an incidental feature of broader analyses of world-building or narrative form. The present article seeks to address this gap by proposing an integrated three-register framework and applying it across a comparative corpus of canonical and contemporary children's fantasy texts.

## Methods

The present study adopts a qualitative, text-centered approach drawing on three complementary methodological traditions: literary onomastics, intertextual analysis, and cognitive narratology. Literary onomastics provides the foundational toolkit for the investigation of proper names in literary

texts. Following theoretical parameters established within the wider onomastic field (Hough, 2016; Honegger & Turner, 2017) and developed in the context of fantasy literature by Tolkien (1983), who wrote extensively on the linguistic and mythological dimensions of his own naming practice, the analysis attends to the etymological provenance of names, their phonological texture, and their structural integration into the world-building apparatus of the texts under examination.

Intertextual analysis, informed by Kristeva's (1980) account of intertextuality and by more recent work in classical reception studies (Buxton, 2004), allows for the mapping of allusive networks between fantasy texts and the mythological traditions on which they draw. This approach is particularly productive for the analysis of authors such as Rowling and Lewis, whose naming systems are densely layered with references to Greek, Latin, Norse, and Celtic mythological traditions.

Cognitive narratology, drawing on the broader programme set out by Herman (2002) and extended in more recent possible-worlds applications (Babelyuk et al., 2021), provides a framework for analyzing the reader-facing functions of mythonyms – specifically, the cognitive and affective responses that myth-resonant names may generate in child readers. This dimension of the analysis is necessarily exploratory, given the methodological difficulties of empirical reader-response research, but it is grounded in established accounts of how children process literary language and develop symbolic competence (Weisberg & Richert, 2022).

The primary corpus comprises six texts selected to represent a range of national traditions, historical periods, and narrative modes: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1995), Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), and Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* (2017). These texts were chosen on the basis of three criteria: canonical status within the children's fantasy tradition, generic representativeness across its principal sub-modes (high fantasy, portal fantasy, contemporary fantasy, and mythological retelling), and the salience of mythonymic naming within them.

## Results

Analysis of the corpus revealed three distinct but interrelated functional registers through which mythonyms operate in children's fantasy. These are presented in turn below.

*The Aesthetic-Phonological Register.* The most immediately perceptible function of mythonyms in children's fantasy is aesthetic and phonological. Myth-derived names are characteristically distinct from the names of everyday experience: they tend toward unusual phonological combinations, archaic or foreign-sounding morphology, and a generalized quality of strangeness that signals the reader's entry into a secondary world governed by different ontological rules.

Tolkien's naming practice exemplifies this tendency most elaborately. The names of Middle-earth – *Aragorn*, *Gandalf*, *Lothlórien*, *Mordor*, *Shire* – are constructed from invented languages (Quenya, Sindarin, Westron) that draw on Old Norse, Old English, Finnish, and Welsh phonological and morphological patterns (Tolkien, 1983). The effect is one of defamiliarization combined with a sense of deep historical rootedness: these names sound old, even to readers without access to their etymological substrata. For child readers in particular, this phonological strangeness appears to function as an imaginative threshold, marking the textual world as decisively other while simultaneously investing it with a quality of mythological weight.

Similar observations apply, albeit with different phonological profiles, to Le Guin's Earthsea names (*Ged*, *Vetch*, *Roke*, *Pendor*) and to Pullman's daemon-names (*Pantalaimon*, *Stelmaria*, *Salcilia*). In

both cases, the names combine accessibility – they are pronounceable, if unusual – with a distinctiveness that sets them apart from both everyday names and the names of other fantasy traditions.

*The Intertextual-Cultural Register.* The second functional register is intertextual and cultural. Many mythonyms in children’s fantasy are not simply invented names that sound mythological; they are direct adoptions or deliberate adaptations of names from identifiable mythological traditions. In deploying such names, authors establish intertextual connections that enrich the semantic texture of their narratives and situate them within broader cultural conversations.

Rowling’s practice is particularly instructive in this regard. The names of her characters and institutions draw systematically on Latin (*Albus Dumbledore, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black*), Greek mythology (*Hermione, Narcissa, Andromeda*), and British folk tradition (*Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, the Whomping Willow*) (Abduolimova, 2025). These allusions function on multiple levels simultaneously. For adult readers and those with classical educations, they signal the ethical and symbolic valences of characters before these are developed narratively: Remus Lupin’s lycanthropic associations are encoded in his name, as are Sirius Black’s canine ones. For younger readers without this cultural capital, the names may function primarily at the aesthetic register, contributing to the sense of an alternate world with deep historical roots. Over time and with rereading, however, the intertextual dimensions of the names may become progressively available, serving as an invitation to wider cultural literacy (Buxton, 2004).

Lewis’s Narnia series operates within a similar logic, though drawing more explicitly on classical mythology (*Aslan* is a Turkish word for *lion*, while figures such as *Bacchus, Silenus*, and the *Maenads* appear by their classical names in *Prince Caspian*). Gaiman’s *Norse Mythology*, by contrast, adopts the mythonyms of the Norse tradition wholesale – *Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, Yggdrasil* – with the explicit pedagogical intention of transmitting this tradition to new audiences.

*The Ideological-Didactic Register.* The third functional register of mythonyms in children’s fantasy is ideological and didactic. Names do not merely reflect or represent values; they actively participate in their construction and transmission. In children’s fantasy, mythonyms frequently serve as condensed ethical programmes, encoding moral orientations that the narrative subsequently unfolds and either endorses or complicates.

Le Guin’s treatment of names in the *Earthsea* cycle is the most philosophically developed in the corpus. In the world of Earthsea, knowing the true name of a person or thing is equivalent to having power over it – a premise that the narrative uses to explore questions of identity, integrity, and the ethics of knowledge (cf. Wheeler, 2018, on the identity-bearing functions of personal names). The protagonist Ged’s journey toward self-knowledge is simultaneously a journey toward knowledge of his own true name, and the climactic moment of the series’ first volume involves Ged’s recognition that the shadow he has been fleeing is himself – a realization literalized through the naming of that shadow (Le Guin, 1968). The mythonymic texture of the Earthsea world thus serves the series’ central philosophical concern: the relationship between naming, knowing, and being.

Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series demonstrates an analogous but differently inflected use of mythonymic symbolism. The name of the protagonist’s daemon, *Pantalaimon* – derived from the Greek meaning ‘all-compassionate’ – encodes the novel’s investment in a secular humanism that counterposes authentic compassion and embodied selfhood against the repressive spirituality of the Magisterium. The names of the novel’s institutions (the Oblation Board, the Church of Eternal Flames) similarly carry ideological freight, signaling Pullman’s critical stance toward organized religion through the connotative resonances of their nomenclature (Pullman, 1995).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The three functional registers identified in the preceding section – aesthetic-phonological, intertextual-cultural, and ideological-didactic – are analytically distinct but practically interdependent. In the most accomplished examples of the genre, a single mythonym may operate simultaneously across all three registers, its phonological texture contributing to the sense of a richly realized secondary world, its intertextual resonances connecting that world to broader cultural traditions, and its ideological valences encoding the ethical concerns that animate the narrative as a whole.

This multifunctionality carries significant implications for the understanding of children's fantasy as a cultural institution. The genre has at times been dismissed as escapist or ideologically naive – a charge to which its wholesale adoption of mythological materials might appear to lend support. The present analysis suggests, on the contrary, that children's fantasy is among the most culturally dense and symbolically sophisticated modes available to young readers. Through its deployment of mythonyms, the genre offers children entry to the deep structures of cultural memory, initiates them into the conventions and concerns of broader literary and mythological traditions, and invites them to develop the symbolic and analogical thinking central to both literary competence and moral development.

This article has argued that mythonyms in children's fantasy literature are not merely decorative features of world-building but constitute a core mechanism through which the genre transmits cultural values, fosters imaginative engagement, and initiates young readers into broader mythological and philosophical traditions. Through the analysis of a corpus of canonical texts, three functional registers of mythonymic operation have been identified: the aesthetic-phonological, which contributes to the sense of a richly realized secondary world; the intertextual-cultural, which connects fantasy worlds to the broader traditions of cultural memory; and the ideological-didactic, which encodes the ethical and philosophical concerns of individual narratives. These findings carry implications for the theory and pedagogy of children's literature, suggesting that careful attention to naming practices can open significant lines of inquiry into the cultural work performed by fantasy texts. They also point toward the value of interdisciplinary approaches – combining literary onomastics, intertextual analysis, and cognitive narratology – for the study of a genre that has often been treated as less analytically demanding than its adult counterparts.

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