

MORAL AMBIGUITY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: FINDING THE GRAY
SPACE AND IN BETWEEN IN THE WORKS OF GARTH NIX AND J.K. ROWLING

By

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For Will.
For Luna.
For Lily.

This thesis is my fourth labor of love, so I want to dedicate it to my first three little loves.

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ABSTRACT

MORAL AMBIGUITY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: FINDING THE GRAY SPACE AND IN BETWEEN IN THE WORKS OF GARTH NIX AND J.K. ROWLING

One of the cornerstones of heroic fantasy literature is the ever-persistent struggle between opposing forces traditionally conceived as the sides of good and evil, often metaphorically described as a conflict between “the light versus the dark.” This dichotomy was cemented within the genre with the publishing of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* series in the mid-twentieth century. Since that time, the lines between “good” and “evil” within the genre of heroic fantasy have been drawn very clearly, especially when the fantasy is intended for a child or young adult audience. However, in more recent years, subversions to these characteristic conventions have been increasingly popular; moral ambiguity now seems to be a dominant thematic trend for twenty-first century heroic fantasy, especially that aimed at a young adult audience. The focus of this thesis will be on morally ambiguous characters as seen in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling and the Old Kingdom series by Garth Nix.

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INTRODUCTION

HEROIC FANTASY

What is fantasy literature? This specific genre of fiction can be seen stretching as far back in time as stories themselves. Myths and legends, fairy tales and folklore, and even the great epics and medieval romances all serve as the foundation which modern fantasy has been built upon; however, modern Anglo-American fantasy, especially in children's literature, did not begin to take shape until the mid-to late nineteenth century. It was at this time that books such as Lewis Carroll's two books about Alice (1865 and 1871), George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Well at the World's End* (1896) by William Morris, and many others set the stage for this transformation from the older tradition of fantasy—folktales, myths, and legends—into what we may start to recognize as the fantasy fiction that is familiar to us today. Lykke Guanio-Uluru mentions MacDonald as one of the earliest fantasy theorists and writers in her work *Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature*. Guanio-Uluru discusses how MacDonald (and later J.R.R. Tolkien) relied on a formulaic strategy for fantasy that had to deal with a moral and ethical code. In his survey essay on the development of "high fantasy" for children in *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, C.W. Sullivan credits William Morris as the major influence for later writers of fantasy novels, stating that "Morris . . . is generally acknowledged to be the first to

have brought the elements of traditional narrative together in novel form to create a secondary world within which to set a fantastic tale told in high style (265).¹

These publications can be attributed to the beginning of the turn away from older fantasy works —such as the heroic epics of *Homer* and *The Odyssey* or the legends of King Arthur—and toward what is considered today as the staple of the genre: heroic fantasy. While the definition of heroic fantasy may change from decade to decade and author to author,² heroic fantasy can be boiled down to the subgenre of fantasy that is based on the conflict of “good” and “evil” forces that usually involves a battle (or battles) as these forces clash against each other. The reader is usually aligned with the forces of the “morally good” and is meant to empathize with their “righteous” fight, while the forces of the “morally evil” are meant to be antagonistic and self-serving — they are not meant to be characters with whom the reader may intimately identify with.

In his work *Strategies of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery makes the claim that either games or books can follow this “recipe” for fantasy:

Take a vaguely medieval world. Add a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it.

¹ This is a crucial observation and a bold claim because of how easily fantasy was dismissed as “literature” in the late 1900s (and sometimes still is today). The history and development of the fantasy genre, along with defining that genre, is the subject of many academic articles and monographs. For more information on the development of fantasy from the early epics up through today see *Worlds Within* by Shelia Egoff; *Children’s Fantasy Literature* by Levy and Mendlesohn; and *Strategies of Fantasy* by Brian Attebery.

² Ursula K. Le Guin has a particularly tart definition she provides when considering her own heroic fantasy series of *Earthsea*, saying “Some assumptions are commonly made about fantasy that bother me. These assumptions may be made by the author, or by the packagers of the book, or both, and they bother me both as a writer and as a reader of fantasy. They involve who the characters are, when and where they are, and what they do. Put crudely, it’s like this: in fantasy, 1) the characters are white, 2) they live sort of in the Middle Ages, and 3) they’re fighting in a Battle Between Good and Evil” (<https://www.ursulaklequin.com/some-assumptions-about-fantasy>).

Introduce one villain with no particular characteristics except a neatly all-powerful badness, Give him or her a convenient blind spot.

Pour in enough mythological creatures and non-human races to fill out a number of secondary episodes: fighting a dragon, riding a winged horse. Stopping overnight with the elves (who really should organize themselves into a bed-and-breakfast association).

To the above mixture, add one naïve and ordinary hero who will prove to be the prophesied savior; give him a comic sidekick and a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot.

Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals. (10)

Fantasy scholar Ruth Nadelman Lynn describes heroic fantasy as a story in which “the fate of the world hangs in the balance, while the forces of good and evil, or light and darkness, battle for control of humanity” (289). This argument of the “light” versus the “dark” is seen repeated throughout both fantasy scholars and fantasy books—Guanio-Uluru describes the idea of the light and the dark as a contrast to fully set the two sides apart from one another in the reader’s minds (40). Sheila A. Egoff, critic of children’s literature, claims in her work *Worlds Within* that “. . . modern epic fantasies are chiefly concerned with the unending battle between Good and Evil” (6).

The Roots of Heroic Fantasy: JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis

Whereas fantasy novels developed during the 19th century, heroic fantasy first rose to prominence in the mid-20th century, with works such as Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954/55) as well as C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of*

Narnia (1950-1956) soaring in popularity with readers. Although fantasy is known for its numerous subgenres, it is because of these works by Tolkien and Lewis that today's concept of fantasy has been defined in the public's eye by a new subgenre, i.e., heroic fantasy. This immense popularity of heroic fantasy in the mid-21st century is why the mention of fantasy may now bring to mind works such as J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, George R.R. Martin's world of Westeros, or even Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*. The ethics and moralities that were laid down by Tolkien and Lewis commanded fantasies following in their footsteps to adhere to the strict regime that had been previously established by the duo.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) was best known as an English writer and scholar who not only became celebrated for his set works in Middle Earth, but also for his influential scholarly work on Arthurian tales such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, his lectures and papers on the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, and his essay "On Fairy Stories," which details Tolkien's philosophy on mythopoeic³ fantasy. Historian James Trilling, with his interest in Tolkien spanning over 60 years, claims that with the creation of Middle Earth, Tolkien "established, virtually singlehandedly, the modern genre of heroic fantasy" (136). Trilling is hardly alone in his sentiments, with other notable authors and critics also taking up this idea. University of Wisconsin-Stout Professor Michael Levy and British academic historian and scholar on speculative fiction Farah Mendelsohn note in their work *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction*,

³ "Mythopoeic—of or pertaining to myth-making." This genre of fantasy literature is one that typically is heavily influenced by myths or mythologies. It sometimes may also be interchangeable with the term "high fantasy" as coined by children's author Lloyd Alexander.

“the stand-out text of the period is J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937)” (98). The two go on to emphasize Tolkien’s influence on the genre: “[a]lthough it was never intended for children, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is overwhelmingly the most significant publication to affect the development of children’s and teen’s fantasy in the 1960s” (134). In Brian Attebery’s *Strategies of Fantasy*, in which Attebery attempts to fully define the fantasy genre, he circles around again and again to Tolkien specifically, “. . . not just because of the imaginative scope and commitment with which he invested his tale but also, and chiefly, because of the immense popularity [in fantasy] that resulted [from the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*]” (14). Tolkien historian Tom Shippey claims that the “dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic . . . [with] its most representative and distinctive works books like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” (vii).

Although C.S. Lewis may not have had as big of an impact on the fantasy genre for adults as Tolkien did, he absolutely was a massive influence on children’s fantasy novels at the time. Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was also a British scholar and writer. Lewis’s biographer Walter Hooper⁴ notes how in his meetings with him, they spent time discussing not only other influences from other authors in the Inklings, but also the impact that the Arthurian literature had both on Britain and on Lewis himself. The King Arthur stories and legends can be seen as some of the earliest forms of fantasy literature, and the values and themes present throughout them can be seen echoed not only in

⁴ Walter Hooper was Lewis’s secretary for a few months near the end of Lewis’s life. He was also the literary advisor for Lewis’s estate after his death, and it is during these last few months that these meetings occurred.

Lewis' works, but also in Tolkien's. One familiar with both the Narnia works and the Arthurian legends may see the influence directly within the works, such as the parallel of Cor from *The Horse and His Boy* and Tor from Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* as both secret sons of kings. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* can be appreciated as a version of the Holy Grail Quest from legend (Kehl 3-4), and the four Pevensie children's return to Narnia has been "directly compared to Arthur's future return to Britain" (Schenk). In *Worlds Within*, Egoff discusses how today's fantasy has both an ancestor with the tales of King Arthur and a parallel with modern stories, saying, "[w]hile myth, legend, and folklore can be differentiated . . . they can also share a common ground in their 'matter,' that is, in their elements of composition [as compared to 'modern' fantasy works]" (4). Lewis's ties to older versions of fantasy are seen in his works set in Narnia, ties which Attebery claims are not only necessary, but vital to the survival of fantasy stories, stating in *Strategies of Fantasy* that it is how authors "reproduce the familiar" (17) that gives fantasy stories their power, and enables them as a genre to continue to be powerful stories to this day. The way Lewis can reference Arthurian tales in his works helps to give the Narnia series the stability it still maintains over half a century ago as a pillar of children's fantasy literature.

Both Tolkien and Lewis fought in WWII and then returned back to Britain to write their respective novels. This impact of this war can be seen in the strict moral code between the sides of good and evil that has been written into their works. Both Tolkien and Lewis have included the sides of Good and Evil in their writings, and in doing so, defined what it means to be Good versus what it means to be Evil. In Tolkien's and Lewis's works, there is no room for any in-between morality: their characters have to

pick a side. Children's fantasy scholar Suzanne Rahn discusses fantasy wars in her essay "Lewis, Tolkien, and the Ethics of Imaginary Wars," noting how this trend was established by the second world war and the clear evil and good sides that were evident to not only the writers as they crafted their stories, but also to the readers.⁵ Rahn argues that the idea of the war of good versus evil forces was something uncommon in children's literature until this new tradition was established by Lewis and Tolkien, and it has since remained a staple in children's literature so "universally familiar as to have become a cliché" (163). Attebery describes this "cliché" as simply being formulaic, stating, "[s]ome of the iconic signs in fantasy are derived from a single author's dreams or visions" (8).

While these authors were shaped by the wars they lived through, war also shaped their outlook on the world, and how they internalized and processed this experience came out in their writing. Levy and Mendlesohn note that "the children prior to 1950 were *children*. Those afterwards . . . were simultaneously children and carriers of adult responsibilities" (108). In other words, children were given agency in fantasy literature after WWII. These weren't children who just had magical things happen *to* them. These were children who had to make their own choices and were able to see the consequences of those choices. In *Tolkien and the Great War*, John Garth examines in detail how World War I had such an indelible impact on Tolkien's creation of the mythology behind Middle Earth, while Joseph Loconte explores the impact of that same war on both Lewis

⁵ British fantasy authors Susan Cooper and Diana Wynne Jones are two more acclaimed writers who lived through the war, although they were only children at the time—they were also students of Tolkien and Lewis at Oxford later. These two novelists have spoken at length about the impact of WWII on their fantasy work.

and Tolkien in terms of faith as well as creative output in his work *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-1918*. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, written immediately after WWII and published in 1950, perfectly encapsulates this dual child/adult identity: the four Pevensie children (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) are evacuated out of London during the war due to the air-raids only to find themselves in another morally significant war, between the evil White Witch and the leader of the good, Aslan. While the age range of the four children is between 8-13, they are still huge players in this fictional war, and find themselves on multiple occasions at the heart of the conflict. This focus on children⁶ in these fantasy wars⁷ as being the heroes who win the day, or at least who help do so, can be seen as a direct impact that war had on Lewis and Tolkien, and how it is reflected in both of their works, as well as in countless authors that came afterwards.

The shifting of the genre, as discussed in this introduction, may very well be attributed to children who were having to take on adulthood or adult weights and responsibilities while still navigating their own childhoods, especially children of wartime. Levy and Mendelsohn point out that

the physically constrained fantasies of the previous fifty years fell away as children explored other lands...as children's fictional playgrounds expanded, so

⁶ While Tolkien did not use actual heroic children in the same way that Lewis did, both readers and scholars have commented on how the Hobbits are intentionally childlike and function in a similar fashion.

⁷ As Attebery suggests in his commentary on the "formula of fantasy" quoted earlier in this chapter, there are numerous works which feature a young protagonist caught in the middle of a war between Good and Evil, such as the works by Rowling with Harry Potter, or Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence with Will Stanton.

too did their sense of self. The awareness of being a child in the world rather than a child at home became an important element of post-war fantasy, and children's adventures became less localized, instead becoming rooted in an awareness of landscape. (101)

The genre of heroic fantasy could serve as a mirror for these children of wartime, even if it was a mirror of magic in which they were allowed to play out the idea that what they did could make a difference in the war against the Nazis.

Children's fantasy literature can be seen as a genre that grew its moral code out of the didacticism from earlier works, but post WWII, the children featured in these fantasy tales now also carried the weight of the adult world on their shoulders as they had adult responsibilities, and books such as Narnia reflected that. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (the first book published in the Narnia series) four children, escaping from WWII, are sent to the country but all end up in the middle of the war in Narnia. Here the children have their own agency, but unlike in some previous children's literature, what they do in this world makes a difference for everyone. The impact of the children's actions and choices can be felt on a global scale. While Lewis has filled his work with Christian allegories and references, his work is a direct reflection of war and it is one of the first that introduces this very rigid idea of morality in children's books.

While the sheer enjoyment of story is a huge factor in the immense popularity of Tolkien's and Lewis's books, the impact of war should be considered. Both authors have fantastic battles in their works, and both worlds are ravaged by war, although these are wars in which good will surely triumph over evil. As Tolkien explains in his work "On

Fairy Stories,” these types of stories *must* end with the triumph of good over evil, and that evil should never prevail in this genre of literature.

The Moral Code in Fantasy

The term “high fantasy,” coined by Lloyd Alexander in his essay “High Fantasy and Heroic Romance,” is the type of fantasy novel that takes place in an entirely different world from our own—a secondary world. High Fantasy, sometimes called mythopoeic fantasy as coined by Tolkien in the 1930s, is what came after fantastic realism, but the idea of a moral code at the center never changed. While the idea of explicitly good and evil sides in fantasy was a newer concept in the 1950s, as Levy and Mendlesohn argue, the idea of having strong moral codes was not new to the genre, and it was a line that was usually followed closely throughout the publications of the time. Referring to Tolkien, Attebery argues in *Strategies of Fantasy* that “[s]ome of the iconic signs of fantasy are derived from a single author’s dreams or visions” (8). Guanio-Uluru states that *The Lord of the Rings* “has come to be regarded as formative of the genre of modern fantasy fiction (3). Egoff explains in her chapter “There and Back Again: Fantasy of the 1950’s” that “. . . Lewis . . . made a unique contribution to fantasy—[and] brought it into the modern age” (*Worlds Within* 151). Tolkien and Lewis are paving the road during the 1950s for the strong moral code in fantasy tales, with no room for morally ambiguous characters. Since then, these two can be considered as having established the formulas for the fantasy that would follow for another 50 years.

The Transformation of Fantasy

The publication of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy and Lewis's Narnia books in the 1950s began a seismic shift in the narrative structures and inherent purposes of fantasy fiction at the time, establishing a formula for fantasy that lasted well into the last decades of the 20th century and even today. As Attebery argues, “fantasy . . . has crystalized around central works like *The Lord of the Rings*” (15), and the plethora of scholarship on these two authors and on epic or mythopoeic fantasy since that time attests to the role Tolkien and Lewis played in establishing new fantasy narrative patterns.

As noted in the beginning of the chapter, heroic (or mythopoeic) fantasy has the distinction of focusing on a struggle between good and evil, the light and the dark, the right and the wrong that gives heroic fantasy its definition. Regarding the seminal *The Lord of the Rings*, Professor Dominic Manganiello argues, “Since the ‘trilogy’ did not fit any preconceived categories, Tolkien was generally credited with almost single handedly inventing the fantasy genre” (171). While there were certainly some heroic tales, and fantastic tales also in existence during and before this time, with the publication of his *Lord of the Rings* series Tolkien was able to blend high fantasy and the heroic tale into this new, and most popular, subgenre. Levy and Mendlesohn point out that Tolkien’s immense popularity may stem from the blending of “. . . three ingredients . . . fairy, animist folk tales, and hero tales” (99). Because it was popular, other authors began to use the works of Middle Earth as inspiration, and the new themes and norms that can be found within and throughout contemporary fantasy may be traced back to these ideas from Tolkien. Even Lewis, with his works in Narnia, set up certain conventions and

expectations for children's heroic fantasy in the 1950s with his structured approach to the genre. His works were so formulaically persuasive that his style of writing this brand of fantasy seemingly controlled the narrative of the genre until writers such as Rowling and Nix came along and took the genre in another direction, subverting the narrative elements and complicating the previously rigid definition of children's fantasy.

Ursula K. Le Guin, author of the heroic fantasy series *Earthsea*, states in her critical essay "The Shadow" that "the tension between good and evil, light and dark, is drawn absolutely clearly, as a battle, the good guys on one side and the bad guys in the other, cops and robbers, Christians and heathens, heroes and villains" (*The Language of the Night* 58). On each side there is a definitive party for good and there are forces that are working against them. As Egoff states in *Thursday's Child*, ". . . the battle is always between black and white, right and wrong; there is no room for the gray or in-between" (92). This moral fight does not leave any room for questioning or second guessing the motives of the players or moving pieces in the work. They are either on the side of good, or they aren't.

This heroic formula as created by Lewis and Tolkien is particularly evident in children's heroic fantasy of the 20th century, given that literature for younger readers is expected to serve as tools to develop the child's ethical outlook and behavior; in heroic children's fantasy, the line between "good" and "evil" is distinctly drawn, and there is no mistaking one for the other—children's mythopoeic fantasy of the 20th century contained that "very vague, moral dialectic, often expressed as a struggle between the Darkness and the Light" that LeGuin describes in her definition of "great fantasies" in *The Language of*

the Night (56). One example is Lloyd Alexander's Chronicles of Prydain series, published in the United States during the 1960s. In the first book of that series, *The Book of Three*, young Taran is tasked with protecting his home of Prydain from the forces of evil, and the reader watches him grow and mature over the course of five novels. In Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence, published from 1965 to 1977 also in the United States, the protagonist Will Stanton discovers that he is one of the chosen magical people called "Old Ones" who are destined to wield the power of The Light in the struggle with The Dark.

Levy and Mendelsohn note that books such as *The Dark is Rising* or Lewis' Narnia Chronicles must "deal in choice" in regard to evil, saying that

. . . [t]he children are pitted against the ultimate dark forces that attract human beings, but Cooper [and Lewis are] always careful to deal in *choice*. No one is forced to side with the dark; those who do always have their own reasons. Over and over again in these books we are told that true evil needs human beings to facilitate it: perhaps one of the most intense lessons of the Second World War.
(111)

The books that follow this "traditional" heroic fantasy formula have characters that make their choices and then follow through with them.

Breaking the Tolkien and Lewis Pattern

As popular and as dominant as Tolkien and Lewis's heroic formula was during the 20th century, particularly in fantasy literature for children and young adults, by the

end of the 20th century, fantasy authors were beginning to subvert those previously set expectations and rules regarding characterization. While these subversions may have started off small, they continued to grow and significantly evolve around the 1990s. J.K. Rowling's work is a great example of these subversions because at first, she seems to be writing a very stereotypical fantasy school story before she begins edging further and further away from traditional fantasy guideposts. Vandana Saxena notes in her introduction to *The Subversive Harry Potter* that while Rowling is able to fit her story into the formula of heroic fantasy, her works are still able to pull away from some of the standards and are juxtaposed to other heroic fantasies of its time—the most evident of these subversions can be seen in Rowling's complicated characters. In an interview with *Time Magazine* in 2005, Rowling noted that she had been intending to subvert the fantasy genre all along, as she states she “doesn't particularly like fantasy novels.” In another interview, this one with *The New York Times* in 2012, she said, “I don't read . . . fantasy fiction.” Rowling has intentionally been relying on the power of love and friendship or the weight of choices and morality to resolve the troubles of the boy wizard Harry Potter, instead of the more traditional journey to accumulate power to overcome the darkness.

One of the possible reasons for the shift away from Tolkien's and Lewis's very clear moral binaries could be that by the end of the 20th century, society itself had shifted away from the strong influences inculcated in the generations that fought and grew up during the time of the two world wars. In her study on gender and villainy, “Images of Evil: Male and Female Monsters in Heroic Fantasy,” Nancy Veglahn theorizes that “when a writer creates a figure of incarnate evil, some of the writer's deepest loathings are likely to appear, not consciously or intentionally, but with the force of inner truth; the

“other” we find most ghastly in the world outside may be an image of some denied self, grown ugly in the struggle of expression” (108). The shift in the idea of evils may very well come from a younger generation of authors who didn’t grow up during wartime, and thus were not products of the impact that war had on their parents. As Veglahn notes, authors put bits of themselves into their works, and therefore, while Lewis and Tolkien were very impacted by the idea of a literal battle waged between good and evil, having both fought in war, newer authors moving into the latter half of the century who had never experienced war on such a scale had different definitions of such ethical concepts as morality and “good” and “evil.” Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (published in the United States in 1968) is a perfect example: in this book, the battle of good and evil is not one on a grand scale of war with absolute villainous enemies to go up against the forces of good. Instead, when the main character, Ged, finally confronts the “dark” (which is just called “the shadow” in this book) he does so alone, without an army at his back, and as an emotionally damaged young man. Once he faces his “enemy,” he finds that the dark is nothing more than the hidden and repressed parts of himself, which he then embraces to become whole again. While this example does provide the idea of “light” and “dark,” it does not include the global level of war that has been an established motif beginning with Tolkien, with the War of the Ring, and Lewis, with his Narnian Civil War.

The most important change to occur in the classic fantasy narrative formula is the inclusion of morally ambiguous or morally gray characters that do not fall under the umbrella of “good” or “evil.” Instead, these characters straddle the middle line, or manage to avoid the definition of good and evil altogether. In discussing morality,

Tolkien is clear in “On Fairy Stories” in his belief in the strict telling of a fairy tale type story. He argues that the idea of “good” must always triumph in the end and includes this idea of morality as an important aspect of the fairy tale archetype, which of course is the predecessor to his modern fantasy works. In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Mendelsohn discusses the idea of “moral exception.” She argues that “[f]antasy, unlike science fiction, relies on a moral universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be, a belief that the universe should yield to moral precepts” (5). An important clarifying point to consider is that while Tolkien may have included some subversions of good and evil in his characterizations, these inclusions were still mostly black and white creations. Boromir was on the side of good—he was one of the nine in the Fellowship until he was corrupted by the ring, and Frodo slowly began descending from his position of good into a more antagonistic characterization by the time he made it to Mount Doom. Even Gollum and his alter ego Sméagol are shown in both a good light and as a sinister villain before he destroyed the One Ring. While these characters may skirt the definition of being morally ambiguous, there are some characters from more recent writings that are able to fully embrace their ambiguity and thrive within the morally gray space between the frameworks of good and evil for the entirety of the novel or series of publication instead of sliding from one scale to the next.

While there are obviously a multitude of examples that can demonstrate how newer books are able to showcase the subversion of the fantasy genre, the most prominent subversion, and the one argued here in my thesis, is the inclusion of morally ambiguous characters. J.K. Rowling and Garth Nix have both published works that employ a multitude of heroic fantasy conventions that have been previously established

within their two respective series; however, these two authors still have some additional adjustments and pushbacks of their own within their works. While Rowling and Nix both offer a multitude of new ideas to the genre as a whole, this thesis will be specifically focusing on the subversion of the moral code of the major characters that both authors predominantly feature in their works. In *The Canons of Fantasy*, author Patrick Moran argues that Tolkien is the “canonical author” of fantasy literature and, by being in this prominent place of fantasy literature, all other works are “written in reference to Tolkien, whether in his shadow or against him” (5). By including these moral ambiguities, authors are complicating the definition of what a heroic fantasy is, its function, and how it acts in relation to other works in their genre as established by Tolkien and Lewis. The reasons for including these complex characters may differ from author to author, but the idea of subverting the genre in this way is what this thesis intends to focus on.

As children’s literature has continued to develop, so has the way in which children’s literature is presented to the child. The inclusion of the morally ambiguous characters could simply be because they mirror characteristics of people found in the real world. These baselines that were set in place in the middle of the 20th century by Tolkien and Lewis can be seen starting to divert from the traditional heroic fantasy genre the further we get into the century. Examples of these deviations, as previously stated, came more frequently as the century came to a close in the 1990s.

Focus of this Thesis

This thesis will examine the intentionally subversive characters created by both Nix and Rowling within their respective works, and how these characters function both

together and apart as morally ambiguous in the heroic fantasy genre that has very established boundaries. The following chapters will focus specifically on four individual characters, with the conclusion serving as an area for reflection and comparison between these four, specifically Clariel/Dumbledore and Mogget/Snape. Clariel, Dumbledore, Mogget and Snape are all characters that operate equally in the dark and the light. Their motives remain ambiguous (although all four can also be perceived as selfish) but they do not move dramatically in and out of the “light” or “dark.”

This true moral ambiguity, as argued here in this thesis, is a less common trope in children’s fantasy literature, but it is becoming more commonplace and popping up more often throughout various children’s heroic fantasy books. The inclusion of a morally ambiguous character can be beneficial for the reader because it can reflect more life-like portrayals of people—no one is truly only good or only bad; instead, most people are filled with some of each. Guanio-Uluru contends in her work *Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature: Tolkien, Rowling and Meyer* that “in the broadest sense, the difference between good and evil...is a discussion of self-interest versus virtue [which] is tied up with the notion of free will . . . an important factor in determining moral responsibility” (65-66). This argument can be seen as one of the important ways in which the four characters this thesis will discuss break the molds as they envelop themselves in the folds of moral ambiguity.

J.K. Rowling seems to be crafting a straightforward children’s heroic fantasy about the boy wizard Harry Potter; however, by the end of the first book she has already complicated the character of Severus Snape, Harry’s potion master at Hogwarts. The

reader is expected to look at Snape through an extremely negative viewpoint (through Harry's eyes), and no good deeds done by Snape, or even fond words spoken by Dumbledore, are able to outweigh the overwhelming feeling that Snape's character is trouble. This characterization of Snape keeps the reader guessing as to what Snape's motives and agendas truly are until the end of the last book, when more information is revealed, and the details on how Snape has been operating both in the "light" and in the "dark" are explained to the reader.

While the character of Dumbledore seems to fit into the trope of the wise old wizard, such as Merlin of the Arthurian legends, or Gandalf from Middle Earth, towards the ending of the series Rowling's rendition of this character type with Dumbledore is shown to be much more complicated. Dumbledore's seemingly once perfect embodiment of the forces of good becomes more and more muddled as more information about his past and present motives continues to be revealed, especially after his death in the penultimate book. The more information that is given to the reader, the more complex and confusing Dumbledore becomes. Was he truly an agent of good, even with such a dark and marred past? With all of his seemingly good intentions that were established in the first book for Harry, did using Harry as a pawn to help defeat Voldemort darken his character at all? Dumbledore's own grappling with his choices emphasizes this constant, behind-the-scenes struggle that began before the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*⁸ opened on Privet Drive.

⁸ The UK editions have a different title—*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

Australian author Garth Nix has won accolades for many works of fantasy, including several series aimed at middle-school readers and young adults. Nix has sold over six million copies of his works globally in over forty-two different languages. Nix has also appeared on multiple bestsellers lists, including *The New York Times*, as well as winning the Aurealis Award for Best Fantasy Novel in 1995 and 2003 for both *Sabriel* and *Abhorsen*, respectively the first and second book in his heroic fantasy series titled The Old Kingdom. Levy and Mendlesohn mention Nix in *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction*, calling The Old Kingdom series “[a]n important mythopoeic work” (144).

Garth Nix has proven to be a prolific author of fantasy fiction, both for young adults and for adults, but he may best be known for his Abhorsen books. *Sabriel*, the first book of the series, was first published in 1995 in Australia, followed by *Lirael* (2001), *Abhorsen* (2003), and *Goldenhand* (2016). In addition to these four, Nix has also published two prequels to the main series, *Clariel* (2014), which takes place hundreds of years before the events of *Sabriel*, and *Terciel & Elinor* (2021), which relates the love story of Sabriel’s parents. Nix also has produced two novellas set in this same world, “To Hold the Bridge” and “Nicholas Sayre and the Creature in the Case,” and two shorter stories, “Dr. Crake Crosses the Wall” and “An Extract of the Journal of Idrach the Lesser Necromancer,” not to mention a few essays that provide explanatory background material on the magical system in the books.⁹

⁹ These essays can be found on his website—<https://oldkingdom.com.au>.

The Old Kingdom series takes place in a fantasy world in which magic is primarily confined to a region referred to as “the Old Kingdom” which lies due north of the country of Ancelstierre; the two regions are separated by a stone wall and, at least on the Ancelstierre side, protected by a sort of demilitarized zone patrolled by the Ancelstierran military. In an interview published in the digital *Lightspeed Magazine* in 2012, Nix comments on how his own military experience influenced his world-building in this series:

[the series is] . . . set in a sort of 1918-ish country that’s kind of like England, which is separated by a sort of World War I trench line called the Perimeter and a wall from a country called the Old Kingdom. And in Ancelstierre, the 1918-ish country, technology works but magic doesn’t. Except that magic does work closer to the Wall. And when you cross the Wall, modern technology fails and magic works. But the Perimeter is manned by the army of Ancelstierre, which is really like a first World War British or Australian trench line. So certainly I drew on my experiences of how that sort of thing works for some of the characters—the officers, the NCOs, and so on.

One of the primary motifs of the Abhorsen books is the idea that death is a journey rather than a single moment: Nix describes death as another plane of existence in his works, and one that everyone must travel at some point. One of the ongoing conflicts in this series is that not everyone goes willingly “into Death,” and that some magic-wielders seek to gain power by using less powerful creatures who also wish to avoid doing so. In the world of Sabriel, those who wish to control death and the dead are called necromancers, while the role of the Abhorsens is to stand against those necromancers. The Abhorsen (there is only

one per generation) wields this power by using a set of bells to “ring” the unwilling dead on to their final destiny. In the moral balance of Nix’s fictional world, the necromancers represent “evil” while the Abhorsens are the “good” characters.

Part of a fantasy writer’s world-building is the creation of a magical system for that world; for the Old Kingdom books, Nix established a dual system of what he named Free Magic and Charter Magic, Free Magic usually being aligned with the nefarious characters that wield it, while Charter Magic is used by those who are “Charter Blessed,” and these characters are good in intentions and in nature. In a series of essays posted on his Australian website *The Old Kingdom*, Nix explains that in the ancient history of his fictional world, powerful beings established a system to control the magic in that world, which is called The Charter. Whatever magic is used by following the rules of that system is called Charter Magic; what magic lies outside of that system is Free Magic. Free Magic is not inherently evil, but it is outside of the control system; as Nix explains, it will “resist any constraint or direction” (“An Essay on Free Magic”). In the world of the Old Kingdom books, Free Magic creatures (those made of free magic) and those seeking to use it against Charter Magic are typically “evil,” though there are key exceptions to this general structure in the series, exceptions which this thesis will discuss.

The main plotline of the series focuses on this ongoing good versus evil battle as it is fought first by the young Abhorsen Sabriel and then her half-sister Lirael, aided by a large cast of characters and resisted by yet another cast of characters. Most of these can clearly be recognized as either on the side of “good” or “evil,” yet two characters stand out as particularly ambiguous in that respect: Clariel, who lived 600 years before Sabriel and who was born into the Abhorsen family line but who eventually becomes one of the

greatest necromancers that Sabriel and her friends have to face; and Mogget, a Free Magic creature who at times provides essential aid to the forces of good and at other times tries his best to destroy them. Clariel's journey will be examined in Chapter One of this thesis, while Mogget, along with his counterpoint character the Disreputable Dog, will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The basic story of the series follows the Abhorsen and the Abhorsen in Waiting, Sabriel and Lirael respectively, as they undergo personal trials and tribulations in order to fight Evil as it appears in various formats throughout the series. The opening book, *Sabriel*, introduces Nix's world through the eyes of our protagonist as she comes into her Abhorsen powers (the power to use the tools of magic, bells, to keep the balance of death and life in check) through her father's bloodline in order to fight the forces of darkness that have overpowered her father and plagued the magical realm. While the antagonists may shift throughout the series, Nix follows the Abhorsen family as they each find out where they fit and function in The Old Kingdom and how they are able to use their powers for good in order to restore balance and order in the fight against the dark. The second book in the series, *Lirael*, picks up 14 years after the conclusion of the first, and introduces the reader to Lirael, Sabriel's younger half-sister. Much like the first book, Lirael's journey is one that introduces a dark threat to the world, and showcases Lirael on her journey to claiming her heritage as an Abhorsen and shows her journey on how she learns to use her powers in this world to fight alongside her half-sister Sabriel against the forces of evil.

The character Clariel isn't introduced as such to the reader until her self-titled prequel work that takes place approximately six hundred years before the events of

Sabriel, but which is meant to be read as the fourth book in the Old Kingdom series.

Clariel must overcome many difficult and devastating trials before we ultimately see how her path of good intentions becomes darker and darker. Much like Dumbledore, Clariel is making terrible choices, but is filled with good intentions. It is not obvious that she is a character of evil until towards the end of *Clariel* (after all, she has been the reader's protagonist and viewpoint throughout the entirety of the work) when the consequences of her actions finally begin to take shape for the reader, and we begin to see her for what she has become, the adversary Chlorr of the Mask who serves as the main antagonist in *Goldenhand*.

On the other hand, the character Mogget is shown to be completely self-absorbed, dangerous, and a potential threat and enemy throughout several moments of the series (including *Clariel*, because he is an ancient being and ageless), until the climax of the third book *Abhorsen*, in which Mogget is able to work for the greater good of everyone as the party of characters act together in opposition to the malevolent and world-endingly powerful entity Orannis. Mogget's characterization may be more straightforward than some of the other characters included in this present study; however, Mogget serves as an important character throughout all of the Old Kingdom works, as well as an intriguing parallel to Rowling's Snape, who seemingly put his own selfish wants above everything else.

These complex, morally ambiguous characters may be the most human of them all. People in general are flawed, and none of the time there is not someone who is wholly good, or wholly evil. People can be a mix of these: there may be someone with good intentions who only uncovers darkness unintentionally whilst trying to obtain

“good” deeds (like Clariel and Dumbledore) or someone who uses their own selfish reasoning and selfish motivations to operate as an agent of “light” from the shadows (such as Mogget and Snape).

CHAPTER ONE

CLARIEL / CHLORR OF THE MASK

Clariel

The fourth book in the series per publication order, *Clariel* takes place 600 years prior to the events of the first published book *Sabriel*. During this time period, The Old Kingdom is peaceful and prosperous, a much different situation than in the first three books. Because of this, the conflicts that Nix builds center on political intrigue rather than multiple encounters with necromancers and their minions, and on the psychological inner conflicts that Clariel tries to work through as she seeks to find an identity and a place within the community that she can live with.

Clariel begins her story as a member of the privileged class and as a Charter Blessed magic user. She is the granddaughter of the current Abhorsen, her mother's father, and her aunt, her mother's sister, is the Abhorsen in waiting. In addition, she is also shown to have strong blood ties to the royal family. Clariel is set up as the protagonist, but because of her own character flaws combined with political forces that she has little control over, she eventually becomes an antagonist in the series— one of the necromancers that Sabriel, her father, and even Lirael must battle in the other books. This eventual revelation that the sympathetic character Clariel in this book is the same nemesis that the reader meets in the other books as Chlorr of the Mask showcases Clariel as an extremely complicated character, and one whose morality is not so easily defined. This is the primary way that Nix subverts our expectations regarding protagonists in heroic fantasy: as Sheila Egoff observes, “[g]ood is still viewed as the norm [in fantasy literature] . . .”

(93), so as we meet and get to know Clariel, we expect her to be another hero in this tale. Nix stated in an interview with Michael Levy that his purpose for writing the character was to give the readers someone both likeable and identifiable, saying, “I wanted Clariel to be someone who a reader could feel was basically a good person who for reasons both of her own choosing and exterior forces, ends up being something she never would have deliberately chosen if she could have seen the consequences of her actions” (Levy, “Four Questions”).

Her story for the reader in the series as a whole actually begins in the prologue to *Lirael*, the second published book in the series. In it, the primary conflict between good and evil centers on the nefarious plans of the necromancer Hedge. Clariel’s role in this conflict begins very minimally, and darkly, with the prologue simply introducing a powerful sorcerer named Chlorr of the Mask who becomes compelled to serve under Hedge and whom Sabriel and Lirael must try to defeat along with Hedge. As the series progresses, Chlorr of the Mask’s story continues to grow until finally she is featured as the main antagonist in *Goldenhand*, where she is also marked by being one of the Greater Dead, powerful Necromancers who have died but still are able to use their strong will and knowledge of Free Magic to continue to build strength and influence even beyond death. In the last book featuring Lirael and company, the connection between the evil necromancer Chlorr who has been the nemesis of the Abhorsens throughout the first three books and the confused young teenager who makes poor choices in her desperate fight to find inner peace in the prequel is revealed.

There are no blurred lines with Chlora of the Mask throughout the works regarding whether she is “good” or “evil,” only subtle references to the girl she once was, as Mogget knew her in *Clariel*. While Clariel is not an inherently evil character at the opening of her story, her affinity for things that lie outside the rules shows up shortly after the prequel begins. Clariel is discovered to be a Berserk, which is an ancient form of Free Magic that manifests as an uncontrollable rage, thus allowing the enraged person great strength, will, and overall power, a characteristic which she has apparently inherited through her connection to the Royal bloodline, as her mother did before her. While her Berserk bloodline isn’t necessarily a negative aspect, it does seem to cover up some of her flaws, serving as a convenient excuse for her poor judgment or quick temper that appeared at the beginning of *Clariel*. It also serves to introduce a connection between the potentially harmful Free Magic and Clariel herself, though in a neutral and not a negative light, since it is part of her heritage and bloodline, not an illegitimate source of power that she seeks at this point of her life. As her instructor in Charter Magic, Master Kargrin, explains in their conversation about her Berserk heritage, “Free Magic often appeals to the solitary, those who wish to order their lives without the constraint of others . . . the berserk state is itself a form of Free Magic, or derived from some ancient effect of that magic.” He goes on to explain that “Free Magic is not necessarily *evil* as such, it is merely unconstrained” (*Clariel* 97-98). This reasoning by Master Kerrigan also helps sway the reader to the side of Clariel. Since in heroic fantasy, “good” is viewed as the “norm” as noted by Shelia Egoff, and since the protagonist of a fantasy novel is traditionally assumed to be a “good” character, it makes sense that the reader is so willing

to overlook any signs or flags that Clariel might be more complex than she originally appears or that she might have dark tendencies in her personality and outlook.

Whereas Chlorr of the Mask is unequivocally evil in the other books of the series, in this book, Clariel's doomed character arc is traced in heartbreaking detail. From the beginning of *Clariel*, her fate is foreshadowed as she is continually forced to partake in things she pushes back against. She is shown repeatedly to be nothing more than a pawn to those around her — Clariel has no agency over her life, even at the age of 17. The beginning of the novel finds her moving into the city with her mother and father against her will and self-interests, and from there on, her freedom and even her sense of self are slowly stripped away in front of the reader's eyes. These things start small, and build over time until the reader realizes that Clariel's path is dark indeed. Clariel has absolutely no desire to marry and start a family, and she spells that out plainly in multiple places in the work. Early on in chapter one she muses,

. . . [she] didn't want to marry anyone. She had once or twice — no more— wondered if she was naturally a singleton, like the russet martens who only came together for the briefest mating season and then went their own way. Or her own aunt Lemmin for that matter, who chose to live entirely alone, though happily for Clariel could stand visitors provided the amuse themselves. (12)

Later on, she's even more straightforward: "‘I have no desire to be married,’ said Clariel firmly. ‘Or to have children’" (58). She is not interested in romantic or sexual relationships and her biggest fantasy at this point is to go live out her days alone in the woods. Her parents forcing this betrothal on her without a thought on her own self-

interests or desires is another strain to add to her already overloaded plate of responsibilities that she has no interest in. She is forced against her will to come to Belisaere with her parents, and her grasp on her life begins to quickly unravel. While Clariel doesn't begin her work as an antagonist, I argue that it is her lack of choices, or agency, that push her quickly over the edge to more nefarious threads and fates. Intertwined with this lack of agency are her selfish motivations that drive her and ultimately have no solid conclusion or offer any sort of redemption.

Nix develops Clariel's escalating pressures and rebellious attitude one example at a time. From making decisions about the clothes she's wearing, to an arranged marriage that she definitely does not want, Clariel's choices are shown to be limited and sometimes non-existent. It is also noted in the beginning of the novel, and repeatedly throughout the rest of the story, that she wants nothing more than to go and live out her life peacefully by herself away from the city. She finds she has no attraction to boys or girls, and even physical intimacy has no real meaning to her. It is this lack of connection with others, as well as her own desires, that begins to morph what appears to be a clear protagonist into a morally complicated character who makes poor choices.

While by themselves, the struggles that Clariel has with learning to adapt to social customs she despises, a new way of life that is antithetical to her personal preferences, and her parents' own selfish desires were certainly not the catalyst to her transformation, they were the start of the breaking of her limits which she was not even aware of at the time in that her own sense of right and wrong, appropriateness and inappropriateness, is constantly violated and negated to the point that she sees no wrong in violating Charter

Magic rules when she thinks a greater good can be achieved. Clariel is so objectified by those around her that she has internalized it: “Clariel felt as if she were an object, being weighed up and examined, and, once identified, to be put in the appropriate place, just as she herself had often sorted coins by type and weight and mint, and placed them in the correct niche within the great chest in her father’s office” (*Clariel* 58.) In addition to her boundaries becoming increasingly stressed, Clariel’s relationship with her parents, especially her mother, seems to also be strained and suffocating. We can see into Clariel’s perspective of course, and there are multiple times during her interactions with her parents that she is having to stifle her own ideas and thoughts in order to at least appear to be pleasing her mother—although when she does advocate for herself it usually ends in a disagreement with her parents. This shows that even with conversations, Clariel is not able to truly express herself as she should be able to with her own mother. This is another way in which her agency is shown to be stifled from the onset of the work. She has no true allies, unlike the nine members of the Fellowship in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, or even the four Pevensies siblings in Narnia. Because her parents have forced her to move to the city and socialize with people she has no affinity for, and because she cannot even talk to her own parents, who are far more wrapped up in their own interest and ambitions, Clariel is alone. Her isolation is not the catalyst for her turn to the dark, but it certainly helps lead her that way, as she has no one else to rely on or turn to. Thus, when she eventually encounters the mysterious being called Mogget while staying at the Abhorsen home, she is vulnerable to his manipulations because she does feel an affinity for him.

All the increasing pressures on Clariel come to a head when her mother and father are both murdered and she is spirited away by her grandfather to the Abhorsen's estate where she first comes into contact with Mogget the cat. It is here at this estate that she begins spiraling and dreaming of revenge, she plans to take events into her own hands. She releases and binds two free magic creatures to herself, tainting her blessed Charter Mark as well as corrupting her morally good intentions. She is successful in killing her parents' murderers, but at great personal cost. She now wears a corrupted Charter Mark instead of a blessed Charter Mark, which is a sign of evil to those who can see such marks, and the act of becoming a murderer herself is another huge dent in her character. After the events of *Clariel*, she next appears as Chlorr of the Mask, a servant to Hedge in both *Lirael* and *Abhorsen*. It is not until *Goldenhand* as the Witch With No Face that she comes into her own as the ultimate evil that must be defeated by both sisters, Sabriel and Lirael.

To some, this may appear as an obvious shift of Clariel's character to a more nefarious state of morality, however, as the reader progresses through the eponymous book it becomes obvious that Clariel as an "evil" character is not what the reader is intended to feel with Clariel's thoughts and actions. As Egoff has stated, in fantasy works the default for the reader is the side of good, so as Clariel is our protagonist we are meant to see things from her perspective, which by default, should also be the side of good. When Clariel begins making some of these more questionable choices, the reader sees her thought process and logical process in her head and thus is inclined to get swept up into her fantasy and faulty lines of reasoning that she presents as excuses for her actions and deeds. With Clariel at the helm of the story, and providing the reader with platitudes and

empty promises, it's easy to lose sight of when Clariel begins to fizzle out and Chlorr of the Mask begins to come into focus.

This moral ambiguity that begins to appear in the character of Clariel is in stark contrast to what has been previously established in the genre by Tolkien and Lewis. While Clariel is slipping in and out of this construct of “morally good,” the characters that came before her in the established fantasy works were ones that were firmly planted on one side or the other. Éowyn is a comparable character here from Tolkien's work, and one worth mentioning in order to fully comprehend the ambiguity that Clariel is undergoing in her metamorphosis. Much like Clariel, Éowyn is a character who feels trapped by her circumstances and birth: she and her brother have both been orphaned and raised with their uncle, King Théoden of Rohan, and she yearns for prestige in battle, but because she is a woman she finds herself falling into her royal duties at court and struggles to find where she fits best in the world for herself, and not for those around her. This is where the similarities between Éowyn and Clariel end, because much unlike Clariel, Éowyn ends up taking a stand against the darkness and evil in Tolkien's works, and is the shieldmaiden who kills the Witch-King of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgul, during one of the final battles in *The Return of the King*. Through Éowyn's own trials and tribulations, we see what Clariel could have been if she had stayed on the morally good side and not danced between the blurred lines. Éowyn, a character who is forged out of her circumstances with her parents as well as her expectations simply because of her gender, was able to rise above these expectations to accomplish more—she is not a victim of her situation, rather she is able to take advantage of it and still come out of her experiences firmly planted on the morally good side. Éowyn maintains her morals and

character while she traverses the path she undertakes, even as her weaknesses and fears are laid bare before the reader during her conversation with Aragorn during the chapter “The Passing of the Grey Company” in *The Return of the King*. In it, Éowyn admits to Aragorn that she would rather fight alongside the men, instead of tending to her duties as dictated by her gender. She knows her place, and it is terrifying and the only thing she truly fears, which is demonstrated when she tells Aragon that the one thing she does fear is “A cage . . . [t]o stay behind bars until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire” (68). Her one ambition is to make a name for herself, and when she does go undercover and sneaks off to fight in the Battle of Pelennor Fields she does not cross any questionable lines while doing so. While I am not claiming that Nix is purposefully subverting Tolkien’s character of Éowyn with Clariel, I do think it is important to restate that Tolkien is adhering to his strict moral code as laid out in the introduction, and as Attenbury mentions in his work, Tolkien has trademarked the formula for fantasy which authors generally followed. Nix, as shown here, is challenging or reworking Tolkien’s formula with the character of Clariel, who should be following along more closely to Éowyn’s path if she wasn’t a subversion of the genre.

While Clariel does have a shift over the span of the works between the side of light and the side of the dark, she spends much of her time in her self-titled work straddling the line between, which is what ultimately earns her this title of a morally ambiguous character within a children’s or young adult book. Clariel’s time spent doing wrong things for the right reasons places her on the line, and shows the reader that even with good intentions, you can still be a “bad” character, and even when you do “bad” things, you can still align with the side of good.

Clariel's moral line begins as justice, which is seen as noble and honorable. She sets out to avenge her parents, who may not have been the ideal parental figures, but who were still her parents and she still mourns their deaths while she seeks. What happens along the way as she begins to follow this moral line of justice is that her noble pursuit becomes twisted and malformed, and justice soon mutates into vengeance, and the line gets so blurred along the way. As Attebery discusses in *Strategies of Fantasy*, "the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me" (32). Clariel as the protagonist of the novel and a young girl, is meant to be relatable to the reader. We should be able to identify with her and her struggles with love, parental expectations, and duties as a daughter. Clariel does not resemble evil as found throughout Tolkien's works, creatures such as Orcs or the Ring-Wraiths who are more obviously "evil." Nix gives us a teenager who we can relate to and relate with before pushing her character into the "otherness" as Chlorr of the Mask.

Clariel begins to cross lines, and have her own boundaries pushed, as we see her be repeatedly let down by those around her. Clariel is the hero of her own story, until she isn't. There are lines that she can't uncross and bottles she can't recork, all of which leads her down the path of evil. Clariel is not inherently bad—she is filled with good intentions gone awry. She's flawed. She's the epitome of doing bad things for good reasons, and her ultimate title of Chlorr of the Mask as well as her position as a servant to Hedge and Kerrigor are the consequence of those choices. As Guanio-Uluru states in her discussion on fantasy works, ". . . self-interest versus virtue is tied up with the notion of free will, which obviously is an important factor in determining moral responsibility" (68.) Clariel is practicing free will throughout this book on her quest to vengeance, but she gets so lost

in herself on her way to her end goal that she compromises her own morality.¹ Author R.J. Reilly echoes this sentiment in his chapter in Neil Isaacs' work on Tolkien, arguing that the choices that Frodo and Sam make to complete the journey to destroy the One Ring in Tolkien's series are what empowers them as the heroes of their story as opposed to antagonists. This idea of choice that molds and shapes characters in novels is exactly what is at play in Nix's work. It is the choices made by Clariel, tied in with a new-found free will gained only because all those who have previously subdued her are out of the picture, that plunge her character into a morally corrupt space as she tries to navigate from a place of good intentions. Clariel does not begin with the intentions of gaining power for the sake of power, or with the thoughts that she wants to live forever hoarding power as she does. She begins her descent by wanting to take revenge on those who have wronged her and her family, and like a rubber band that has been stretched too thin, snaps at the first chance she has where she is unsupervised and unrestrained. While her act of going into the bottom of the Abhorsen house with Mogget and binding the two Free Magic creatures is her first real step over the strictly drawn line of good and evil, the buildup to this begins as soon as she arrives in Belisaere and is wistful and longing for a solitary life where she is able to make her own choices and choose her own destiny without the influence of her parents or being used as a pawn in anyone else's story.

Garth Nix's Old Kingdom series is one that introduces a wealth of subversions to the heroic fantasy genre. While I argue that Nix has subverted the genre with his morally

¹ This is something we do not see with "traditional" characters like Tolkien's Éowyn, who are also so focused on their end goal, and ultimately are able to achieve it, but there are no moral failings along the way or at the end of her journey.

complicated characters, it is worth mentioning that Nix subverts the expectations of the genre in other ways as well. *Sabriel* tells the story of a young heroine that partakes in the traditional hero's journey that was usually reserved for boys and men in the genre, as she comes into her power as an Abhorsen to serve on the side of the light and life, or morally "good," in order to defeat the side of death and darkness, or the morally "corrupt." Other subversions of note include Sabriel's husband Touchstone with the role of damsel in distress; and the inclusion of Death as a facet for magic and seen as another stage of life rather than the ending of one. While these subversions don't have much impact on the morality that is discussed in this thesis, it is important to note that the inclusion of morally ambiguous characters in the traditional hero's tale is not the only subversion of the genre by Nix in his works, and instead highlights the ways in which fantasy literature was continuing to shift away from the mythopoeic formula established by Tolkien and Lewis towards the end of the century.

CHAPTER TWO

PROFESSOR ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series is arguably one of the most popular fantasy series of all time. First published in the UK in June of 1997, it quickly became a hit for young readers, and its popularity began to multiply beyond the likes of any modern-day children's series. The massive numbers can speak for themselves—in 2004 Forbes named Rowling the first billionaire author (Watson); and since the publication of the first book in 1997 up to the seventh book that was published in 2007, there have been over 500 million copies sold world-wide, making it the best-selling book series of all time (Rusli). Guanio-Uluru credits "age [of the readers], technology and timing" as important factors that contributed to the massive success of the series (4). However, it isn't simply a coincidence or twist of fate that the Harry Potter books are so loved by so many. The popularity of the series is due to the elegantly crafted magical world that Rowling has created, and the many different themes she has included: love and hate, families and adversaries, life and death, and everything that encompasses the wide berth and in between of all these subjects, including the moral complexities within several characters in the series.

While there are a handful of characters to choose from that would be enlightening studies of moral ambiguity in Rowling's works, this chapter covers the character Albus Dumbledore and his struggle to stay aligned with the light. I intend to analyze his actions throughout the series, as he seemingly is a kindly, wholly good character in the first few

books, before more information towards the end of the series reveals that his true intentions and moral compass may not be as clearly pure as they once seemed to be.

The Magical World of Harry Potter

The Harry Potter heptalogy is an epic fantasy series comprised of seven main books. These seven have spawned a multitude of other media, such as movies based on the books themselves, a set of supposed schoolbooks from the library at Hogwarts, a collection of wizarding world fairy tales for children, prequel movies, a sequel Broadway play, and even multiple theme parks with rides and shops featuring different parts of the books, not to mention computer games, board games, card games, toys, and other such paraphernalia. The series spanned the last few years of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st. A unique aspect of the series is that each one of the seven books covers a sequential school year for the main characters, taking them from age 11 in the beginning to age 17 and adulthood¹ by the end. Along with the aging of the characters, Rowling's intended audience ages too: the books begin clearly as children's literature, with a less complicated depiction of character development and a more refined sense of "good" and "evil" in general, but by the end of the series, the narrative has become darker and more complicated in terms of determining "good" and "evil," "right" and "wrong," and so the last few books in the series are considered by most children's literature scholars to be young adult literature.

The series focuses on the titular character, Harry Potter, as he learns not only to navigate the wizarding world, but also how he fits into the struggle between the light and

¹ In the Harry Potter universe, wizards and witches reach adulthood at 17—not 18.

the dark in this seven-part coming of age sequence. While the Harry Potter books may at first seem a straightforward heroic fantasy, with the lines of “good” and “evil” clearly defined, the definition that was once so clear becomes more and more muddled as the story progresses. As Guanio-Uluru notes in *Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature*,

[T]he narrative’s notion of evil is developed most significantly through the character of Voldemort, while the characterization of the good is developed most prominently through Harry and Dumbledore. Distinguishing between good and evil is easy at first, but becomes more complicated as the focal character (Harry) matures and his perspective expands and develops. The three most significant factors blurring the boundaries between good and evil are the ‘parasitic’ entanglement between Harry and Voldemort, the character and characterization of Professor Snape and the deconstruction of Dumbledore’s normative authority in *The Deathly Hallows*. (109)

While a later chapter will focus on the characterization of Severus Snape, this chapter will examine Professor Dumbledore and his intentions throughout the works. While Dumbledore is cast as a beacon of light, justice, and good in the books, especially for someone as young and impressionable as Harry is when we meet him in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, by the end of the series, Dumbledore is found to be a tragically flawed character, who is filled with doubt and is shown to have made deeply calamitous choices in his life that have led to pain, suffering, and even death.

Dumbledore's Origins: The Shadow of Merlin

Like many fantasy series that have come before this one, Rowling has a “Merlin-figure”² that she uses in the book in order to pass along crucial information to Harry, to be seen as the guiding light for morality when Harry may struggle with doing what is right versus doing what he truly wants to do. As author and critic Frank Riga argues in “Gandalf and Merlin: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Adoption and Transformation of a Literary Tradition,” Merlin figures have been crucial additions to fantasy tales since the 12th century, and are somewhat of a staple for fantasy literature. In this chapter I argue that Dumbledore is a subversion of Gandalf more so than Merlin himself; however, this tradition of the “wise old man” archetype stretches back much further in time and should be acknowledged.³ In her chapter “Mentoring in the Wizarding World: Dumbledore and His Literary Ancestors,” scholar Christina Vourcos notes that Dumbledore “wasn’t the first wizard in literature to guide a great hero. There have been others, such as Merlin and Gandalf, and what makes them so similar is that their actions as well as words make the difference in the success of the literature, far more than great magic” (163). Dumbledore is fashioned after the character Gandalf, while Tolkien’s Merlin figure of Gandalf is a character who only acts with good intentions through morally good and selfless actions, which can be seen when he sacrifices himself so the fellowship can have safe passage through the mountains as he fights the Balrog. Critics such as Riga and Guabui-Uluru argue that this characteristic of Gandalf’s is different from Merlin’s, and Dumbledore’s

² See Attebery’s statement in the introduction on the “recipe” for fantasy which includes “a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot.”

³ See Christina Vourcos’s chapter “Mentoring in the Wizarding World: Dumbledore and His Literary Ancestors” for a more detailed description of “The Wise Old Man” archetype (164).

character is a direct subversion of Gandalf (Riga 21). This subversion may seem coincidental at first, but upon a closer examination of the texts by Rowling and by Tolkien, there are clear parallels and juxtapositions drawn between the two wizened wizards. This parallel comes from Dumbledore's darker side. While Dumbledore is—overall—aligned with the “good,” he is shown to have committed actions that would generally place him across the moral line—thus making him a more morally complicated character, unlike Gandalf.

Tolkien was able to deconstruct the Merlin archetype and reform him into what one might think of today when thinking about Merlin: the wizened old man who is able to help not only with his vast and deep well of magical abilities, but more so with the wisdom he has accumulated over time. Thus, Tolkien reconstructed the wizard and the Merlin definition with the creation of Gandalf. Gandalf is a character whose sacrifice and selflessness know no bounds. Gandalf is determined to finish his quest of destroying the One Ring, and is able to recognize his own weaknesses when they appear before him, and most importantly, is able to resist those who would stop him on his path to ending evil, or that would hurt those he cares about. These traits of Gandalf in contrast with Merlin are crucial to consider before moving on to Rowling's interpretation of the Merlin figure to better understand how the same situations by both characters are handled differently within their respective works.

Refining Dumbledore: The Shadow of Gandalf

Just as Gandalf shared many connections and attributes with previous Merlin figures, Dumbledore is a character who shares many of these same things with Merlin, but more importantly, Gandalf specifically and purposefully, mirrored him. At the start of the series, Dumbledore can be seen as the “wise wizard” archetype as previously established by Gandalf the Grey (and later Gandalf the White) in J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic fantasy series, and before that, Merlin, from the King Arthur tales. Author and critic Frank P. Riga draws the parallel between Merlin and Gandalf, noting that while Merlin was able to occupy the “ambiguous space between good and evil,” Tolkien does not share that same moral ambiguity with Gandalf (21). When noting the flexibility of this genre, one should consider how Merlin’s archetype was set in stone until Tolkien’s rendition of Gandalf—and then how Gandalf’s iteration of the “wise wizard” was seemingly unchallenged until Dumbledore. This can help demonstrate how archetypes may ebb and flow over the years. More importantly, it highlights how Merlin, Gandalf, and Dumbledore may all align with the “good” side of morality on the surface, but how characters may become more complicated as we dive into their personalities.

One subversion within the character of Dumbledore in comparison to the figure of Gandalf is the use of “The Ring” in Middle Earth. Gandalf refuses to use the One Ring to increase his own power—this can be an example of Gandalf as the “purely good” archetype that has been defined and established. Juxtaposed to Gandalf’s use of the ring would be Dumbledore’s use of an equivalent ring of power in the Harry Potter universe—Voldemort’s family ring that contains one of the three legendary Deathly Hallows. While

Gandalf is steadfast in his refusal to use the One Ring, even when pressed by Frodo multiple times to take it, we are shown in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* that Dumbledore, when presented with a ring of immense power, cannot be trusted with it. In fact, Dumbledore is corrupted and ultimately is given a death sentence because of his lack of self-restraint: the ring was cursed and in his haste to put the ring on in order to channel its powers and see his deceased sister, he unintentionally cursed himself. Although another teacher, Severus Snape, was able to confine the curse to just his hand, this is what would be the death of Dumbledore, if not for the mercy killing of him by Snape in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

The Ambiguity of Dumbledore

The seventh book in the series is threaded with multiple references to Dumbledore's life before he became headmaster—this side of him that was previously unknown to both Harry and the reader. These revelations are uncovered slowly, over the course of the book, in various forms, from some offhanded comments about Dumbledore during a wedding, to snapshots of his life from old articles, and even some chapters from books within the world of Harry Potter itself are included, such as the chapter entitled “The Greater Good” from the fictional work *The Life and Lives of Albus Dumbledore* by Rita Skeeter. These revelations serve to fill out Dumbledore's character, to show that he was a much more complicated figure than the reader perceives in the early books, and a much more mentally tortured one as well.

The chapter “King's Cross” in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* highlights some of the power struggles Dumbledore has come face to face with, and how he has

failed throughout his life to stay as morally good as he wanted to be. In this chapter, where he and Harry meet in death, Dumbledore has a long, frank discussion with Harry about all of his failings and shortcomings, especially those concerning the death of his sister, and in all the ways he is convinced he failed Harry as an adult responsible for his care and safety.

One key revelation in his early history is the story of Dumbledore's sister's death many years before, and his own part in that death. Dumbledore's grief and guilt over his sister's death has compromised his ability to do what's right at times. Much like Clariel was driven by a sense of justice that warped into vengeance, Dumbledore is driven by his guilt for being swayed as a youth by Grindelwald's disdain for Muggles warped into an obsession with never letting such men rise to power again. Unlike Clariel from the previous chapter, Dumbledore is acutely aware that power is his weakness, and that he does not need to seek out any more of it. His rejection of power occurs several times in the series, such as when he refuses the position of Minister of Magic. In the final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Rowling gives the reader a glimpse into Dumbledore's youth and his quest for power in obtaining all three Deathly Hallows with the powerful, and ultimately dark wizard Grindelwald—escapades which culminated in the death of his sister, an event for which he never forgave himself, and which, we are led to believe, caused his reluctance to take on powerful roles. Young Albus had believed in his own sense of right and wrong, so when that search for power led to the eventual death of his sister, he came to doubt his ability to wield power without harming others. Yet Dumbledore cannot resist power either. One example is in Book 6, when Dumbledore finds and wears one of the artifacts that contain one of the three Deathly Hallows, the

ring that was mentioned earlier in this chapter. He also admits to Harry that he was tempted to keep Harry's father's cloak of invisibility rather than return it to Harry as he did in the first book, since apparently he realized that it was one of the three Hallows that he had been searching for. He tells Harry of his elation in having "two Hallows at last" (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 715), and that when both of these Hallows fell into his possession, all rational thought seemed to have left him and he was consumed with the pleasure of knowing that *he* is the wizard to possess the magnificent wizarding artifacts.

Dumbledore appears in the early books to be a character who is filled with calm, what one might expect to see when thinking of the Merlin figure, and indeed, he is a "good" character in many ways in the series. Dumbledore is also shown to be a patient figure with Harry, especially in Harry's moments of struggle and distress as he progresses through the series. A great example of this struggle that Harry undergoes with guidance from Dumbledore is seen at the end of Book 5, *The Order of the Phoenix*, after the death of Sirius Black. Harry is inconsolable with the death of his godfather—he is brimming with hate, guilt, and regret, but Dumbledore is the character who never loses his cool with Harry, and simply lets him exhaust himself through unleashing his anger and frustration by smashing numerous possessions in his office: "'By all means continue destroying my possessions,' said Dumbledore serenely. 'I daresay I have too many'" (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 825). In this and many other instances, Dumbledore appears to Harry and the reader as wise beyond his years and also compassionate and patient.

In the first few books, and indeed, in many instances throughout the entire series, Rowling only shows Dumbledore in a positive light, as the kindly and wise mentor and guide for Harry and the rest of the wizarding world. Dumbledore does not seem like a morally ambiguous character—until the last two books, when Rowling takes the reader “behind the scenes” and into Dumbledore’s past to reveal that he was not as innocent or as morally aligned with the good as we might have hoped him to be.

One of the neat tricks that Rowling as a writer uses is providing information in the later books that makes the reader re-examine much of what they have read in the earlier books in a different light. This is particularly true of Dumbledore's interactions with Harry. Some of the more innocent things, especially the conversations that Dumbledore and Harry repeatedly have in the Hospital Wing after the climax or fight of several different books, are made much more sinister after it is revealed that Dumbledore knew the whole time that he intended for Harry to sacrifice himself for the “greater good” to save the wizarding world from the wrath of Voldemort or what he might have inflicted upon both wizards, witches, and muggles alike. He mentions at Kings Cross Station, after Harry has been killed, that over the years, he kept thinking he should tell Harry the truth about the enormous sacrifice he suspected Harry would have to make, but he was always too cowardly to do so. In fact, during this last conversation that Harry has with Dumbledore in death, he continues to beg for Harry’s forgiveness and compares himself to Voldemort throughout the chapter. Dumbledore, in death, is aware of the mistakes he has made throughout his life, even if Harry isn’t willing to acknowledge them, and instead, overlooks and excuses them. Readers, too, might want to excuse them because

Dumbledore's cowardice was often caused by love, but that does not excuse the fact that his decisions seem more akin to those of evil characters than we would like to think.

The Abuse by Dumbledore

Though the reader does not see it at first, Dumbledore is shown throughout the series to use others for his own ends and needs, regardless of what might happen to that character as a result. Severus Snape is perhaps one of the characters that he leans on and uses the most, even knowing that one wrong move or slip up would mean certain death for his most trusted potions master. In Book 7, through his memories he gives to Harry as he dies, Snape reveals to Harry that he was actually deeply in love with Harry's mother, Lily Evans, from the time they were schoolmates. After graduation, Snape joined Voldemort's forces, but upon learning that Voldemort intended to kill the Potters because of a prophecy that their child would be his undoing, Snape went to Dumbledore to bargain for Lily's life. It was at this point that Dumbledore realized he could use Snape as a tool and therefore put him in the precarious position of double agent, which is where he remained the rest of his life. Snape only realized that he was intentionally used in ways he would not have consented to a few months before Dumbledore's death. When Dumbledore finally tells Snape about his plan to sacrifice Harry, Snape is in disbelief and horrified at the revelation, saying "You have used me . . . I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter—" (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 687). This is the moment that Snape has realized the extent of Dumbledore's deceitful use of him.

After Lily Potter was killed by Voldemort, and her son survived, Dumbledore had Snape vow to protect Harry as he grew up. Yet he compels that vow not simply to protect an innocent child, but rather to preserve that child until he is needed as a sacrifice in war against Voldemort. Snape, thinking he is honoring Lily's memory by protecting Harry, does not realize Dumbledore's ultimate plan and is distraught to learn the truth. This is a significant ding to Dumbledore's character because while he is doing the ultimate good thing here—he is aware of how to vanquish Voldemort, the most evil wizard of his time, once and for all—he has only been able to get this far by lying to Snape, who must tell Harry on numerous occasions that Dumbledore has placed his full trust and confidence in the potions master.

While Dumbledore's use of Snape as a double agent is troubling, and mars the image of Dumbledore as a wholly flawless character, the character he abuses the most out of all of those he has wronged is Harry Potter. Dumbledore withholds every piece of inside information from Harry until the last possible minute, by which time it's too late to change course. One of the most important examples can be seen when Dumbledore is telling Harry about musing over when he thought might be a good time to reveal all he knew of Voldemort's connection to Harry, and the possibility of Harry being another Horcrux, but found that he thought Harry was always too young and that he should wait another year or two, which meant that Harry was much older when he finally received crucial information that might have swayed his mind one way or another if he had the information in time. While Dumbledore might have been withholding this information because he truly did care about Harry, and was hoping to find another way out of it,

because he kept this information privileged there was no alternative by the time Harry learns about this and he does die⁴ as intended by Dumbledore.

Another way in which Dumbledore's actions subvert the perception of him being good and kind is how, in his zeal to pursue finally destroying Voldemort, he overlooks the needs of some people he doesn't see as important to his plans—for example Harry's godfather Sirius Black, who is under house arrest even after being proven innocent. Dumbledore never helps him beyond what is useful for him or beyond what he knows is needed; Sirius is in danger and needs to be somewhere safe—so he is placed in his childhood home that is also doubling as a secret base for The Order. By ensuring Sirius's safety in this way, Dumbledore keeps him away from Harry and locked in a house that he hates, with memories of the family he hates, and the house-elf he hates, which in turn forces Harry stays at his aunt and uncle's house instead of living with his godfather as he wishes to, which results in a missed opportunity to really get to know his godfather before Sirius's untimely death.

Finally, in Book 5, Harry is ostracized by the wizarding community for claiming that Voldemort is back, and his most constant authority figure, Dumbledore, refuses to speak with Harry or explain anything to him. In fact, when Harry tries to catch his eye during a impromptu trial that is held for Harry's (warranted) use of underage magic, Dumbledore will not even make eye contact with Harry. The reader is able to see how much this hurts Harry, and how badly Harry wants the headmaster to look at him: "He

⁴ Although he is able to make the choice to come back after the part of Voldemort's soul is killed and no longer a part of Harry.

wanted to catch Dumbledore’s eye, but Dumbledore was not looking his way” (*Order of the Phoenix* 139). “And without looking once at Harry, he swept from the dungeon” (*Order of the Phoenix* 151). While it is important to recognize that Dumbledore is coming to Harry’s defense and rescue here, having to jump through some (figurative) hoops in order to do so, the emotional distress and trauma caused to Harry by Dumbledore continuously ignoring him for the large majority of this book showcases a colder side of Dumbledore that we as readers have not encountered before. Of course, we learn by the end of *The Order of the Phoenix* that the only reason Dumbledore was giving Harry such a cold shoulder is because he was one of the only people who actually did believe Harry about the return of Voldemort, and this caused Dumbledore to go into battle mode, which in turn causes him not to think as much about the feelings of others. Dumbledore believes that Voldemort can use Harry to get to him, and sacrificing Harry’s emotional state and feelings in order to resist the Dark Lord is an easy trade for him. Dumbledore is trying to protect both himself and Harry’s physical wellbeing at the expense of his mental state.

In Conclusion

Dumbledore is a tragic figure, one whose inner demons cause him a lot of pain because he truly does care about people—yet he also believes that any sacrifice is worth it for the “greater good,” which in his case, is vanquishing Lord Voldemort. He has his own guilt, guilt about what Grindelwald did and his part in that, and guilt about not being able to stop Tom Riddle⁵ when he might have been able to when he was a teacher and

⁵ Lord Voldemort’s real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle

Tom was a student at Hogwarts. He is a flawed character, and one that had to make terrible choices for the greater good of wizard kind. While Dumbledore is a wizard, he is still a human, unlike Tolkien's Gandalf ⁶, and he shows us that no one is infallible. Dumbledore makes mistakes. *The Deathly Hallows* reveals to both Harry and the readers that this idea of Dumbledore as a faultless figure simply isn't true—while he did what he could to make the wizarding world a better place, he also made some terrible choices, especially in his youth concerning his sister Ariana and his best friend turned rival Grindelwald. His flawed character becomes more apparent when we realize the true intentions of Dumbledore and what he wants or thinks needs to happen with Harry in order to save the wizarding world from Voldemort. This is a case of the greater good, the sacrifice of one for the good of many, but it does not allow Dumbledore to occupy a space of true goodness.

Rowling's use of Dumbledore as a morally ambiguous character is a crucial addition to this thesis because Dumbledore's morality does not exist in the same way that the others in this thesis do. Dumbledore is a character who appears to be one that would only make choices that would be traditionally "good," both because of his role as a headmaster of a school, but also because of his quirky, caring personality that is enshrined throughout most of the books. Dumbledore, like Snape, is more human because of his faults.

⁶ Gandalf is one of the Maiar—a fictional class of beings which are angelic and supernatural—not human.

CHAPTER THREE

FREE MAGIC, CHARTER MAGIC, AND THE NINE BRIGHT SHINERS

As briefly noted in the Introduction, Nix's magic system in the Old Kingdom series falls into two categories: Free Magic and Charter Magic. As the Disreputable Dog (herself a Free Magic Creature) explains it to Lirael, "In the beginning, all magic was Free Magic—unconstrained, raw, unchanneled. Then the Charter was created, which took most of the free magic and made it ordered, subject to structure, constrained by symbols" (*Lirael* 559). In the Old Kingdom series Charter Magic is a system bound to symbols that control how Charter Magic is used and regulated. These symbols force Charter Magic users to be subject to rules and limitations that are defined by the symbols of the Charter. If a Charter Magic user wants to cast a particular spell, they must use the appropriate symbol of the Charter (in the appropriate order) to do so. This is demonstrated by characters throughout the book series multiple times. The magic users are restrained by the symbols and must follow the laws put into place to cast the spell correctly. In this way, the symbols of the Charter act as a set of constraints or boundaries that limit the use of magic and keep it under control.

While the Charter Marks, and Charter Magic in general, seem to be set up as a fool-proof method of magic, the use of the symbols of the Charter can have unintended consequences. If a magic user were to use the wrong symbol or use a symbol incorrectly, they could potentially unleash unintended magical effects with dangerous consequences. This means that even though the symbols of the Charter provide structure and order to the use of magic, they also pose a potential risk and can be a source of danger if misused. A

character's Charter Mark works in much the same way—those “Charter-Blessed” are given invisible marks on the forehead that allow them access to the wealth of Charter Magic; however, as characters (as we saw with Clariel in Chapter One) abuse their Charter Magic, their marks start to become tainted, and they lose their access to Charter Magic altogether, forcing them to rely on Free Magic and become Free Magic users.

Nix also goes deeper into the specifics of the two magic types in some of his essay writings about the world of the Old Kingdom. In “An Essay on Free Magic,” a fictional “archival” piece of writing that is meant to be written by a character in the Old Kingdom world, Nix details some of the key differences between the two types. Charter Magic is seen as the morally good form of magic in this universe. It is structured magic that has limitations that are built into the fabric of the magic; anything that pushes against the Charter too much or too powerfully might kill the caster within these confines. Because it is magic that is constrained by rules, Charter Magic must be learned: a person in the Old Kingdom would not be able to control Charter Magic just by sheer willpower. It has laws that must be obeyed, and nothing is able to sway or influence Charter Magic to be anything other than what it is. Free Magic, on the other hand, is wild and without constraints. It is not held to any sort of regulations like Charter Magic is. A Free Magic sorcerer is only limited by their willpower and life force. Free Magic is also more intuitive, and a Free Magic sorcerer will not need classical lessons in magic; they just need a strong will and some natural magical talent. Generally speaking (with a few exceptions such as the Disreputable Dog herself) characters in this world that use or are made of Free Magic are nefarious and working against those who use Charter Magic. There are instances shown in the works that highlight how characters might abuse their

Charter Marks or push their magic beyond the realm of what is allowed or lawful, so they turn to Free Magic.

This concept of Free Magic and Charter Magic rules is particularly evident in the juxtaposition between Necromancers and Abhorsens. While both categories of magic wielders use the same tools, the bells, to control Death and those who “walk” in Death, the Necromancers pull from Free Magic while the Abhorsens use the rules of Charter Magic to do their work. Thus, one of the ways to discern a Necromancer from an Abhorsen is that the Abhorsens have untainted Charter marks, a sign that they have not been corrupted by the Free Magic as those working the side of evil have. Both parties use magic that deals specifically with death, but while the Abhorsens are tasked with maintaining the border between life and death, Necromancers are nefarious beings that blur that line for their own gains. Necromancers raise dead creatures to serve them throughout the series, and most of the time they are using Free Magic to expand their own lifespans and consolidate their power.

Free Magic Beings

In the Old Kingdom books, Free Magic isn't just a tool used by Necromancers to gain power: there are Free Magic creatures as well, beings that are made of Free Magic and are outside of the Charter law, though they can be bound by the Charter on occasion and can choose to serve the Charter if they wish (or not). There are many kinds of Free Magic creatures that appear in the books, from simple creatures that can be constrained or destroyed if need be, depending on whether they are working actively against the Charter or not, to the vastly powerful Nine Bright Shiners, the mythology of which Nix gradually

uncovers throughout the series. Seven¹ of the Nine Bright Shiners are known in the works for being the ones who actually established the Charter itself. These Nine are powerful beings made up of light and magic that have existed before the creation of the world. The Charter Symbols that were discussed earlier in this chapter were created by the Nine² Bright Shiners, and weaved into the Charter in order to transform the chaos of the universe into order. This system of magic they created was with the intent to make magic stable and predictable—bound to laws in order to function. The ultimate evil within the series is a Free Magic character of unknown origin called Orannis the Destroyer. This character is the epitome of evil, and fits into the stereotypical side of “dark” that is seen time and time again throughout heroic fantasy literature. Throughout the series, various characters seek to destroy Orannis for the greater good, and much of the storylines throughout the books follow the efforts of the protagonists as they attempt to stop Orannis from breaking free of the binding chains and causing widespread destruction, chaos, and the end of the world.

Mogget

Mogget is perhaps one of the most complex and perplexing characters in the Old Kingdom series. Mogget the Cat, as he is introduced in *Sabriel*, the first published book of the series, is a character that slides to the more apathetic and slightly nefarious side of ambiguity. Known for his dry humor and sarcastic nature, Mogget is one of the most interesting of these beings because of his conflicted loyalties. Mogget appears in every

¹ The seven are for whom the bells are named for—the bells are how Charter Blessed are able to channel Charter Magic through the Free Magic conduit of the bells.

² The remaining two Bright Shiners are Mogget and Orannis.

Old Kingdom novel, and generally speaking, the reader sees him as a chained being in the service of the Abhorsens who is submissive (in a way) only because he is forced to be. Mogget (originally the Eighth Bright Shiner, Yrael) was bound before the start of the works to the Abhorsen bloodline against his will by the Seven Bright Shiners for his refusal to participate in the original binding of Orannis, the Ninth Bright Shiner. As punishment for his lack of cooperation and help, he is forced to be in servitude of the Abhorsens and their bloodline. This prevents Mogget from using his full powers when bound and renders him harmless and obedient. Mogget's character is shown to be a supernatural deadly force who is impassive to others and mostly self-centered (such as when his collar is taken off and his true form unleashed).

Throughout the work, Mogget appears to be apathetic to the protagonists, and he doesn't take any initiative to help Sabriel or Lirael throughout the storyline; however, by the end of the series, Mogget is able to do something for the greater good of everyone as they all act in opposition to malevolent and very powerful entity Orannis in *Goldenhand* when it is certain that the world is going to end without his assistance. This could be argued that he is still only acting for his own benefit, as he is a creature living in the world and thus doesn't want the world to end, but nevertheless, he does participate this time, and this decision is part of what shows him to be an ambiguous character. He most often appears in cat form with a collar that binds his power, but also as a smallish human figure wearing white robes and a belt that binds him to that form. Despite the collar or belt, Mogget constantly tries the constraints put on him: he tries to get other characters to unbuckle his collar (to do so would lead to their death at his hands,) he leaves the

Abhorsen island where he is supposed to stay whenever possible, he steals fish off the dinner table, and more.

Mogget's desire to be his own "person," that desire which led him to refuse to be involved in the conflict between the other Bright Shiners on either side, is evident in his ambivalence towards Sabriel and Lirael in their storylines. While he journeys with Sabriel as the Abhorsen's servant (as she is the Abhorsen-in-Waiting while she is on the search for her father,) he is very vocal about specifically not wanting or caring to be particularly involved. His lack of care for anything other than saving his own skin at times may paint him as more of a neutral character as opposed to a morally ambiguous one; however, throughout the series with Sabriel and Lirael, the reader can see how Mogget is closer to a morally gray character than simply an indifferent one. In the first published work, Sabriel finds that she must involve Mogget and uncollars him in order to save them both as they plunge to their deaths on a Paperwing, but Mogget almost kills her in the process as he turns on her in his unbridled form after they land. After he is recollared, he does seem slightly remorseful about his behavior, but that remorse does not prevent him from doing near-murder again if given the chance. Mogget, while collared with the Abhorsen magic and spells, is more pliable, but unwillingly so. It isn't until the third book in the series, *Abhorsen*, that Mogget finally is able to take the side of Sabriel and company on his own terms and with his own reasons to fight the ultimate antagonist, the World-Ending Orannis. Mogget joins with The Disreputable Dog, Sabriel, Touchstone, Lirael and others in order to not only save himself, but save the world. Mogget here shows that when it comes to saving his own skin he is able to participate and aid those serving the side of the good, even though Mogget himself is forced into

servitude and is a Free Magic creature from the beginning of time who is capable of almost limitless power. Mogget has free choice in this situation, and in fact, wasn't even asked to participate-- as the protagonists seem to be failing to complete the second binding, Mogget appears as the Eight Bright Shiner, Yrael, and lends his aid to them on his own terms. In addition to this, after the successful second binding of Orannis and after having been freed by Sam, Mogget is fully restored with the use of the bells by Sabriel. "Be free, Mogget!" shouted Sam as he held a red collar high. **'Choose well!'**" (*Abhorsen* 333). Nix highlights here the power of choice, and how that choice can affect the outcome of the world in this case. Mogget, given the power of choice, chose to stand with the Abhorsens that he has hated for so many years, ever since his binding to the Abhorsens by the Seven Bright Shiners (Sabriel is the 53rd to give perspective on how long Mogget has been in their service)-- and even forgoes his oath to kill all Abhorsen and their bloodlines as vengeance for his lifetimes of servitude.

The Disreputable Dog

The Disreputable Dog, as introduced in the second book of the series *Lirael*, is much less ambivalent and can be seen as a character juxtaposed to Mogget. Like Mogget, she possesses the ability to speak and she is a creature of unimaginable power, though the extent of her powers and abilities are not obvious from the onset of her introduction. Although she is flowing with Free Magic, which at first makes Lirael and others very wary of her, she is shown again and again to take the side of the light and be of great use to Lirael as she takes up her mantle as Abhorsen in waiting and fights the Dark alongside Sabriel. The Dog is a faithful servant who is never questioned throughout the series as a

whole. After her first introduction, and Lirael's obvious hesitance of what exactly she is in *Lirael*, she becomes an integral part of Lirael's support system, and is a companion to lean on with unimaginable power to aid the side of good, even though that power is raw Free Magic that is bound in Charter Symbols, much like the Charter Stones themselves.

While Mogget and the Disreputable Dog are both powerful magical creatures that aide the Abhorsens in their fight against the dark, they each represent a different side of the magic that is present in Nix's world. While Mogget represents and embodies the unpredictable and dangerous power of Free Magic, the Disreputable Dog is able to showcase the more benevolent and stable side of Free Magic. The Disreputable Dog represents Free Magic in cooperation with Charter Magic, whereas Mogget is Free Magic chained to serve Charter Magic because he refused to help create and secure it. While these two characters are shown to clash and have opposing ideals throughout the series, it is important for this thesis to recognize that each of these characters are different sides to the same coin: they both are representations of the magic system in Nix's Old Kingdom, and together are able to highlight how Nix has made his magic system one of the more morally ambiguous center stones in his work.

Conclusion

While Free Magic is what the antagonists throughout the series use, most notably Chlorr of the Mask, it is also shown to be utilized by other creatures like Mogget and the Disreputable Dog. This shows that the idea of Free Magic, while painted in a very dark and terrible light in the series, is able to maintain its balance and composure between good and evil on the lines of morality. While Charter Magic is credited with the magic

used by the protagonists, The Dog and Mogget also have been shown to be agents of light (Mogget just once towards the end of the series during the finale), and they are freely able to use Free Magic as demonstrated in this chapter.

It is this intersection of alignments between Free Magic and Charter Magic that demonstrates how Nix's magic is a force that falls under the category of morally ambiguous. From the nefarious Necromancers, to chaotic Berserk—through Mogget and up to the Disreputable Dog, magic in this world is shown to exist across multiple planes of morality and can come across to the reader as neither on the side of dark or the side light.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROFESSOR SEVERUS SNAPE

Finally, I examine Professor Severus Snape, the potions master and double agent in Rowling's Harry Potter series. While Professor Dumbledore is the character that at first glance seems to embody moral integrity and Snape the opposite, Snape in fact may be the most morally complex character to be found in all of modern children's fantasy literature.

Snape is a fascinating character because on an initial read through of the series the reader's opinion of him sways back and forth as to whom he is truly loyal, and the reader (through Harry's perspective) constantly questions in each book which side he serves. Harry's suspicion about Snape's seemingly nefarious actions and involvement with the evil Voldemort begin in the first book and continues throughout the entire series until "The Prince's Tale" near the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Snape's chapter will focus not only on his behavior at a micro level, but also his characterization on a bigger scale and how these complexities fit into the moral ambiguity and the subversion of both the classical hero and villain as previously discussed.

Severus Snape is the best example of the "moral ambiguity" that this thesis is exploring. Snape is seen as an agent of evil from the start of the series, as the world we see is through the lens of Harry Potter's perspective. Everything from his appearance to his horrific attitude is meant to turn the reader away from Snape and dismiss him—other than Dumbledore's insistence upon him as being someone who can be trusted. Snape is also shown throughout the series to not be as nefarious as Harry makes him out to be: a

prime example is Harry's overwhelming conviction that Snape was trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone in Book 1 when in reality he was also protecting it. The reader and Harry are both stunned to discover that it was Professor Quirrell that was attempting to steal the stone for Voldemort, and even Quirrell laughs at Harry's shock at the revelation, saying, "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat" (288). In addition to thinking that Snape wanted to steal the stone, Harry, Hermione, and Ron were also convinced that Snape was jinxing Harry's broom during his first Quidditch match, that Snape gave Hagrid Norbert in an attempt to learn how to get past the three-headed dog guarding the stone, and that Snape let the troll in on Halloween in a first attempt to obtain the stone—and all of these examples are just from the first entry in the series. In reality, of course, Snape was taking measures to not only protect the stone, but also Harry. As the reader eventually discovers, Snape is protecting Harry throughout the series as best he can, despite his genuine loathing of Harry, in order to honor the memory of Harry's mother in accordance to a promise he gave Dumbledore, two aspects of Snape's character that Rowling has kept hidden until the end of the series.

The Half-Blood Prince

Professor Severus Snape is one of the most prominent characters throughout the series. The reader is first introduced to him during Harry's first night at Hogwarts, following the sorting of the houses. Immediately, we are exposed to Snape in a negative tone, and he is described as having "greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin" (*The Sorcerer's Stone* 126.) We aren't given anything positive about Snape during his

first mention in the books: from his appearance, to how he is ominously described by Percy Weasley just a few lines later, Snape seems to leave a bad taste in the Harry's (and the reader's) mouth from his introduction in the series. The characterization of Snape as we meet him for the first time in the Great Hall is a cloudy area in the reader's mind. Snape has been ominously built up to be the character who had tried to hurt Harry, who the trio believed was trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone from under Dumbledore, who had attempted to break into the Gringotts's vault before the beginning of the school year to service Voldemort, whom Snape has a history with. In reality of course, Snape was trying to save Harry and stay one step ahead of Quirrell throughout the year. The juxtaposition for Snape comes in with his other behaviors that are not easily explained away as a misconstruing of the truth, such as his unadulterated hatred of Harry, or his bias and horrible treatment against students that aren't in Slytherin.

The Power of Love

One of the biggest factors in how Snape is perceived by the reader is the fact that the reader is seeing Snape through Harry's eyes. Although numerous other professors at Hogwarts and even Hermione come to Snape's defense time and again, not one of them, including Dumbledore, can persuade Harry that Snape is anything other than the villain Harry wants to see him as. This not only solidifies that Harry is capable of misjudging and making mistakes as the hero. Because Harry is the focalizer in the work his perspective on Snape misleads the reader—as the protagonist and the point of view that the reader aligns with, Harry never sees Snape as anything other than what he wants to see him as, and this information is passed through the narration as the reader receives it

straight from Harry. By throwing so much conflicting information into the work, Rowling is forcing her “reader to distinguish between nastiness and wickedness, between subjective hatred and objective evil” (Schanoes 132.) The reader has to think beyond the information given to them through Harry.

Snape has many bad qualities that can be considered a counterpoint to the hero of the story, or simply petty. Veronica Schanoes writes that “Snape is an oily, petty, nasty, vindictive man with a heart of pure malice” (132). Not only is he initially cruel to Harry when they first meet in potions class in Harry’s first year, he torments Neville Longbottom to the point that Neville sees Snape as his boggart during their third year in Lupin’s Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Snape also tries to get Harry and his friends expelled on more than one occasion throughout the series. Snape actively seeks Harry out to give him detentions and other punishments. Snape genuinely dislikes Harry, for reasons that are eventually disclosed to the reader in the sixth book, and he genuinely seems to be the sort of teacher who has favorites and bullies those students he takes a dislike to. He is truly a petty person. This side of Snape is what is mainly focused on throughout the series as Rowling’s overarching story unfolds. When Snape does something cruel or unusual, from the grand scale events, such as in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Snape was ready to take Sirius and Lupin back to school from the Shrieking Shack in the hopes that they would both receive the Dementor’s Kiss, to assigning too much homework for Harry’s liking, Snape is constantly seen in a negative light so much so that it overshadows any good or redeeming qualities that Harry is forced to admit that Snape has. There are countless examples of Snape’s pettiness and cruelty through the series, but the overabundance of this side of Snape is what ultimately shapes

Harry's and the reader's perspective of him. This is why when Snape does do things that would normally be categorized as "good" they are, for the most part, largely ignored.¹

Snape also has a more obscured, "good" side to him. As Dumbledore puts it in *The Deathly Hallows*, "I shall never reveal the best of you" (679.) Dumbledore knows the risk that Snape is taking and understands that Snape would not want that side to show, even before Lord Voldemort's return, when he was not in as much danger as he is later after his return. While Snape is not a character who is comprised of purely evil or purely good intention, he does have large doses of both, even though some of Snape's more heroic actions go unnoticed or are overshadowed by the negativity that Snape has around him as a persona. The first example is one the reader gets during Harry's first year at Hogwarts, in the surprise twist that Snape is actually working against Quirrell, who is acting for Voldemort, whereas Harry and his friends assume that Snape is the one working for Voldemort. This is not Snape's only redeeming moment. Snape also makes Professor Remus Lupin the Wolfsbane Potion to ensure Lupin remains lucid when he is transformed into a werewolf during the full moon. Snape does this even though he has a great distrust of and dislike for Lupin. Still, he takes the time and effort to brew this for Lupin, as it is an extremely difficult potion to make. In fact, he puts himself in danger in order to brew this potion, as it can pose a great danger to the person who concocts the potion if it is done incorrectly because it can be volatile.

The occlumency lessons that Harry receives from Snape in *The Order of the Phoenix* are a different sort of good deeds. Harry is in desperate need to shield his mind

¹ Just as the opposite is true for Dumbledore.

from Lord Voldemort at this point, but he is unable to do so without assistance. This is where Snape comes in, as he has been asked by Dumbledore to give Harry these occlumency lessons to keep the connection between Voldemort and Harry at bay. Because of these lessons, not only is Snape sacrificing his free time to spend it with the son of the man he despises, but he also is putting himself at even greater risk than he is at normally. The link between Harry and Voldemort allows them to see through each other's eyes, and more importantly, read each other's minds. This is the crucial factor in why Harry must begin his lessons, because Harry is privy to many of the Order's secrets. This can also be seen as problematic for Snape for another reason. While Snape is a double agent at this point, and each side does assume that Snape is working for them, if Voldemort flipped carefully enough through Harry's mind, he may see that Snape is teaching Harry occlumency. While Voldemort does expect Snape to "keep his cover" under Dumbledore, Snape is possibly taking actions that would anger Voldemort and cause him to suspect Snape's loyalty to him.

Severus Snape does many things that Harry initially views as sinister, but Rowling surprisingly and effectively turns the tables on Harry and the reader at the end of the series, when Snape tells Harry his own story in full, in the chapter "The Prince's Tale" at the end of *The Deathly Hallows*. Once he gets Snape's perspective, Harry is finally able to fully understand the motivation for Snape's actions.

In *The Half-Blood Prince*, when Snape kills Dumbledore at the top of the Astronomy Tower, his action plants Snape firmly on the side of the Death Eaters in Harry's mind. This paints Snape in the dark shadow of morality, but as it is uncovered in

the seventh book, Snape had been secretly working as an agent of light while he was an agent of the dark.

It is not until we are able to comb through Snape's memories with Harry that we can see that killing Dumbledore was not murder for Snape as much as it was a mercy because of Dumbledore's imminent death due to the curse of the ring he had tried on in his haste to see his sister. There are many other examples similar to this one throughout the chapter of Harry and the reader misunderstanding some of Snape's actions until we are able to see them from Snape's perspective. We are shown Snape's immense love for Lily Evans as a motivator to help Dumbledore defeat Voldemort as revenge for killing her. While Harry is in Snape's memories, Dumbledore asks Snape what he would do in exchange for keeping the Potters safe, and Snape replies that he would do anything. Snape is sworn to protect Lily's only son and lives out the rest of his life in grave danger, where he could be found out and executed at any moment if his true loyalties were ever given up. After Lily and James have both died, Dumbledore tells Snape that his way forward is clear, that he must help protect Lily's son. Snape also is shown to be aiding Harry behind the scenes, mostly in *The Deathly Hallows*, even more than Harry has seen throughout the series.

Characterization and narration are crucial parts of how the reader views a character within a given text. The style of narration and opinions filtered through the point of view can make "the author's choice of narrator influence what information is presented to readers about agents and events" (Golden 55.) This proves especially true

with the Harry Potter books, as we only see Snape through Harry's eyes for the seven books, and the readers are inclined not to trust him.

Snape's inclusion as a multilayered, multidimensional character within this series has many different aspects to it. To begin with, one of the best take-aways from Snape is the lesson of passing judgment on a character. While Harry did have multiple reasons why he maintained his distrust of Snape, many of which were validated, he also had numerous other people whom he trusted fully and completely, but he failed to trust them on their word about Snape's allegiances. Harry said on more than one occasion that he believed Dumbledore to be the wisest wizard he had met, but this belief still did not stop him from having little to no faith in Snape, and he constantly questioned Snape's motives. Harry refused to listen to anything other than his own instincts and bias against Snape, and he was ultimately proven wrong by the end of the series and ended up naming his second born son after him.

In Conclusion

Snape as a morally ambiguous character in the fantasy genre is a huge complexity and subversion of the established conventions of the genre. Severus Snape is also a one-of-a-kind example of good and evil characteristics at play in a heroic fantasy novel. Not only is Snape courageous and self-sacrificing for the greater good, he is also a character that is mean and petty for no reason other than because he enjoys it. He is selfish and some of the "good" deeds he does are only driven by his own ulterior motives. He has the best qualities of the tropes surrounding heroes and villains in a fantasy work. Snape is one of the more realistic characters in the Harry Potter universe, and it is because he

operates at the extreme ends of both tropes. While Harry is a character that is able to live in the spotlight as a hero, Snape operates in the dark, but also doing heroic things. Not every real person who does heroic things may be put on a pedestal for it. In fact, there are many times that a good deed can be overlooked in favor of a bad act, and Snape's story helps to show that people have to take the good with the bad. Without Snape, in the world of Harry Potter at least, evil may have triumphed over good. Snape proves that all sorts can be a hero, and it takes all sorts to help defeat the darkness. He is also a reminder that just because you help save the world, that doesn't make you a good person.

Rowling's choice to wait until the end of the series to reveal Snape's true character crystallizes his moral ambiguity throughout the work—if readers had seen his true intentions and motivations from the onset, Rowling's development of Snape as a morally ambiguous character would likely have been more muddled, and although that ambiguity would still exist, the realization of just how ambiguous Snape is would not have the strong impact as it does now. This is also important for Dumbledore's reveal—each one of these characters embodies either the “good” or “bad” morality as established in heroic fantasy on the surface, but underneath there are a wealth of subversions and expectations that are not part of the standardized, formulaic pattern from the last 80 or so years.

CONCLUSION

While Tolkien and Lewis have laid the groundwork for establishing highly defined moral codes in both adult and children's fantasy literature, the use of this code has ebbed and flowed over the decades with the complication of characters who don't fit into the "light" or "dark" but instead occupy the space in-between. As this thesis has shown, the line of morality in fantasy that was initially established as an essential element of the genre was popularized in its tradition by Tolkien and Lewis in the mid-20th century. This formulaic mode of heroic fantasy was then later complicated by authors around the world. I believe that this trend of moral ambiguity in literature will continue to be followed as the popularity of books with the inclusion of morally ambiguous characters has only seemed to increase as time goes on. From romance fantasy to urban fantasy, popular fantastical works of the 21st century now seem to usually include a morally complicated character as one of their main protagonists. While there are likely several causes of this shift in how morality is defined in fantasy today, one main cause is an international pushback against previously established formulas, such as Dumbledore who appears to be a complication of the Merlin figure, as noted in Chapter 2. Another is the distance that modern society now has from clearly defined "good" and "evil" sides in war, as Tolkien and Lewis and their generation had from WWII.

While Nix and Rowling are just two examples of authors who reinforce that idea of morality by having morally ambiguous characters, there is a movement of other authors who also complicate the genre in both the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Some recent subversions to this genre can be seen in a multitude of works spanning over the

last 50 or so years. Polish fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski's titular character Witcher from *The Witcher* Saga has obvious ties to both Tolkien and Arthurian mythos; however, the main character, Geralt of Rivia, is far from the model character that might be expected in a typical heroic fantasy setting. Geralt's job as a Witcher might be akin to a paladin or a knight in his journeys to slay all demonic or evil beings, but Geralt himself is not the typical knight in shining armor that some may expect. Instead, he's crass, brutal, and even sometimes negotiates or befriends the beasts or monsters he was originally hired to slay. This is an obvious subversion of the heroic fantasy genre as the sides of "good" and "evil" clash. Additionally, in Sapkowski's work, the "Chosen One" in the saga, Cirilla, is not the central character of the works, unlike other heroic fantasies. She of course features in them, but unlike characters such as Harry Potter, or Percy Jackson from Rick Riordan's *Camp Half-Blood Chronicles*, or Sabriel and Lirael from the *Abhorsen* stories, she doesn't have a date with destiny to challenge the evil forces of her world; she is simply another character within it. Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels are another notable example of modern fantasy with subverted expectations, with the inclusion of chaotically ambiguous characters.

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000) is another noteworthy example of heroic fantasy works that push back against the 20th century ideologies, especially those set down by C.S. Lewis. Pullman has gone on record as claiming to be intentionally subverting and deviating from some of the baselines that had been set by Lewis with his *Narnia* works. Whereas the underlying theme of the *Narnia* Chronicles is Christian faith, and fighting for the "good" side means fighting for Christ (represented by

Aslan), Pullman's trilogy clearly challenges conventional Christian tenets of faith. In the *His Dark Materials* books, the established church (the Magisterium) is corrupt and faithless, and the young protagonist, Lyra Bellaqua, eventually leads forces to resist and even battle with that institution and its goals. Pullman's themes are too complex to go into here, but the trilogy also includes a character, Mrs. Coulter, who is every bit as morally ambiguous as those characters discussed in this thesis.

Sarah J. Mass's explosively popular *Court of Thorns and Roses* series has inverted not only the heroic fantasy story, but also has the inclusion of a morally ambiguous character as the protagonist's love interest, and Mass further blurs the lines of "good" and "evil" by having her characters that are good commit some truly despicable acts, while many of her villains let redeeming qualities shine through when the reader least expects it.

The idea of morally ambiguous characters in young adult and children's literature is not a subversion that I think is going to disappear anytime soon—these characters are some of the most realistic and humanized ones of all, because they are able to represent human nature more accurately. What would an agent of evil redeem himself for if not for love as in Snape's case? Why would a girl on the path of justice fall into the trap of revenge if not for her humanity and flaws that led her there? How could a respected elder ever be seen as morally ambiguous if not for his massive guilt that he has carried around since his childhood? Readers are able to relate to these characters on a personal level which makes them extremely likeable or memorable. Their flaws and contradictions challenge the expectations of the readers and allow the reader to connect with them on a

deeper, more personal level. The inclusion of these morally gray characters is still seen today as a subversion and not the norm—another factor that I think highlights why the inclusions of these characters will be around for awhile: the shock factor that the readers get is still one that is impactful since Tolkien and Lewis’s morality is still viewed as the formula for heroic fantasy about 70 years later. Traditional heroes and villains are still defined by their clear-cut morals and values—these morally ambiguous characters have much more depth and require much more inspection of them and their motives.

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