The Rise of Strong Female Characters in YA Fantasy

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When we think about fantasy, magic, mythical creatures, and adventure all come to mind; however, the overarching theme critics use to define fantasy is literature of or about the "impossible" (Sullivan, 2001). The earliest forms of fantasy literature can be found in folklore, fairy tales, and myth. In the broadest sense, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient Mesopotamian poem, and Homer's *Odyssey* can be considered two of the earliest pieces of fantasy (James & Mendlesohn, 2012). As we can see, the idea of escapism, a direct subversion to the confines of realism, has always been craved by humankind. We can see that many of the key elements of fantasy were derived directly from folklore and fairy tales, such as, the element of morality, the hero's journey, and the presence of the impossible.

Similarly, the brave, handsome prince and the beautiful, helpless maiden are common tropes that made the transition from fairy tale to fantasy. Historically, the fantasy genre has been the domain of masculinity. Fantasy rarely included any female characters and if there were, they were two dimensional figures that only served the purpose of serving the men in the story. For the transition from fairy tale to fantasy to be apparent, the characters must also make the evolution from flat to well-rounded (Soltan, 2015); thus, female characters that lack development are permanently stuck as the classic fairy tale 'princesses', perpetuating gender stereotypes and the ideals of a patriarchal society. Many credits J. R. R. Tolkien as the founding father of the fantasy genre and he, himself, has claimed inspiration from fairy tales and myth (James & Mendlesohn, 2012). This is apparent in the fantastical land, mythical creatures, and the blatant lack of female characters. As one *Time Magazine* writer stated, "Tolkien seems to have wiped women off the face of middle-earth," (Konigsberg, 2012, para.3).

Jumping forward a bit, young adult fantasy, in particular, started to gain popularity with the release of "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" by J.K. Rowling in 1997. Similar styles of fantasy series for young adults followed, such as "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" by Rick Riordan and "The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel" by Michael Scott. Credit must also be given to "Twilight" by Stephanie Meyer, a paranormal fantasy with a female protagonist published in 2005 that opened the floodgates for YA fantasy. But the books that followed "Twilight" had a similar style of female protagonists. She was two dimensional and reactionary.

She allowed the secondary characters to shape who she was and the decisions she made. Her worth was demonstrated only when a male love interest swooped in to inform her of her beauty. In a study on female teens' reactions to Meyer's vampire novel, researchers found that participants determined Bella's character to be incomplete; "Female readers might reject Bella and feel better about themselves because, in comparison, they have more defined personalities and interests," (Suico, 2014, p.150). Furthermore, Meyer's protagonist is often criticized for only valuing romantic endeavours, negating any healthy relationships with friends and family and, in general, not having any of her own emotions or motives (Suico, 2014).

Not long after the era of Bella Swan, we saw a distinct shift in popular female protagonists in YA fantasy. This can be seen in books such as "The Hunger Games" by Suzanne Collins and "Divergent" by Veronica Roth. Girls like Katniss and Tris were tough and rejected anything too feminine. They crushed gender stereotypes and ate girls like Bella Swan for breakfast. They didn't need a man to give them value (but there were love interests, regardless). While this era of YA fantasy certainly saw an improvement in gender equality in literature, there was, and is, still room for improvement.

Physical strength alone is not enough to make a strong female character. As much fun as it is to see females kick-butt in fantasy, it is even more important to see accurate representations of women. That is, women who are well rounded, multifaceted, experience realistic emotions, and possess both strengths and weaknesses. We need to see a variety of strengths valued in literature, not just physical.

In direct response to the to the theme of physically strong female characters who obstinately rejecting anything that appeared too "girly", came a new, multifaceted female protagonist. For instance, Celaena from Sarah J. Maas' "Throne of Glass" series. She can be both quick with her fists and bookish. She can enjoy dressing up in ball gowns and in battle armour. Most significantly, she can have confidence. Gone is the girl who doesn't know she's beautiful until a man tells her so. In her place is a strong female character.

Society as a whole has shifted since the "Lord of the Rings" series first hit the shelves. As an excellent example of societal changes in pop-culture, let's jump away from books and to the big screen. The original "Star Wars" was first released 1977. While acknowledging the presence of Princess Leia, a strong female character in some regards, we still see a massive imbalance between the genders. Moreover, the limited female characters had severely low

character development and mainly filled the roles of wifely and motherly duties. In comparison, if we flash forward to 2015 when a new instalment in the "Star Wars" series, "The Force Awakens", featured a strong, well developed leading lady: Rey. Rey's success for womankind was followed by another: "Rogue One", released in 2016, featured Jyn, yet another strong and well-rounded female lead in a "Star Wars" movie. Most importantly, Rey and Jyn are heroines who are not overly sexualized, as is sometimes the compromise women face when given representation in the world-saving industry, which can even be seen with Leia throughout the original trilogy.

Even Disney movies have experienced this shift towards female empowerment. Consider "Cinderella" and "Beauty and the Beast" which have both been updated for a modern audience since their release dates in 1950 and 1991, respectively. The rejuvenation of these films and their new and improved female characters is a recent component of a clear shift towards feminism in pop-culture that has been evident in the past few years. The process was likely not an immediate change, but rather a gradual one. Disney, for one, has a large hand in pop-culture for all age demographics, but most importantly, for young, impressionable audiences. In 2012, Disney's *Brave* was a huge leap in the right direction; it featured the first 'Disney Princess' without a prince. Instead of romance, *Brave* focused on mother and daughter as the main relationship in the story arch. Most recently, Disney's *Moana* stole the hearts of everyone by not only negating any romance in the plot, but also by changing the animation of the female body to better represent realistic body proportions (Moss, 2016).

Public libraries can also adapt to account for the rise in strong female characters, and overall, better writing, in young adult fantasy. For instance, this rising trend has correlated to a rise in adult readership of young adult books, particularly fantasy (Diaz, 2015, p.23). This will require public libraries to adjust how they market and display the young adult section; for instance, adults may feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in a space designed for a younger audience. Furthermore, this may be cause for reconsideration in cataloguing, particularly with the creation of "new adult" books that bridge the gap between young adult and adult. Additionally, female millennials are the highest population to visit libraries in America (Geiger, 2017). This, paired with the fact that female millennials are the most likely to relate to strong female characters in the fantasy genre, has influenced the library to expand their young adult

fantasy collection. The library, as a public institution, must be adaptable and able to meet the needs of its community.

Good quality and diverse female representation are vital for the development of young readers. Especially as children, we are influenced heavily by the characters we see. In Parent's study on how different age groups of females react to female characters in young adult literature, it was shown youths responded to the main character as an individual (Parent, 2015). Additionally, in Suico's study on young adult female readership, it was determined that readers frequently draw comparisons between their own lives and that of the characters (Suico, 2013). The demand for well-rounded females and good role models for young girls is undeniable. "It's all about awareness and visibility, so the more that you see female characters in lead roles, in prominent positions, it becomes expected that they're supposed to be there," (Eckstein, 2017, as cited by Stahler, 2017). The gradual evolution we have seen towards the improved representation of women in young adult fantasy has been increasing rapidly in recent years and it will likely continue to do so.

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