Mirrors of Reality in Fantasy

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Abstract

Readers who enjoy fantasy literature often turn to these works as a means of escape. However, beyond the entertainment, these novels often reflect real-world political and societal issues. This paper explores how fantasy novels depict complex struggles such as social inequality, power structures, and moral dilemmas of good vs. evil faced in our current society. It is argued that these fictional narratives do more than critique society - they have potential to radicalize the reader’s beliefs. Through these works, the portrayal of resistance and injustice that fantasy novels show the readers can act as a driving force for challenging social norms and ideological transformation. In all, fantasy can be used as a form of escapism, however, it can provoke social change and influence radicalization of thought in the real world.

Introduction

Science Fiction and Fantasy are genres of literature that feature magical and supernatural elements that do not exist in the real world. The plot, setting, and characters typically follow the same pattern. This may include marginalized characters or groups fighting their world's corrupt government, or the chosen one's quest to obtain a significant object or being to defeat the villain. Many authors use this pattern while creating their own original fantastical language and systems. With this, readers gravitate towards fantasy as a means of escapism. Escapism is defined as an habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine ("Escapism," [Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary]). While literature can be a form of entertainment as a means of breaking from reality, the patterns that are found in fantasy are events that are based in reality. Fantasy novels often depict political and societal challenges that reflect real world issues. This gives readers a different perspective in which they can understand and critique current power structures, social inequalities, and moral dilemmas. For example, the authoritarian-totalitarian corrupt government structure of the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*, discrimination against muggle-borns in *Harry Potter*, and Frodo's dilemma to keep or destroy the power the eponymous ring holds in *The Lord of the Rings*.

By examining these key elements that come with the genre, this paper will explore how fantasy literature serves as a tool for ways in which readers can challenge the real world situations and be a catalyst for ideological transformation. When repeatedly encountering themes of corrupt governments, social injustices, and the internal struggle between good and evil, readers begin to recognize a pattern. By identifying common storytelling structures in fantasy novels, readers can use these patterns to draw parallels and even predict real-life social and political climates. With this, authors play a crucial role in connecting readers to their stories

while also guiding them to critically think about real-world issues. For example, George Orwell wrote *1984* during the aftermath of World War II and predicted a future of violations of fundamental rights and privacy, the undermining of constitutional institutions, political manipulation, and the suppression of dissenting voices (Pathak, pp 8). Although written in the late 1940s, readers can recognize similar parallels to real-world events in the 2020s.

According to the New York Public Library, the history of fantasy is as old as storytelling itself, deeply rooted in the myths and folklore of cultures across the globe. Fantastical tales were often used to deliver harsh cautionary lessons. From the epic adventures of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* and *Journey to the West* to the myths of Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Norse mythology, fantasy has long served as a vessel for moral instruction and cultural preservation. In the 1800s, the *Grimm' Fairy Tales* collection of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson introduced readers to characters like "Cinderella" and "The Little Mermaid" - stories that, in their original forms, were dark, unsettling, and meant to warn as much as entertain. Western fantasy literature, shaped heavily by European medieval traditions, continued this trend using settings filled with castles, dragons, and knights not just for escapism, but to explore power, corruption, and the human condition. Unbound by the limits of reality, fantasy has always wielded the unreal to force readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the world they live in.

This paper will explore this tradition through an examination of three novels: *Lord of the Rings*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *The Hunger Games*. Although each story is unique and written during different decades over the past century, they all share common themes such as depictions of social injustice, power structures, and corruption; character moral dilemmas involving the choice between good and evil; and the potential to radicalize readers, inspiring resistance and challenging social norms.

I. *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, published in 1954, is an epic fantasy trilogy that follows the journey of Frodo, a young hobbit, tasked with destroying a powerful ring to prevent the dark lord Sauron from conquering Middle-earth. Alongside a fellowship of allies including humans, elves, dwarves, and other hobbits, Frodo battles overwhelming odds, temptation, and the corrupting influence of power. The story explores themes of friendship, sacrifice, and the enduring struggle between good and evil.

II. *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, published in 1993, is a dystopian novel set in a near-future America damaged by climate change, economic collapse, and social chaos. The story follows Lauren Olamina, a young woman with hyperempathy, as she escapes her walled community and develops a new belief system called Earthseed, centered on the idea that "God is change." Through Lauren's journey, the novel explores themes of survival, inequality, and the power of belief to shape a better future.

III. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, published in 2008, is a dystopian novel set in the nation of Panem, where the oppressive Capitol forces its districts to participate in a brutal annual event where children fight to the death for televised entertainment. The story follows Katniss Everdeen, a teenager who volunteers to take her sister's place in the Games and becomes a symbol of resistance. Through Katniss's struggle for survival and justice, the novel explores themes of power, propaganda, and rebellion.

Case Studies of Real-World Events Reflected in Fantasy

I. Examining Depictions of Social Injustices, Power Structures, & Corruption; The Moral Approach to Good vs. Evil; The Radicalization of Readers within *The Lord of the Rings*

In the Medium article "Lord of the Rings: Sauron & Authoritarianism," Gabriel Young analyzes J.R.R. Tolkien's use of Historical Criticism to create parallels between real-world dictatorships, specifically Stalin's Soviet Union and Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor. Historical Criticism is defined as literary criticism in the light of historical evidence or based on context in which a work was written, including facts about the author's life and the historical and social circumstances of the time ("Historical Criticism," [Britannica]). Young states:

> For example, Stalin was known to have an "iron fist" akin to Sauron's armor and consistently schemed against anyone who threatened to challenge his power. In other words, Stalin's deceptive nature, consistent oversight, and malicious nature are akin to Sauron's character description, hence by using Historical Criticism, it can be concluded that Sauron represents the traits of authoritarianism (Young, 2).

Young then goes into the description of the environment of Mordor under the rule of Sauron. He states that Mordor's description is reminiscent of the Soviet Union's industrial environment which produced unhealthy living conditions, poor air pollution, and radioactive contamination. Tolkien describes Mordor as:

> "grasping pools choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains has vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about, High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light" (Tolkien, LOTR).

Sauron's "land" exhibits how authoritarians tend to focus on an industrial economy rather than diversifying their economic production. Tolkien's use of Historical Criticism recognizes Sauron's dispute for resources and expansion is similar to what Stalin did with the Soviet Union. Next, Young touches on the One Ring that can be seen as a tool for power, which in turn, can be compared to how authoritarians rely on tools to maintain their power in comparison to those around them. Tolkien writes in the *Lord of the Ring*s: "One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them, One ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them; In the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie." Sauron's development of the ring is to deter the Free People from using their other rings against him. According to Young, using Historical Criticism, Sauron uses the One Ring, like Stalin's Tsar Bomb, to deter those with rings, other atomic and nuclear weapons, to attack him or lay claim to his domain. Lastly, Young acknowledges that Sauron's enemies, the Alliance of Free Peoples, represents a form of governance that opposes Authoritarianism - Democracy. Stalin and the Soviet Union are seen as one body led by an authoritative leader, however, America was seen as different cultural and regional bodies that allied together to halt the spread of communism. Young's article of Historical Criticism to analyse *The Lord of the Rings* is a perfect example of how Sauron, and the land under his rule, represents Authoritarianism.

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially the story of the struggle between the forces of good and evil. Tolkien was deeply religious, and his faith strongly influenced his writing, particularly in his portrayal of the struggle between good and evil. In Keith Mathison's article "Good and Evil in The Lord of the Rings," he argues that Tolkien rejects both the notion that evil is illusory and the dualistic idea that evil is as ultimate as good. Instead, Tolkien presents evil as the absence of good while using the concept of "shadow" to illustrate that

absence. The One Ring symbolizes the corrupting desire for power, and Mathison emphasizes that Tolkien believed one cannot fight evil with evil, as doing so leads to becoming the very thing one opposes. He states: “The parasitic nature of evil means that it is ultimately self-destructive because when it destroys the good it hates, it destroys the very thing it requires for existence.” With this, Tolkien emphasizes that the primary means of overcoming evil is through love. This love manifests itself in many ways, but in *The Lord of the Rings*, the most important ways in which it manifests itself are through the trust and self-sacrifice involved in friendship and through acts of kindness, mercy, and pity (Mathison, 10). This ties back to Christian thought, where the ultimate act of love and self-sacrifice is embodied in the story of redemption.

In the BBC article “Tolkien’s grandson on how WW1 inspired The Lord of the Rings,” Simon Tolkien reflects on how his grandfather’s experiences in World War I profoundly influenced his writing, He notes that J.R.R. Tolkien’s depiction of evil - embodied by Sauron and Saruman - mirrors the industrialized brutality of modern warfare, with orcs as dehumanized laborers and Saruman’s mechanized army echoing the destructive power of industrialization. The landscapes described of Mordor and Isengard are compared to the ravaged battlefield Tolkien fought in the Battle of Somme. Simon states:

> There is a sense too that the world has been fundamentally changed by Sauron even though he has been defeated. Innocence and magic are disappearing from Middle Earth as the elves leave, departing into the West. And I think that my grandfather must have felt the same about Europe in the aftermath of the Great War (Tolkien, 12).

This quote highlights Frodo’s post-war trauma as a parallel to the psychological scars carried by veterans. The influence of war and J.R.R Tolkien’s experiences as a WWI soldier in *The Lord of*

the Rings can radicalize readers by revealing the devastating consequences of unchecked power, industrialization, and blind obedience to authority. Through the lens of fantasy, Tolkien exposes the dehumanizing effects of war and glorifies resistance, courage, and moral integrity in the face of overwhelming darkness. Readers can recognize that even the smallest individuals can challenge great evils, sparking belief in collective action and resistance against injustices faced in the real world. This is not about gaining success or recognition, but about doing the right thing - the central messaging of Tolkien's writing.

II. Examining Depictions of Social Injustices, Power Structures, & Corruption; The Moral Approach to Good vs. Evil; The Radicalization of Readers within *The Parable of the Sower*

In *The Parable of the Sower*, a futuristic dystopian America is shaped by advanced capitalism, which drives a political and economic system that causes widespread suffering. Although the corrupt government in the novel is responsible for many of the world's problems, Octavia E. Butler emphasizes that climate change is the underlying cause of it all. In the "Narratives of Nature and Justice: Environmental Cinema and Literature Through Butler and Kingsolver" Journal by Indu Bala and Dr. Shuchi Agrawal addresses the environmental concerns with an emphasis on how the novel criticizes social injustice and environmental degradations. The novel highlights how the ecological issues impact the population while it exposes the interconnection between socio economic disparities and environmental challenges. Butler skillfully weaves ecological issues with social justice in her novel to raise awareness about environment destruction and systemic inequality. She critiques how human exploitation of nature leads to widespread harm, particularly affecting marginalized groups like women, racial

minorities, the poor, and queer individuals. The novel also condemns how powerful institutions such as the church, government, and corporations manipulate the vulnerable for profit and control and often use religion to justify their actions and maintain oppression (Bala & Agrawal 2). Lauren Olamina further documents and journals the devastating effects of climate change, such as drought and water scarcity highlighting how environmental disasters contribute to broader social crises. She recognizes the unequal impact of these crises based on class, race, and gender, acknowledging both her relative privilege and the systemic inequalities faced by others. As she travels north, Lauren encounters individuals like the Douglases who are a mixed-raced family and whose suffering reflects a modern form of slavery which deepens her awareness of the widespread social injustice and human cost of environmental collapse (Bala & Agrawal 3).

In Lauren's journal entries, her newly founded religion, Earthseed, reflects on the struggles between good and evil. Octavia E. Butler's questioning of her Baptist faith is reflected in the novel and in the character of Lauren Olamina. Earthseed is a religion developed by Lauren Olamina as a response to the deteriorating world and her own personal struggles. In a Skidmore College article, "Earthseed: Invented Religion and Science Fiction," Professor Eliza Kent writes that Earthseed asks that we confront the inherent instability and precarity of life. Instead of defending against change, Earthseed urges us to yield to change when necessary and remain alert to opportunities to affect change and thereby shape god (Kent 5). In *The Parable of the Sower*, the struggle between good and evil is portrayed more as a conflict between truth and denial. The novel mentions multiple times that "God is Change." Instead of waiting for evil to change on its own, the protagonist believes it must be confronted through deliberate actions that create change. Kent states that the "god" of Earthseed is not something to worship or even to call upon for defense or revenge, and that its hard truths provide comfort and framework for action. Denial

means oppression and confinement, but truth means liberation and freedom. Another important role of good versus evil is Lauren Olamina's "hyperempathy syndrome." This is a genetic defect caused by her mother's drug use while she was pregnant, and Lauren can feel the pain and sometimes pleasure of others. However, Lauren sees this as an asset in which it might be used to do some good as it could become the basis for a more compassionate and caring society. Even though Lauren Olamina must decide to take a life in self-defense or to survive, she will still have to live with the emotional burden of that choice. At other times, she could witness someone in pain and immediately understand what they were experiencing. This syndrome can be seen as a positive trait because it prevents her from believing that death, pain, or suffering is only justified to those who deserve it.

When reflecting on this novel in light of the events that have unfolded in 2025, many readers feel that Butler's message hits uncomfortably close to home, particularly because the beginning of the novel takes place during the middle of the year 2024. When Butler first published the novel in the early 1990s, climate change was just beginning to emerge as a public concern. A 1989 article published by Los Angeles Times titled "Global Warming Is Expected to Be the Hot Issue of 1990s : Environment: Some scientists studying the greenhouse effect say the sky is falling. Others believe the best advice is to stay cool," Mitchell Landsberg writes:

> The World Bank, long dismissed by environmentalists as ecologically insensitive, now calls the environment its leading priority for the 1990s. President Bush called the '90s "the era for clean air." The Worldwatch Institute, an environmental research organization, calls the '90s "the turnaround decade" in which people will either stop polluting or face an environmental disaster as devastating as nuclear war (Landsberg 4-5).

Currently in 2025, climate change has run rampant, the government has for all intent and purposes been eclipsed by the power or large corporations, and racial tension shapes community behavior in uneasy ways. In Ambrose Reed's article "Radical acceptance of the present: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," she states that radical acceptance of our changing present would dramatically transform our country and world. By presenting Lauren as a protagonist who clearly and bluntly describes the effects of climate change and socioeconomic injustice, Butler helps readers visualize the world she depicts and examine how it parallels their own reality. In a Dragonfly article "Climate Change Author Spotlight - Octavia Butler," Nikolas Caukouma writes:

> Climate change doesn't really *fit* into either reality or fiction in a compartmental sense. It looms over society and is a result of many other root issues, such as greed and capitalism. Octavia Butler recognized this and world-built her stories by looking at what wasn't, isn't, or won't be "great." Her novels lie on the path of "If we continue this …then." If society sees a natural resource it can make money off of, capitalism provides a path for that. Eventually, with too many resources taken, not only is the climate itself altered but the same kind of root greed doesn't disappear…" (Caukouma 10).

Caukouma eloquently describes how climate change in *Parable of the Sower* can affect its readers. He also suggests that while Butler may have hoped for a better America, true greatness cannot be achieved by ignoring scientific facts, civil rights, ecological and economic sustainability, forethought, and equality. Climate change is portrayed not as a distant threat but as an immediate, life-altering force that worsens inequality and dismantles society. By showing the devastating human cost of environmental neglect, Butler radicalizes readers to recognize the

urgency of ecological responsibility and the need for collective action before such a future becomes reality.

III. Examining Depictions of Social Injustices, Power Structures, & Corruption; The Moral Approach to Good vs. Evil; The Radicalization of Readers within *The Hunger Games*

In highlighting the Capitol's corruption and the social injustices it creates, Suzanne Collins powerfully conveys the oppressive weight of a totalitarian government. The people of Panem are ruled by a brutal and repressive regime that will do anything to stay in power. In an analysis article named "*The Hunger Games* Themes and Issues," Brett Lamb writes about how the government of Panem maintains its power through military force and exploitation, using Capitol Peacekeepers to control the districts with violence and suppress uprisings. At the same time, it abuses its authority by seizing the districts' resources and offering little in return, allowing the Capitol to thrive while the rest of the nation suffers in poverty (Lamb 4-5). In the article "How *The Hunger Games*' Transcends Make-Believe," Tammy Lam writes about how the series portrays the brutal reality of authoritarian control through the Capitol's use of the Games as a tool of oppression, where the lives and dreams of young tributes are sacrificed to maintain dominance. This ongoing conflict between the privileged Capitol and the oppressed Districts mirrors modern struggles with inequality, capitalism, and the abuse of power. As readers observe the Capitol's relentless grip and the Districts' fight for freedom, the story serves as a powerful reflection of contemporary political and social issues, prompting us to question the ethics of authority and consequences of societal division (Lam 6-8).

In *The Hunger Games*, the conflict between good and evil is clearly represented by the rebellion against a corrupt government. In the journal titled "The Concept of Power in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*," Ismail Tahir examines the power dynamic used between Panem's government and its people. The Power-Over is one of the three types of power the authority figures in the Capitol uses to manipulate their society. People in positions of power often try to lead those beneath them, even when those individuals do not want to be led. Taking young boys and girls from each District while people watch the games on television is the Capitol's way to remind the people of how they are completely at the Capitol's mercy (Tahir 169). Katniss Everdeen has always had a rebellious nature, especially shown when she volunteers in place of her sister Primrose. This marked a turning point in the series, as she was the first person ever to volunteer as tribute. From that moment on, she becomes the unlikely hero who leads a rebellion against the government. Katniss demonstrates her defiance during the Games by forming alliances with other tributes like Rue, developing a romantic bond with Peeta, and showing a willingness to sacrifice herself to save him. In a Wordpress article "*The Hunger Games*: The Rebellion within Katniss Everdeen," Kate Cookson writes:

> She realizes the country is not how it should be, and something must be done to fight it. This is why she decided to fight their rules of the games. She did not want to be another tool in their games. Her life mattered and so did everyone else's in the game (Cookson 13).

Katniss's rebellion against the Capitol, marked by her courage, love, and strength represents the force of good standing up to an authoritarian, controlling and corrupt regime.

Since Suzanne Collins published *The Hunger Games*, many young readers have looked to Katniss Everdeen as a symbol of resistance and have drawn inspiration from her to challenge

real-world government corruption. In the series, Everdeen uses the three-finger salute used by District 12 residents as a gesture of admiration, gratitude, and saying goodbye to someone they love. When Katniss's ally Rue dies in the arena, Katniss gives a three-finger salute as a sign of respect for her fallen friend. This moment marks a turning point, as Katniss honors someone she was never meant to care for, defying the Capitol's expectations. A real-world example is the people of Myanmar using the three-finger salute to symbolize their civil disobedience against the ongoing military coup and a tool to fight for human rights. This Southeastern democracy movement underscores the influence and effectiveness of displaying rebellion in literature. The resonance of these symbols, born out of a dystopian narrative, reflects the universal aspirations for freedom and resistance against oppressive regimes, emphasizing how the fictional struggles of characters like Katniss Everdeen continue to inspire real-world movements for justice and democracy (Lam 15). In a Mashable article "Why the internet is comparing the Met Gala to The Hunger Games," Meera Navlakha wrote about how the Met Gala took place at a volatile and harrowing moment in history. In Panem, fashion is used by the Capitol as a socio-political tool to emphasize class division and distract from its oppressive regime. Extravagant clothing worn by the elite contrasts sharply with the modest attire of the poor, serving to both display power and conceal state violence. Katniss Everdeen's flaming gown, worn before a deadly battle, exemplifies how spectacle is used to obscure the brutal reality beneath (Navlakha 4). This ties back to Collins' inspiration for the novel's plot, which came from flipping through TV channels and noticing how scenes of war were casually placed between events like the Met Gala, highlighting society's desensitization to violence.

Unpacking the Psychoanalysis Impact

I. Subconscious Exploration and Psychological Shift

When connecting the stories mentioned so far in this paper, readers can finish each series reflecting on their own lives and considering how they might embody the qualities of the main characters. Many readers tend to imagine themselves as the main character, essentially "putting themselves in their shoes." This plays a huge role in the psychological impacts fantasy has on readers. In an article from *Science That Matters* by Megan Schmidt titled "How Reading Fiction Increases Empathy and Encourages Understanding," she writes about the reader's experience in stepping outside of oneself and into a world of fiction. Schmidt writes:

> Fiction has the capacity to transport you into another character's mind, allowing you to see and feel what they do. This can expose us to life circumstances that are very different from our own. Through fiction, we can experience the world as another gender, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, profession, or age. Words on a page can introduce us to what it's like to lose a child, be swept up into war, be born into poverty, or leave home and immigrate to a new country. And taken together, this can influence how we relate to others in the real world (Schmidt 6).

Fantasy and fiction in general can expose us to different lives. While it may make readers uncomfortable, it educates them on how characters with different traits can behave. This is crucial to the reader's experience because it provides an opportunity to safely explore other people's perspectives from a distance, which in turn helps develop empathy skills. In the same article, a 2014 study showed that elementary and high school students in Italy and the United Kingdom became more empathetic towards immigrants, refugees, and gay and lesbian people after reading *Harry Potter* (Giovannini, Capozza 2014).

In the introduction of Terri Apter's novel *Fiction Literature - An Approach to Reality*, she uses Freud's dream analysis theory to explore the unconscious mind in fantasy novels. This theory has been challenged since Apter's publishing, however, she uses Freud's analysis that dreams reveal hidden desires, fears, and conflicts, applying this framework to characters and their surreal experiences. What Freud and Apter are alluding to is that dreams and the unconscious influence many narratives. This allows for deeper psychological exploration with fantastical storytelling. Freud's own writings are deeply figurative, revealing that psychoanalysis itself functions like a form of fantasy literature. It tells speculative stories about unseen mental processes using metaphorical language because it investigates an unconscious life that resists direct observation. It often defies strict allegorical or metaphorical interpretations because it disrupts logic and meaning, challenging readers to confront unsettling possibilities with their own world.

In Pavol Stubna's research titled "The fantasy fiction viewed through the lens of psychology of literature," he compiled selected literary and psychological aspects of fantasy fiction that can significantly influence expansion of cognitive, emotional, and social competences in readers. He utilizes a new interdisciplinary science called *psychology of literature* which explores and explains the brain's motivational circuits that determine human behavior and emotions in interaction with the environment or with other agents. Fantasy fictions, often seen as an adventure-driven genre, offers readers intense emotional experiences while also fostering imagination and creative thinking. It allows individuals to explore alternative realities, identify with characters, and consider how they would act in unfamiliar situations, often without triggering defensive reactions to sensitive real-world topics. He states:

> Readers can take on the roles of protagonists, "experience" the same situations, and/or think about what they would do in their place, as they would react. In other words, one of the great things about fantasy literature is that we can be transported into worlds we do not know. We can wear skins that are not ours. We can look at the landscape through someone's eyes (Yolen & Stubna 11).

Fantasy stories offer models of heroism, social ideas, and alternative worldviews, helping them process complex emotions and social roles. While critics warn that fantasy can become escapist or detach readers from reality, others argue it can expand scientific and abstract thinking by presenting metaphorical or symbolically real alternatives. In all, fantasy provides a spiritual or ideological counterbalance to modern materialism, addressing existential concerns and resonating with timeless, archetypal themes rooted in myth and collective human experience (Stubna 10-17).

II. Reader Reactions

In a *Medium* article titled "My mental health improved dramatically since reading epic fantasy books," Lexy M. reflects on her own emotional catharsis. She writes that the range of emotions and profound themes such as heroism, anger, hate, friendship, courage, overcoming challenges, love, and loss provide a safe outlet for her own feelings. Lexy M. states:

> This emotional catharsis can be incredibly therapeutic, helping you to process your own emotions and gain insight into your own life. By seeing characters overcome obstacles and grow, you may feel inspired and empowered to face your own challenges…By witnessing characters face and overcome incredible odds, you can internalise these messages of hope and resilience, applying them to your own life…Through the lens of

> fantasy, you can explore your values, beliefs, and aspirations, gaining a deeper understanding of yourself and your own potential for growth and change (Lexy M. 20, 28, 34).

Lexy M. also shares how she draws on the tactics from these fantasy novels to stand up for herself and build self-confidence in both her professional and social life.

In the blog post "Book Review - The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien," author Joy V. Spicer offers a detailed analysis of each book in the trilogy. Specifically focusing on Spicer's insights into Tolkien's rich descriptions of the landscape and intricate history of Middle-earth, they explain how deeply immersed they felt in the story - so much so that it seemed as if they had been transported into that world. Spicer states:

> We get this from the ruins found in many areas, all of which have a backstory, many only mentioned fleetingly; place names, some retaining their ancient name while others have changed over time, reflecting momentous events that have transpired; mention of this or that battle from previous ages…Each of the different races has their own mythology and stories of the past, some unique to each, others intertwined. Each race also has its songs and verse, peppered through the story (Spicer 48-50).

Spicer's observation is especially interesting because it highlights J.R.R. Tolkien's dedication to detailed writing and his commitment to creating an immersive world for the reader. Tolkien's intentions in writing so meticulously demonstrate his purpose of encouraging readers to deeply engage with the characters and the environments they inhabit. Spicer also notes that Tolkien's background as a philologist, a specialist in the study of language and literature, helped bring out the authenticity to his world-building, highlighting how he drew inspiration from Finnish for the Elvish language, Quenya, and from Welsh for another Elvish language, Sindarin. The history

section of Spicer's review reveals how deeply immersed they were, demonstrating the psychological process of imagining themselves within the world of *The Lord of the Rings*.

With renewed attention on the novel due to its setting in 2024, many young readers are now praising Butler's work for its power to enlighten, provoke, and most importantly, empower youth and support their causes. In a *Yes Magazine* article "*Parable of the Sower* Is Now, Says Gen Z," author Aina Marzia highlights how Gen Z readers connect with the novel and see themselves reflected in Butler's protagonist, Lauren Olamina. An interview with a 22-year-old, Killian, from Atlanta Georgia states:

> All of Butler's work focuses very specifically on hierarchical power and how it affects us. She shows its effects on our jobs, households, and relationships, and how we can cope with these unequal power relations. Many of us living in this year are intimately familiar with the coming of climate change, the perils of deregulation, the dehumanization of the homeless, and drug abuse (Killian 2024).

Killian's review not only talks about the hardships in the novel but how it also relates to today. Marzia also quotes Butler from the first page of the book that's written below the year 2024: "Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all" (Butler 1993). It's clear that Butler's intention isn't to accept a doomsday scenario, but rather to inspire readers to take a closer look at their own reality. In an interview with 27-year-old Zachari Brumaire he states:

> Literature about dealing with exploitation and having one's labour used to further the ill effects of capitalism and colonialism and patriarchy against one's will, and how to survive and resist that. As a young person - becoming politically aware during the Great Recession, stuck in a world with awful work and a collapsing climate and rising food

> prices and health care prices, and no real institutional resistance to Covis and genocide - everything is so incredibly bleak (Brumaire 2024).

Brumaire feels the intensity of Butler's novel and draws strong parallels to real-world issues today. What's most unsettling is that many real-life examples support these comparisons. The protagonist, Lauren Olamina, constantly critiques how she is used as a political pawn by those in power, and Brumaire eloquently captured this in his interview.

An article published by The Michigan Daily titled "How *The Hunger Games* series taught me how to feel," author Graciela Batlle Cestero reflects on her reading of Collins' popular series in 2020 during the Covid-19 quarantine. She writes:

> Suzanne Collins employed such specificity and imagination in her world building that I began to imagine myself as a part of one of the Panem's districts. The characters felt so real to me. Say what you want about Katniss Everdeen, but I related immensely to her emotional suppression…At the point where I was in my life, crying or outwardly expressing any emotion was an activity reserved for the confines of my bedroom. Even though I am more emotional and expressive now, I related to Katniss at the time, and her character helped me understand myself (Cestero 8-9).

Cestero then writes about how *The Hunger Games* helped her feel again and become more emotionally expressive. However, reflecting on her article in depth, Cestero put herself in Katniss Everdeen's shoes and allowed herself to emotionally connect with the character. In an article titled "I Just Reread *The Hunger Games* - Here's What I Think of the Series Now," Michelle Lema lists her reflections and analysis of the series from the perspective of rereading it as an adult. Her first reflection talks about how books are for realists as much as they are for escapists (Lema 1). She states:

> I'm now in a place where I want to face my life and analyze it. Because of this, the reread felt more present. I found myself relating to Katniss instead of looking at her character from an outside perspective. I had forgotten that in the books, the reader is always in Katniss' point of view…Whether you're looking for a place to escape to or a place to analyze your current and ongoing existential crises, these books are home (Lema 1-2).

Lema captures the experience of revisiting a book that played a pivotal role in her youth, reflecting on how its meaning has evolved over time. When Lema refers to the series as "home," it suggests that revisiting the novel was a grounding experience, helping her reconnect with both her sense of self and her understanding of the world around her.

Conclusion

There are many examples of fantasy literature reflecting reality, and based on what has been examined, each of these stories appears to be shaped by the personal experiences of their authors. When drawing from real-world events to create fantasy literature, with their own world building and invented languages, they offer a fascinating way for readers to confront and better understand their own realities. Fantasy literature acts as a powerful tool that allows readers to question real-world situations and can serve as a catalyst for ideological change. Through recurring themes such as corrupt governments, social injustice, and the internal conflict between good and evil, readers begin to recognize deeper patterns reflected in their own world. For example, Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor, can be compared to Stalin in terms of their authoritarian tactics and oppressive regimes. The concerning effects of climate change depicted in the Parable series - written in the 1990s, when climate change was just beginning to gain public attention - remain strikingly relevant today in 2025. Additionally, the people of Myanmar

adopting Katniss Everdeen's three-finger salute as a symbol of rebellion in their fight for civil disobedience. Many fans of the fantasy literature genre are drawn to its escapist elements, but they often find themselves reconnecting with reality as the themes–sometimes unsettlingly–mirror real-world issues, while also helping them empathize with both heroic and villainous characters. Fantasy has the power to inspire radical thinking in its readers, yet it is often overlooked as a tool for challenging dominant ideologies and driving transformative perspectives.

For further research, it would be beneficial to interview more young readers today who have recently read *The Lord of the Rings*, given that it was published many years ago. Interview questions could explore how Tolkien's novels may have shifted reader's perspectives in the real world, whether they used story as a tool to navigate personal or societal issues, and if the narrative influenced their political or social views. Further research should also include gathering quantitative data to determine how many readers have been influenced or radicalized by fantasy literature. This could be done by collecting data from video review platforms like YouTube or TikTok, book review apps like Goodreads or Storygraph, articles/personal blogs, or discussion forums. Additionally, conducting case studies on individuals or groups involved in political or social activism who cite fantasy literature as a major influence. These studies could explore how these books have shaped their motivations, ideologies, and actions.

Overall, the fantasy literary genre is a catalyst for psychological growth and self-reflection, our understanding of good and evil, and inspiration for ideological change and empathy in our real world. The emotional intensity and epic nature of fantasy stories often trigger psychological shifts in readers, encouraging personal growth by providing a space to process trauma, uncertainty, or inner conflicts. Fantasy fiction challenges readers to step outside

their reality and consider new perspectives on identity, purpose, and society. The transformative journeys of character mirror the growth and resilience many individuals experience in their own lives, fostering a deeper understanding of themselves. By immersing themselves in fantastical worlds, readers can explore complex questions about morality in a safe, controlled environment, which helps them develop a more nuanced understanding of good versus evil in their own lives. Given the current climate of ongoing civil unrest, many readers turn to these books for escapism; however, these novels also offer a sense of empowerment and psychological shifts of radicalization, inspiring small acts of rebellion in everyday life. Readers come to understand not only how to challenge oppressive forces, but also how to advocate for themselves and resist being silenced by suppressive governing bodies. Fantasy often reflects the historical context in which it was written, serving as a kind of time capsule. This allows readers to explore the past and present more deeply and encourages them to hold themselves-and those around them-accountable to do better. By offering readers an opportunity to engage with these moral dichotomies, it can result in a much deeper and impactful relationship with themselves and others. When looking at fantasy as a tool for change, readers empathize with characters by navigating their struggles, developing a stronger sense of social responsibility and solidarity, becoming aware of injustices present in reality, and using them as a driving force to call for action.

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