

Critical Introduction:
The Influence of Worldbuilding and Culture on Modern Fantasy
&
Beneath The Shadowed Sky: A Novel
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Critical Introduction: The Influence of Worldbuilding and Culture on Modern Fantasy

Elements of the fantastic and supernatural have been part of literature since its beginning. Before the written word was invented, several cultures around the world spread fairy tales, myths, and legends through word of mouth, which created a rich foundation for the fantasy literature created today. The fantasy genre has influenced everything from pop culture to political movements, cementing it as one of the most impactful genres within the speculative fiction sphere. For example, *The Hunger Games* trilogy has had a tremendous impact on various political movements across the United States, from the Black Lives Matter movement to support for universal healthcare (The Artifice, 2014). However, despite its influence, fantasy has often been overlooked in academia until recent years, as it can be dismissed as geared toward younger readers or lacking critical merit.

When academics compare genres such as fantasy and science fiction to other literary styles of writing, the question of its value often arises. However, these genres work in a completely different way than the other styles of literature (Delany, “Some Presumptuous Approaches” 298), making the study of them different from the study of literary fiction. While it does have its own conventions and unique focuses like other genres, fantasy is unique in that it uses a separate setting to discuss the given world between the author and reader. Rather than focus on the fantastical setting and elements, fantasy literature uses these elements “as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present” (Delany, “Some Presumptuous Approaches” 291). This directly contrasts the way “realistic fiction,” or fiction set in the real world with plausible plots and characters, works, making fantasy difficult to examine and analyze.

Because of this nature of the genre, fantasy literature has several conventions that allow its readers to understand and dissect different real world issues without the bias of familiarity. A large part of its influence is that it “tends to ask the ‘big’ questions of life, forcing students to consider such topics as the nature of good and evil, universal morality, the afterlife, heroism and the quality of one’s character, and the importance of cultural diversity” (Fabrizi 1). While the text may not offer definitive answers to these questions, fantasy literature highlights the complexity of these issues within the human experience and allows for engaging, open discussion around them. According to folklore scholar Martha M. Johnson-Olin, once readers engage with these texts and ask themselves the thematic questions each text offers, they are able to then imagine themselves within the story’s context and contribute a unique voice to the larger discussion around the real-world issues they present (89). By removing readers from reality, fantasy authors have the unique power to open readers’ eyes to a variety of issues and encourage discussion that allows readers to grow their knowledge and perspectives.

My novel, *Beneath the Shadowed Sky*, is a story about a young woman named Lailah who has an uncontrollable gift to influence and move shadows. She has been trapped within her childhood home for most of her formative years due to the fear her power evokes in the members of her village. However, when the goddess of her realm, Coretha, offers her a chance of freedom, she takes it, plunging herself into a new environment where everything is not as it seems. The novel illustrates the fantasy genre’s conventions of a magical world building and cultural influence to highlight themes of self acceptance, access to knowledge, and healthy relationships. By building a unique world and creating complex characters within a thematic plot, I have cemented my novel within the traditions of fantasy literature while adding distinctive features that make it an isolated work as well.

The Issue of Magic Systems

Magic is a defining characteristic of fantasy, and many hardcore fantasy readers will not classify a work as fantasy without it. Anybody believes that without magic, a work cannot be fully classified as a fantasy. However, the introduction of magic to a world proves to be fickle, as the inclusion of this element of the fantastic “presupposes a world governed by a variant system of the natural law” (Carter 213). In other words, because magic does not exist in the natural world and the existence of any gods or higher powers is unproven, a fantasy author must take great care to make their world separate from reality and give their magic system limitations and flaws. Similarly, an author must also take great care to ensure that their magic system functions within the expectations of their world’s reality. As fantasy and science fiction author Lin Carter puts it, “A world that has magic in it, *magic that really works*, ought not to have gunpowder” (Carter 216). The author must create the willing suspension of belief phenomenon, where an audience temporarily accepts the unreal or impossible within a story, so their readers actually believe the fantastical elements. Without this suspension of disbelief, readers are unable to see past the falseness of the world being built, therefore making it nearly impossible for them to understand the thematic issues being addressed in the fantasy literature they are reading.

N.K. Jemisin balanced this issue exceptionally well when creating the magic system used by orogenes in *The Fifth Season* (2015), the first novel of her *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017). In the series, orogenes are a race of humans that have the ability to manipulate and redirect the kinetic energy within the earth. To address the difference between reality and fantasy, Jemisin wrote that orogenes have a sessapinae, a highly developed and enlarged organ that sits at the base

of their brains and allows them to use orogeny due to its sensory connection to the earth. In the given world between an author and reader, sessapinae do not exist; they were created by Jemisin to explain the way orogenes access the power of orogeny. However, Jemisin only brushes the surface of creating an in-depth magic system. The way she completes this process is shown in the rest of the series through the introduction of the ultimate price of orogeny. In the second and third novel, the reader is shown that advanced orogeny, when pushed too far, results in one becoming a stone eater, a fate that seems terrifying because of the characterization of these creatures in the first novel. Rather than face death, orogenes who push the boundaries of their magic become walking stone people, cursed to live forever as a shell of their former self. By including both the sessapinae and a fresh perspective on magical limitations, N.K. Jemisin establishes herself as one of the most influential fantasy authors, as she is able to create an incredible suspension of disbelief for her readers and therefore introduce them to themes of prejudice and oppression of powerful culture in history.

While writing *Beneath the Shadowed Sky*, I focused heavily on the way the magic system is portrayed to create the suspension of belief phenomenon. My goal was to create something focused on both the natural and supernatural by introducing the idea that magic is a life force, connecting every being together. It was created by the universe, existing before any physical plane, and it will continue to exist once the physical universe has been destroyed. It is the magic itself that created the gods and realms within my universe, and it is a superior source with its own will.

Setting up the magic system this way allowed me to characterize my antagonist, the goddess Coretha, in a way that does not allow her to be all-powerful. An omnipotent, unbeatable force does not make for a good villain, and it removes the willing sense of belief phenomenon

from the readers. If Coretha had the ability to snap my protagonist out of existence or destroy an entire universe in one blink of an eye, beating her would be nearly impossible. Instead, Coretha is able to access an enlarged amount of magic from the universe itself, but that magic can run out or become limited. The checks and balances system within my magic system ultimately makes Coretha a better villain, as it shows how those with nefarious intentions can attempt to circumvent the checks put in place by the universe's natural law and order.

Upholding the willing sense of belief and the idea of magical limits is also why I chose to make the magic system, rather than the gods, the supreme authority in my novel. This choice allows me to create an air of mystery and unpredictability surrounding the magic itself. Once again, this connects the novel back to the given world between me and my readers, as the natural law of nature and higher power is mysterious and unpredictable as well. It is in this way that my magic system relates to the given world and allows readers to relate to it while still adjusting to a brand-new setting, opening their minds to the new ideas and themes of self acceptance, growth, and preservation of knowledge presented in my novel.

Philosophical and Moral Approaches to Theme and Worldbuilding

Good versus evil is another conventional theme that is ingrained in several fantasy novels. Despite any larger, overarching themes that may appear in fantasy, these novels almost always return to themes of good and evil existing in the world, making them similar to early myths from traditional societies. Typically, good and evil are both represented by a higher power, or an omniscient force, but science fiction academic Kenneth L. Golden uses Jungian philosophy to show that the nature of good versus evil can be an internal battle within a character as well.

When human civilization recognized the distinction between pairs of opposites, consciousness and moral philosophy took an evolutionary step, allowing people to pair opposites such as good and evil with others like self and other (Golden 99). Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung used this idea to create a form of therapy that suggested the existence of a universal version of the personal unconscious, resulting in individuation that allows the individual to “[come to the] realization of the self or superior personality in the individual and of the wholeness of the psyche.” One of the largest steps of this individuation is coming to terms with the dark side of the self and psyche, and “according to Jung, the meeting with this dark brother is the essential first step towards psychic growth.” Once that meeting is completed, the individual can then “move on toward the stage of reunification with the self and the transcendental ego” (Golden 100).

In fantasy, both internal and external factors show this idea, as the fantastical elements within the genre allow for a greater understanding and reflection of the internal battles that each character faces. Patrick Rothfuss’s *The Name of the Wind* (2007) is a fantastic example. The novel follows Kvothe, an incredibly powerful and well-known wizard who has gone into hiding, as he tells the reader of his past. It is established that the titular Name of the Wind comes from a study of naming magic, something that was thought to be lost in this universe. However, Kvothe becomes entangled with the magic itself and discovers that he has the ability to harness it. It is this journey that influences Kvothe’s inner psyche: the quest to pursue and evolve his magic directly reflects his search for identity and self acceptance. But magic comes with a price and in order to harness it, he must accept his faults and look within.

Similarly, *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black (2018) uses its main character’s physical weaknesses to propel her personal and intellectual growth. Jude Duarte is a human girl living in

the land of Faerie, taken from her home and adopted into a family of fae at the age of seven years old. As a human, she has had to adapt to the various dangers within Faerie, each of them designed to hurt her. The first novel in the series in particular shows these various dangers, from near death by the hands of a nixie to a slew of faerie enchantments and glamours that affect Jude's mind. However, these physical weaknesses are what make Jude strong, and she learns to use them to her advantage. She has accepted her weaknesses, and in doing so, she is able to move forward in her psyche, reunifying the transcendental ego that Jung theorized, and eventually become the High Queen of Faerie by the end of the second novel.

Beneath the Shadowed Sky uses magic to emulate what both *The Name of the Wind* and *The Cruel Prince* achieve with their characters. The novel's protagonist is a girl named Lailah who has been raised within the confines of her childhood home, unable to leave regularly due to the fear her shadow magic brings to her village. At the beginning of the novel, she is desolate and ignorant, unaware of the world around her due to her isolation. Her psyche is fully unrealized, blocked by the thought that her true self is dark and evil, which is something that she has been told her entire life. This results in her inability to control the shadows, something that leads to intense guilt within her. However, once Lailah leaves her village and is around others with magical abilities, her mindset begins to shift. She begins to train the shadows and use them, and it is only when she learns to accept them as part of her and capable of both good and evil, that she displays abundant personal growth. Finally, at the end of the novel, Lailah's ignorance of the way magic works in her universe proves useful, as she is able to unlock a new way to use it that others before her could not discover. Like other fantasy novels, *Beneath the Shadowed Sky* uses both the physical manifestation of power and the internal weaknesses within a character to

reflect their growth, showing Jungian ideals of the process of individuation through external elements.

The Influence of Culture on Fantasy Worldbuilding

The political intrigue of fantasy is one of the biggest reasons for its popularity. American studies professor Philip John Davies suggests that science fiction and fantasy are genres that are “particularly suited to the analysis of conflict and war” because they highlight “how confrontation leads to conflict, and the discussion of how conflict may be resolved through mediation and accommodation, or institutionalized by bigotry and social inflexibility, or even lead to war” (2). Often, fantasy novels with political intrigue base their conflicts off of real-world dissention, allowing their readers to connect more with the subject material. This dose of reality opens the reader’s mind up to empathy and understanding, and it gives authors the ability to spread a message about society without the full familiarity of a novel set in the real world.

This can be seen in several novels, but one of the most popular in modern fantasy circles is R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* (2018). The novel focuses on Rin, a young girl who attends a military academy and pushes herself to new limits to become a warrior. However, a longstanding rivalry between Rin’s empire of Nikan and the island of the Federation of Mugen reignites, sparking a Third Poppy War and leaving Rin to make sacrifices to survive and protect her country. *The Poppy War* is a staple of modern fantasy because of its realistic portrayal of war, its nuanced characters, and its deep cultural worldbuilding. Kuang heavily based the world in her novel around Chinese history and its conflict with Japan in the Second Sino-Japanese War, using Song dynasty iconographies and histories to influence both the culture of the Nikara empire and

the events of the novel. One scene in particular, when Rin and her team enter the ravaged city of Golyn Niis, mirrors the Nanjing Massacre, or the Rape of Nanjing, the mass murder of Chinese civilians by the Imperial Japanese Army in Nanjing from 1937 to 1938. Because of these historical connections, *The Poppy War* feels like an existent world despite its fantastical elements, and that allows readers to understand the conflicts between the Chinese and Japanese in the mid-twentieth century without the struggle of implicit bias.

Kuang's own writing style and cultural influences in *The Poppy War* heavily inspired my own writing while developing *Beneath the Shadowed Sky*. Her ability to blend unique cultures together in a meaningful way, showcasing the strengths and weaknesses of those cultures, allowed me to understand the depth of what culture looks like in a fantasy setting. *Beneath the Shadowed Sky* features several diverse characters, all from different cultural backgrounds, and once I read Kuang's work, I was able to blend together culture from real life with my own ideas. This can be seen through the various references to my characters' cultures within the novel. Lailah's home village takes inspiration from communal German and Turkish customs, and Callan's clagnan is heavily influenced by the clan culture of the Scottish highlands. The legend of Hjorvak, told by Aleksei, blends the *Epic of Gilgamesh* with Scandinavian and Russian traditions while the *kafka* that Khari mentions to Lailah is based on African clothing styles. Rafael's religious devotion and personality are largely based on the community and religious tendencies of Latin American culture. Maa, a country that my characters travel to, is largely described in a way that resembles Chinese architecture, and the only Maayan character, Yuutai, describes his family as placing emphasis on honoring their ancestors. Even Ulrik, the group's scholar, has a backstory inspired by the violence enacted upon the African diaspora, and the food Ayira eats is similar to the cuisine of Middle Eastern cultures. Even the characters' names are all

drawn from the etymology of each culture's language. By using real cultures to inform my fantastical ones, I was able to honor the diversity of the real world while creating rich, complex characters with diverse backgrounds, customs, and motivations.

Despite these influences, my novel's connections to real-world issues is completely my own. In recent years, information and knowledge have become censored or banned from public libraries, and in 2024 alone, there were 821 attempts to censor library materials and services (ALA.org). This is an issue that I have been studying and advocating against for several years, and my novel's main conflict is based around the lack of information that each character has. The countries within the novel are all separated from each other with no international relations, and from years of that isolation, several pieces of history and works of literature were destroyed or lost. Later, it is revealed that this is because the goddess of their realm has destroyed the histories to gain power over them and keep them in the dark, unable to oppose her authority. *Beneath the Shadowed Sky* reflects real-world conflicts, as censorship directly impacts both intellectual growth and social progress, and this mirror to current society both in American and international relations reflects the political mystery that the fantasy genre is known for.

Conclusion

While *Beneath the Shadowed Sky* is a fantasy novel that fits within the conventions and traditions of its genre, it is also important to note that several conventions from other genres exist in the novel as well. At the Strasbourg International Colloquium on Genre in July 1979, French philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote *Ne pas meler les genre*, or "genres are not to be mixed," as the first line of an essay defending the mix of genre itself (Delany, "The Gestation of Genres" 63). Derrida believed that imposing such a law on genres was madness, as it is nearly impossible

to separate them. Similarly, science fiction author Samuel R. Delany suggests that genre cannot be distinct within oneself because they all draw influences from the same past works: “We say that ‘horror’ springs from fiction, but clearly the particular horror genre that Stephen King and Peter Straub have constituted between them owes as much to science fiction as it does to Henry or M.R. James” (66). In the same vein, the romance genre, which has quickly become one of the most widely read genres, can be attributed to the contemporary “gothic,” its predecessor, as seen in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872). Fantasy is no different; several of its influences come from a variety of predecessors, making it an amalgamation of several genres upon its very birth.

Beneath the Shadowed Sky certainly has these elements, blending conventions of romance and horror within it. A large portion of the storyline focuses on Lailah’s romantic relationship with Callan, a fellow user of magic in service to the goddess Coretha. When writing the novel, I used the conventional tropes of a slow burn, where the characters take a long time to realize their feelings for each other, and a fated romance, where the characters were destined to be together before they met. From a horror perspective, I used several methods, such as withholding information from the reader, to create a higher level of suspense. This creates a mystifying yet terrifying atmosphere within the novel, something that can come from both the genres of horror and mystery.

Fantasy literature has its own conventions, but to make a well-rounded fantasy novel, one must take from other genres and influences as well. This is how fantasy can be reinvented, shaped into something new and developed to bring a fresh perspective on repeating themes to new generations. *Beneath the Shadowed Sky* has done both of these things. My use of magical worldbuilding and cultural influences, along with my conventions from other genres, allowed me

to write a story about self acceptance and the importance of open knowledge from an alternative viewpoint. It is my hope that the novel will one day be published and shared with the public, contributing to several ongoing discussions within literature circles and inspiring new audiences to look at the light within themselves.

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