

MEN ARE STRONGER; WOMEN ENDURE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE THRONE OF GLASS AND THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS YA FANTASY SERIES

KATHERINE CRUGER*

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes two popular YA fantasy series: Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* and Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass*. We evaluate both series for explore tropes and themes common to YA fantasy. Research shows that popular series have important effect on identity formation of readers, for good or ill. We conclude that, despite often being written by women and about girls, the narratives found in YA often perpetuate internalized sexism, play into racist tropes, reduce heroines to love interests, romanticize unhealthy relationships, use rape as a plot device, and abuse characters' reproductive abilities.

Keywords: Young Adult, literature, symbolic annihilation, media criticism, *The Mortal Instruments*, *Throne of Glass*.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, Young Adult (or YA) fantasy novels are taking up more space on bookshelves and in the hearts, minds, and wallet share of adolescents. Books written primarily for teenaged readers were relatively scarce until around the year 2000, when the genre became newly focused on fantasy, a shift largely attributed to the success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and which gave us the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* popular culture crazes in 2005 and 2008 respectively (see Withers & Ross, 2011). While there were just over 3000 YA titles published in 1997, by some estimations there are 30,000+ published each year since 2002. (Bowker, 2014). Bushman and McNerny (2014) argue that YA literature (often overlooked as a legitimate field of study) helps readers understand who they are and what is moral and immoral behavior. We argue that YA franchises do cultural work, meaning that they are both constitutive of and constituted by our larger cultural and social ideas about gender, romance, sexuality, heroism, and ideology. One study found, for example, that readers and viewers of the *Twilight* franchise had more submissive self-concepts than those who were not (see Melchiori & Mallett, 2012).

* Assistant Professor, Chatham University, USA. kcruger@chatham.edu

In this study, we analyze two recent and popular, if not blockbuster, YA fantasy series. *The Mortal Instruments* by Cassandra Clare made its debut in 2007 and has sold 18 million copies, inspired a movie adaptation, as well as a forthcoming television series. The *Urban Fantasy* series follows Clary Fray, an ordinary girl who learns that she's a part of a magical World of angels, demons, and fae. The *High Fantasy Series* *Throne of Glass* debuting in 2012, follows Celaena Sardothien, a teenaged assassin fighting for her freedom in the kingdom of Adarlan. Although worlds and authors apart, these two-book series have a lot in common. They both have an international fanbase, have inspired television adaptations, and have been praised for their diversity. Both series were written by women who began writing fan fiction before securing publishing deals, and both authors actively engage with fans in person and online through Tumblr and social media. Many have argued that problematic representations of marginalized groups would largely be eliminated if those behind the scenes (writers, film makers, cinematographers, producers) were a more diverse group. However, this does not prove immediately true in the YA fantasy genre, dominated by women writers like Clare and Maas. Through our textual analysis, however, we find that these entries in the YA canon perpetuate many damaging stereotypes. "Diverse" characters are tokens that are often abused. The books are celebrated by fans and publishers for having strong female characters, but this strength often comes at the expense of any other woman and girl in proximity. While YA heroines can be stronger (and better) than all other women and girls, they can never out shine their boyfriends. Heroines are often reduced to love interests in wildly unhealthy relationships. Both series are guilty of using rape narratives and abusing characters' reproductive capabilities to move their stories along.

SYMBOLIC ANNIHILATION: Representations of Women and People of Color in Mediated Messages

Symbolic Annihilation is a term coined by sociologists George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) to describe the phenomena whereby marginalized groups (women, people of color, LGBTQIA) are absent or under-represented in television content, both in scripted shows and news coverage. They argue that symbolic annihilation is a mechanism through which those with power maintain their power. Indeed, while 37% of the US population are people of color, only 11 % of children's books published over the past 23 years features "multicultural content." Young Adult books, are perhaps even less diverse. The Cooperative Children's Book Center found in their 2013 study that only 5.3% of YA books featured characters of color, while 95% featured White characters (see Horning, 2013; CCBC, 2017).

As of 2015, according to their Diversity Baseline Survey the publishing industry is 79% white, 92 % able-bodied, 88 % heterosexual, and 78 % cisgendered-women. The genre is dominated by female writers (CCBC, 2017). However, African-American, Latinx, and Native American authors combined wrote less than 6 % of children's books published in 2016 (CCBC, 2017).

Gaye Tuchmann (1978) further classified symbolic annihilation into three types: omission, when characters from a particular identity group are simply absent; trivialization, when characters from a particular identity group have silly, minimal, or foolish storylines or coverage; and condemnation, when characters from a particular

identity group are depicted disproportionately as either victims of violence (as with women and girls) or perpetrators of violence (as with black men, for example.)

While studies of symbolic annihilation have largely been applied to television and film representation, here we explore depictions and representations of characters in two YA fantasy series. Young Adults are reading more than they were in the 80s, or 90s. The National Endowment for the Arts released a report celebrating that teen readership increased 21% from 2002 to 2008 (NEA, 2009). In a phenomenon uncommon before Harry Potter, popular YA series now become franchises of film or television adaptations, merchandise, video games, conventions, even theme parks. Fan websites, tumblrs, and forums for fan fiction allow superfans (not always teenaged themselves) to comment and critique series and author choices, as well as participant in the world building. Teenaged girls identify heavily with characters in the YA books that they read. In some cases, teenaged readers sometimes look to these characters for a model of how to handle real life situations (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015).

In this study, character relationships, main plot points in the series, and dialogue were analyzed. Where appropriate, the rhetorical analysis of the primary texts was supplemented with secondary texts from fan message boards, series critiques, social media content, and interviews with authors and fans. We sought to determine what themes and tropes might emerge from the text as commonalities between the series, and which can be seen are a larger trend in the multi-billion dollar YA genre are analyzed in the remainder of this piece. More specifically, we wondered whether these two series (written for, by and ostensibly about young women) would disturb the cycle of symbolic annihilation of women and people of color.

After tabulating all named characters in both series, we found that of the twenty-six mentioned characters in Throne of Glass series, twelve are women, only four are people of color. Of those four women of color, two die. In The Mortal Instruments of the thirty-nine characters mentioned, seventeen are women, and nine characters are people of color. Eight out of those nine are alive at the end of the series. Of the series' nine main characters, only three are women.

NOT THAT KIND OF GIRL: Internalized Sexism

In YA fiction, it seems that the best thing a heroine can be is nothing like other girls (Buttsworth, 2002). To prove their strength and individuality, heroines often reject conventional expressions of femininity, but more than that, fantasy heroines reject other women and girls as vapid, conniving, or slutty. It seems that in a world with werewolves and demons, the most outlandish thing is a friendship between two women.

The message is painfully clear: there is only room in the story for one amazing girl, there is only one way to be a girl or woman, and perhaps most troublingly, it's impossible for girls to have meaningful friendships with one another. These characters often display internalized sexism, the involuntarily believe of the worst existing stereotypes about one's own gender identity group.

When readers meet Clary Fray, the heroine of The Mortal Instruments series, she is with her best and only friend Simon Lewis. She wears jeans, tee shirts, Converse sneakers, and doesn't wear makeup. At the age of sixteen, Clary hasn't managed to connect with anyone else over her passion for popular culture or her love of art. Whenever Clary is confronted with another girl, she instinctively feels threatened by

them. Most of the conflicts between Clary and the only other young woman main character in the series, Isabelle, revolve around slut-shaming and body snarking.

Young women are taught from a young age that the most significant and fulfilling relationships they will have in their lives will be with men. They are also taught that the thing that will most interfere with those relationships are other women (hooks, 1986). In *The Mortal Instruments* series this idea is reinforced when conflicts between Clary and other girls are only resolved when they no longer see each other as a threat to their relationships with the boys in their lives.

Celaena Sardothien the young blonde heroine of *Throne of Glass* Celaena doesn't entirely reject traditional expressions of femininity as Clary has. Unlike Clary, who thinks of herself as unattractive, "a Raggedy Ann to her mother's Barbie doll" (Clare, 2007, p. 41). Celaena considers herself beautiful and uses her beauty "like she used her whip" (Maas, 2012, p. 515). However, Celaena does not like or trust other women:

She never had many friends, and the ones she had often disappointed her ... she'd sworn never to trust girls again, especially girls with agendas and power of their own. Girls who would do anything to get what they wanted (Maas, 2012, p. 166).

Celaena has as much to fear from men as women. The king is responsible for the slaughter of her family. Her father figure exploited her abilities for years and groomed her to be a killer before she was even an adolescent. During her time as a slave, she witnessed undertakers sexually assault young women. So, after a lifetime of trauma and betrayal, why isn't Celaena as weary of the men in this world as the women? Because women are inherently untrustworthy, YA novels assert.

Even when there are brief examples of female friendship present in these series, it seems that female relationships are still tied up in men. Bonds are preserved or initiated not based on shared interests or experiences, but around men. Isabelle and Clary's friendship is solidified when Isabelle learns that Clary saved her brother's life, not by living and working together, or by battling evil forces together time and time again.

The boys in the heroines lives also go out of their way to tell them they're "different." Not from any other person they've ever met, but specifically from any other woman or girl they've ever met. In addition to strong female characters rejecting other women, they must also be defined and controlled by their relationships with men.

TO LOVE IS TO DESTROY: Romanticized Toxic Masculinity

Jace Herondale, the male lead in *The Mortal Instruments* series, recalls an episode of childhood emotional abuse to heroine (and his love interest) Clary, concluding: "The boy never cried again and he never forgot what he learned: to love is to destroy, to be loved is to be the one destroyed" (Clare, 2007, p.329).

Jace's abusive father isn't the best person to ask for relationship advice, but in the world of fantasy YA this is an apt observation. In a fantasy story of a YA heroine these things will be true: she will be beautiful, she will save the world, and she will find true love with her soul mate. But all too often in YA, "I love you," is used as a justification for female characters being subjected to physical and emotional violence. In YA, the romantic relationships are often endgame, meaning permanent, but very rarely are healthy (Taylor, 2012).

A defining characteristic of the young adult fiction genre are the all-consuming relationships. It's normal and expected that female characters will find their soul mates before the age of 18. In fantasy in particular the relationships are written as being "fated" (Taylor, 2012). As Kristina Deffenbacher (2014) noted, the prominence of soul bonds in these books complicates narratives surrounding dating. Because these characters are written as being destined to be together instances of abuse are easily brushed off; a relationship with a soulmate cannot be toxic, as it was written in the stars.

The negative types of relationships one will often find in YA will typically fall into the following categories: co-dependent, toxic, or outright abusive. The three romantic relationships that Clary Fray, Maia Roberts, and Celaena Sardothien are in provide an example of each. Clary Fray and Jace Herondale in *The Mortal Instruments* are an example of codependency being portrayed as love. Their story starts with Jace saving Clary. The narrative then segways into belligerent sexual tension. Then once the obstacle of their assumed siblinghood is out of the way their relationship shifts to troubling co-dependency.

"And its potential for danger is literally unlimited," said Alec. "If Jace knew I let Clary go to the Seelie Queen, he'd—"

"I don't care," Clary said. "He'd do it for me. Tell me he wouldn't. If I were missing—"

"He'd burn the whole world down till he could dig you out of the ashes. I know," Alec said, sounding exhausted" (Clare, 2012, p.49).

That exchange takes place between Clary and Jace's best friend Alec Lightwood and describes the dynamic between Clary Fray and Jace Herondale pretty accurately. The love that they share comes before safety, sanity, questions of mortality, and even Clary's own character development. Clary often ends up comforting Jace after he physically harms her. Jace declares unapologetically that he cannot live with Clary.

Clary and Jace's relationship goes to troubling extremes. However, it's not the only troubling relationship in the series. Maia' Roberts' first real boyfriend, Jordan Kyle, physically and emotionally abuses her. The abuse leaves scars physically and emotionally, culminating in Maia being attacked and turned into a werewolf by her boyfriend after she attempts to end their relationship.

"Twenty-four stitches later, she was back in her pink bedroom, her mother hovering anxiously. The emergency room doctor had said the bite looked like a large dog's, but Maia knew better. Before the wolf had turned to race away, she'd heard a hot, familiar whispered voice in her ear, "You're mine now. You'll always be mine" (Clare, 2008, p.66).

Readers meet the werewolf Jordan two books later and his version of events are somewhat different than Maia's. In Jordan's side of the story, it sounds like he only hit Maia once, whereas in Maia's recollection whenever Jordan became angry with her he would slap her and get physical with her when she tried ending their relationship. Jordan makes a point of telling a friend of Maia's that the night he attacked her she kissed another boy in front of him, implying the attack was justifiable and provoked. From the moment the audience meets Jordan he is set up to be a sympathetic character and not an abuser and the audience is encouraged to forgive him. According to the narrative and supernatural mythology surrounding the story Jordan didn't hurt

Maia because he's an abuser, it was all because he is a werewolf. The bite excuses everything.

Initially, upon seeing him again Maia is understandably furious. But ultimately, she accepts his apology and forgives him. They once again become romantically involved and Jordan is accepted into her friend group. Werewolves are not real and Maia Roberts is a fictional character, but allowing a sixteen-year-old girl to take back her abusive ex-boyfriend is not without consequence. Because Maia and Jordan's story is heavily focused not on the pain that Jordan caused Maia, but on the pain Jordan feels for hurting Maia, the message is being sent that in some cases domestic violence is acceptable and forgivable.

On series author Cassandra Clare's Tumblr fans of the books expressed concern that Maia and Jordan rekindling their relationships despite their violent history might send a bad message (Clare, 2014b). Clare responds by saying that "portrayal is not endorsement" and "I might think that the message of Maia and Jordan's relationship was "girls will forgive their abusers" if Maia actually did forgive Jordan and accept him back into her life, but she doesn't. She tries temporarily — she really does believe that Jordan was behaving out of character due to the werewolf transformation he was undergoing, and indeed that magical aspect of things absolutely muddies the water. Even though she may be right to some degree that the fault on Jordan's side is complicated, she realizes she can't forgive him, realizes she doesn't want to be with someone who did what he did to her, and decides to dump him" (Clare, 2014b, para. 1).

Generally speaking yes, portrayal is not endorsement, provided that there isn't endorsement within the portrayal. Jordan is accepted amongst Maia's friends. In the fifth book they're dating and sleeping together. When Jordan dies, he spends his final moments being held by Maia. He's a romanticized and sympathetic character remembered fondly after his death. That's a form of endorsement.

Unfortunately, the *Throne of Glass* series published five years after *The Mortal Instruments* has similar troubling portrayals of relationships. In Sarah J. Maas' world, toxic masculine behavior is not only condoned but rewarded. This can be seen most prominently through Celaena Sardothien relationship with Rowan Whitethorn. The pair meet in the third book when Celaena is in a deep depression due to the brutal murder of her best friend. Celaena is ordered to train with Rowan, and Rowan walks her back to the room where she'll be staying afterward. Neither Celaena nor Rowan is happy about this arrangement. Rowan thinks that Celaena is a spoiled child and Celaena believes him to be an arrogant brute. When Rowan expresses his displeasure for the task of training together, Celaena angrily insults him. Rowan is infuriated and chooses to respond with violence.

"Faster than she could sense, faster than anything had a right to be, he punched her.

She shifted enough to keep her nose from shattering but took the blow on her mouth. She hit the wall, whacked her head, and tasted blood. Good" (Maas, 2014, p.109).

Rowan punched her the face, so hard that she bled and her lip was swollen. Not in a duel, not in training, not in defense, but simply because Celaena insulted him. This behavior is excused almost immediately. As Celaena is lying in bed later that night she

would think to herself that she “deserved it.” The following morning, she would also find a tin of salve outside her door from Rowan, attached to a note that said she deserved it (Maas, 2014, p.114). Upon considering the physical power of the immortal Fae and Rowan’s age and experience, Celaena observes that if Rowan really wanted to him could have shattered her jaw. So, by only leaving her slightly bloodied and bruised, the audience is supposed to believe he practiced restraint. This is only the beginning of the violent foundation of heroine Celaena’s relationship with Rowan. Rowan’s approach to “training” Celaena mostly consists of beating her senseless. This is romanticized. “Gods, he was brilliant. Cunning and wicked and brilliant. Even when he beat the hell out of her. Every. Damn. Day” (Maas, 2014, p. 669). Rowan is mostly seen through Celaena’s eyes, and in this context female gaze is not empowering for her or for the reader. Focusing on his attractive qualities while Rowan “beat the hell out of her,” takes away from the seriousness of his behavior.

Rowan’s violent behavior is excused repeatedly. The audience is told that because Celaena is capable of violence, is not a stranger to being treated violently, and has been hurt worse by others, Rowan’s violence towards her is inconsequential. The audience is told that because Rowan is a Fae male his aggression cannot be helped. “It’s in our blood,” another Fae Luca says. “It is our duty, honor, and life’s mission to make sure our families are cared for. Especially our mates” (Maas, 2014, p.228).

This portrayal of violent, overprotective Fae male behavior as well-meaning and noble echos the unfortunate reality that abuse victims are sometimes told that their abuser’s behavior is for their own good. It also echos one of the most damaging myths about dating and domestic violence: men simply cannot help themselves and therefore cannot be held responsible for the damage they do (Deffenbacher, 2014).

Although in their own way they are noticeably toned down from Stephanie Meyer’s Edward Cullen, Jace, Jordan, and Rowan in different ways embody the compensated psychopath Debra Merskin (2016) describes. “A psychopathic personality is one characterized by manipulateness, low frustration tolerance, lack of remorse or empathy, shallow emotions, egocentricity, episodic relationships, glibness, a parasitic lifestyle, persistent violation of social norms, and hyper need for stimulation” (Merskin, 2014, p.159). In Rowan, we see the constant assertion of dominance and lack of remorse. In Jace we see the constant need for stimulation and unattainability serves as draw within the text (Merskin, 2014). In Jordan we are shown a manipulative young man who gains sympathy from peers for his own predatory behavior.

They easily win over characters that dislike them or have reservations about their relationships with their partners. By the end of *The Mortal Instruments*, Jace has won over Clary’s mother and closest friend. Jordan easily gains Maia’s friends’ approval. Rowan wins over Celaena’s cousin. Within the narrative they are not just sympathetic but pitied. Jace because of his abusive childhood. Rowan because of the murder of his first wife and unborn child. Jordan due to his guilt over injuring Maia, Maia not loving him back, and his murder. Even when they cause their significant others pain, the pain of the male characters is more important (Taylor, 2012).

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie observed, “We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man.” (Adichie, 2012, p. 1). This is true of many of the relationships within *Throne of*

Glass and The Mortal Instruments. These heroines can be superior to other characters of all gender identities, but they are written to be smaller in comparison to the boys they fall in love with (Peterson, 2012). Although Clary and Celaena are the protagonists of their stories, neither of them are ever quite as strong as their love interests. In The Mortal Instruments what makes both Jace and Clary special is that the angel blood given to them in utero endowed them with abilities no others of their magical kind (called Shadowhunters) possess. For Clary, this means the ability to make runes, magical tattoos that give the shadowhunter that wears them supernatural abilities (no one has ever had this power before). For Jace this means he is stronger and faster than any other Shadowhunter alive. In theory this is Clary's story, and yet the title of best shadowhunter in the world goes to Jace. The same is true in Throne of Glass with Celaena and Rowan. Rowan is the first and only person in the series who is able to best Celaena in battle. Rowan's ability to command the air can smother Celaena's fire magic. Heroines can be strong, stronger than other girls, stronger than the villains, but not stronger than their boyfriends. That would be too much of a threat to traditional gender roles that require women to be submissive in relationships. This sends the message that even if you are the hero of your own story you have to be Lois Lane, just a little, or else that would be too threatening to any man.

In these characters readers see themselves, their friends, and who they would someday like to be (Kokesh & Sternardori, 2015). So if it's ok for Maia, Clary, Celaena, and a never-ending list of examples of characters in unhealthy relationships to stay because it's true love, then readers subconsciously might be lead to believe that in life as is the case in these books: it's not real love unless you're bleeding.

WHEN MAGICAL GIRLS ARE MAMMIFIED: Race, Colonization, and Sacrificial Characters of Color

When writers of fiction and television are praised for their diversity, what people usually mean is that they have a character of color that exists. They have done the bare minimum. But the problem is that in doing this, many well-meaning authors do characters of color and their readers a great disservice. In works of fiction all too often characters of color exist only in relation to the white protagonist. They exist to provide comic relief. They exist to convey information. They exist to die or be tortured to further a protagonist's character development and teach a lesson. However, they are not often whole characters in their own right.

In the Throne of Glass series, Nehemia Ytger is a rebel princess fiercely devoted to her people. She's kind, empathetic, cunning, and capable of being very calculating. She saves Celaena's life more than once throughout the first book. Nehemia's bravery and devotion has made her beloved by her people. And it's that devotion and her profound hope for a better world that is what costs her life.

Our heroine, Celaena Sardothien is the "chosen one." She's the lost heir of a long-conquered land and is endowed with incredible power by her bloodline. She's the only one who can save the continent from the tyrannical king. As the ghost of the departed queen tells her in the first book, "You could rattle the stars," she whispered. "You could do anything, if you only dared" (Maas, 2012, p.633).

Celaena understands that the king is evil. He is to blame for the slaughter of her family and conquering of many kingdoms. despite not being loyal to him, Celaena

doesn't want to act because she feels there's no hope. But according to Nehemia, according to Elena, according to everyone who comes into contact with our reluctant hero, Celaena could change the world for the better, she just needs a push. After Celaena refuses to help Nehemia challenge the king and help to free her country, this conversation between Princess Nehemia and the ghost of the queen takes place.

"One of them has to break," the queen said to the princess. "Only then can it begin."

"I know," the princess said softly. "But the prince isn't ready. It has to be her."

"Then do you understand what I am asking of you?"

The princess looked up... When she looked back at the ancient queen, her eyes were bright. "Yes."

"Then do what needs to be done" (Maas, 2013, p.340).

Nehemia orchestrates her own brutal murder to spur her friend into action. Nehemia Ytger's terrible storyline is a hybrid of two equally offensive tropes: 1) the magical negro and 2) the mammy. The mammy archetype goes back to at least the 1800s, but unfortunately unlike corsets and muskets, the trope has had much more staying power. The archetype is simple: a black woman who is resigned to a lifetime or enslavement or general servitude. These figures are often docile, obese, and sexless (Collins, 2000). Not all the cliches usually found in the mammy trope are found with Nehemia, but ultimately, she exists to serve. As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins would describe a mammy figure, "the faithful, obedient domestic servant...loving, nurturing and caring for her white children...[she] knows her 'place as an obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination." (Collins, 2000, p.71) Before we meet her, we learn that Nehemia has resigned herself to self-sacrificing subordination. She exists to bleed for everyone around her and is more than willing to do it.

The magical negro trope is a supernatural version of the mammy archetype, the trope is wrapped up in black and brown characters serving white protagonists who cannot take care of themselves (Harriot, 2016). In addition to providing comic relief and motivation should they meet an untimely death, characters who are considered "magical negroes" provide magical support for the protagonists (Harriot, 2016). As critics have pointed out, one of many implications of these kinds of tropes is that characters who exist to clean up emotional or magical messes can never truly be equals.

It's deeply troubling that one of the few prominent women of color in this series who wanted so desperately to change the world decided upon calculation and a dead queen's urging that only way to make the world better was for her to no longer be in it.

Sorcha, who wasn't important enough to be given a surname, suffers a similar fate. She is introduced in the fourth book and is one of the castle's healers. In the continent where the events of Throne of Glass are taking place it appears that Ellwye, Nehemia's country, is heavily populated with black and brown people. When Sorcha's physical description is given, other characters deduce that one of her family members must come from Ellwye. And while talking about her physical appearance the prince describes her as not beautiful, but only "pretty" in comparison to Celaena the thin, blonde haired, blue eyed epitome of white womanhood and western beauty. Ultimately, Sorcha is a consolation prize for the prince, who could not win Celaena's heart.

Sorscha feels for the prince and they enter into a secret relationship. Ultimately, she is beheaded before the Prince's eyes, and it is the pain of her death that causes him break with his father and develop his magical powers. Again: the woman of color's awful death is mere catalyst or motivation for another character's development.

Bad representation is as damaging as no representation. Regardless of author intent, creating characters like Sorcha and Nehemia who exist to be tortured and killed for white characters to learn a lesson or have an epiphany perpetuates white supremacy; it perpetuates the idea that black and brown people only exist to serve. Characters of color in this scenario exist to hold other characters' confidences, they exist to sacrifice themselves, they exist to be tortured, but they do not exist to be the heroes of their own stories. While studies have shown that reading fiction increases empathy, stories that perpetuate negative stereotypes can reinforce real life prejudices. Being included in the narrative only to have negative stereotypes about you reinforced leads to individuals internalizing those stereotypes. A story with more dead people of color than alive is a poor excuse for diversity. Real representation and diversity is when characters that are part of marginalized populations are fleshed out, three-dimensional characters, who are not simply plot devices. This is especially true for the world of fantasy, because in a world where anything is possible audiences are given the opportunity to imagine worlds where there isn't inequality.

To be a hero or heroine means that you model what heroism is for an audience. Having a character that is a woman of color choose to die for the "greater good" and because they ultimately were not the chosen one sends the message that the only acts of heroism women of color are capable of is martyrdom and that communities fictional or otherwise are better served without their existence.

TRIGGER WARNING: Use of Sexual Violence as Plot Device

A trigger warning is an advisory to individuals who have suffered traumas ranging from war to sexual violence that the content that they may see or hear may bring up painful memories and or cause physical and emotional responses (Phillips, 2016). The Mortal Instruments and Throne of Glass series probably should have come with several trigger warnings for sexual violence.

Clary Fray of The Mortal Instruments and Kaitain Rompier from Throne of Glass although worlds, years, and authors away are both victims of sexual violence. Kaitain is an antagonist whose rape is meant to purify and redeem her. She is catty, manipulative, social climbing, and obsessed with marrying a prince, so much that so she participates in a plot that nearly costs heroine Celaena her life. For her crimes Kaitain is thrown in the dungeons, raped repeatedly by her once co-conspirator the duke, and eventually blackmailed into marrying him.

To have a villainess, an antagonist, a "bad girl" like Kaitain raped and violated repeatedly has some unfortunate implications. In literature and television, sexual violence has been a tried and true way to make unlikable female characters likable (Dutta, 1999). When the audience meets Kaitain they have every reason to dislike her, to have no problem with such a vapid and conniving girl rotting away in the dungeons. The duke's sexual assault appears to be a tool to get the audience and Celaena who suffered the most because of her actions, to forgive her behavior.

When rape is meant to be a purifying and redemptive experience in storytelling these narratives communicate conflicting notions about sexual violence (Dutta, 1999). On the one hand, it's made clear that rape is a crime and being raped causes victims a great deal of trauma. On the other hand, writing rapes as the beginning of characters redemption, perpetuates some of the most persistent and damaging of myths about sexual violence in regard to women: their actions in some way bring on their attacks, only "bad girls" are raped, and men cannot help themselves.

Focusing on when rape is meant to redeem and or "tame" the victim there is a consistent formula. Introduce a young woman, show her behaving badly, in this context bad behavior is characterised as being sexually aggressive, manipulative, dishonest, and then have her to be the victim of rape or a sexual assault (Dutta, 1999). On the one hand, it's made clear that rape is a crime, being raped causes a great deal of trauma, and so long as the rapist isn't meant to be redeemed things usually don't end well for them (Dutta, 1999). And yet the message is clear: if the victim had behaved better this wouldn't have happened (Dutta 1999).

Sometimes writers write sexual assault into their stories to shock people. Sometimes it's a lazy way to make a point or convey information, as with the sexual assault of Clary Fray by her brother Sebastian.

"Open to me, my sister, my love." His blood dripped onto her face. She held herself still, her body humming with the effort, as his hand slipped from her throat, along her side, to her waist. His fingers slid inside the waistband of her jeans. His skin was hot, burning; she could feel that he wanted her.... She silently thanked the battle euphoria for doing what it had to do and keeping her focused while Sebastian sickened her with his touch" (Clare, 2012a, p.716).

When writers want to remind characters and audiences of a male hero's vulnerability they kill someone he loves; when writers want to remind a heroine, they have her raped or threaten her with rape (Brown, 2014). Clary is defined by her good intentioned reckless behavior, and has been reprimanded more than once for her impulsivity. The kinds of gendered attacks that Kaitain and Clary are subjected to typically happen after the girls have challenged societal norms or authority in some way. And it goes without saying that their male counterparts (Harry Potter, Percy Jackson) rarely experience similar treatment. Upon frequent questioning from readers in online forums, author Cassandra Clare defends the decision to have Sebastian attempt to rape his sister Clary by stating via her Tumblr account that the audience needed to know that Sebastian was irredeemable (Clare, 2012b). However, Sebastian's past behavior communicates that information just fine.

Cassandra Clare also justified her choice by arguing that books must reflect reality and, "To say rape shouldn't be written about, that sexual assault shouldn't be written about, it is to say that people who are survivors of sexual assault and rape shouldn't see representations of people like them in books. It is also to say that books should represent a world in which those things don't happen. This is extremely dangerous thinking" (Clare, 2012b, para. 1). Clare is correct that rape narratives are not inherently problematic. A distinguishing characteristic of the YA genre is hope. Narratives about individuals who are survivors of sexual violence do have the potential to provide hope for readers that they can recover too. (Deffenbacher, 2014) There is a place in literature for stories about individuals who have experienced sexual violence and managed to heal. There is even a void of such stories (Phillips, 2016). However, where Clare fell short in storytelling is that in its aftermath, Clary Fray's sexual assault

was not the story of a young woman's recovery, but evidence of a young man's depravity.

Mediated messages are constitutive of and constituted by our larger culture. This is crucial, as generations of activists have learned the experiences that real life victims will have in their personal lives and in the justice system depends upon society as a whole understanding the seriousness of rape and sexual assault and who is at fault (Cuklanz, 2000). In a fantasy context, there is the opportunity to imagine a better world, a safer world for women and girls. As Kristina Deffenbacher observed, done properly a story about a heroine who has been raped in a fantasy setting could portray a world where women defeat rape culture (Deffenbacher, 2014). Unfortunately, *The Mortal Instruments* fails to do that. Clary Fray could have been a positive representation of sexual assault survivors. Clary is sixteen. RAINN, the Rape and Incest National Network, estimates that 54 % of victims of sexual violence are under the age of eighteen, as are most of this genre's audience. She also doesn't tell anyone about her attack as many victims don't (RAINN, 2016).

Many writers are under the impression that for a heroine to become a heroine she must at some point in her journey be raped or sexually assaulted (Phillips, 2016). One of troubling things about this trend is that for these characters, being raped or sexually assaulted isn't something that was done to them, but something that defines them. More than that: transforms them into superheroines (Deffenbacher, 2014). Before *City of Lost Souls*, Clary was still fumbling through her training, by the final book she is a competent fighter. This attack can be considered the final nail in the coffin for Clary Fray an innocent aspiring artist from Brooklyn and the birth of Clary Fairchild a Shadowhunter, a warrior.

To give writers an idea of how to respectfully and realistically write about sexual violence RAINN suggests that writers focus on the the impacted character's journey to recovery to show audiences what happens in real life (Phillips, 2016). Clare fails to do this. The way Sebastian's assault of Clary impacts her is largely absent from the narrative. In *Throne of Glass* and *The Mortal Instruments*, masculinity is portrayed as the solution to sexual violence as opposed to the cause. With the Duke and Sebastian, the audience is presented with psychotic, marginal, outlier demonic portrayals of rapists. In *Throne of Glass*, it is revealed that the Duke is being possessed by a demon from another dimension. In *The Mortal Instruments*, Sebastian's inhumanity is often attributed to the demon blood in his system. Sebastian and Duke Perrington are not meant to be considered "real men." They are portrayed to be violent not because of misogyny, but because of supernatural forces; they cannot help themselves. The danger here is that such narratives reaffirm the myth that rapists are outside of the general population and that no one anyone might ever believe to be "normal" or "respectable" could ever commit such crimes. Statistically this is untrue. Reinforcing the myth that rapists exist only in dark alleys and not on swimming teams, makes it more difficult for people to see "respectable" individuals as guilty of these sort of crimes (Cuklanz, 2000).

Done improperly, as I feel it was in these stories, the use of sexual violence in storytelling can take even more of the characters' agency away from them. Because their attacks are used to make a point, to convey information, or to facilitate a reaction from other characters. The victims, the ones who will suffer the most are quickly put

on the back burners in these narratives. Characters like Clary and Kaltain are often robbed of their right to say no by their attackers and then robbed of their reactions by the authors. Stories about survivors of sexual violence are important as they reflect and form our societal understanding of rape culture. Which is why writers should craft them with great care.

When written properly, researchers have found that narratives surrounding victims of sexual violence can have a positive impact (Hust et al., 2015). A study found that viewing television shows with storylines about sexual violence can lead to a better understanding of consent, lessen victim-blaming, and increase bystander intervention. Unfortunately when poorly written and portrayed they can reaffirm destructive myths about sexual violence. (Hust et al., 2015). However, rape narratives are not the only way women can have their agency taken from them in stories like these.

INCUBATORS WITH LEGS: Mystical Pregnancies and Disposable Mothers

As a general rule, pregnant protagonists are few and far between in fantasy stories; babies usually come after evil's been vanquished. So as a reader it is safe to assume if there's a pregnancy before the epilogue it's probably not going to go well for the pregnant person. In fantasy, pregnancy is another way that many a female character have their bodies violated to move the story along. In a similar fashion, the way that pregnancy is treated excludes the experience of those most impacted by a pregnancy and pregnancy becomes a plot device that's about everyone except the mother.

An example of this in *The Mortal Instruments* is Jace Herondale's mother Celine. The audience knows very little about her except these four things: she was twenty when she died, she loved her husband who did not love her back, her family was abusive, and she always looked vulnerable. Celine is, in short, a walking incubator; she's a way to explain Jace's existence and importantly why he and Clary are not related after all and it's okay for them to date.

When asked by readers why Jace is utterly uninterested in learning about his birthmother's family, Cassandra Clare said that it's because Jace already has a family that he loves. And yet, Jace tried to understand himself better by learning about her birth father's side of the family. The same is never true for Celine. She is absent from the narrative surrounding her pregnancy and the death that it ended with. Oddly enough, even though Celine was the pregnant person and she is biologically Jace's parent too she is not truly Jace's mother, she is just an incubator whose life and experiences were ultimately irrelevant beyond her ability to carry a child.

The abuse and subsequent disposal of pregnant bodies doesn't end with Celine within the series. Warlocks are immortal beings with the ability to wield magic. They have demon fathers and human mothers, but the warlock race stems from rape. Demons seduce these women by pretending to be their significant others. When the readers are introduced to Magnus Bane, a powerful warlock, in the first book one of the first things learned about Magnus is that his mother committed suicide.

"You want to know what it's like when your parents are good churchgoing folk and you happen to be born with the devil's mark?" He pointed at his eyes, fingers splayed.

"When your father flinches at the sight of you and your mother hangs herself in the barn, driven mad by what she's done?" (Clare, 2007, p.368).

Although the emotions that surely go along with being the product of rape are valid and worth exploring we never truly understand what these women went through.

When the mothers are horrified, it's always because their children are not human and not because of the revelation they have been raped. Never once is it mentioned how deeply violating it must have been to realize their spouse or significant other is not their child's father, except that it is awful to realize the father is a demon. Worse, to learn about their own rape in the form of their child. They simply provide backstories to other characters. As is the case often for female characters who are victims of violating crimes, their pain is never truly allowed to be their own.

Throne of Glass handles pregnancy in a similarly dehumanizing way. It's heavily implied that the witches of Throne of Glass come from non-consensual circumstances. "The Valg kidnapped and stole whatever Fae they could, and because your eyes are getting that glazed look, I'm just going to jump to the end and say the offspring became us. Witches" (Maas, 2015, p.360). To strengthen the king's army the duke wants to use a group of witches to bear half-demon, half-witch children. For the women selected the process is rather brutal. The pregnancy cycle is accelerated and women are required to give birth to one "child" after another with no real time for recovery. For the women involved the process is traumatic.

"They are not witchlings. They are not babies," Elide spat, covering her face with her hands as if to rip out her eyes. "They are creatures. They are demons. Their skin is like black diamond, and they—they have these snouts, with teeth. Fangs. Already, they have fangs. And not like yours" (Maas, 2015, p.687).

The readers never learn the names of the women forced to bear the demons' offspring, or see what the experience was like from their perspectives, or hear from them again because at the end of the story they along with their demonic progenies are incinerated. The witches who were forced to bear the demon spawns, were not characters but plot devices. What was done to them, was done to make a point. It was done to reinforce the ruthlessness of the Duke and the King. It was done to create conflict among the witches. However again, as is a trend with this sort of plot device, the characters hurt the most and impacted the most by having their reproductive abilities used and abused are excluded from the narrative.

Unless things seriously go wrong medically, pregnancy doesn't leave a person ruined. In these YA fantasy stories it does. That was the story of Magnus' mother and the witches. They couldn't bear to live after their traumatic experiences with pregnancy and didn't even have the option of healing. More often than not when a character becomes pregnant her agency goes out the window as often does her usefulness after giving birth. These women are so dehumanized they're not given names or space to have reactions to the often deeply traumatic experiences inflicted upon them. They're not only subjected to horrifying births or conception circumstances, but they're reduced to their functioning uteruses until they can carry the story no further. And all without ever having their stories told.

CONCLUSIONS

Throne of Glass, The Mortal Instruments, and the countless other YA fantasy stories that follow their generic form pass off disempowering narratives as feminist epics. Many of the narratives conflict, (re)producing a contradictory double bind of ideal womanhood. Heroines embody western beauty ideals, but see themselves as ordinary until they become extraordinary under the gaze of their soulmate. A heroine is physically and emotionally strong, but embodies patriarchal, militaristic concepts of

strength, just not as much strength as their boyfriend has. Lead characters are destined to be together, and love is used as justification for heroines being subjected to physical and emotional violence at the hands of their older, more experienced partners. This all-consuming violent love is presented as pleasurable for protagonists, but the audience also consumes violence as pleasure. Heroines distrust and trivialize other women, while their boyfriends reassure them that they're "different" from any other woman or girl they've ever known. Heroines are often white saviors, and servile women of color are commonly killed as a plot device in the protagonist's character development. Magical races, often coded as people of color, are often depicted as savage, uncivilized, and violent in nature, peoples for the heroine to conquer. Heroines are frequently disciplined or developed through sexual violence; sexual assault isn't something that happens to heroines, but something that defines them and transforms them into superheroines.

In sum, YA authors often wind up using the supernatural rules to reinforce real world inequalities. We argue that authors should give their audiences credit and trust them to deal with difficult emotions as it's likely they've had to deal with them in their own lives already. At the same time, I believe that authors should always consider the vulnerability and likely lack of media literacy of their audience. These stories are fictional, but their impact on the people who read them is profound.

Masculinities and femininities are lived and performed in daily life, but constructed in the imagination. As hooks (1986) argues, sometimes representations of black womanhood is so awful it's almost better to be excluded. In essence: omission might be preferable to annihilation (Tuchmann, 1978).

REFERENCES

- Adichie, C. N. (2012). *We should all be feminists*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bushman, J. H. & McNerny, S. (2004). "Moral choices: Building a bridge between YA literature and life." *ALAN Review*, 32, Retrieved from: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v32n1/mcnerny.html>
- Buttsworth, S. (2002). "Bite me": Buffy and the penetration of the gendered warrior-hero." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 16, 185-199.
- Bowker (2014). Print ISBN counts, USA pubdate 2002-2013. Retrieved from <http://www.bowker.com/news/2014/Traditional-Print-Book-Production-Dipped-Slightly-in-2013.html>
- Brown, J. A. (2016). "Torture, rape, action heroines and *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*." In N. Jones, M. Bajac-Carter, & B. Batchelor (Eds.), *Heroines of Film and Television*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- CCBC (2017). "Publishing statistics on children's books about people of color and first/native nations and by people of color and first/native nations authors and illustrators." Retrieved from <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pestats.asp>
- Clare, C. (2007). *City of bones*. London: Walker.
- Clare, C. (2008). *City of ashes*. Wurzburg: Arena.
- Clare, C. (2009). *City of glass*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.
- Clare, C. (2011). *City of fallen angels*. London: Walker.
- Clare, C. (2012). *City of lost souls*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.
- Clare, C. (2012, May 21). *Rage myths, rape culture, and the damage done.*" Retrieved from <http://cassandraclare.tumblr.com/post/23500077162/rape-myths-rape-culture-and-the-damage-done>
- Clare, C. (2014). *City of heavenly fire*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.
- Clare, C. (2014, November 23). "Maia and Jordan." Retrieved from <http://cassandraclare.tumblr.com/post/103390611664/maia-and-jordan>
- Collins, P. C. (2000). "Mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images." In *Black Feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. (67-96). New York: Routledge.

Cuklanz, L. M. (2000). *Rape on prime time: Television, masculinity, and sexual violence*. State College, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Deffenbacher, K. (2014). "Rape myths' Twilight and women's paranormal revenge in romantic and fantasy fiction." *Journal of Popular Culture*, 47, 923-936.

Dutta, M. B. (1999). "Taming the victim: Rape in soap opera." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27, 34-39.

Gerber, G. & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26, 172-199.

Hooks, B. (1986). "Sisterhood: Political solidarity between women." *Feminist Review*, 23, 125-138.

Harriet, M. (2016, August 30). "The school for magical negroes." *The Root*. Retrieved from <http://www.theroot.com/the-school-for-magical-negroes-1790856573>

Horning, K. T. (2013, July 11). "I see white people." *CCBlogC*. Retrieved from <https://ccblogc.blogspot.com/2013/07/i-see-white-people.html>

Hust, S. J. T., Marett, E. G., Ming, L., Ren, C., & Ran, W. (2015). "Law & Order, CSI, and NCIS: The association between exposure to crime drama franchises, rape myth acceptance, and sexual consent negotiation among college students." *Journal of Health Communication*, 20, 1369-1381.

Kokesh, J. & Sternadori, M. (2015). "The good, the bad, and the ugly: A qualitative study of how young adult fiction effects identity construction." *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 23, 139-158.

Maas, S., J. (2012). *Throne of glass*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Maas, S. J. (2013). *Crown of midnight*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Maas, S. J. (2014). *Heir of fire*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Maas, S. J. (2015). *Queen of shadows*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Maas, S. J. (2016). *Empire of Storms*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Melchiori, K. J. & Mallett, R. K. (2012). "You are what you read: Twilight readers have more submissive self-concepts," 24th Annual Meeting of the Association for Psychological Science, Chicago, IL.

Merskin, D. (2014). *Sexing the media*. New York: Peter Lang, Inc.

National Endowment for the Arts (2009). Reading on the rise: A new chapter in American literacy. Retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/ReadingonRise.pdf>

Phillips, N. D. (2016). Beyond blurred lines: Rape culture in popular media. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Tuchman, G. (1978). Introduction: the symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In G. Tuchman, A.K. Daniels & J. Benet (Eds.), *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. (3-38). New York: Oxford University Press.

RAINN (2016). "Victims of sexual violence: Statistics." Retrieved from <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>

Taylor, J. (2012). Romance and the female gaze obscuring gendered violence in *The Twilight Saga*." *Feminist Media Studies*, 14, 388-402.

Withers, H. & Ross, L. (2011, February 8). Young people are reading more than you. *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. Retrieved from <https://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/young-people-are-reading-more-than-you>