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The Reality of Escape in Fantasy

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THE REALITY OF ESCAPE IN FANTASY

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the instances of escape experienced by the characters in popular fantasy novels such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* and looks at how this escape teaches its audiences lessons about the real world and philosophical truths. It answers the question of whether or not fantasy is escape and why, accepting fantasy as escapist, this genre—and escape itself—is valuable to its audiences. The method for completing this project was a close analysis of the primary texts *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* along with the research and writing done by Tolkien himself and other scholars. The first main discovery is that fantasy *is* "escape of the prisoner", as reflected by the instances of characters escaping in the novels. The second is that escape fantasy is closely rooted to the real world and philosophical truths, and escaping into these stories offers the same benefits to readers as escaping danger does to the characters. All of this leads to the conclusion that, in a world where secondary worlds are rapidly growing, escaping into thoughtfully constructed fantasy is invaluable for hope and humanity.

Key Words: Fantasy, Escape, *The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter,* English

Introduction

In 2007, the seventh installment of the *Harry Potter* series sold 6.9 million copies within the first 24 hours (Rich). *The Chronicles of Narnia,* published by C.S. Lewis in 1955, still sit on the shelves of many a library. Meanwhile, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy has been included on *The New York Times* bestseller list for at least 100 weeks (Armitstead). Additionally, preceding all the aforementioned titles, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has been consistently rated by the British public, "as the most popular work of English Fiction, beating Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* into second place" (James 62). What do all of these wildly popular titles have in common? While there are a number of similar elements at work here— relatable themes, charming settings, and daring and desirable characters, to name a few—one of the elements that stands above the rest is that they are escapist fantasy. Each of these stories allows the reader to essentially escape into an invented world that is not their own. What are the merits of such literature, if any? What is it that has caused this literature to soar in popularity in the last half of the century? Why is it that this genre of fantasy has captivated worldwide audiences over and over again? While there might be a range of answers to these questions, it is safe to say that there must be some merit in the idea of "escape" in literature, if such literature is the recipient of such worldwide admiration. This paper will seek to examine this merit in the context of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* through their connection to the escape of the prisoner, their reflection of the human condition and their movement towards truth and reality.

A good place to begin to delve further into the idea of an "escapist" novel, and the merits of such work, is with the very novels that are arguably responsible for what we know as fantasy today—*The Lord of the Rings.* Not only has J.R.R Tolkien written extensively on his own personal ideas about escape in fiction, his books also serve as a springboard for most fantasy that

has followed since. Describing Tolkien's work as the place where, "Much of the modern fantasy genre emerged" (62), Edward James, co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature,* and others, have supported the claim that Tolkien has revolutionized escape in fantasy. Filled with elves, magic, talking trees, and strange creatures called Hobbits, *The Lord of the Rings* undeniably creates a secondary world—a world that could be considered an escape from reality.

However, it is entirely possible that these novels, and others of their kind, help prove that escape in fantasy is not a negative thing. Rather, these stories can be read as an escape towards, and into, reality. Additionally, instead of viewing these imagined elements being as purely escape, they can also be read as lessons. They can be interpreted as a way to represent and overcome our own personal fears, shortcomings, and, at times, need for escape. By closely examining *The Lord of the Rings* as escapist fantasy, I propose that escapism is not a negative term, but rather a term necessary for humanity and sanity. Our intrinsic need for escape also factors directly into fantasy's popularity, and it is, in part, because of perceived elements of escape that books like *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* remain so popular. Within the elements of escapism lie elements of reality, self-improvement, and deep seeded truths. Elements of escape help magnify the binaries of good and evil faced by humanity every day, offering an imagined place where one escapes from evil into good. These elements can all be seen in *The Lord of the Rings,* but not simply because of its genre. The benefits of escape for humanity and reality are directly mirrored by the instances of escape in the actual text. By comparing escape in reality to escape in the books, this idea will become clear.

Background Information

However, in order to truly understand how escape in fantasy is necessary and important, it is first useful to understand why it is traditionally considered a discrediting and negative aspect of literature. One of the first individuals to express this position with regards to *The Lord of the Rings* was Edmund Wilson. In his scalding critique of the series, he takes issue with a number of elements in Tolkien's work. However, he ultimately dismisses the novels as books for children and establishes them as books designed simply to escape. Wilson also calls on Louis J. Hall for reinforcement. Hall asked, "What… does this invented world have to do with our own?" (qtd. in Wright).Wilson goes on to express that the novels' wild appeal comes from the fact that, "certain people have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash" (qtd. in Wright).

This negative connotation has resonated with many scholars and critics, giving fantasy in general a bad reputation among literary critics and academics. Larz Konzack gives a very good history of the term in *The Routledge Guide to Imaginary Worlds* where he reports that "The first use of the term "escapist," to describe a person who seeks diverson from reality, has been ascribed to John Crowe Ransom… Ransom portrays escapism as a combination of illusionism, anesthetic, and pathological infantilism" (246). This description follows with Wilson's idea that escape in fantasy is childish and immature. Rabkin reiterates this, writing that, "Escape literature, according to the conventional wisdom, "aims at no higher purpose than amusement"'" (44). While this renders fantasy and escape as utterly useless, the discomfort scholars have with it seems to stretch deeper than that. Derek Lee outlines a number of critics' further complaints. He reports that, "the most damning indictment leveled against the genre [fantasy] remains its apolitical aesthetics. As articulated by Frederic Jameson, fantasy is an escapist discourse that ignores material reality in favor of pseudo- Christian and medieval nostalgia" (552). Lee goes on to list

other ways in which the genre is discredited, including that fantasy is a way to escape to a world that is not real, while remaining inaccurate to history and politically useless, and concludes his critique by writing, "… Marxists have waged a scorched-earth campaign against fantasy in which the fanciful conceits of the genre never reconcile with the politics of the world they wish to transform" (553). All of these quotes flesh out Rabkin's previous assertion that escape in fantasy is purely for amusement. It is a cowardly escape from reality—a recoiling from societal problems. To many critics, escape is simply the Flight of the Deserter.

Fortunately, there are a number of critics who are beginning to attempt a defense of the genre. Tolkien himself begins to tackle this problem from a spiritual viewpoint in his essay "On Fairy Stories." One of the important distinctions he makes is between the escape of the prisoner versus the flight of the deserter. About this he writes:

> Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get
>
> out and go home?... The world outside has not become less real because
>
> the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have
>
> chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always
>
> by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter.
>
> (Tolkien 11)

Tolkien goes on to discuss how the term "desertion" has negative connotations, including, "disgust, anger, condemnation, and revolt" (Tolkien 11). Martha Sammons further supports this point in her book, *War on Fantasy Worlds: C. S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien on Art and Imagination,* stating, "… the Flight of the Deserter is a refusal to recognize sorrow and death and to escape duties and responsibilities" (170). Clearly, desertion should be viewed negatively. This connotation has been applied to escape in general as indicated by Tolkien's essay.

Rabkin also defends the fantasy genre with respect to the reader's escape into the secondary world. In his book *The Fantastic in Literature* he writes of escape as a necessary element of humanity. He views fantasy literature as a "much-needed psychological escape" (42). One of his chief examples is escape from boredom, and he holds that escape in fiction is a "fantastic reversal" of reality (45). Northrup expands on this idea, writing that, "we can remove ourselves from the pain, suffering, sorrow, and injustice of the ordinary or Primary world. We need this kind of escape in order that we can regroup… and again face the miseries and pains of our ordinary lives" (829). Both of these opinions support, in part, Tolkien's idea that the Escape of the Prisoner is not dishonorable; rather, it is something to be celebrated and encouraged—it is necessary to go on. Realistically, there is merit in such a stance. The everyday troubles of life are often worth escaping. Disappearing into a world that is 'other' or different from our own is an easy and simple way to do so, and this is beneficial to people. Prisoners are wise to escape—staying would be foolish. People are right to seek a release from troublesome life events. This does not exactly disprove critics, though. It is, rather, a different opinion.

Further complicating the argument is a man named Raboteau, who's article "Re-enchanting the world: Education, Wisdom, and Imagination" focuses on the importance of the imaginary in our lives, something Tolkien also wrote about extensively. He holds that throughout our lives we become disenchanted with the real world. We no longer readily appreciate the awesome beauty and feel the real fear of everyday life. Fantasy literature and escape help us to occasionally regain these important elements of living, and as such are worthy of being taught in schools (np).

I believe that this vantage point begins to touch on an even deeper defense of escapism, because there is an even more complex way to look at escape in fiction. It is not a complete

escape from our own world into another. Rather, an argument can, and will, be made that it is also an extension of our own world. As Martha Sammons writes, in *War on Fantasy Worlds,* "… writing fantasy is a rational activity: the clearer the reason, the better the fantasy produced. Fairy stories depend on the real world's sharp outlines rather than blurring them" (119). Tolkien also writes about this, claiming that fantasy must allow the imagination to create, "the inner consistency of reality" ("On Fairy" 5). He goes on to write that, "the peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" ("On Fairy" 14). The secondary world, or fantastical one, is something that closely mirrors the primary one. It is also a way of understanding and coping with the things we wish to escape from. The secondary world would not be successful or satisfying if readers could not imagine it as plausible, real, and relating to their own world.

The claim that escape is closely related to our own world hinges around two main points. The first is that reading fantasy literature is *not* a flight of the deserter but rather the escape of the prisoner. Building upon that is the principle that this escape of the prisoner is often a movement toward reality—not away from it.

All of this can be seen by simply examining what people are escaping towards when reading *any* fantasy; however, each of these ideas can be also represented by the forms of escape found within the novels. By examining the instances and ways in which the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* escape to and from things, each of these points is not only reflected by people in the world today but also in the literature they read. In order to truly understand the scope of escape in literature, this concept will then also be applied to another extremely successful and more recent example of fantasy—the *Harry Potter* series.

Escape of the Prisoner, *not* Flight of the Deserter

Perhaps the best way to begin to defend escape in fantasy is to turn towards Tolkien's ideas on the escape of the prisoner. In his essay, "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien discusses how much of the backlash against elements of escape is due to the misconception that this escape is the "flight of the deserter" not "the escape of the prisoner." He writes, "… I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which "Escape" is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all" (*On Fairy,* Tolkien 10). What is meant by these two terms "flight of the deserter" and "escape of the prisoner", and why are they important? Arguably, their meaning is inherent in the phrases used. Apart from what was mentioned before in consideration of the term, Northrup also elaborates that, in the case of the deserter, fear so overcomes them that they are, "fleeing from [their] fears, [their] friends, and the enemy [they have] come to fight. Deserting may cause the death of his friends and the victory of the enemy…" (827). This is, thus, viewed as negative and cowardly. Such a viewpoint would make escape in literature seem harmful—as something that brings pain and suffering to the individual deserting and those around them while simultaneously revealing a self-serving cowardly character. There is also an element of shame associated with desertion, which, in relation to escape and fantasy, means reading fantasy as a deserter is shameful.

However, Tolkien and others argue that escape in fiction is actually the latter—"escape of the prisoner." Such an escape is much more admirable, and even necessary. Tolkien defends this writing, "In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic" (*On Fairy,* Tolkien 11). Northrup expands writing, "the prisoner, on the other hand, desires to escape from the enemy… to go home and fight again on another day. If he cannot escape, then he does not allow the misery of his situation to overcome

him and lead him to despair…" (827). Viewing escape in fantasy as such completely redefines the connotations associated with it. Escaping from a situation that is bad in the way Northrup is describing is important for one's wellbeing, safety, and continued survival. Escape in this sense also allows the prisoner a chance to continue facing danger to fight for what is important to them, even giving escape a sort of nobility and allowing people to regain agency in a truly authentic and important way.

This idea of escape is represented continuously in *The Lord of the Rings*. Characters repeatedly escape dangerous encounters only to move on towards more danger. When Frodo and Sam escape Shelob, they move further into Mordor. When Merry and Pippin escape the Orcs, they are found by friends and taken closer to battle. One striking instance of this is when Gandalf escapes the Balrog. In book III, Gandalf the White reveals himself to Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas and details the gruesome fight (Tolkien, *Return* 102 & 110-112). First, they fall down deep into the earth, where, "'We fought far under the living earth… Ever he clutched me, and ever I hewed him" (110). After this arduous fight, at the peak of the battle, Tolkien writes, "I threw down my enemy, and he fell from the high place and broke the mountain-side where he smote it in his ruin. Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell" (111). Here we see no cowardly desertion. Here we see a brave man fighting for his life physically and mentally, even after the immediate threat is exterminated. He destroys a fiery creature formidable enough to climb out of hell and ruin a mountain-top on his fall back down.

Finally, after feeling he was, "'alone, forgotten, without escape upon the hard horn of the world'" Gandalf is saved by Gwihir the Winldord (111). He finally escapes this trial and emerges stronger. Upon his salvation, he then goes to find three crucial members of the fellowship to help

lead them further into battle against Sauron. Here we see the epitome of the escape of a noble prisoner. He does not allow himself to stay slave to despair over his situation. Rather, he listens to the, "gathered rumor of all lands" and is rescued (111). This marks one characteristic of the prisoner's escape, which is not allowing their imprisonment to lead to despair and despondency. Additionally, consider the fact that he escapes only to grow stronger and return to battle and danger, also a trait identified by Northrup, Tolkien and others.

The novels are riddled with examples like the scenario described above. The fellowship escapes the mines of Moria only to continue on their quest after losing one of the most valuable members of their group—Gandalf (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 323). Merry and Pippin escape the orcs, crawling through undeniable peril only to convince Treebeard to enter the same fight (*The Two,* Tolkien 57&76). Sam also helps Frodo escape the Orcs after he is kidnapped upon being poisoned by Shelob. After this they too continue towards more danger. All of these are examples that also support the point above—escape, as illustrated time and time again by the characters of fantasy novels--is often noble, necessary, and beneficial to more than just the character in question.

Another fantastic example of escaping an unfortunate situation occurs in Rowling's fifth book: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.* Near the end of the book, Harry and members of Dumbledore's Army go to the Ministry of Magic to supposedly find Serious Black. When they get there, they are sabotaged by Death Eaters and an epic fight ensues: ""Now!" yelled Harry. Five different voices behind him bellowed "REDUCTO!" Five curses flew in five different directions and the shelves opposite them exploded as they hit… "Run" Harry yelled" (787). The rest of the chapter details a dangerous fight, in which many of their group are injured. Ginny breaks an ankle (795), Hermione is knocked unconscious (792), Ron is almost strangled

by a brain (798), and, most tragically, Serious is killed (806). The situation is dire and perilous, and escaping is in the interest of everyone present—especially the injured, under-aged wizards.

The most climactic instance of this whole scene, though, is when Voldemort possesses Harry. There is an instance when Harry could flee like a deserter, and give up. Rowling writes, "… there was no escape….Blinded and dying, every part of him screaming for release, Harry felt the creature use him again*… Let the pain stop,* thought Harry. *Let him kill us…. End it, Dumbledore…. Death is nothing compared to this…."* (816). However, upon thinking about Sirius, and the people he cared about, Harry is able to defeat Voldemort's grasp. In essence, he escapes, but not because he is a coward. Rather, he escapes because he is strong enough to. Rowling writes, "And as Harry's heart filled with emotion, the creature's coils loosened, the pain was gone…" (*The Order,* Rowling 816). The emotion he felt was a mixture of love and sadness, but the emotion itself was enough to drive Voldemort away. While Harry does not initially realize how he escaped, it is his ability to have the strength to keep feeling emotions after all the pain he has endured that allowed him to escape. This escape results in him continuing to fight the Dark Lord for two more books, enduring even more loss and pain. It also allows the entire wizarding world to realize Voldemort is really back, as seen when one of the Minister of Magic's employee's says, "" I saw him [Voldemort], Mr. Fudge, I swear, it was You-Know-Who…"" (817). This whole instance allows the entire wizarding world the opportunity to begin to prepare to fight evil, after previously attempting to avoid acknowledging Voldemort was back.

Perhaps a less obvious example of the escape of the literary prisoner is Aragorn's attempt to escape from his identity through the first portion of the book. The true king of Minis Tirith and ruler of the country of Gondor, Aragorn, although aware of his lineage, is nowhere near claiming his throne when we meet him in the Prancing Pony tavern: "His legs were stretched out

before him, showing high boots of supple leather that fitted him well, but had seen much wear and were now caked with mud. A travel-stained cloak of heavy dark-green was drawn close about him" (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 153). This introduction is hardly fit for a king, but this is where the audience first encounters who is to become the long awaited king of Gondor. Frodo first sees him sitting mysteriously in the corner, and asks Butterbur who the stranger is. Butterbur's response is, "He's one of the wandering folks—Rangers we call them" (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 153). Rangers are a small population of nomads who wander far and wide and are regarded as fairly mysterious and elusive by the men and Hobbits of the area. They are believed to have powers such as speaking to animals, but most of Middle Earth knows little about the title aside from that.

Hardly a princely description, it is clear that Aragorn is not in any hurry to return to Gondor and claim his throne. Rather he is described by Elrond as being, "… Chief of the Dunedain in the North" (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 240). When we meet Aragorn, he does not have much intention of accepting his throne, and he has rather run as far from it as possible, choosing to roam the north east of Middle Earth. Aragorn's escape is not from imminent danger but from identity. This form of escape, though, fits all of the aforementioned traits of escape of the prisoner instead of flight of the deserter even though it may seem more like the latter at first glance.

His escape from identity follows Northrup's definition almost as well as Gandalf's aforementioned escape. "The prisoner… desires to escape from the enemy…" (Northrup 827). Aragorn is a prisoner to his identity in the fact that his lineage, through Isildur, is responsible for the survival of the ring. The enemy he is escaping is in part the danger of claiming the crown and the shame carried by his line for perpetuating this evil. During "The Council of Elrond" the

elves, hobbits, and most of the fellowship all are discussing the situation surrounding the Ring, and Elrond begins to give an account of what happened to Isildur and Aragorn's ancestors. Isildur was virtually betrayed by the ring, and perished during battle. His sword was broken and carried back to his heir Valandil, who was living in Rivendell. It was here that most of Isildur's line was raised (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 237-238). When Boromir realizes Aragorn is the true king, he automatically becomes defensive: "… the sword of Elendil would help beyond our hope—if such a thing could indeed return out of the shadows of the past.' He looked again at Aragorn, and doubt was in his eyes" (*The Fellowship* 241). This doubt is not unfounded, for Aragorn's line does disappear for a significant period of time. However, Aragorn defends his position saying, "'And this I say to you Boromir, ere I end. Lonely men are we, Rangers of the wild, hunters—but hunters ever for the servants of the Enemy; for they are found in many places, not in Mordor only'" (*The Fellowship* 242). He is not fleeing his destiny, but rather gaining skills and protecting the world in a place he could successfully do so.

"The Prisoner… desires to escape from the enemy… to go home…" (Northrup 827)—Aragorn, although living years of his life as a Ranger, slowly moves closer to Gondor as the story progresses. With every passing moment, he assumes more leadership and responsibilities such as leading the fellowship or mustering the army of the dead, whereupon he says, "the hour is come at last. Now I go to Pelargir upon Anduin, and ye shall come after me… for I am Elessasr, Isildur's heir of Gondor" (*Return* Tolkien 53). This is one example of many where Aragorn begins to change from a wandering Ranger to the king he was born to be and using his previous escape from identity to "fight again on another day" (Northrup 827).

Put more simply, Aragorn escapes from his identity as king of Gondor, only to be raised by elves, gain useful skills as a Ranger (such as fighting, tracking, and leading) all while nobly

protecting the North and waiting until he is most needed in Gondor. Then, when the time is right, he begins to return to his kingdom, using all of his skills gained while away to successfully fight against evil. It is arguable that he is successful only *because* he hides his identity for so long. Without his experiences in the north, he would not be as well equipped to ascend the throne of Gondor, or use his bloodline to help defeat Sauron as seen when he summons the host of the dead. This escape from identity also parallels a type of escape fiction offers readers. Escape of the prisoner—illuminated by Gandalf, Aragorn and Harry Potter—is what Tolkien would claim to be, "very practical, and maybe even heroic" (10).

Escape as a Movement Toward Reality

As Martha Sammons writes, "By *escape,* Tolkien does not mean "escapism" but rather escape from the ugliness of our world, from hunger, pain and death and from industrialization, machines and technology" (169). All of these things are very tangible elements of the real world and striving to escape from these things falls under the umbrella of "escape of the prisoner". As such, it is intriguing and critical to note that many of Tolkien's characters are escaping from these same things, and many of the big points of danger and conflict in the story closely relate to the condition of the world during Tolkien's time. One of the big ways in which it does this is by painting an accurate picture of war—something that greatly affected Tolkien and continues to wreak havoc in today's world. There are numerous instances in which many of the characters escape from battle.

One example of this is when the remaining company of men reaches the gates of Mordor. The stakes are high. Pippin recalls the scene: "Then even as he thought these things the first assault crashed into them… Like a storm they broke upon the line of the men of Gondor, and beat upon helm and head, and arm and shield, as smiths hewing the hot bending iron" (176).

Shortly thereafter, when the war seems lost, the Ring is destroyed, the Eagles arrive, and the entire company escapes a near certain death. First, this is a direct reflection of the normal human reaction to escape danger in order to preserve their lives, as discussed earlier.

However, it also connects to important elements of real history. Such scenes are directly related to World War I, in which Tolkien served on the front lines. Grotta writes in a biography on Tolkien's life,

> To break this military stalemate, both high commands resorted to the strategy of attrition– wearing down your enemy's resistance by killing more of his soldiers than he killed of yours…. This stalemated war of attrition periodically exploded into great battles, after which the casualty rolls exceeded the populations of many small cities. (49)

This is reflected in scenes of battle like the aforementioned one. We read of large casualties of men. We encounter seemingly insurmountable challenges. We see gruesome scenes of war like this over and over again in the text.

It also should be noted that the Hobbits were created to resemble common men Tolkien fought alongside during that time. Grotta also writes, "He [Tolkien] particularly admired the simple working-class and rustic lads…. Such men were models for the small, unimaginative but brave Hobbits who did their duty against all odds" (49-50). The direct correspondence the text has with World War I and the men who served is a close parallel to the world Tolkien lived in and the world that many people still face today.

The significance of such a parallel to World War I is articulated by Martha Sammons who writes, "To attract… readers, a fantasy work must first of all be a good story– a straightforward adventure. Action must be compelling, believable, pleasing, exciting, moving,

and relevant. However, this goal is unachievable unless the topic is worthwhile and relevant to the human condition" (118). Writing about war is relevant to the human condition—it is an element of humanity that has afflicted the world for centuries. The action in *The Lord of the Rings* is compelling and believable; it is not only directly related and imitated from real instances of war, but it closely mirrors the very natural and instinctual desire to survive. The term "human condition" in this example means the human condition to do everything possible in order to survive—including escape. Not only does this parallel tie the reader to the real world and connect them to the story in a real way, following Fliger's idea that the craft of fantasy lies in, "achieving and maintaining that delicate balance between fantasy and reality that will lead us to the underlying truth", it also connects them to the instinctual need for survival—even if that means needing to escape (7).

This representation of a very real and significant element of the actual world is grounds to claim that *The Lord of the Rings* uses elements of escape to closely mirror the real world. The scenes of war are closely related to the war faced by Tolkien, indicating that the imaginary world of Middle Earth is much more closely related to the real world than not. Just as it was necessary for the company to escape the host of Mordor, the representation of war also holds necessary lessons for readers about survival, endurance, the horrors of war, and even the necessity of escape and goodness, just the same as the characters within the story gain knowledge and wisdom from their situation.

Another example of escaping from war is when Merry and Pippin escape from the Orcs after being held as prisoners of war. Their situation is dire. Tolkien writes, "Neither Pippin nor Merry remembered much of the later part of the journey. Evil dreams and evil waking were blended into a long tunnel of misery" (*The Two,* 49). Being held because of the looming war

between the people of Middle Earth and Mordor, the Hobbits can be read to represent the prisoners of war in any situation. They are also, as previously stated, reflections of the common person and the impact that war has on the everyday foot soldier. As Grotta previously stated, Tolkien related and admired the common person who volunteered to be a soldier (49). Tolkien believed that, "the heel of the world was turned by the small hand because the greater was looking elsewhere…. Such men fought under him in his platoon; such men were models for the small, unimaginative, but brave hobbits who did their duty against impossible odds" (Grotta 50). Watching Merry and Pippin be carried off gives the reader more of a perspective on the trials suffered by the "little person" during trying times.

The capture and mistreatment of the hobbits translates well to what happens to the everyday soldier in actual battle.

> Trench warfare in World War I was a Dantesque nightmare: rotting corpses, intermittent shelling and sniper fire, constant downpours and flooded trenches, and a sea of mud reeking of death. Nighttime forays into no man's land meant daily casualty lists, surprise attacks, and dead comrades. Sleep was impossible, comfort all but forgotten; soldiers suffered from body lice, from drenched and rotted clothing, from swollen feet, from never ending colds, and from faulty equipment. (Grotta 51)

It is oftentimes the everyday people who are killed in mass numbers in battles, forced to sustain the worst injuries, and the members of the war effort that are missed the least in the big picture of war. During their imprisonment, Merry and Pippin face loss, pain, trauma, fatigue, fear and many more things, all of which are also things that people face every day in a very real setting.

As such, it is essential to the Eucatastrophy in the fantasy genre that they escape. Eucatastrophy is Tolkien's invented word for the "sudden joyous turn" that happens in fairytales (*On Fairy,* Tolkien 13). When the chance presents itself, Pippin frees Merry, and then, "They crawled. The turf was deep and yielding, and that helped them; but it seemed a long slow business. They gave the watch-fire a wide berth, and wormed their way forward, bit by bit…" (*The Two* 57-58). In this scene escape is vital to the Hobbits' survival, and such a scene is closely related to the reality of people instinctually striving for self-preservation. Escape itself is inherent to reality and existence—it is instinctual to most living things. It also gives readers experiencing these same instances of fear and loss something to use as a hopeful example, once again proving that the escape endured by the characters oftentimes translates spectacularly into escape necessary to the real world.

Similarly, there are numerous instances in the Harry Potter series where the students escape from conflict; however, there is only one large scene of war, found at the end of the seventh book—*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.*

> The air exploded… Harry felt himself flying through the air… And then the world resolved itself into pain and semidarkness: He was half buried in the wreckage of a corridor that had been subjected to a terrible attack. Cold air told him that the side of the castle had been blown away, and hot stickiness on his cheek told him that we was bleeding copiously. Then he heard a terrible cry….(*Deathly Hallows,* Rowling 636-7)

This is one of many descriptions of the battle of Hogwarts. There are many elements of these scenes of war that match with Tolkien's experiences, even though written by a different author. The battle is fought primarily by young students, kids of only seventeen, which are similar to the

"small people" that fought in trenches. There are stunning casualties, and we also see examples of someone's childhood home being destroyed. There are numerous times when characters escape the arms of death, and numerous times when they don't.

As with *The Lord of the Rings,* these similarities to real war root fantasy stories beyond Tolkien's world in reality as well. *Harry Potter* further reflects the elements of sacrifice, love, and family that many people hold dear to their everyday lives. All of these are examples in addition to war that are reflections of the real world in some of our world's favorite fantasy books.

Aside from the similarities *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* have to World War I, the next biggest instance of *The Lord of the Rings'* relation to the real world is seen through industrialization. Many scholars have read Mordor to be a representation of industrialization, another element of reality that is problematic in our world today.

Tolkien himself was greatly invested in nature, as is evident in the attention he pays to the natural world in his writing. This interest in nature in turn played a large part in the conflict and underlying themes of *The Lord of the Rings.* Liam Campbell reports in his article "Nature" that even as a young child Tolkien was tuned into nature and disturbed by the destruction of trees, a trait, "that would later find focus in literary manifestations such as the desolate landscapes of Isengard and the Shire under Sharkey" (433). Campbell goes on to report that, "we see here evidence of a boy, a man, and a writer who not only deeply loved and embraced trees and nature, but who also held extremely progressive views concerning the unwarranted destruction of natural phenomena" (433).

The origin of Tolkien's industrial influence is the industrialization of the idyllic countryside of his hometown—Sarehole. Campbell describes the town as, "picturesque, pastoral"

(432). Grotta expands on this, writing, "Sarehole had 'good waterstones and elm trees and small quiet rivers.' It was surrounded by open fields and farmlands…" (21). He goes on to say that, "Sarehole in the last decade of the nineteenth century was like an island of tradition about to be submerged in a vast sea of change" (Grotta 20). Birmingham, the neighboring city, would later absorb the little English town of Sarehole, destroying much countryside in the process.

The destruction of Sarehole can be easily translated to the destruction that Mount Doom, Sauron and Saruman slowly spread across Middle Earth. As Sauron gains power, everything that enters under his realm becomes dark and destroyed. Saruman likewise willingly destroys nature to gain more power. Campbell goes on to say that, "Saruman has been corrupted by the allure of power, and as a symbol of industrialized power, pollutes and exploits all natural life around him. Tom Shippey states that, "Saruman Shows many signs of being equitable with industrialism or technology"" (Campbell 438). There are many scenes in which this is exemplified. The destruction that Saruman wreaks upon Treebeard's forest is a prime example of this. When the hobbits first meet Treebeard, they try and convince him to help in the fight against Sauron. He is reluctant, but begins to recall the trouble caused by Saruman in his forest. He says, "Down on the borders they are felling trees—good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot—orc-mischeif that; but most are hewn down and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days" (*The Two,* Tolkien 76). The desolate state the Shire is reduced to by the end of the journey is another. The very state of Mordor is rich with examples of industrialization. Similarly to the connections the story has with World War I, the elements of industrialization closely parallel the real world. Once again, this easy relationship to the real world emphasizes that *The Lord of the Rings* are novels that relate to the human condition.

Frodo and Sam destroy the ring in the same way that Tolkien most likely hoped humanity would destroy their tendencies to damage nature. As they approach Mount Doom, the landscape is very reminiscent of an industrialized city, with Tolkien describing it as being hazy and smoky: "Far away now rising towards the South the sun, piercing the smokes and haze, burned ominous, a dull bleared disc or red; but all Mordor lay about the Mountain like a dead land, silent, shadow-folded, waiting for some dreadful stroke" (*Return* 238*).* Then, the single greatest moment of triumph over Sauron occurs when Frodo and Sam successfully destroy the ring. Upon casting the ring into Mount Doom, the reign of industrialization begins to crumble. Tolkien writes, "Fire belched from its riven summit. The skies burst into thunder seared with lighting. Down like lashing whips fell a torrent of black rain" (*Return* 241). This passage is wrought with imagery of industrialization as Tolkien might have viewed it. Fire belches from Mount Doom, just as smoke rose from Birmingham (Grotta 21). There are torrents of black rain and lightning, which is very similar to the dark grime that covers an industrialized city. This desolate and destructive imagery is closely related to images of industrialization, in addition to the characters that imitate it.

A similar example occurs when the Hobbits return to the Shire. Tolkien writes, "Many of the houses that they had known were missing. Some seemed to have been burned down. . . their little gardens that used to run down bright to the water's edge were rank with weeds. . . An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. . . they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air" (307). Just as with the fall of Mount Doom, the Hobbits save the Shire from this scene. In the end, everything is returned to normal and order is restored.

The characters in the book risk their lives to bring the reign of industrialization to its end. After destroying the Ring Frodo and Sam escape of the backs of the Eagles from Mount Doom,

but at that moment they have fully resigned themselves to dying by the time they destroy the Ring. Destroying the Ring is the only way to stop Sauron and thereby stop industrialization and ruin. It is of utmost importance. The characters escaping the doom of industrialization represents a number of elements that can be used as lessons in the real world. For starters, it represents the ability to end destruction, even if you are—as Tolkien would put it, little people. Even though the happy ending in the novel is mostly an element of a fantasy story, it holds a great lesson for humanity—stopping industrialization and the destruction of our world is something that should be done unquestioningly and wholeheartedly. Just as it is essential for the characters to escape Sauron, it is also essential for those reading the story to escape from industrialization.

Such parallels to the real world help to further prove that the elements of escape within *The Lord of the Rings* offer valuable reflections of the real world. Escape holds numerous lessons and movements towards reality, as the examples of World War I and industrialization found in Tolkien's novels help prove. Examining the instances of the characters themselves escaping industrialization or war at all costs, once again, helps to prove that the novels closely parallel the real world and ask the audience for much more growth than just escaping into a piece of fiction. It is also important to note that these are only two of many examples; there are parallels to reality in many aspects of fantasy, not just industrialization and war.

To return to the world of Harry Potter, there most certainly are arguments to be made favoring the presence of industrialization in the text. However, there are even stronger relations to other real world critiques. For example, the infiltration and corruption of the Ministry of Magic speaks to political corruption. Throughout the series, we see a string of ministers who handle their jobs poorly at best. By the seventh novel, the ministry has been completely overtaken by Voldemort's death eaters. When Harry, Ron and Hermione sneak into the ministry,

their first view of the place is shocking: "Previously a golden fountain had filled the center of the hall…. Now a gigantic statue of black stone dominated the scene. It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and a wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones, looking down…. At the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT" (*The Deathly,* Rowling 242). Underneath the witch and wizard are, "hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women and children" (*The Deathly,* Rowling 242). This is a visual representation of the strife caused by a corrupt government. The failure of the previous leaders to prepare for Voldemort's return played a large role in his ability to take over all facets of the wizarding world. As with the connections to war, the effects of political unrest in *Harry Potter* look very similar to the effects political unrest has on real people. The lower status people (such as the muggles under the wizards' feet) are harmed while the powerful reign. Harry, Ron and Hermione repeatedly escape from different harms that could come their way from the reign of Voldemort.

This same quote could also speak to the treatment of immigrants or other races. Racism has a deep root in both Europe and the Americas, and the treatment of muggles throughout the series is very similar to the discrimination minorities still face today. Another example is found the first time Hermione is called a Mudblood. Hagrid explains the term saying, "There are some wizards—like the Malfoy's family—who think they're better than everyone else because they're what people call pure-blood" (*The Chamber,* Rowling 116).

Another example connecting *Harry Potter* to the real world could be drawing comparisons between Harry Potter living with the Dursleys and the unrest present in foster care systems. Rowling is not shy about detailing the ways in which Harry is mistreated by the Dursleys. "Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept" (*The Sorcerers,* Rowling 19). Yet another could be the class divide

between the rich and the poor and the impacts that has on a society, seen when the Weasleys are regularly mocked for being poorer than most wizards. The main point I am making here is that these examples can go on and on throughout several different fantasy stories. The relations that fantasy books have with the real world are almost unlimited. The best fantasy *is* rooted securely in reality, and these real world relations often help readers do more than escape their troublesome lives—they hold deep rooted lessons about overcoming adversity and facing the real world.

Escape as a movement toward truth

A number of scholars who have reviewed *The Lord of the Rings* have found that many of its roots lie in reality, as seen in the distinct examples above. Denis Burkhard states that both Lewis and Tolkien consistently use real elements in their imaginary worlds. She also cites Peter Hunt as saying, "fantasy has an inevitable role as commentary on, or counterpart to reality and realism" (Burkhard 134). Martha Sammons also writes that, "Tolkien and Lewis use elements from the real world within their fantasy worlds in order to teach truths about our world". Sammons' and Hunt's ideas on fantasy, however, begin to touch on an even deeper meaning to the phrase 'movement towards truth' than just a reflection of palpable events in real world. The truths being taught through these stories about our world are also oftentimes abstract and philosophical. This section of the essay will move away from the literal connections these books have to the real world and focus instead on the abstract truths they assert. In his essay, "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien writes, "We need… to clear our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity…. Creative fantasy… may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like caged-birds" (9-10). Fantasy has a beautiful way of making the familiar seem unfamiliar, and as such, allowing us to rediscover truths about life we had long forgotten.

As Edward Castronova writes in his chapter, "Philosophy" of *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds,* "Thus what we view as world creation is true subcreation: It is not the imagination of entirely new things, but rather the reuse of things that have existed forever" (132). Of these "things that have existed forever" are certain age-old truths about how the real world ought to be. This entire section aims to move away from the concrete representations of the very palpable realities of our world, to the underlying truths that have plagued and inspired our world for centuries.

The abstract representations of universal truths and lessons learned by and through the trials and escape of the characters is a large part of why these novels are so wildly successful and valuable. The truths learned and lived by the characters give *us* the readers the chance to recognize and grow from the same lessons. As outlined by Verlyn Flieger, "The particular skill of the writer of fantasy, especially in devising a sub-created secondary world, lies in effecting the escape and still keeping the recognition; the craft resides in achieving and maintaining that delicate balance between fantasy and reality that will lead us to the underlying truth. Nobody does it better than Tolkien" (7). It is in this balance that the reader stands to gain valuable lessons, and this is in part due to the nature of world creation. The nature of world creation is defined by Castronova as the power of writers and world builders to, "begin by defining what the consequences of a concept will be, and then create the concept as whatever the author intends" (129). One of the central concepts that Tolkien defines the consequences of is escape; and, one of the biggest consequences of escape in the novel is the realization of essential truths.

The underlying truth that resides in these novels concerns everything from ignorance and violence to perseverance and bravery; cheerfulness and levity to seriousness and reflection; above all, it tells a story of hope—an elusive reality that many chase and few achieve. Flieger

would argue, Tolkien's writing is so appealing to audiences, "not because of its fantasy but because of its reality, because his world shows us that things are "so" in our world" (Flieger 8). This sentiment closely echo's Castronova's idea that all world creation revolves around age-old truths. Not only does such an observance negate the argument that fantasy is merely an escape into another world, it also supports the idea that escape through fantasy is more realistically a revelation of an overarching philosophical truth, as perpetuated by the lessons the characters learn through their various instances of escape. There are three main things I will examine our characters escaping from—delusion, innocence, and complacency. In these instances they are escaping towards the truth that the world is not all trustworthy and inherently good, we must all mature and accept responsibilities, and taking a stand in what you believe in is far better than doing nothing at all.

One of the first philosophical things that the characters escape *from* is delusion. In its place, they escape *towards* the truth that not all is great and trustworthy. For example, Frodo and Sam move even further away from delusion and blind trust when they become trapped in Shelob's lair. Here they experience deception in its truest form, highlighting the human tendency to deceive. It is at this moment that they come to realize Gollum has betrayed them and nearly led them straight to their death. Gollum leads Frodo and Sam into a tunnel, insisting that this is the back way into Mordor. However, they quickly lose him and become disoriented. "'He's really gone this time, I fancy,' muttered Sam. I guess this is just exactly where he meant to bring us'" (*The Two,* Tolkien 371). At this moment, they begin to be chased by an unknown foe, which turns out to be Shelob, a deadly and humongous spider. This encounter turns out to be nearly deadly for Frodo, and the quest to destroy the ring is almost left incomplete. The main issue here is that another character very intentionally betrayed them, helping the characters and audience

move away from delusion and learn the truth that not all is trustworthy and people can be deceptive.

There are many instances in the books when the characters come close to failure, but this is one of the few that is an acute result of misdirection from other characters. Gollum very intentionally leads them astray. When they reach the Gates of Mordor, Gollum insists there is only one way in saying, "' This is the only way… no paths beyond the road… no paths. We must go to the cross-roads'" (*The Two,* Tolkien 350). He insists again at the entrance to Shelob's lair, "' Is this the only way, Smeagol?" said Frodo. 'Yes, yes,' he answered. 'Yes, we must go this way now'" (*The Two* Tolkien 386).

Even though Smeagol is not a trustworthy character for most of the book, the realization of the depth of his betrayal represents a very significant kind of growth to be gained by the characters and audience. The Hobbits, mainly Frodo, trusted him out of desperation if nothing else, and it backfired. When they initially catch him following them, Sam suggests killing him. However Frodo responds, "If we kill him, we must kill him outright. But we can't do that, not as things are. Poor wretch! He has done us no harm!" (*The Two,* Tolkien 245). This optimism is not only unwarranted given Gollum's spotty past, but it is the ignorance that Gollum can be redeemed that leads them to near death in Shelob's lair. Once again, deception is a timeless experience. Think the Trojan horse, Julius Caesar or Judas. Deception and betrayal are common themes throughout history and literature, and while escaping Shelob's lair, we see the Hobbits escaping the delusional belief that all things are redeemable and good, while they also move closer to the truth of how things are in a world where dishonesty is not uncommon and human flaw is to be expected. As Tolkien voices in "On Fairy Stories" it is the strangeness of this event that allows the characters and readers to re-open their eyes and discover the truth of how the

world works. Such scenes move us away from the naiveté of ignorance and deception and towards a greater understanding of the evil in the world. This escape from ignorance about deception and loss leads the Hobbits to extreme growth. For example, when they return to the Shire and do not allow themselves to be deceived by Saruman, they are able to use this growth to restore the Shire to its former beauty.

Rowling also leads Harry to realize hard truths about deception. In the end of the seventh book, Harry comes to realize that he was always meant to die in order to save everyone else and that his close mentor, Dumbledore, head knowingly kept this from him for years. Rowling writes, "Finally the truth. Lying with his face pressed into the dusty carpet of the office where he had once thought he was learning the secrets of victory, Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive" (Rowling, *Deathly* 691). Harry must face many truths leading up to this point, but as with Frodo and Sam on the precipice of Mount Doom, this is the moment when Harry realizes the depth of the sacrifice he must make. Through the fog of terror, Rowling writes, "Dumbledore's betrayal was almost nothing. Of course there had been a bigger plan; Harry had simply been too foolish to see it, he realized that now" (*The Deathly Hallows,* Rowling 692).

I am not claiming that Harry's will to live was ignorant, delusional, or something humanity needs overcome; however, this is a similar moment when we see a beloved character realizing the truth of their circumstances and come to accept the full extent of the deception rooted in learning that truth. Just like Tolkien, Rowling has already decided the consequences her characters must face after certain decisions, and most of these consequences continue to lead to the truths we all must face. Here we see the truth that everyone must die eventually, life is too

short, and sometimes those we love can cause us the most pain. To believe otherwise is ignorant, and to live life as though these truths don't exist is delusional.

The second thing our characters escape from is innocence. While this may seem harsh and undesirable, I mean this more in the sense that they move away from childlike immaturity and learn overarching truths about responsibility and maturity. When the Hobbits leave the Shire, they move closer to a truer understanding of the world in which they live. First, it is important to understand why this can be classified as 'escape.' True, it is not necessarily an instance where the characters are fleeing from imminent danger (at least until later). However, the Hobbits are leaving to escape certain things. The primary reason behind Frodo's desire to leave is to keep the Shire safe. After Gandalf explains the situation with the Ring, Frodo contemplates what to do. Once all of his options are exhausted, he decides he will take the ring from the Shire until a better keeper can be found for it. His reasoning behind such a decision is, "'I should like to keep the Shire safe… I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable'" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship* 61). He is deliberately trying to escape the black riders to keep his town safe, holding the innocent belief that nothing bad can touch this place of refuge. He is hoping to escape the responsibility of the Ring as well, by delivering it safely to Rivendell. Frodo then makes an elaborate plan to leave without people knowing his reasons, enlisting the help of his friends and soon-to-be fellowship members.

As they escape the Shire, many of the company express excitement. Take, for example, when Sam finds out he is to be sent on the journey with Frodo: "'Me sir!" cried Sam, springing up like a dog invited for a walk. 'Me go and see Elves and all! Hooray!' he shouted, and then burst into tears" (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 63). Considering the bleakness of the journey to come, this is also a prime example of the naiveté in which the characters are living. After several

instances of escaping the Black Riders and a few adventures, the Hobbits finally leave the Shire—a moment that does not go without notice. The Hobbits pass through a gate and let it shut with a clang before Merry says, "There!... You have left the Shire and are now outside, and on the edge of the Old Forest" (*The Fellowship,* Tolkien 108). Once they enter the forest, Tolkien takes special care to explain the strangeness of this new space, describing the trees, for instance, as becoming "taller, darker, and thicker" (109). This is another moment when the fantasy writer is able to draw our attention to sentiments and truths about the world not being a pure and worry free place by using strangeness and fantasy to make learning these truths more accessible.

The escape from the Shire relates to escape as a genre in a couple of ways. First, it uses "fundamental things from the primary world… by being free with nature, the fantasy writer makes them [nature] more wondrous in their new settings" (Sammons 43). Here Sammons describes one of the ways fantasy writers draw readers in, but the same thing is also happening to the characters. They are escaping from all that is familiar; therefore, the things they experience after leaving have a new sense of wonder for them. This sense of wonder, however, will end up leading them closer to the truth of their world. Tolkien has already mapped the consequence of this action: by leaving the Shire, they are leaving this untouched place of safety and peace.

While the Shire does not remain untouched by the rest of the world, the Hobbits escape their innocent view of the world. By leaving the Shire, they leave the innocent idea that the world is a wonderful, peaceful place, and move toward growth and maturity. Throughout the rest of the book, they will come to learn of the truth of their actual world—one where Orcs are destroying countryside and Saruman and Sauron are beginning to slowly wage war on all creatures and lands outside of the Shire. The tumult, cruelty and strife are truths of existence that has permeated Middle Earth for much of its history. Realizing the truth of having to face

adversity in their lives is also a reality that almost all living creatures have been forced to accept for thousands of years—it is the "reuse of things that have existed forever" (Raboteau 132). What is perhaps even more moving is the fact that the very act of leaving this place allows the entirety of Middle Earth to be saved. If the Hobbits did not move closer to the reality of the state of Middle Earth, the world would have been lost to Sauron. Their acceptance of their responsibility is a great example of the characters escaping not only from the Shire but also escaping from innocence towards maturity.

Another example of characters escaping innocence is the loss of innocence Pippin experiences when Merry is almost killed outside the gates of Minas Tirith. As he lays in a coma at the Houses of Healing, Pippin approaches the bed: "'Poor old Merry!" cried Pippin, and he ran to the bedside… his friend looked worse and a greyness was in his face, as if a weight of years of sorrow lay on him; and suddenly a fear seized Pippin that Merry would die" (*Return* 148). Shortly after this, Merry escapes death itself. The acknowledgement of death and sorrow is something the Hobbits have to learn time and time again through the book, and this is a moment when we can see another example of the characters leaving behind their innocence and childlike views of the world.

Similarly to the Hobbits leaving the shire, this same form of escape from innocence to maturity can be seen in a more current and universally read text—*Harry Potter*. When Harry escapes the care of the Dursleys in *The Sorcerer's Stone* he could not be more than willing to leave. When he wakes up the morning after Hagrid's arrival, he is described as, "so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside of him" (Rowling, *Sorcerers* 62). Similar to Sam, Harry is more than willing to leave his original situation to embark on what seems like an innocent adventure. Like the Hobbits, Harry wonders at the things he discovers after leaving his

primary world. Upon arriving in Diagon Alley, Rowling spends a lot of time describing the things Harry is seeing, drawing strangeness to the world around him. Describing cauldrons, shops, dragon livers, broomsticks and much more, Rowling also writes, "Harry wished he had about eight more eyes" (*Sorcerers,* 71). Harry then embarks on a journey that causes many similar instances of pain and growth as seen in *The Lord of the Rings.* Similarly to the instance seen in *The Lord of the Rings,* these passages not only draw attention to the wonder caused when one steps into a Fantasy world, but they also are an instance where some of our most beloved characters are experiencing the same benefits from escaping innocence and moving towards growth and maturity. Once again, we see the age old truth that we must all leave our innocence behind for responsibility and maturity, and this is reflected in the growth gained by the escape experienced by relatable characters of our favorite stories.

In addition to the characters themselves moving closer to the overarching truth of the harshness of their world through leaving the Shire, the Dursley's house, battle or any of the other numerous examples one could find to support this point in the texts, the readers themselves also move closer to truth. At the same time as the Hobbits and Harry are learning about the pain and suffering of their world, the reader is moving closer to those same truths about their lives. Most people have experienced coming of age moments where they must leave the safety and comfort of their childhood homes, lives and innocence for adulthood and responsibility. Whether that be joining the military, going to college, moving to an apartment, starting a family, or many more, most adult people have experienced moments in their own lives where they too must leave their innocence behind and move towards the reality of the world. Every person who reads this paper can most likely think of an instance in their lives where they were forced to accept that adversity must be faced, endured, and learned from. Therefore, such scenes of escape in the text are largely

used to serve as a realistic representation of our own lives—"…his world shows us that things are "so" in our world" (Flieger 8). The lessons in and truth of escaping innocence—in or outside of the text—are valuable and necessary.

Aside from ignorance, delusion, and innocence our characters also escape from complacency toward the truth that action trumps fear. This is the last example I will give about the philosophical truths present in the text, but, as with the movement toward reality, there are numerous more. While escaping complacency, the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are forced to take action in moments when they otherwise would have cowered. Merry and Pippin will be the focus of this example. To really prove their growth towards action, it is necessary to start at the first place they falter along the journey. When they face their first altercation with the Black Riders, Tolkien sets up the scene: "Frodo thought that he heard a faint hiss as of venomous breath and felt a thin piercing chill. Then the shapes slowly advanced. Terror overcame Pippin and Merry, and they threw themselves flat on the ground" (*The Fellowship* 191). Here we see the Hobbits face true fear for the first time, and they fail to retaliate against the attack of the Riders. From here they only continue to advance towards danger, similarly to Gandalf, showing a depth of perseverance that translates easily to the perseverance needed in real life. We see them make a conscious decision to not remain complacent and inactive and to instead take action against the wrongs of their world.

The Hobbits' acceptance of the truth that courage trumps fear—action trumps complacency—carries through the rest of the story. A final instance of the ways in which they have grown from deciding to take action against wrong is seen in the courage and leadership the two Hobbits exhibit upon returning to the Shire. Here they are largely in charge of defeating Saruman one last time. It is Merry and Pippin who deal the final blows to the ruffians who've

overrun the Shire, and their bravery is recorded forever in Hobbit history books. Tolkien writes, "at the top of the Roll in all accounts stands the names of Captains Meriadoc and Peregrin" (*Return* 321). The Hobbits' acceptance of fear and rejection of complacency allows them to better the world around them throughout the novels.

These troubles and fears are, in turn, contrasted with scenes of immense joy and contentment like when Gandalf and Théodon encounter the Hobbits upon arriving at Isengard— "There they saw close beside them a great rubble-heap; and suddenly they were aware of two small figures lying on it at their ease, grey-clad, hardly to be seen among the stones. There were bottles and bowls and platters laid beside them, as if they had just eaten well, and now rested from their labour" (*The Two* 176). Here we see the Hobbits taking a moment amid strife and evil to enjoy a meal and a peaceful moment. The next scene consists of a merry chat between the Hobbits, Gimli, and Legolas. It is in these moments that we see the Hobbits learning to accept that joy and contentment can have a place amid great trouble, and that taking those moments is not weak but necessary. This is one of the moments where our characters are developing into complex beings much live ourselves. They are no longer children living naïve protected lives. They have changed into knowledgeable, experiences citizens who are able to contend with pain and fear and still find the joy essential to humanity. Accepting the truth that, while humanity can be harsh and cruel, perseverance can lead to growth and peace is invaluable.

Not only do our main characters move away from complacency, they move towards action. The ways that we see them escaping towards underlying truths is more numerous than what is listed here, and this too is something that easily translates to our own lives. To help support this claim, I ask the audience again to think of similar instances in their lives. There are times when all of us have drudged through crisis, only to escape and allow ourselves to enjoy a

moment of peace and happiness before continuing to times of trial. There are times when our escape from battles of our own have only left us in the direct line of fire to receive news of loss and sadness. There are moments when we too have had to decide to take a stand, have courage, and change our story to something better. Such stories as examined here reflects these ultimate and never-changing truths that lie in the heart of all humanity, and it is the strangeness and newness of fantasy that allows us to really learn from the escape faced by the characters. "During life the path is one of decay, loss, illness, and finally death" (Raboteau 132). However, amidst all of this decay and grief, these stories also teach us of hope, joy, love and endurance.

Conclusion

This brings me back to the question, what does all of this mean for fantasy and escape in fantasy? Perhaps the more accurate question though, is what does all of this mean for humanity? The concept of escapism doesn't just apply to *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter.* Being able to escape through and learn from the escape experienced by the characters is invaluable, as I hope this paper has adequately shown. Not only is escape of the prisoner a necessity for characters and readers, fantasy allows a window through which individuals may view historical and instinctual lessons. Fantasy and escape *is* rooted in reality and universal truths. However, the implications of escapism and subcreation permeate much further than two of the world's most beloved novels. The reality is that world building and escape is something that has begun to leak into almost all aspects of life, and the underlying truth behind this statement may have more serious ramifications than initially evident.

Castronova outlines this point perfectly, writing that, "… due to the ability of technology to fully immediate our sensations, the making of imaginary worlds has become a seriously pragmatic undertaking" (127). So much of the technology that surrounds us involves elements of

subcreation and escapism, making the topics covered above significantly relevant. The creation of imaginary worlds has grown from telling stories or writing novels to a culture that embraces immersive movies, TV series, and video games. My significant other has 164 hours logged on his two favorite video games, and his best friend has 555. *The Black Panther,* a long awaited Marvel movie is currently setting box office records along with *The Force Awakens* and *The Avengers* earning 404 million dollars in ten days (Mendelson). *Ten Days.* Once again, I am purposely using a film that will date me to the exact time that I am writing this paper, because the implications of fantasy and, through the nature of fantasy, escape will continue to grow and permeate many new aspects of the everyday life. "Imaginary worlds… represent the future of human experience" (Raboteau 127). Such an idea is, indeed, frightening in the wrong hands. However, escape and fantasy is a technique that stretches as far back as humanity itself, which is perhaps why it holds so many philosophical truths. Think once again back to myths and fairytales that shaped entire cultures—again think Grecian or even Nordic myths. A world truly founded on escape is one that can become problematic, especially if secondary world creators do not use the same care and deliberation as Tolkien or Rowling. It is important to keep in mind though that the influence of fantasy and escape has guided cultures for centuries.

When well crafted escape and fantasy can be a *very* good thing. The situations and instances of escape faced by the characters are not only oftentimes courageous and heroic, but they usually reflect necessary and ancient lessons about reality and truth in general. These same lessons transfer easily to the benefits that escape and fantasy has for the reader or participant. Escape in fantasy is not only positive for fictional characters but potentially for readers as well. In a world that is so quickly digitizing and embracing technology and imaginary worlds, it is good to have examples of escapist fantasy such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* learn

from and emulate. It is even more important though to fully understand the amount of growth and lessons that can be found within fantasy and escape. Being aware of the benefits that come with escapism, fantasy and imaginary worlds is beneficial to everyone. We all live in a world where it is very common to curl up with your favorite book or TV series, settle down with a controller and the newest edition of *Assassins Creed,* or jaunt on over to a movie theater to watch the newest installment of the Marvel universe. Escape and fantasy surround us, and the lessons held within some of the most iconic fantasy books are notable, making the genre of "escapism" far too simple to categorize a feat such as *The Lord of the Rings.* Rather, escape in fantasy can be seen as a necessary representation of how things ought to be in the world, and a way to understand the underlying problems and challenges of our real world.

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