

Realistic Fiction and Literature: The Influence of Believable Characters on Readers

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Abstract-*What we think and what we read has more influence on our political attitudes as adults. Much of our political information comes from literature. The amount of time the average person spends watching television becomes a dominant force to how we view the world. We see books such as Harry Potter and the Wizard of Oz tell a story that brings a message on the political landscape of a nation, as Dorothy's party returns after killing the Witch of the West, the Wizard keeps them waiting, then puts them off. Short stories and novels that make the reader feel that they are getting to know real people dealing with believable situations can be considered literature that is realistic fiction. This type of fiction has been found in the stories of fiction shows that the impact of characters has a direct influence on reader's decision-making and world view. This is due to creating characters that are realistic to the people and situations found in society today.*

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Short stories and novels that make the reader feel that they are getting to know real people dealing with believable situations can be considered literature that is realistic fiction. This type of fiction has been found in the stories of Harry Potter and The Wizard of Oz. However, there are a number of books that may be considered a part of the realistic fiction genre. The impact of characters has a direct influence on a reader's decision making ability and world view. This is due to creating characters that are realistic to the people and situations that are found in society today.

REALISTIC FICTION AND IT'S STORIES

Realistic fiction is a genre that consists of stories that have characters that live in a believable setting. Their stories resemble real life, and the fictional characters within these stories react similarly to real people. Stories that are classified as realistic fiction have plots that highlight social or personal events, along with issues that mirror contemporary life. They depict the world and society. Realistic fiction can be identified in the following ways:

- Realistic fiction stories tend to take place in the present or recent past;
- Characters are involved in events that could happen;
- Characters live in places that could be or are real;
- The characters seem to be like real people with real issues solved in a realistic way; and
- The events portrayed in realistic fiction conjure questions that a reader could face in everyday life.

In examining the types of literature that have impacted readers, and the view of the world, the books of Harry Potter and the Wizard of Oz can be categorized as realistic

fiction. To readers of the Harry Potter, and its books by J.K.

Rowling, the characters that were written used personality traits that were believable to the reader. However, there are also theories that create opinions about issues today. An area in particular are theories that range from criticism of racism to anti-government sentiments. This is due to the political and social factors that can be found in Harry Potter, since these series of books has been viewed as being similar to the 19th century phenomenon of literature, such as, Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which had added fuel to the abolitionist movement that led to the American Civil War.

REALISTIC FICTION SENDING A MESSAGE

Realistic fiction is capable of sending a message to readers. An example of this would be the political message sent to readers through Harry Potter. The creation of the character Harry, so to be able to leave the world that we know it and enter into a wizardly world that had the same problems that we see today. There is an intent to impose a hierarchy that includes bigotry and a notion of purity that instead becomes this great fallacy. People tend to like to think of themselves as superior and with the hope that they can pride themselves in being seen with purity. This occurs in the Ministry even before it is taken over. There are parallels to regimes that we are familiar with that leaves people to question authority, this includes the media. The advancement of social media and media attention on government and politics should be questioned, since the press may not always tell viewers the truth. The Wall Street Journal compared Neville Chamberlain to the character Cornelius Fudge, to show the eagerness there

was to help their constituents to look the other way, in order to avoid a war. Throughout the 1930s, Chamberlain feared that Churchill needed the support for employment and started a campaign against his fellow Tory. Chamberlain denied the existence of the German menace and ridiculed Churchill. Chamberlain used the media to attack Churchill and suppress dispatches from abroad about the Nazis that would have vindicated him. It was Rowling that had stated that Chamberlain was her inspiration. Characters such as Voldermort was modeled after Hitler and Stalin, as being a paranoid individual. The story behind Harry Potter was inspired by the Second World War. The post 9/11 generation has the idea about war, leadership, and the dangers of power, dictatorship, heroism, and sacrifice in the character of Harry Potter. It is Harry Potter who has created the concept of freedom of speech. There is a lesson that is being taught on tolerance and parity, even on culture, that has been largely due to the characters developed in the Harry Potter books, since there were many themes, such as racism and social justice. In the book Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Rowling created the female character, Hermione. After graduating the wizard school of Hogwarts, she started a career with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures where she was instrumental in improving life for house-elves. She then moved to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement where she became a progressive voice that ensured the eradication of oppressive laws. Harry Potter and the characters in the series evokes a theme of social activism, as Hermione has a passion for oppressed elves and forms the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. She is portrayed using the methods of real world campaigns on social and political issues by including badges and slogans. Hermione persists in campaigning when it is considered quixotic even by her close friends, and not much appreciated by most of the House elves themselves. However, in the book Deathly Hallows, the campaign turns out to have enormous unforeseen results, with House elves joining the struggle and making several indispensable contributions to Voldermort's final defeat and saving lives. Although Rowling developed the Harry Potter books by thinking of re-creating Nazi, Germany in the wizarding world, there were many associations with other political situations. Phrases, such as "half-blood" and "Muggle-born" were developed by using real charts that the Nazis had used to show what constituted "Aryan" or "Jewish" blood. The lightning bolt that Harry received on his forehead as a result of Voldermort's curse is considered to be symbolic of the book series, it is also the symbol of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, which was a prominent Nazi group of sympathizers that had existed during the 1930s and 1940s. Other publications such as the Providence Journal suggests that Harry Potter is a parable on immigration rights, stating that the United States immigration, citizenship, and naturalization laws are based on discrimination and where a person is born. It was Rowling who stated on a 2007 United States book tour, that consciously she was looking to show one of the

greatest evils of war on innocent people where children would lose their families. To recognize the French publication of Deathly Hallows, a French Liberation paper answered the question and put in the mind of readers: "Why Harry Potter is of the Left?" However, to understand how the world of Harry Potter has affected politics, it would be first important to understand the plot and setting of this wizard world.

A ten-year-old Harry Potter, who is an orphan that lives with his uncaring Aunt Petunia, loathsome Uncle Vernon, and his spoiled cousin Dudley. Always in trouble for things that are not apparently his fault, condemned to a life of drudgery and forced to sleep in a cupboard under the stairs, Harry is astonished to receive a letter from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Before he can open the letter, Uncle Vernon takes it, but the house is soon plagued by letters and surrounded by owls. On Harry's 11th birthday, a giant called Rubeus Hagrid appears with another copy of the letter. Harry rapidly discovers that it is an offer of a place at Hogwarts, that he is a wizard himself, and that he acquired the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead in the fight when his parents were killed by the evil wizard Voldermort. Hagrid deals with Uncle Vernon and with Dudley, and soon Harry finds himself in the magical world of Hogwarts under the care of headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Harry's eventful first year at the school—with its successes and failures and friendships is often times overshadowed by dark thoughts of his parents' murder and the dawning knowledge that one day he may have to meet Voldermort, too. Harry's curiosity is destined to lead him and his friends into trouble, even danger, as he discovers the truth about his journey by coming to terms with his past and facing his future is peopled by believable characters with whom it is easy to identify.

There's a specter haunting the United States. We are welcomed into a world that is filled with wizards, otherwise known, as the Generation Harry Potter. Despite the release of the first installment nearly two decades, the children's fantasy series manages to enter about every discussion of politics and culture. It is a classic tale of good versus evil. To have a role model like Harry Potter that says you can defeat evil but still be a complicated human being. That gives voters hope.

REALISTIC FICTION AND METAPHORS

Using a teenage wizard's adventures at a boarding school as a proper metaphor for our entire political system is nauseating in its simplicity and saccharine cuteness. If that's what you're relying on to teach your kids how to navigate their way through a troubling moment in history, "hopeful" wouldn't even appear on the long list of appropriate reactions. The obsessive millennial comparison of everything to Harry Potter's struggle against Voldermort led the Washington Examiner's T. Becket Adams to plead on Twitter: "Read another Book." Although, the books that makeup Harry Potter are not all

that deep. They do look into the themes of good and evil that inspire readers.

Fictional stories have always thrived off the imaginations of their writers. Nonetheless, it is also true that most authors are inspired by the world around them to write their stories. However, what we read can influence how we think about government and politics. It can influence how we think and feel about other countries and people. This thinking all comes out of the writings of authors. J.K. Rowling is an example of this type of writer. In truth, although she is strongly influenced by her own culture in England. Rowling, like many authors and writers, is also inspired by literature, culture and historical events of countries around the world. In particular, the author draws parallels to Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and although we see that this world is considered fictional literature, as it creates a world that maintains all the aspects of the real world. Through her characters such as Voldemort and Grindelwald, she shows that the issues that arose during the Second World War are not confined to the real world. She shows that they are timeless, universal and relevant in even the magical world. Through her parallels, she brings a certain sensibility towards the issue and attempts to teach her readers, who are predominantly children and teenagers, the dangers of bigotry and power hunger as well as the importance of unity, bravery, and compassion. By describing the idealistic views on society held by characters of the magical world such as Grindelwald and Salazar Slytherin, and their similarities to Anti-Semitism, by comparing Voldemort's life and personality to Hitler's and finally by comparing both dictators' regimes, a clearer understanding of Rowling's use of parallels will arise. We can see this in how Harry Potter provides a distinction between the fictional worlds to that of the actual world that we live in today.

In the book *The Wizard of Oz*, realistic fiction is portrayed in the parallels between the fire-breathing huckster known as The Great and Powerful Oz to the president of the United States and his ability to making a better society. However, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* had the characteristics of realistic fiction, as it was suspected to have referenced several political issues of the late 1800's through the use of symbolism to readers. The parallels between the characters in the book and history of the United States through political and personal symbolism in the following ways:

DOROTHY GALE

Political Symbolism – Dorothy Gale represents American values.

Personal Symbolism – Dorothy Gale is the every girl. She is the dreamer. The optimist. The leader of her troupe and the hero on her journey of realization. She is the nucleus of the group, much like Matilda was in her own family.

Journey in Oz: In search of home, self.

SCARECROW

Political Symbolism – The Scarecrow is the Midwestern American farmer. He is wise, but naive and at the mercy of the environment, economy, and government.

Personal Symbolism – The Scarecrow is a good-natured, but gullible chap that's always getting the stuffing knocked out of him. He's like a tumbleweed on a desolate prairie. Someone that stumbles through life much like Baum did during a series of early career failures. Journey in Oz: In search of a brain.

TIN WOODMAN

Political Symbolism – The Tin Woodman is the dehumanized American industrial steel worker. The steel workers who protested during the deadly 1892 Homestead labor strike at the Andrew Carnegie owned steel mill near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania were a likely source of inspiration for the Tin Woodman character.

Personal Symbolism – The Tin Woodman is an average working Joe. Baum, likely found inspiration for this character in his own financial struggles and early career jumping.

Journey in Oz: In in search of a heart.

COWARDLY LION

Political Symbolism –The Cowardly Lion is the blustery politician and orator, William Jennings Bryan. During the late 1800s elections, Bryan was the Populist Democratic presidential candidate. His platform promoted the free silver monetary standard over the gold standard. Personal Symbolism – The Cowardly Lion represents the inner child or self. The courage seeking Cowardly Lion is the character that most closely represents Baum in the book. Compare W. W. Denslow's original Cowardly Lion illustrations to photos of Baum at the time. There is an uncanny resemblance between the bespectacled Baum and Denslow's spectacle wearing Cowardly Lion illustrations. Journey in Oz: In search of courage.

WIZARD OF OZ

Political Symbolism – The Wizard represents political leaders, particularly any of the US presidents during the late 19th Century. Some historians believe 'OZ' stands for an abbreviation of the weight measure, 'ounce'. This gives more credence to the Populist silver vs. gold monetary metaphor. Baum once claimed that 'OZ' was simply taken from the O-Z label of a filing cabinet in his office. Personal Symbolism – The Wizard is as historian Littlefield aptly describes, "a little bumbling old man, hiding behind a facade of paper mache and noise, able to be everything to everybody." He represents anyone who is a fraud, perhaps even Baum. Who at his lowest point in his career may have seen himself as fraud?

Journey in Oz: The Wizard is not on a transformational journey. He is in essence dismantled and revealed for who and what he is, a fraud.

WICKED WITCH (OF THE WEST, EAST)

Political Symbolism – The Wicked Witch of the West in the movie adaptation, represents the American West or more specifically a malevolent Mother Nature, who is eradicated by the farmers' most precious resource, water. The Wicked Witch can also be interpreted as representing, politicians, government and the corporate ruling class. The Wicked Witch of the East "...has held all the Munchkins in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day." Personal Symbolism – The Wicked Witch represents maligned minorities who are painted as evil by some – these would be suffragist women and American Indians. The Wicked Witch can also be seen as an illusion or 'fraud' that disappears when water is thrown on her visage. It is interesting to note that not all witches in Oz are bad. The Witches of the East and West are seen as malevolent, but Glinda presents herself as good even though her motives are questionable, as she never tells Dorothy that all she needs are the ruby (silver) slippers and her two feet to take her home.

MUNCHKINS

Political Symbolism – The Munchkins represent ordinary citizens.

Personal Symbolism – The Munchkins also represent the marginalized, or "the little people" which includes all the poor, itinerant workers, European immigrants, Indians, Asian, black and brown peoples.

WINGED MONKEYS

Political Symbolism – The Winged Monkeys are thought to represent Native Americans or Asian railroad workers exploited by the Wicked Witch of the West. (The East and West symbolizes politicians and government)

Personal Symbolism – The Winged Monkeys also represent all marginalized workers whose unique skills and sheer numbers are exploited in dangerous engagement and conflict.

YELLOW BRICK ROAD

Political Symbolism – The Yellow Brick Road represents the gold monetary standard, with each brick of gold leading to the Emerald City.

Personal Symbolism – The Yellow Brick Road, in Baum's theosophical mindset, also likely represents the path to enlightenment and transformation.

EMERALD CITY

Political Symbolism – Emerald City represents Washington, D.C., a capitol, or the seat of power. Personal Symbolism – The Emerald City was for Baum, an entrepreneur, salesman, shopkeeper and publisher of a shop window trends magazine, a magical and shining metropolis of the future. He saw the future with its mechanical inventions and technological advances as a

welcoming and wondrous place, much like the Emerald City.

SILVER (RUBY) SHOES

Political Symbolism – The Silver Shoes are a symbol of silver monetary reform. The Populist movement supported the silver (free money) standard over the gold standard. The Populist Silverites were in favor of an inflationary monetary policy using the "free coinage of silver" as opposed to the deflationary gold standard. They believed it would enable debtors (often farmers who had mortgages on their land) to pay their debts off with cheaper, more readily available dollars. Those who would suffer under this policy were the creditors, such as banks and landlords.

Personal Symbolism – The Silver Shoes (and Ruby Shoes) are symbolic of power and mobility. They can move you forward in life, or bring you home. The Ruby Red shoes are only found in the movie adaptation. In the original children's book version, the shoes are silver. The significance of making the shoes ruby red in the movie, may be as simple as exploiting the use of Technicolor with a splashy ruby red color. However, it's likely that the color 'red' is a metaphor for the 'heart.' This color reinforces the idea that home is where the heart is and "there's no place like home".

TORNADO

Political Symbolism – The Tornado represents political upheaval and the sweeping free silver monetary movement. Personal Symbolism – The Tornado represents transformational change through transport to another dimension. It was likely a journey to the center of your mind — perhaps through a dream.

REALISTIC FICTION AND THEMES

In the Harry Potter series, characters such as Hermoine and Voldermort influenced the political values and perspectives of the generation that came of age with these books. Reading the books correlated with greater levels of acceptance for out-groups, higher political tolerance, less predisposition to authoritarianism, greater support for equality, and greater opposition to the use of violence and torture. As Harry Potter readers will have noted, these are major themes repeated throughout the series. These correlations remained significant even when applying more sophisticated statistical analyses – when controlling for, among other things, parental influence. Literary characters and their stories have an ability to not only entertain, but also influence how readers process information on an emotional level, and at a distance from real world facts. An example would be Harry Potter readers compared Donald Trump to Lord Voldermort, the villainous wizard of the Potter universe, who made a name for himself using dark magic and xenophobia. Young, liberal Potter readers used the characters within the story as a comparison of Hillary Clinton, meet your Harry Potter doppelgänger, Hermione Granger as a campaign

connection. The Potter politics connection isn't new, it is just a more palpable this election cycle. However, there is research to show that characters, such as Harry Potter, are able to influence readers by the language used when writing.

Books such as Harry Potter are one of many that influence the way people make decisions. It is persuasive language that provides a foundation for decision-making. Literature is able to persuade readers in how they think about the world around them. One example of this would be in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard*, which provided a view to readers that was symbolic to traits of real world people. It was well-known in economic academia that "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" is loaded with powerful symbols of monetary reform, which were the core of the populist movement and the 1896 and 1900 presidential bids of Democrat William Jennings Bryan. The yellow brick road (gold standard), the Wicked Witch of the West (Cleveland banker J.D. Rockefeller) and the Wicked Witch of the East (NY banker JPMorgan), the emerald city of Oz (greenback money), even Dorothy's silver slippers (changed to ruby slippers for the movie version) were symbols of the beliefs of Baum and Bryan that adding silver coinage to gold would provide much needed money to a Depression-strapped, 1890s America. Baum was able to write a story of characters that portrayed traits of those of the real world.

For a child who reads the *Wizard of Oz*, this book represents magic – a wonderful, pure, magnificent fairytale. However, when this book is being read or re-read by someone in his 30s, the reader might in fact draw parallels between the US history and the political movements that might have been depicted in the book. Finally, when one re-reads the book at a mature age, with not only the benefit of life experience, but also with the benefit of financial knowledge, one may begin to wonder whether there are parallels between the book and the national debt in general, its need for reform, and the economy.

FICTION AND ITS EFFECTS ON SOCIETY

Fiction is dangerous because it has the power to modify the principles of individuals and whole societies. However, fiction is influencing in a way that all political factions should be able to get behind. Beyond the local battles of the culture wars, virtually all storytelling, regardless of genre, increases society's fund of empathy and reinforces an ethic of decency that is deeper than politics.

For a long time, literary critics and philosophers have argued, along with the novelist George Eliot, that one of fiction's main jobs is to "enlarge men's sympathies." Recent lab work suggests they are right. Psychologists Mar and Keith Oatley tested the idea that entering fiction's simulated social worlds enhances our ability to connect with actual human beings. Findings suggest that heavy fiction readers outperformed heavy nonfiction readers on

tests of empathy, even after they controlled for the possibility that people, who already had high empathy, might naturally gravitate to fiction. Fiction serves the function of "making the world a better place by improving interpersonal understanding" (Oatley). Followup studies have reached similar conclusions. In a study on fiction and its effects on small children (age 4-6), who were exposed to a large number of children's books, showed that children had a significantly stronger ability to read the mental and emotional states of other people. Findings showed that people who read short stories that are specifically written to induce compassion in the reader and increased empathy after reading fiction (Johnson). Other possibilities are that fiction has hidden benefits that outweigh its costs. For instance, anthropologists have long argued that stories have group-level benefits. Traditional tales, from hero epics to sacred myths, perform the essential work of defining group identity and reinforcing cultural values.

CONCLUSION

Realistic fiction challenges the boundaries between truth and fiction. Many classic literary works have actually been thinly veiled allegories of contemporary or historical events, and many of the world's most famous writers of fiction such as George Orwell, Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, and Aldous Huxley are perhaps remembered even more for the depth and quality of their social and political commentary, than they are for the overall quality of their writing. Famous classic books such as *1984*, *The Jungle*, or *Brave New World* have a much more serious purpose than just pure entertainment. Books such as the *Harry Potter* Series and *The Wizard of Oz* provided a realism that readers find believable, as it relates to the issues of the real world. *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation*, suggests that the J.K. Rowling's depiction of equality, tolerance, and societal acceptance of half-muggle/half-wizards and elves, which interviewed 1,000 millennials at seven U.S. colleges to investigate the intersection of books, movies, and fanaticism to show their influence on young people. Findings showed that readers of the *Harry Potter* series were more in tune with the Democratic Party than the GOP. This may be due to the reading/voting block that had occurred during the 2008 election, which may have played a small role in the decision-making when choosing a presidential candidate, with 60% of those surveyed who read *Harry Potter* books voted for Obama, and 83% of them felt poorly about the Bush administration, mainly on key issues such as violence and deadly force. (Gierzynski & Threlkeld) According to Gierzynski and Threlkeld, "attitudes in opposition to the use of violence, torture and deadly force came to be associated with the Democrats at the end of the Bush years, mainly in opposition to Bush administration policies and failures in these areas. The opposition to equal marital rights for same-sex couples and immigration

reform by the Republicans put those who support political tolerance ... and those who are more accepting of diversity on the side of the Democrats."

Issues such as government, politics, and women's rights, along with many others have become prevalent in the United States have been impacted through the realistic fiction genre of literature. For many readers of the Harry Potter series, the audience was swayed towards the Democratic Party right at the perfect time to help Barack Obama win the 2008 presidential election. Realistic Fiction has powerful effects on readers and their ability to view the world around them. Characters from books such as the Harry Potter Series and The Wizard of Oz were written to have traits that are similar to real people, since it cultivates our mental and moral development. The more deeply we are cast under a story's spell, the more potent its influence. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence. Realistic Fiction utilizes stories that allow the reader to take down any intellectual guard, which allows readers to be moved emotionally. This allows literature to provide insight on issues with an increased openness. Realistic Fiction

enhances our ability to understand other people, promotes a deep morality that cuts across political creeds, and a sense of reality, as it relates to having an important effect for society.

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