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EPIC STORIES: SEQUENCE FICTION, YOUNG READERS,
AND THE AESTHETICS OF WORLD BUILDING

JORDANA ESTELLE HALL

221 Pages

This study theorizes the world building processes that sequence fiction engages within a framework of intratextual structuralism and cognitive aesthetic stage theory. The study begins with an interdisciplinary overview of fictional and possible worlds theory before proposing a structural adaptation of this lens that explains the developmental, aesthetic benefits of the genre for young readers. Chapter II is an application of the adapted lens to a canonical epic, the *His Dark Materials* sequence by Philip Pullman. I interpret the intentional structure of the story world across novels to discuss how these engage readers at different aesthetic milestones and encourage a deeper imaginative construct as a result. Chapter III is a similar application of the proposed theory for the popular television story world: Nickelodeon's animated epic, *The Last Airbender* by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko. The examination of this story world includes a discussion of how media and different forms of literacy disrupt and encourage specific aesthetic responses to a story world. The final chapter begins with an observational discussion of my two children and their experiences engaging with fictional worlds. My analysis of their responses to a popular sequence proposes that children have an intuitive reading process that revolves around play and multimodal engagement with fiction that enhances the internalization of a story world. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how similar methods in an adult classroom can benefit adult students that struggle with reading engagement.

KEYWORDS: Children's Literature; Sequences; World Building; Aesthetics; Multimodality

EPIC STORIES: SEQUENCE FICTION, YOUNG READERS,
AND THE AESTHETICS OF WORLD BUILDING

JORDANA ESTELLE HALL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

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2019

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EPIC STORIES: SEQUENCE FICTION, YOUNG READERS,
AND THE AESTHETICS OF WORLD BUILDING

JORDANA ESTELLE HALL

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J.E.H.

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INTRODUCTION

From childhood, my interest in children's literature was linked to works such as C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Susan Cooper's *Dark is Rising*, lengthy, fictional productions that develop into complex story worlds. I was drawn to sequences instead of standalone children's books because of a deep, abiding love of fantasy, but I was also drawn to the idea that the characters would appear again and again. I recognized early on that reading sequence fiction was an investment in time that had a more enjoyable payoff. Reading sequences was a commitment—*an investment*. I found a sort of security in that these imaginary investments would continue. Unlike other genres, sequences seemed to last forever. The worlds they created were large enough for me to become utterly lost in them, and as I read the characters became so familiar and well-loved that most of my early imaginary friends were the literary creations I read about. As a mother, I have found that my children and many of their friends share this appreciation for the elaborate story worlds that sequences build. Indeed, it is the sequential, developmental nature of the genre that keeps at least one of my sons reading,¹ rather than any real love for the act of reading itself.

My son, Asa, is one of those 12-year-old boys that teachers struggle with because he finds it difficult to enjoy reading. His antipathy is quite strong, and when he was a bit younger, he cried and threw tantrums in school when told to choose a book from the library. The choice itself, he tells me, bothered him since he has no real desire to read anything. This struck me as odd because he had been an avid reader of series fiction and had read the entirety of the *Magic Tree House* series only a few years before. At some point, however, he simply lost interest.

¹ As of the completion of this project, the younger of my sons discussed in this study has chosen to read only sequence fiction for more than three years.

As a book lover and a children's literature scholar, I spend a lot of time taking my children to libraries and bookstores and discussing the books we read, so Asa and I butted heads for some time over whether he really *needed* to read or not. Three memorable sequences changed his attitude. The first was Harry Potter which he read over the course of three months. During that time, I noticed that he started to discuss the characters and setting more and more around the house and over dinner. Soon the Lego™ creations he made were all places that he envisioned from Hogwarts. His drawings were all pictures of magical creatures, and the pretend games that he dictated (and he is the mastermind of most pretend adventures at home and school within his peer group) took place in Hogwarts alongside the students and teachers from the books. I'll note here that Asa never had any desire to be Harry Potter or any other character. He did want to play with them, though, and he imagined all kinds of adventures of his own that filled in the world of adventure that Rowling authored. And though he did not cry when Sirius Black, Dumbledore, Fred Weasley, or Remus Lupin died (as some fans did) he did cry long and loud when he realized the sequence was over. It was bittersweet to watch as my son who resided on a scale of indifference to dislike with regard to reading actually cried when he realized he had no more books to read. Yet, adventures with Harry and his friends in the magical world continued to appear in the pretend play in our back yard.

Once again, I was met with resistance after he completed the sequence, though. I was forced to think around the situation some. One day when helping Asa select a book from the local public library, I asked about the Hardy Boys books since I knew he had read one or two years ago. I also suggested the Ghostville Elementary series, which is similar to the Magic Tree House books though a little more advanced with mystery elements that I knew he enjoyed while reading Harry Potter. He was uninterested and kept searching despite his frustration. By this

point I was growing frustrated as well. I knew that Asa did enjoy reading once he got invested in a book. He had read the entire Harry Potter sequence in just under three months, after all. He had also read through Tui Sutherland's *Wings of Fire* sequence and Chris Colfer's *Land of Stories* sequence equally quickly, hardly putting them down.

"Why not one of these," I asked finally, pointing to another series as he scanned the stacks.

"They're just not interesting," he responded.

It occurred to me then that I might be conflating Asa's interest in sequences with an earlier, less aesthetically aware interest in series fiction. Asa liked sequences, but he had moved past his affinity for basic, formula fiction some time ago. It was at this point that I began to consider what the biggest difference between series fiction, which is formulaic by design, and sequence fiction, which has some formulaic, intratextual features that encourage interest and immersion in a lengthier, more complex story arc, actually is. Watching the patterns of taste that have developed in my own children has encouraged me to develop a theory about this difference as they seek out more and more sequences and spin-offs (prequels, sequels, etc.) while leaving series fiction like the *Oz* books and the *Alex Rider* novels behind. Even though similar elements of familiarity across books are what initially pique a reader's interest in a series or a sequence, series fiction does not necessarily challenge readers with a developing understanding of narrative form and structure that additionally highlights changes and variances across books. The Harry Potter sequence, for instance, follows recognizable patterns, beginning in the muggle world before entering the carnivalesque wizarding world where Harry encounters some new dilemma of increasing significance to his destiny (an overarching thread that shapes the development of the sequence), and then returning to the muggle world once again. There is a clearly defined

beginning and end for each story, though a larger arc develops across all of the novels. There are shifts in the patterns that develop across the arc as well, and these subtle changes help young readers identify when something important might be happening. These two features—the self-enclosed narrative structure that constrains any developing patterns, and the nuanced shifts in the formulaic arc to develop changes in story significance across novels—provide the rich development that holds attention for more invested readers. In fact, breaks in story patterns offer an additional puzzle for readers to unravel to better understand the structure and form of a story world.

As I reflected further on these generic differences, I was transported once more to a childhood of richly imagined worlds. This notion of imaginative world-building complicates sequences as a genre. For an experienced, adult reader it is not difficult to find elaborate structural patterns in most novels, but could I really say this is the same for my ten, twelve, and thirteen-year-old sons? Asa, for example, has parsed out even the minutest details of his favorite sequences and found infinite significances in them. His lack of interest in reading in general, however, means that while he may understand and appreciate the expression and mastery of form of particular imaginary worlds like that of Harry Potter, he cannot always accomplish the same thing in application to other works of fiction, especially shorter works with fewer patterns and less emphasis upon foregrounding and backgrounding of certain elements (though he improves the more times he participates in this process). It is this that most interests me in sequences as a genre; the structural development of the narrative arc seems to encourage meeting different aesthetic milestones situated in form and nuance that help readers internalize and engage more deeply in fiction. Additionally, I found that the playful responses my children participated in when reading sequences accordingly demonstrated this developmental progression, suggesting a

pedagogical benefit for improving imaginative responses and an awareness of aesthetics.

Sequences may encourage the process of reading *and imagining*. Yet, scholarly examples of this developmental progress and imaginative play are largely un-explored because the generic specifics of sequence fiction is typically ignored. This study seeks to engage this critical oversight so we can begin exploring how and why sequences work to create readers.

Chapters

I begin the study with an overview of the interdisciplinary development of the fictional worlds theory, which is my basis for how to read and interpret epic worlds/sequences. In chapter one, I look at the ways the theory has been adapted to meet different disciplinary needs as it progressed from a theory of philosophy/logic to linguistics, semantics, and finally narrative and semiotics. From there I lay the basic groundwork for how the theory may be further adapted to address the particular generic elements of sequence fiction and literary universes that appeal to children and adolescents by helping transition young readers through various stages of aesthetic appreciation, meeting milestones, and engaging their development as *critical* readers; this means that much of chapter one provides a foundation for thinking about reading processes as well as understanding fictional worlds as an art form and aesthetic object. Additionally, the first chapter establishes a vocabulary for discussing these various elements later in the study.

Chapter two is an example of what fictional worlds theory might look like when applied to an epic literary work or sequence as well as the later additions that continue to develop or change it. This application thus moves from the analysis of fictional worlds to entire literary universes. There are a number of sequences that I might have chosen for a study such as this, but two worlds resonated most strongly for me as I developed this theory in order to address the unusual structure that a sequence may come to demonstrate. Philip Pullman's *His Dark*

Materials sequence has become something of a canonical universe for scholars of children's literature, giving it a measure of credibility while also providing an example for how a theory of fictional worlds can specify how we read an epic world. A fictional worlds interpretation of Pullman's sequence will read quite differently from the main body of scholarship on his work. In part this is a result of his additions to the world. His spin-offs highlight how the basic aesthetics of a world might change while maintaining the basic expectations of the original sequence (an important structural component of the genre's development of a fictional world); the changes result in a challenge to readers who have become invested fans in the original world. Though the criticism surrounding Pullman's most recognizable world is extensive, it is telling that very little has been written in response to his three novellas that continue to develop the universe. Moreover, the 2009 publication of the *His Dark Materials Omnibus* sheds light on the new directions that Pullman continues to take with regard to his world and suggests that an interpretation of the elements that hold the world and universe together can provide new insight into the lasting appeal of the sequence for readers and critics.

Chapter two is an example of this theoretical application to a traditional, literary sequence; chapter three breaks from the more traditional models of fictional worlds and suggests how this theory can be applied to a multimodal story world with greater emphasis on the structural parts of a semiotic representation. Part of my interest in this study is how the field of children's literature studies might continue to develop aesthetic theories alongside discussions of narrative theory. The most obvious move is to develop methods to address the many multimedia texts for children beyond traditional print narratives, and with more emphasis on the impact of the modes/parts of the storytelling medium. Kimberley Reynolds suggests in her study of innovative or progressive works for children that the groundbreaking aspects of the genre are

linked to the willingness or even the tendency to “operate two [or more] semiotic systems simultaneously” (17). She argues the need for new narrative methods to address the rapidly changing media and technology of today. Unfortunately, she treats children’s television and film as traditional narratives rather than approaching these works as a separate medium that utilizes technology to maneuver semiotic systems in ways similar to and different from other transformative texts.²

Earlier, I briefly alluded to the fact that the cinematic trend in Hollywood of adapting young adult sequences to film creates a need for further study of sequences and their appeals to mass audiences, but there is even less critical discussion of popular sequences for adolescent audiences in television. At the time of this writing, at least two extremely popular self-enclosed sequences exist: Nickelodeon’s *Avatar the Last Airbender*, an anime sequence that I discuss in chapter three of this study, and *The Clone Wars*, an animated sequence about Anakin Skywalker’s time as a Jedi knight that provides the back story for the Star Wars sequence.³ Chapter three highlights one of these narratives. As *Avatar the Last Airbender* now includes the completed spin-off series *The Legend of Korra* whereas the sequel to *The Clone Wars* is still incomplete, I have opted to focus on the anime sequence. While I do consider those aspects of narrative that make the world unique, I also highlight how the visual and audio modes

² Reynolds only briefly touches on any of the audio aspects of the sources that she analyzes. With the increasing significance that music and genres such as podcasts and audio books take up in the lives of adolescents and young adults, it is important to create methodologies for the study of story worlds that incorporate this mode in particular into storytelling.

³ Both sequences are extremely popular, but IMDB.com indicates that the success of the *Clone Wars* animated sequence outstrips the success of Lucas’s Star Wars films, *Attack of the Clones*, *The Phantom Menace*, and *Revenge of the Sith*, that complete the original arc begun in 1976. Meg Dowell, fan journalist for the popular Star Wars fan site *dorksideoftheforce.com*, argues it is the character development and sequential structure of the television arc that appeals so strongly to fans (“Why the Clone Wars Seems So Awful Compared to the TV Show”).

work together to create a more concrete thematic experience for viewers. This allows for a discussion of aesthetics along a different textual axis in order to address issues of medium. The Avatar Aang and Avatar Korra cycles also provide an opportunity to contrast sequences and series because the original sequence is a self-enclosed story world that develops a single cohesive arc, while the spin-off series only develops story arcs from season to season instead of building to develop the spin-off into a more elaborate or epic world.

Chapter four looks at two separate pedagogical implications. The first is a discussion of sequences as a genre that develops aesthetic comprehension by engaging different milestones during the process of imagining a story world from a lengthier sequence of works as compared to a series of single-story worlds. For this discussion I work with my thirteen-year-old son, Cameron, whom I would describe as an avid reader of both traditional novels and sequences, and my twelve-year-old son, Asa, whose issues with reading I describe in this introduction. Over the course of a summer both boys read Tui Sutherland's Wings of Fire sequence and a spin-off series related to that sequence. In addition, they agreed to read five separate stand-alone novels (the same number of novels in Sutherland's sequence) to compare their imaginative processes and responses with the response they had to the sequence in terms of interest, taste development, and their ability to feel present or immerse themselves in the story worlds. The first half of this chapter describes their reactions, and I draw conclusions about where their responses position them alongside a cognitive stage theory of aesthetic development introduced in chapter one of this study

The second half of the chapter discusses methods for multimodal response to story worlds similar to those responses that were intuitive to my sons as they engaged with the sequence they read. I argue that their playful, artistic responses help develop a more concrete,

imagined world that facilitates immersive and deep reading. During my work with college students, I have found that using these same activities in an educational setting can help readers who struggle with certain modes of thinking (audio, spatial, visual, etc.). Guided activities helped such students develop resources that enabled them to better realize a story world and achieve a more positive reading response. I look at ways that approaching narrative as an aesthetic construct can help readers immerse themselves within the literature and maximize their comprehension of and response to assigned readings. I also discuss the applicability of creative writing and multimodal response (those areas of play that young readers like my sons Asa and Cameron regularly employ) as methods to achieve a better understanding of the form of a story world in terms of structure, aesthetics, and ethos. I include several examples of student work to clarify how to go about responding to narrative through these methods, while highlighting specific moments when the students seem to either engage with a story world that was previously less accessible or comprehend the structural aesthetics of a work more clearly. In both instances it is my argument that readers' best comprehension of a story occurs when they engage with the story world through some form of imaginative play.

Conclusion

There is currently no critical treatment for sequences as a structurally distinct genre. Assessing *His Dark Materials* alongside other sequences like L. M. Montgomery's *Emily* trilogy will demonstrate certain similarities in terms of structure and methods of intratextual aesthetics that might otherwise be overlooked since one is contemporary fantasy and the other is a romance. This critical trend to disregard most of the structurally-based generic features of sequences has continued with only few exceptions in spite of the increasing interest in young adult sequences that Hollywood and the film industry have cultivated in recent years. Less focus

is given to sequences as a genre that maneuvers readers into a deeper acceptance and appreciation for certain foregrounded characteristics through elaborate world-building than discussions of specific works by specific authors.

One example of the issues that arise from the lack of critical methodology for sequence fiction is the reaction the Harry Potter sequence received within the study of children's literature. While the critical response to J.K. Rowling's sequence was explosive, it also reached its peak before the completion of the seven-book sequence. In particular, the last book was not yet released when an eager young scholar asked the editors of a round table during the 2009 Children's Literature Association (ChLA) conference what exactly they were looking for in terms of publication interests. The humorously unanimous response was, "Oh, anything but Harry Potter. We've had enough of that!" While I understood the sentiment, because criticism had indeed exploded to the point of overwhelming the primary children's literature journals for a time, it struck me that everyone was finished discussing the sequence before Rowling had finished writing it. Most editors felt everything of value had already been said. This implied that scholars had no theoretical frame of reference for treating a sequence generically, or as a structurally comprehensive world. Yet, the self-enclosed comprehensiveness and structure of a sequence is precisely the thing that separates sequences from series fiction and makes them epic rather than traditional formula fiction.⁴ Rowling's final installment broke several patterns that suggested some significant change in the characters and/or the world. Many long-term fans were left feeling dissatisfied for this very reason, but very few scholars addressed *why* Rowling suddenly broke away from the same intratextual structure—HOME, AWAY, HOME—of the

⁴ See Stephens's discussion of micro and macro-discourse for a better understanding of the developing, "deep" structure of sequential fiction (12-16).

previous six novels and transitioned to a quest novel. Clearly, a more fully developed theoretical method for considering sequences as a genre is needed.

I'll end this introduction with an important note on the distinction that I briefly cite above between series and sequence fiction. Series and sequences are two distinct genres often conflated with one another because they rely on intertextuality to function on a basic, aesthetic level. That is, they both call attention to a reader's familiarity with stories that have already been developed to some extent. This formulaic element that relies on reading repertoire is what most scholars recognize when they describe works as a series despite an intentional design that is more epic—a self-enclosed narrative arc that expands the narrative arc to include nuanced variation across the texts, sharing an accessible component and common context alongside an identifiable, chronology (sequential order).

The major difference is the level of advantage each genre takes when building the world further after a reader's initial immersion. Sequences challenge readers on a much deeper level because they develop all aspects of the narrative. Formula fiction, or series, build only on the most basic levels of context—the flora and fauna, or the setting of a world. This includes a reliance upon familiar places and/or characters while individual books establish new stories for rather than building a more epic arc. This tendency in series eventually relegates even important or memorable characters to a status equivalent to setting due to backgrounding. Sequences, on the other hand, are not simply intertextual, but also intratextual, meaning that development and immersion are major aesthetic factors and not just the formulaic appeals that initially inspire interest as with series. The overall purpose of the genres is subtly different. Sequence fiction is a genre that encourages appreciation for and recognition of an overarching design that only becomes apparent *upon the conclusion* of the arc. As a result, sequences build in ways that series

simply do not. Each novel in a sequence is an important *step* in the build-up of the world—reading a well-designed sequence is thus a process that includes reading past the formulaic elements.

I return once again to this notion of reading as an investment. The epic design of the narrative is a challenge that encourages the reader's progression towards more complex aesthetic milestones situated in more than recognizing familiar features. It is this distinction (the structural development of a more epic nature) that allows for young readers to immerse long enough to develop both the confidence and the capacity to read the design itself critically as a type of form. The world, rather than story in a traditional narrative sense, is the form that readers seek to master. This creates aesthetic insiders and outsiders as a result, a type of exclusive membership based on the aesthetics and structure which frequently leads to a sort of literary fandom. It is this quality more than anything, a reader response situated in unravelling the design that underpins an epic world that makes the generic distinction between series and sequence necessary. I argue that readers who transition from sequence to sequence (as my son Asa now does) are seeking out this challenge of a mastery of form and aesthetic inclusion. Their reading patterns are linked to an investment in aesthetic development more than other trends in genre.

The idea of aesthetic insiders and outsiders is important when examining critical trends in children's literature. The communal aspect of story is frequently overlooked even as groups of children share certain story worlds with avid enthusiasm, awaiting the final conclusions of an epic sequence with the same type of eagerness that had thousands of Harry Potter lovers attending midnight book release parties. Publishers, of course, have caught onto the marketing possibilities of this genre, and one result is the conflation of marketing trends with a type of

ideological indoctrination as opposed to aesthetic *communitas*.⁵ It is often safe to assume that your favorite sequence will eventually include a prequel, possibly a sequel, and maybe even a spin-off. This and the advent of fan communities for literary worlds (including television and film sequences) provide ample opportunity for young readers/viewers to interact with small and large groups who share interest and investment in particular imagined worlds. As a parent and educator, I have come to appreciate what literary expansion offers in terms of imaginative response for the cultures of childhood play. Play grounded in specific worlds that young readers spend large amounts of time investing in results in days, weeks, and months of imaginative and pretend activity, sometimes in solitary settings and sometimes in groups. This may lead to crossover play between worlds that stretches a reader's ability to redistribute and design the basic architecture that authors provide for her. The important thing to note here is that investment is not necessarily in the merchandise that often grows out of successful sequences, but in the further development of a world that the reader both embraces and understands in terms of extant rules *and* unrealized possibility. Furthermore, it is demonstrative of the type of excitement that many adults and educators argue no longer exists amongst child readers especially in light of readers like my son Asa, whose tastes are eclectic and may at first seem random.

The goal for this study is to demonstrate the reasoning behind this hypothesis in the hope that future scholarship will move towards long term studies of young readers like my son Asa, who grew up alongside sequences and developed the more in-depth aesthetic capabilities that

⁵ It is my goal here to suggest that we treat the study of development across semiotic worlds, both literary and multimodal, as a type of anthropological endeavor not unlike Arnold Van Gennep (*The Rites of Passage*) and Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process*) both of which looked for rites of passage in the stories and art of different tribal communities. In this way a young reader's embrace of a story world empowers the child in seeking out those with a shared appreciation for certain aesthetics and forms rather than situating her as a passive receptacle of ideologies foisted upon her through marketing.

create *invested* readers, and finally fans of both worlds *and* the imagining of worlds. Asa may never be an avid reader, but he will always be an avid imaginer.

CHAPTER I: AN AESTHETIC THEORY OF EPICS FOR CHILDREN:
SEQUENCE FICTION AND WORLD BUILDING

Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Twilight, the Hunger Games, and Divergent: each of these multimillion-dollar franchises indicates an upsurge in popularity of young adult book sequences made even more popular through movies and merchandise. These stories have become central to the popular culture identities and narrative constructions of youth. Though obvious marketing reasons exist in this push for the continuing rise of sequences, the excitement that young audiences demonstrate as they wait for sequels to their favorite stories in book stores and theatres suggests that young readers also seem to crave fictional worlds that offer expansion and ongoing story development as a form of imaginative play. Perhaps recent trends in Hollywood also indicate that stories that expand into epic proportions have a special appeal.

The marketing success of sequences in the entertainment industry is clear evidence of the extent of interest and pleasure readers and viewers find in these imaginary worlds. It is also possible, however, that sequences as sequences have a structural or generic component more important than the appeal of specific literary trends in fantasy, dystopia, or romance that critics and scholars have overlooked. Many Harry Potter fans, for instance, also eagerly awaited each installment of the Twilight sequence and The Hunger Games, three very different story worlds. More importantly, many of these same young readers have developed a critical sense of which world they prefer based on their reading experiences rather than the genres in which these worlds are represented. After all, sequence fiction incorporates generic trends beyond the fantastic. Chris Lynch's Vietnam sequence is a popular example of historical fiction as well. *Better Nate than Never* and its sequel are an example of a shorter though still popular realistic sequence set in contemporary New York (Federle). There are several popular dystopic sequences, such as

Divergent, Unwind, and Chaos Walking (Roth; Shusterman; and Ness). According to the theories of literary critics like Umberto Eco, Ruth Ronen, Lubomir Doležal, and Thomas Pavel, these examples demonstrate epic qualities necessary for stories that span across more than one book or text to function as fictional worlds.

We *can* argue that a reader's ability to immerse in a well-developed story world is situated in her affinity for certain genres or topical concerns. However, the capability to enjoy fiction more deeply is also likely coupled with a desire to imagine more concretely, through different modalities that control our sensory embodied and mental responses to information. In other words, reading becomes a type of practice in conceptualization. The more a reader engages in the reading process, the more effective her imaginative skills become. I would argue that there are some genres that encourage readers to develop and build imaginative worlds more thoroughly due to the structure these genres exhibit. Epic stories that unfold in sequences place an emphasis on the complexity and completeness of the fictional world foundational to the plot. Series and sequences introduce formulaic story elements that allow additional books to build upon the pre-existing fictional design of a story and its setting (and in some instances plot and character as well). These elements allow readers to immerse themselves in a new story, or a new segment within a larger story arc, more quickly and with more conceptual ease. Because of this, readers have a clearer or more concrete picture of the world of Katniss Everdeen in The Hunger Games cycle than is possible in the world of Zanna in Miéville's stand-alone novel, *Un Lun Dun*, for example. Setting, character, and plot form fictional realities that become more recognizable and credible the more the reader interacts with these elements, especially in the case of fantastic, futuristic, or temporally distant historic novels. While both series and sequence fiction include intertextual and formulaic features to spark interest in readers, sequences also include the

intratextual development of a unified story arc that links the books together in thematic ways that require interpretation, and sometimes re-interpretation, rather than just recognition from novel to novel (Nodelman and Reimer 206). As a genre, sequences prioritize a primary conflict that all works within the overarching narrative work toward resolving; this thread in the basic plot of the story links the novels in a sequence beyond the intertextual formulas that series and sequences both use to build the flora and fauna of a story world, and instead creates a signature or individual form/design.

Series and sequence fiction emphasize world building, but sequences differ from series fiction in basic structural ways. The plot arcs of sequences are more highly structured due to other generic constraints that differentiate the two types of fiction. Series fiction creates limitless worlds that constantly fill unrelated fictional gaps. Sequence fiction, by contrast, creates a world constrained by a primary arc that provides the opportunity for identification and interpretation of its patterns. Unlike series, sequences also *control* the fictional gaps through the logic that the primary arc of the story world establishes and regulates. This logical control is an element of depth that series lack; it is a degree of intratextual connectivity situated in the continuation of a plot across books, and not just through the reinvocation of setting and/or character. The intentionality that sequences encourage through this unique structure (that is both formulaic *and* not) thus provides an aesthetic opportunity for increased mastery of the world's form. Series may develop the world and increase its mimetic or concrete properties through expanded flora or fauna, but typically the narrative patterns are simplistic. This simplicity is the source of a common critical complaint from children's literature scholars like Nodelman and Reimer, and Nikolajeva (see 38-39; *Aesthetic Approaches* 56-57). Series fiction lacks the more in-depth creative elements that demonstrate an author's control of the fictional world she creates. In other

words, series fiction stalls at appeals to a lower cognitive level of aesthetic development based only on an appreciation for realistic representations (see M. Parsons 36), whereas sequences introduce narrative patterns beyond the primary arc that work to expand narrative complexity and encourage appreciation for an author's mastery of her own form. Therefore, sequences provide a narrative push for readers to gain appreciation for creative expression and critique the logic of a story world. The structure of the sequence is a type of narrative challenge for developing readers. Not all readers will rise to this occasion, but the additional complexity is an opportunity for cognitive growth. More importantly, though sequences are part and parcel of several genres for older readers, such as comics (the D.C. and Marvel universes), fantasy (The Lord of the Rings), and science fiction (Dune), for example, children's literature is, according to several empirical studies and personal memoirs, the most impactful for the individual's aesthetic development (Wilkie-Stibbs 163).

The notion of intentional aesthetic opportunity is an important one for developing readers. In a presentation at the 2014 Children's Literature Association conference, Mike Cadden argued that children's literature is a particularly invitational, immersive genre ("The Need for Distance"). So, when scholars who study the aesthetics of the genre, like Nikolajeva and Nodelman and Reimer, note that certain sub-genres in children's literature privilege the ongoing structure and relation between novels as an invitation for readers to immerse more deeply through the familiar, we should consider taking up the critical significances of the form those genres employ. In this dissertation, it is sequences and story universes that interest me. How might we treat these stories theoretically? Since we can establish that series and sequences are subtly different, should story universes qualify as a genre in and of themselves? Is it not simply how we read a story world, but also how a story encourages certain readings through

aesthetic and narrative techniques that is important, for instance? Invitation and structural immersion seem central to understanding both how and why sequences are notable exceptions to complaints about the simplicity of formula fiction. Series and sequences work through familiarity and reader repertoire. Nodelman and Reimer cite familiarity and repetitiveness of children's literature as one of its defining and more pleasurable features (126), and this is especially the case with story universes where, they explain, "even those books that are not merely additions to the series but allow different developments to a continuing plot often read like variations of one another" (207). What Nodelman and Reimer identify and discern as universes can be identified generically as sequences. Immersion, however, is not simply a question of garnering attention, but in maintaining attention.

The ongoing development and continuing complexity of a sequential story is a necessary feature of the logic that connects the works. Each novel in a sequence consists of rising action that builds toward a more epic climax. While familiarity may be pleasurable and therefore invitational, it is only one aspect of children's fiction worth considering. I argue it is beneficial to better understand the appeals of certain epic stories that represent remarkable imaginative experiences by building fictional universes. I suggest that these story worlds can be an important tool for young readers and their developing appreciation for art and literacy. More specifically, I maintain that sequences employ patterns that are immersive and encourage expansion as textual play in a maneuver that may guide readers through various aesthetic milestones. Story worlds like Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising*, Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain*, or Suzanne Collins' *Gregor the Overlander Chronicles* reach a certain magnitude that shapes a fictional world as structured and familiar, but also challenging. Throughout this dissertation, I will demonstrate how readers of story universes are invited to

progress through stages in their aesthetic development that enable them to accept and critique the imaginative properties specific to a story world precisely because of the generic constraints and textual intentionality of the sequence form. Expansive imaginative play and appreciation situated in logic and judgment (critique) require a pivotal form of narrative complexity that sometimes results in transitions across novels in terms of theme, ideology, characterization, tone, or even structure. Such transitions are in fact typical of sequences but lacking in series fiction.

Fictional Worlds Terminology

One of the goals for this study is to provide a vocabulary for the types of stories that have become increasingly popular through marketing strategies—sequences, sequels, prequels, spin-offs, etc. I have already mentioned that Nodelman and Reimer sometimes refer to sequences as universes. Maria Nikolajeva also attempts to classify sequences and other related stories in her essay “Beyond Happily Ever After: The Aesthetic Dilemma of Sequels”, but the work she does is more a clarification of the narrative requirements necessary to qualify a book as related to another and what this relationship might be. My project seeks to understand the aesthetic and semiotic principles that underpin this relationship. I also seek to examine the effect that such inter- and intratextual relationships might have on readers based on a system of aesthetic milestones that I will discuss later in this chapter. So far, my focus has been on aesthetics specifically and fictional worlds more generally for the various aesthetic categories and appeals they use in sequences. In this section I look more closely at fictional worlds as a theoretical concept, defining terms and following theoretical shifts proposed by thinkers such as Ruth Ronen, Umberto Eco, and Lubomir Doležel based on the various forms a literary world may take. Theories of fictional worlds typically focus on the concept of fictionality itself and explore what it means to consider a textual world in terms of mimesis—how a text compares to the real

world—as opposed to an aesthetics of an enclosed artistic system or as a semiotic object. Instead of mimesis, Ruth Ronen considers the uniqueness of fiction as residing in “the relation between a speech situation and its context . . . and the degree and kind of commitment of the speaker to the content of the utterance” (82). In other words, fictionality is based upon structure and believability wherein believability is based upon the enactment and support of a fictional world’s logical foundations. The fictionality of a story then becomes a moot point because of the reader’s commitment, traditionally referred to in Coleridge’s terms as “the willing suspension of disbelief” (Cuddon 984-985). A reader accepts fiction as temporarily true, allowing immersion and a transition from the real world to a textual one. Fictionality as a concept is thus less important to immersion than issues of logical consistency, for example.

For this reason, it is beneficial to consider fictional worlds as comprehensive imaginative models, and this is the goal for most contemporary theorists (see Doležel, *Heterocosmica*; Eco; and Ronen). Their theories of fictional worlds developed as a more encompassing form of the possible worlds theory posited by philosophers as a means to determine the truth-value of statements by means of formal logic alone. Some statements, for instance, can be judged true or false by a straightforward correspondence theory—that is, whether or not they correspond with events or a state of affairs that exists or has existed in consensus reality. For instance, the statement, “J. K. Rowling published the first book in the Harry Potter series in 1997,” is true based on our consensus reality. But what of statements that have no such points of correspondence, or are contestable in some way? A theory of multiple possible worlds allows philosophers to see the root of the problem. For instance, if we imagine a possible world wherein time was measured differently, or J. K. Rowling was never born, or even, more realistically, a world where more than one person is named J. K. Rowling or someone else published the first

book of the Harry Potter series, this statement would possibly be false. Therefore, it cannot be judged necessarily true or false based on its own propositional logic; it is only *possibly* true. Other statements, however, can be judged true or false based on their logical structure alone. For instance, the statement, “J. K. Rowling published the first book in the Harry Potter series in 1997, *or* it is not the case that J. K. Rowling published the first book in the Harry Potter series in 1997” is necessarily true in any possible world since one or the other proposition may be true, while “J. K. Rowling published the first book in the Harry Potter series in 1997 *and* it is not the case that J. K. Rowling published the first book in the Harry Potter series in 1997” is necessarily false because an individual statement cannot be simultaneously true and false. Possible worlds theory is thus useful when considering the logical consistency of fictional worlds because, while imaginary worlds cannot base their claims for truth or falsity on a correspondence theory of truth, structural and logical consistency within their imaginary constructs is still required.

The following list of specialized terminology describes what I consider necessary for the creation of an imaginative world, the ways to analyze imaginary worlds, and the ways in which critics can discuss the logical/structural relationships that may develop between one imaginary world and another with similar features. While my terminology merges the various interdisciplinary understandings of fictional and possible worlds theory, it is important to establish the difference between fictional and possible worlds, especially with regards to sequences and worlds that develop within children’s literature. **Fictional worlds theory** is a theory of texts as complete, wholly imagined constructs or self-enclosed story worlds. While this theory has been and often is applied to single novels, it has not taken up what Nodelman and Reimer describe as universes that span across multiple texts (56-57). **Possible worlds theory** determines the logical, narrative, and structural relationships between the various stories that

revisit a universe. Somewhat different from fictional worlds, possible worlds propose changes through texts such as prequels, sequels, or even spin-offs that reveal something new or previously unexplored about the foundational structure of the created universe. Possible world expansions are also far more likely to include drastic changes in emphasis, design, ideology, etc. The purpose of possibility in literary theory and in relation to story worlds is to highlight a form of critique that challenges the incompleteness of narrative as a representation of reality, also known as its verisimilitude. A fictional world establishes the story at a certain level of concreteness necessary for the reader to immerse herself in the fiction. Possible worlds, by contrast, *expand* the original story while maintaining a level of connectedness that emerges *between* the original story and the expansion.

We regard a text as a possible world only when we consider a whole or self-enclosed story world as what fictional worlds theorists call an Actual. An **Actual**⁶ is what Gerard Genette structurally refers to as the Ur-text (Allen 95-96), the original work of fiction in a group of inter-related texts. The Actual lays the logical foundation of a story world that all other texts must adhere to for maintenance of the pretense as true or believable; in other words, it establishes the conditions for verisimilitude within all of the possible expansions. It also establishes the ethos of a story world. Fictional worlds scholars typically use **ethos** to refer to the atmosphere, or the style, and world-specific elements that make a world both unique and identifiable (Hayot 32); this cluster of elements becomes canon for any possible additions that may continue to develop the Actual story. A multimodal expansion of a fictional world will rely upon multiple logical threads to create an ethos, however. The Harry Potter films, which include the plot devices

⁶ This study will identify the term, Actual, by capitalizing the initial letter. This is a clarification of the status/significance of the Actual as a Proper noun within the context of a literary universe.

surrounding the notion of wizardry in present day England, add a highly recognizable musical accompaniment that people now readily associate with that fictional world, for example. One calls to mind the other. We need only hear the music to begin imagining the world of Harry Potter, which suggests that sound may function as an invitational appeal. That it plays continuously on speakers throughout the theme parks attests to the intentionality of the association to create a more fully immersive experience.

More importantly, minor elements may separate two seemingly identical texts in the mind of a reader. A quick look at various Twilight fan fiction sites reveals that it is not unusual for writers to identify their stories as a part of a movie-verse rather than the books. The result of distinctions like this indicate a preference for some aspect of the multimodal structure—the visual, audio, and/or spatial features—as the most immersive element, rather than any aspect of story or plot.⁷ Character relationships and the surrounding context of setting and space, while a basic foundational feature of a story, may become a major element of atmosphere and ethos, especially in multimodal realms. Many possible situations authored by fan fiction writers change the story world significantly while maintaining the relationships between characters, for instance. Though the way we initially encounter a text often determines which version of a story assumes authority with regards to our imagined responses to later additions to a world, multimodal expansions seem to develop a far more concrete, and therefore memorable, ethos.

Regardless of the initial form in which the texts are encountered by readers or viewers, intertextual allusions function as aesthetic appeals that facilitate aesthetic development and appreciation. Narrative satellites increase a reader's fluency through intertextual references that

⁷ This is especially the case when large movie franchises have established specific actors for long term roles such as Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* or Robert Pattinson as Edward in *Twilight*.

are a part of a world repertoire. A familiarity with the Actual as the cluster of texts that define the world grabs our attention to create a positive emotional response to develop that experience further. At the same time, expansion allows for further play and development of a reader's tastes in terms of content and style as well. For instance, the introduction to *Rose*, a prequel to the original Bone series, provides a sort of mythic history of the dragons and the dreaming where the Great Red Dragon of Bone is a part of the legendary exploits. However, the Great Red Dragon, a protagonist in the Actual, assumes a backgrounded position in Rose's book; the graphic novel refers to "the dragons" but avoids any use of his proper name (Smith, *Rose* 4). Instead, the cover art of *Rose*, as well as some inside panels where the Great Red Dragon is illustrated conspicuously in comparison with the other dragons, offers the moment of intertextual, aesthetic fluency based on the image of the Great Red Dragon (Smith, *Rose* 4). In terms of ethos, *Rose* moves from humor to a more mythopoeic style—which is one reason why the Great Red Dragon, a staple character from *Bone*, contrasts with his *Rose* counterparts visually. *Rose* is also much darker in tone. Thus, the anchoring presence of the Great Red Dragon provides an opportunity for readers to expand their aesthetic experiences with style and tone.

Though any number of narrative and aesthetic or structural logics may serve as the basis for a reader's interpretation of and involvement in a story, shared allusions provide a story grammar of sorts that represent intentional appeals to recognition and deeper immersion in a world, as demonstrated by the case of the Great Red Dragon in *Rose*. This grammar, that includes the overt and defining characteristics of a story world, make up its **intentional contexts**. This term is the way we refer to the logical base and ethos of a world, but also the foregrounded features of a work and the elements of the story that *every reader* will encounter. Smith's visual style in the Bone novels, a combination of realistic, human characters and cartoon main

characters fashioned after friendly-looking, comically animated and agile bones, is an intentional context. Issues of medium are always significant for the interpretation of multimodal stories and are necessarily intentional as well. For this reason, the ways we might read these features as appeals are important. The contrast between realistic and fantastic elements is stylistic, but also impacts how we read the story. Human characters are serious and have serious problems, while Bones and animals are silly and often find themselves in hyperbolic situations that allow for humor. The visual storytelling foregrounds this dualism. An intentional context and a defining element of the ethos, visual dualism makes the Bone sequence unique and identifiable and instructs us in how to respond to the story world *appropriately*. At the same time, the absence of any Bones in *Rose* removes the dry humor of characters like Smiley and Phoney Bone. Doing away with the signature dualism of Bone removes the elements of humor and increases narrative tension substantially.

In addition, the conclusion of *Rose* seems unresolved in comparison to the Bone saga, wherein both Briar and Lucius perish (Smith, *Crown of Horns*). *Rose*, though written after the completion of the Actual sequence, feels unfinished. The main protagonist, Briar, is clearly left feeling at odds with the morality of her choices, such that she eventually returns in the Bone sequence as the much more evil Hooded One. Smith carefully maintains a tone that implies incompleteness. This is important since Rose/Granma Ben represents a narrative intersection between past and present, possible and Actual. Elements of back story are fictional moves that create a façade of completeness by filling in content gaps. However, Smith's conclusion to the prequel uses aesthetic intention (tone) to remind the reader that Rose's story is far from over, even as the world of Bone becomes more complete and realistic in representation through an expanded timeline.

Each possible world legitimizes a response to the various gaps in a fictional world by becoming a part of that world's **canon**, or the material accepted as a part of the official mythology, timeline, and continuity of a story world (Urbanski 83). While our responses to a story are individually based on what the reader brings to a text, constraints set by intentional contexts mean certain readings are more likely due to the grammar of the story world, while others are not supportable as part of the canon. More often than not, intentional contexts are fairly overt issues of tone and style, though their ambient quality may make them difficult to isolate for discussion. The style, tone, and narrative voice of Lemony Snicket in The Series of Unfortunate Events novels are obvious as a shared aesthetic across the sequence, but their appeal can be hard for less experienced readers to articulate, for example. Even if the associative qualities of plot events with style, tone, and voice create expectations in young readers that they are unable to articulate, they can and do intuit them, especially when it comes to the kinds of things such as using animal characters for humor while human characters are taken more seriously.

Once a single novel transitions into a sequence or set of narrative tie-ins and invests in the creation of possible worlds, extensional contexts become a focus for the interpretation of developing or progressive aesthetics; the appeals that make up the dominant story logics (visual, narrative, thematic, ideological, etc.); and the ethos throughout the multiple story arcs and texts. Like intentional contexts, **extensional contexts** are additions to a story through intentional links between the subsequent story and an Actual world. An awareness of extensional contexts in relation to an Actual make up the expanding repertoire of a particular world. While the intertextual, intentional links are a structural foundation and invitational appeal to engage new additions to a story world, extensional contexts diverge into new themes, characters, settings, and

ideologies. Extensional contexts may thus broaden aesthetic tastes across narrative space and time, but they also challenge the incompleteness of the fiction. As a result, readers who take up the challenge offered by extensional contexts to immerse more fully in a concrete or mimetic imagined space thereby transition into the latter stages of the aesthetic stage theory.

Epic worlds establish a sense of completeness and reality that creates varying types and levels of aesthetic appeal in a unified story space. Sequences also, unintentionally or not, expand taste and broaden a reader's scope of likes and dislikes by issuing challenges through the latter stages of aesthetic development once they are fully immersed in the fiction. Sequences may suddenly change directions in radical ways to enhance the epic climax of the arc. As a spin-off, *Quest for the Spark* is more clearly in this second category. The three book sequence incorporates direct plot references to the other *Bone* novels and includes a new ragtag group of characters of every type specific to the Actual (a new family of Bones, two rat creatures, talking animal side-kicks similar to the possum family that make appearances throughout *Bone*, a farmer from the Valley, and an outcast Veni Yan Warrior). Such expansion that draws on intentional contexts serves to pique the interest of readers already familiar with *Bone* as an Actual, and thus appeals to the initial stages of aesthetic development, wherein readers look for consistent representations of what they already know to be true in a world. Aesthetic fluency with character in type and tone is a reminder of the Actual ethos, rather than any function of narrative significance meant to fill in incomplete aspects of the world, as with *Rose*. Instead, new characters introduce new story significances and themes, emphasizing aspects of possibility.

Issues of medium are also drastically different in terms of style. The books in the *Quest for the Spark* sequence are best described as illustrated novels, wherein the visual characterization recalls the Actual, but the storytelling is not necessarily dependent on the images

at all. Whereas *Rose*, a graphic novel like the Bone Actual, is about making the world of Bone more complete, *The Quest for the Spark* and its sequels introduce new aesthetic avenues for exploration and expands the ethos of the universe. The spin-off sequence is a much more aesthetically developed and daring addition to the Actual; it deals more with extensional contexts than intentional contexts and invitation or immersion.

What is significant in terms of sequence fiction and fictional worlds theory is that both *Rose* and *Quest for the Spark*, as expansions of the Bone saga, rely on recognizable elements of accessibility to engage a reader with fluency in the world repertoire in different ways and on different levels of aesthetic and imaginative development. **Accessibility** is the way we reference the intertextual ties between Actual and possible worlds. It speaks to the overt nature of ties between texts. Unlike more general intertextual elements such as homage or influence, the accessible repertoire of a fictional world is intratextual and entirely semiotic as a representation of the culture a textual world creates via the places, inhabitants, even themes and modes a work introduces (Allen 112). For all intents and purposes “the words of the text signify not by referring to things, but by presupposing other texts” within the system (Riffaterre 228). Intertextual moments draw the reader in and provide a sense of belonging to the imaginative realm as a sociolect, or language that carries the values and status of the group defined in this case by a shared interest and understanding of the aesthetic form of the world (Allen 111, 226). Such moments reference certain logics as foundational and true or authoritative. A reader already familiar with the Actual is in the know, so to speak. While intertextuality is typically regarded as a limiting aspect for most children, because they may have limited literary repertoires, the accessible or intertextual relationships between works in an epic world encourage the sense of fictional fluency that attracts readers to the ongoing texts in a sequence. The

intratextuality of sequences and possible worlds relies on a sense of positive reinforcement we can attribute to aesthetics and aesthetic fluency with a fictional world. More importantly, expansions provide an opportunity to continue developing a reader's aesthetic competency, encouraging critical responses to changes in theme, narrative structure, world structure, and sometimes ideology, which the reader will inevitably evaluate in terms of her developing tastes. *Quest for the Spark* may offer little by way of aesthetic complexity, but it adds issues of class, acceptance, and redemption in terms of understanding difference that neither *Rose* nor the Actual Bone saga attempt. It is ideologically complex and therefore significant in terms of challenging readers through expansion.

The aspects of the Actual that accessible story worlds venture out to expand are an indication of gaps in a narrative as a representation of that world; they attempt to transition the fiction into a believable truth. These gaps also often gain the critical interests of readers who seek these out for further narrative play in fan fiction, as already mentioned (see Jenkins, *Fans* 2006). Fan fiction is a genre that attempts to expand the design of a world through what readers might deem an acceptable enhancement or even change. In other words, these gaps or elements of incompleteness become stepping stones from the middle to latter aesthetic milestones that epic structure encourages through the development of worlds and arcs. At the same time, the emphasis on acceptability—some changes can be too great to be an acceptable or canonical addition to an existing imaginative space—reinforces the idea that an author still claims ownership of the basic ethos if not the structure of a world. It is in this way that fiction transitions to a semiotic representation that obtains the status of an imagined culture, a literary or fictional habitus.

The acceptable relationships (those that conform to the Actual canon) that exist between a world and its established ethos suggest that any expansion must remain **compossible**—accessible to the canonical elements of story or aligned with events and characteristics that preserve the willing suspension of disbelief for a specific story world—as a reinforcement of the centrality and authority of an Actual. For instance, even the short episodes that appear in Jeff Smith and Tom Sniegowski’s *Bone Handbook* and *Tall Tales* work within the narrative and aesthetic constraints that Bone establishes as the Actual. Compossibility and accessibility are perhaps the most important features of possible worlds as these elements allow aesthetic fluency and not just abstract creativity. Compossibility in particular demonstrates the acceptance of the Actual as canon. But here, also, is where the notion of interpretability becomes important. **Interpretability** refers to the overall grammar of the story. For instance, the carnivalesque patterns of the adventures of Harry Potter take on more significance as an element of ethos since this feature remains consistent across multiple novels rather than shifting after the first novel in the sequence. It also makes the departure from this pattern in *The Deathly Hallows* both noticeable and significant. How this departure is interpreted is up to the individual reader, but that changes to recognizable story patterns exist is unarguable and therefore worth noting in any interpretation. Interpretability thus refers to semiotic or textual significance and not just possible readings of a story. By speaking of a text’s interpretability, we acknowledge that each self-enclosed story world demonstrates a unique set of primary logics (narrative and aesthetic) to create its ethos (Allen 112). This reliance upon interpretability and story world consistency is a generic feature of all sequences.

Interpretability also reinforces, once again, that certain interpretations are simply impossible. Calling the authority of an Actual into question diminishes the authenticity of the

entire imaginative experience. Challenging the intentional structure of a fictional world impacts the believability of a world's pretense, something most readers seem intuitively aware of (see Pullman, "Intention"). If we consider accessibility as both interpretable and overt, an intratextual element that links multivolume works within an epic fictional world, we gain insight into issues of canonicity and the aspects of a story world that make it unique among others. These story-specific features become a type of creative signature or an ethos. For instance, though Jeff Smith employs his trademark style in his other comics *Rasl* and *Tuki*, none of his work outside of the Bone universe is compossible with Bone as an Actual world, where the blend of realistic and fantastic characters, the Valley, and the Dreaming make the world distinct. The intentional structure is a combination of style (visual dualism), place (setting is significant as each adventure builds upon how we experience the Valley), and theme (the Dreaming as a concept—though how the concept/metaphor should be read is open to interpretation). Without some narrative expansion to initiate a crossover,⁸ treating Smith's creative *oeuvre* as related and accessible with Bone breaks down the ability to immerse fully in any fictional world; so, accessibility and compossibility remind us of the self-enclosed status of imaginative worlds as well. They are by nature exclusionary and as a result offer a sense of cultural inclusion to those who achieve aesthetic fluency. Considered alongside theories of fictional worlds, intertextuality is a much more structured, intentional textual feature meant to engage specific sets of readers. From a generic standpoint, this means we must revise certain theoretical dispositions towards intertextuality in terms of a developing reader's repertoire.

⁸ Crossovers are frequent occurrences in fan fiction, and indicate both a desire to expand a world and to relate disparate taste cultures in some way.

The study of fictional and possible worlds includes a number of terms with advanced theoretic, philosophical implications that I also include in this study as they become relevant. However, the chief benefits for children's literature and especially the many popular sequences within this genre are really caught up with intentional and extensional contexts, accessibility, and compossibility. These are the features that demonstrate how sequences and fictional worlds encourage the ongoing development of aesthetic appreciation and explain how and why the imaginative worlds that young readers play with and in come to mean so much. These basic terms encompass the terrifically complex features that garner interest and allow us to better understand the reading experience in terms of the pleasure a world offers its readers. Thus, the theory enables us to approach aesthetics more broadly and with greater understanding of the structural and semiotic aspects of sequences. The terms also alert us to which textual features are of real importance in response to the more epic literary worlds and make inroads into issues of invitation and immersion from a rhetorical/textual point of view. These are the aspects that make this theory particularly beneficial to the study of children's literature and culture.

Epic Story Worlds and Aesthetic Development

Differentiating between elements of invitation and immersion is key to developing a theory geared to sequence fiction and world building. Invitation works through familiarity of topic, genre, character, etc. Jeff Smith's *Quest for the Spark* does not revolve around his *Bone* novels, but it does make liberal use of certain features of the world and seeks to expand the world *Bone* establishes. These intertextual moments encourage a quick immersion into a new fictional cycle. Certain accepted "truths" are pre-established through these references and lessen the work necessary to situate a reader familiar with the original. From this we may consider that

intertextuality *of a certain type* will be key to understanding the invitational and immersive qualities of epic story worlds/universes.

Fictional worlds such as those that inform this study demonstrate a certain expansive inter-connectedness different from stories represented by traditional novels framed quite literally by the covers of the book. Instead, I argue that series and sequences are genres that demonstrate an aesthetic specific for the process of imagining fictional worlds, though sequences remain the more complex of the two. Each Harry Potter novel begins with an overt example of intratextuality, briefly recounting important moments from the previous novel. Structurally, each book also begins with an established pattern. Harry lives with his muggle relatives in the summer before crossing into the world of magic through the barrier at Kings Cross Station and leaving for Hogwarts. These events and patterns inform each work in the sequence, but each novel also exists as a story that can be read separately from these intratextual elements as a single narrative with its own beginning, middle, and end. The intratextuality makes the experience richer, of course, but the use of this narrative and contextual pattern also allows each successive novel to immerse the reader more quickly into the imagined world. More important, studies suggest that this process of engaging in a remembered experience also recalls the pleasure and other positive emotions of what critics in the field of aesthetics refer to as fluency (Reber 223). Fluency theory suggests that when we process information about a work of art more easily, we experience the same positive emotional responses that we feel in response to something beautiful (Reber 224). The confidence we acquire by expanding our repertoire of a genre unconsciously encourages us to continue reading similar works. Expanding the repertoire of a world works in much the same way. Intratextual moments are also an invitation to resume the initial experience and a key to immersion by building on the emotions of pre-existing responses. The Series of Unfortunate

Events offers an excellent example of this (Snicket). The Baudelaires become increasingly frustrated with the adults in the sequence as it moves towards its conclusion. The characterization of adults as unhelpful and inept also increases in increments before the adults in the novels become confrontational and violent. The siblings' frustration makes more sense as it builds from the first book rather than starting anew with each additional novel. The overt, self-enclosed intratextuality of sequences and narrative expansions helps readers reach a state of aesthetic fluency more quickly and efficiently. As we gain confidence in our understanding of a story world, the combination of familiarity and expansion works to develop the critical competency that encourages the expression of opinions, evaluation, and critique, which all build upon emotional responses that grow stronger with each new addition to the universe. As the worlds that we invest in grow, our ability to appreciate their depth as an art form also grows. So, sequences offer benefits for developing our aesthetic understanding and appreciation of literature while creating a habit for reading and critique. Herein lies the real value of sequences and those epic story universes that populate children's literature so predominantly. What they offer in terms of immersion and imaginative play can help us better understand them as a genre, but what they provide for readers in terms of aesthetic development and taste is also important.

I have referred to aesthetics throughout this study so far, but aesthetics has acquired multiple meanings over the years. Here I would like to clarify how I use that term. When Maria Nikolajeva speaks of aesthetics, she means formal critical methods such as structuralism, semiotics, and even hermeneutics (see *Aesthetic Approaches*) that treat texts as artistic artifacts. When Nodelman and Reimer discuss aesthetics, they reference the joy we experience when reading as well as the development of a critical eye for what lies underneath those texts that appeal most strongly to our tastes in literature. While structuralism is incredibly important,

especially when we consider the level of intention necessary to hold together the sequences that truly capture our attention long term, their definition is particularly interesting as it attempts an understanding of “a special kind of intense and *ordered* experience—sensuous, intellectual, emotional” (Nodelman and Reimer 221, my emphasis). While the sensuous and emotional responses seem more closely related to the aesthetics of invitation, the more intellectual “ordered experience” Nodelman and Reimer refer to is a shared emphasis upon the structuralism that facilitates immersion and the latter stages of aesthetic development. The aesthetic theory I propose in this study and that I address in my discussion of aesthetic stage theory attempts to form a bridge between structuralism and taste to situate a study of sequences and aesthetic development within the broader discourse of fictional worlds. Additionally, the type of fictional worlds so prevalent within the canon of children’s literature—that is, the number of ongoing sequences that expand and develop a literary world into a more epic imagined experience—makes children’s literature uniquely beneficial to the ongoing study of fictional worlds as a theoretical approach by encouraging a focus on aspects of invitation and immersion.

Michael J. Parsons suggests a stage progression theory of aesthetic development useful when considering the benefits of sequence fiction. He proposes five stages of increasing aesthetic awareness that culminate in a position of critical distance, or what we, as critics, might consider the ultimate skill in reading a novel or work as a text for critical reflection and evaluation (M. Parsons 13-14). I refer to this stage as aesthetic competency. Each stage is organized in terms of typical responses to major topics we encounter in art, and, as I will argue and demonstrate in what follows, establishes a set of aesthetic milestones that often complement the typical development of expansive story worlds that stretch across multiple novels or texts. I will begin, however, with a brief introduction to Parson’s stages. The first stage is characterized

entirely by pre-existing personal preferences (M. Parsons 21); that is, bear lovers, for instance, are more likely to show an interest in *Winnie the Pooh* and *Paddington Bear* than *The Poky Little Puppy* (Milne; Bond; and Lowrey). The second stage is slightly more complex in that the reader is beginning to make determinations of truth or accuracy in representation, or mimesis (M. Parsons 23). Stage three moves beyond the appreciation of life-like representation to the more abstract realm of feelings that a work of art or literature might generate (M. Parsons 46). Readers engaged in stage four and five responses have the ability to step back from the subject matter and assess the form of a work; in stage four, readers think about how the work fulfills or deviates from the requirements of its genre, while a stage five assessment examines the purposes and value of the genre itself.

If we follow Parson's understanding of the growth of artistic/literary awareness, we can consider how a sequence corresponds with the various stages and determine the ways intratextual play invites different responses to epic fictional worlds. The intratextual play inherent to sequence fiction as a genre adds the depth necessary to help us maintain our investment as readers, but it also encourages the ability to judge the quality of a work with a sense of objectivity and confidence as we become more fluent with a world and its constraints—a process that happens over time. According to Parson's theory, a young reader may like the first novel in a sequence, but by the second and third novels the reader will have enough experience or fluency with the fiction to either agree with and accept the fiction or reject it. The formulaic aspects of sequence fiction are largely linked to the necessary grammar of world structure as well as the textual foundation that makes up the beginnings of a semiotic/textual habitus or taste culture. What critics might regard as a limitation or shortcoming of the genre, such as a repetitive structure, may help to advance a reader's cognitive ability to evaluate and participate in a

fictional world. The setting of each of the Harry Potter novel begins in the muggle world before transitioning into the wizarding world and the world of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In *Deathly Hallows*, by the end of the seven-book sequence, the subtle departures from this pattern, such as the transition away from Hogwarts and its immediate surroundings into other parts of the magical world, allow readers already experienced with the world of Harry Potter to understand that something out of the ordinary, and therefore significant, is happening, for example. Structural depth of this nature is what we may consider creative expression within a world's form—an author's willingness to break away from formulaic logic to imbue the world with greater story significance.

According to the stages of aesthetic development, then, we can situate how a sequence adapts in complexity alongside the promotion of a sense of critical awareness in its readers. Our pre-existing interests dictate the first stage of interest and appreciation. In terms of literature this translates into subject matter (M. Parsons 21). The surge of young adult adaptations, and particularly sequences, presents an interesting dilemma here. Successful film franchises such as Harry Potter, Twilight, and The Hunger Games have encouraged audiences to participate in an ongoing culture of expansion and textual development wherein fictional worlds and the characters that inhabit them have grown alongside readers over a period of time in an obvious manner. The result is that elaborate fictional worlds, or world-building itself as a process, seem to be the preferred “subject” of the cultural moment. For young readers growing up in the early decades of the twenty-first century, imagined worlds and pretend play provide a type of freedom from over-regulated childhoods. Moreover, innovations in film and gaming technology enable greater possibilities for multisensory immersion in fictional worlds. Multimodal worlds (especially television and film) provide the structure necessary to facilitate those readers with

less success in accessing literacy across modes that are problematic and unfamiliar (audio, visual, spatial, etc.), giving the world realism, and giving novice readers concrete access to more fully imaged worlds.

Michael Benton cites several reader response studies performed on children from early readers to adolescence that demonstrate a developmental component to response (90). Tracing a similar developmental argument, Eva-Maria Simms argues that the book is a form of technology and literacy that profoundly impacts a child's consciousness and thought processes (21).

Linguistic stories that conceptualize the different modalities may allow readers temporary de-regulation of their lived experiences with more imaginative control for invention/experimentation, but only once their imaginative processes allow entrance into a virtual reality (Simms 28). Simms notes phenomenological studies of children during literacy development by Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser to remind us that children learn to "climb aboard" and "accept given perspectives" of textual worlds only through practice (qtd. in Simms 28). Simms explains that "the full magic of the written text can only come alive when the child overcomes the resistance of the body" (Simms 28). Protherough also notes in his reader response studies that "maturity in reading is connected with the ability to operate in an increasing number of modes" (qtd. in Benton 92), an ability which develops with time and practice. The goal is to connect the various embodied modalities within written language with a concrete pretense; this allows for the internalization of fiction and a transition into an imagined space.

Initially the aesthetic appeals of a sequence are subject to generic aspects of story: wizards and magic for Harry Potter or vampires for Twilight. However, the cultural shift towards sequences seems to be superseding other elements as readers instead rush to find the

next world to embrace. Harry Potter *and* Twilight rather than Harry Potter *or* Twilight! Claire Fallon describes the publishing trend like this:

The market for these kinds of books, especially fantasy, exploded during the early aughts, as Harry Potter took off. Not just lightweight series like The Baby-Sitters Club or one-offs like *The Fault in Our Stars*, either; publishers began offering kids blockbuster series like The Hunger Games, Twilight, and Divergent.

What Fallon refers to as blockbuster series is, of course, more accurately termed a sequence, and there is an inherent understanding that the quality of one is superior over the other. Fallon's interviews with various children's book publishers, authors, and marketers supported this as did the burgeoning trend in world building. Publisher Joe Monti went on to discuss the issue further.

Harry Potter combined several qualities that publishers previously thought didn't appeal much to kids: The somewhat nerdy genre of fantasy, *extremely thick books, and a long series with an overarching narrative arc that demanded you start at the beginning and read the whole way through.* All of these things may have existed in middle-grade and YA markets before "Potter", *but the conventional wisdom was that they were liabilities or ill-suited for the age group.* (qtd. in Fallon, my emphasis)

Fallon and other executives in the entertainment industry for children clearly considered the more complex and invested reading practices to be outside the purview of most young readers, but the consensus has drastically changed in recent years.

Ellen Winner interrogates young people's emotional responses to world building in *Invented Worlds* with similar results. Her study includes a discussion of popular aesthetic response theories that psychologists use as models to perform studies on the emotional reactions of young readers/viewers to different types of art and storytelling. They found that development

of formulaic elements into a slightly more complex framework markedly increases a young reader/viewer's response to art and story (Winner 61). Winner explains that "two types of patterns are the most pleasing: ones low in complexity, which cause . . . moderate arousal elevation, and ones moderately complex, which are complex enough to elevate arousal sharply" (61). According to these studies, series fiction arouses interest through its formulaic structure. Sequences share the initial arousal of formulaic elements by employing patterns similar to series, but they also produce sharp, elevated bursts of endorphins when the framework diverges from the formulaic to develop the primary narrative arc that frames the sequence. These psychological studies on art and invented worlds suggest that sequences invite interest as formula fiction, but that they maintain interest through an additional element of structural complexity. These revelations explain why young readers seem to seek the next complex fictional world for entertainment. They know what they like, and they like well-built fictional worlds. The magnitude of a story is its own appeal. Notably, their investment transitions audiences who embrace this trend into the next stage of aesthetic development more easily.

As noted, stage two is an appreciation for representation, or mimesis (M. Parsons 23). We begin to enjoy watching as a world unfolds around us into a complex system of people and places at exactly the point a series begins to build upon its initial aesthetic appeals to provide depth to the sequence. The driving force of this stage is an appeal to the lifelike. Yet, as Ruth Ronen argues, the defining feature of fiction and fictional worlds is incompleteness, gaps in the pretense that are a necessary component of story construction (24). Such gaps may prove problematic for readers transitioning to stage two responses as they can make it difficult to assess the logic of a fictional world. Sequences necessarily challenge fiction's definitional incompleteness by filling gaps introduced in the previous novels in the sequence. Authors fill in

the flora and fauna of a fictional world more and more with each subsequent addition, facilitating deeper immersion even as a reader's appreciation for the reality of the fiction is piqued. Even more significant, narrative expansions challenge the notion of story time as incomplete. Walter Ong explains that the difference between real life and story is that story worlds cease to exist once a narrative is complete, while life goes on around us indefinitely (164). Prequels challenge this notion by creating the backstory for characters and historicizing the fictional, while sequels and spin-offs suggest that "life" goes on even after a story is complete. Characters fill in a world and replace the dynamic of a setting that surrounds characters.

In the case of a fictional universe, concrete description and a challenge to the incompleteness of a text more than any sense of generic realism can control mimetic effect. The graphic fantasy Bone novels, for instance, become more and more intricate with each successive volume. Our world knowledge expands from the town of Boneville and a world of Bones to include a desert, a Valley filled with humans, and places like Granma Ben's Farm and Lucius's pub.⁹ *Volume Five: Rock Jaw Master of the Eastern Border* introduces Roque Ja who roams the border of a mountain range in the East (Smith 19). Smith and Tom Sniegoski's spin-off series, *Quest for the Spark*, introduces both a brief return to Boneville and a deeper role for Roque Ja. Through intertextual moments such as these, the authors draw readers back in with the familiar, deepening their sense of aesthetic fluency. The intertextual allusions are aesthetic appeals that reinforce the "reality" of the story world and the author's position as authoritative. These moments also work to maintain the original story in such a way that certain elements become grammatical, cemented logic. For example, the Hooded One introduced in Bone eventually becomes the centerpiece of a prequel that surrounds a youthful Granma Ben as a princess in the

⁹ Lucius's pub is introduced in *Out from Boneville*.

royal family and Lucius as a palace guard (Smith, *Rose*). Lucius is the love interest and the center of a love triangle that also includes the young Granma Ben (or Princess Rose) and the Hooded One as Briar before her descent into evil. Smith uses fiction to suggest the concept of historical moment as he fills in the back story for the mysterious relationship between the three characters in *Bone* (Smith, *Old Man's Cave* 36). This tendency to build upon story arcs and expand the people and places in fiction achieves mimesis and builds upon stage one to achieve stage two of the aesthetic milestones Parsons describes. It also presents fiction as truth and suggests the author has moved beyond the realm of invitation to immersion in both world rhetoric and structure.

The transition from invitation to acceptance suggests that narrative intention is key to appealing to the latter aesthetic stages, though what we mean when we say intention should be clarified. There is a generic expectation that a sequence will develop the imaginative space to expand a story beyond a single novel since a successful sequence is a large structural undertaking. Multivolume works are an experiment in story logic that require a certain level of authorial intention only made apparent by comparison of the works that link the larger story world together. Story grammar based on intertextual relationships the author develops provides coherence and consistency in multi-textual narratives (Allen 111-112). Stage two of aesthetic development is more than a desire for mimesis; rather “it calls for a style that is readily intelligible” (M. Parsons 47). It is a desire for recognition and understanding in art through logic.

In Philip Pullman’s discussion of literary intention, he explains that “for many readers, the author’s intention still does matter, and . . . not reading against [the] supposed intention, is an important part of the satisfaction . . . [readers] hope to feel” (“Intention” 129). It is in fact a

sense of critical achievement. He explains that beyond the foundational issues of medium, subject matter, and perhaps the beginnings of characterization and setting, “the intentions [authors are] conscious of are concerned with matters of detail” (Pullman, “Intention” 130). Reading authorial intention in these terms engages the second aesthetic milestone as an appeal to the systematic or logical elements of a story, whether these may be linguistic or multimodal (visual, audio, or otherwise). Interestingly, after qualifying that it is “young readers, or unsophisticated readers, who seem to be most anxious to know the author’s intention,” Pullman argues that one of the primary concerns of intention in its traditional understanding is the issue of audience, or for whom the story was intended (132). Here representations of childhood are once again paramount, and in terms of sequences, the path a child character follows to adulthood may demonstrate interesting inconsistencies that would otherwise be unapparent in a single novel. More important, though, is the distinction between intertextual and intratextual moments. Sequences invest in overt intertextuality across works that is more readily available and requires a much smaller literary repertoire. A young reader may not get the intertextual references to *Moby Dick* that litter the Bone sequence, but a reader of Bone who also engages in Quest for the Spark will readily get all intertextual Bone references. Such a reader’s trust in the logic and style of the world, carefully cultivated in Bone and intentionally maintained in Quest for the Spark, increases the pleasure and immersion the spin-off offers.

Stage three marks the beginning of an interest in both expressiveness and the intensity of feeling a work of art demonstrates (M. Parsons 46). It is during this stage that the real benefit of sequences as opposed to works in series becomes apparent. While both genres develop a sense of subject-oriented realism by developing the flora and fauna of an imaginary world and filling in the creative gaps that are inherent in fictional reality, sequences develop past this second stage

into the third stage of aesthetic milestones where a reader develops a greater appreciation for artistic expression (M. Parsons 54). The reader begins to desire recognizable form and design that demonstrates the expressiveness of the author/creator as a master of his/her craft instead of just a competent purveyor of realistic representations (M. Parsons 53). This transition subsequently encourages the reader to seek out and invest in themes rather than realism, and metaphor becomes increasingly important (M. Parsons 54-55). While Don Philpot suggests that different levels of intertextuality encourage young readers to recognize theme as artistic discourse (154-155), he argues for metafiction as the most effective category. However, metafiction is a much more postmodern and stylized form of writing that appeals to a more select audience than sequences and the intratextuality these novels employ.

Unlike series, the generic structure of sequence builds and develops plot, and consequently theme as well, alongside the basic development of flora and fauna that immerses a reader into a story world through concrete description. This attention to detail transitions story discourse into something more epic—world discourse, wherein themes become social/aesthetic conventions that suggest character motivations, and plot elements become associated with specific characters and illustrate development. Themes, like plot and the characters that move the action along, are systematic, though not mutually exclusive systems (they interrelate and correspond). Each of the Hogwarts Houses, for instance, is organized around specific themes that operate simultaneously as character motivations, physical locations, and drivers of conflict. Theme, as a systemic element of narrative, builds from a foundation to develop a more extensive form of logic based on patterns of rising action, conflict, and eventual resolution of a story. Since a sequence incorporates the process of thematic and narrative development across multiple works, epic worlds of this nature introduce levels of complexity where thematic threads may spin

into unexpected webs of significance. Pullman alternately foregrounds and backgrounds the emphasis upon alternate worlds and Dust throughout *His Dark Materials* to add his special take on *Paradise Lost*, for example (see Squires 28). This highlights the creative mastery of the world as a form and allows more opportunity to experience/appreciate the middle and latter stages of aesthetic development where readers enjoy art for art's sake (or a story world for its unique ethos).

These patterns are much more complex than the simple, overt intertextuality that we can expect of formula fiction and series (though sequences also demonstrate these elements of intertextuality as well). Theme that is situated in the form of an Actual world, its ethos, rather than limited to the connections a reader can draw between the real world and a novel as is typical of the second aesthetic stage, is an advanced form of creative appeal. Instead, themes develop in ways specific to the form of an imaginative construct, and add a deeper, richer state of aesthetic fluency than is typical of the more limited thematics of series. The shape of a sequence encourages a young reader to develop her sense of aesthetic appreciation by providing the opportunity to grow alongside the Actual story world.

The transition from second to third stage in response to a story world is an important one. While the first and second stages of aesthetic appreciation are fairly limited and situated firmly in how the reader makes comparisons between art and reality, stage three suggests a change in the imaginative capabilities of a reader. As the reader develops a greater appreciation for the form as expression, she is far more likely to invest and immerse in the fictional, stylized picture the author invents. This stage represents a change in how young minds approach metaphor (M. Parsons 59). Medium matters considerably here. Media that have concrete appeals instead of being conveyed by language (which is already inherently metaphoric) have basic guidelines for

how the audience should view the subject as a form or object. Literature, on the other hand, requires the reader to take up the process of imagining on an entirely metaphoric level. Fiction that develops alongside a growing appreciation for metaphor is ideal for facilitating that stage. Sequences provide an especially notable opportunity for this process.

In terms of the potential for immersion, every novel we encounter is a nascent world. The invitation to build the reading experience as both series and sequence fiction does offer the beginnings of a participatory sense of investment that emulates a reader's immersion in a real culture (a felt reality, so to speak). It is this aesthetic moment that transitions a story world from aesthetics to semiotics, or an imaginative world with a recognizable culture of its own. This appreciation alongside the appreciation and subsequent ability to fully immerse in the artistic image (specific to sequence rather than series) is the beginning of a desire for mastery of form and the ability to conceptualize what's needed to genuinely participate in the Actualized reality (M. Parsons 67). The third stage deals primarily with a return to the more controversial element of this theory—intentionality. Stage three is about the communication between the artist and the viewer, author and reader. Beyond investment, there is a sense that the reader who is moved to anticipate what will happen or what she desires to happen is anticipating through a sense of empathy with the characters *and the author* (Winner 86-87). The reader catches the author's intention through the work, learns to love what the author loves, and hates what he or she hates, so that the world becomes a shared emotional space as well.¹⁰

¹⁰ This presents a challenge to authors who develop spin-offs and other narrative tie-ins to a sequence that has already been accepted by a reader. Accessibility/compossibility recognize the author/reader relationship that develops because of the shared space the world creates—it is a contract of sorts.

This quickly moves a reader to stages four and five in terms of reader response. It is here that readers find the encouragement to express and interpret, and more importantly to approach this process as a form of play. Finding incomplete moments in a sequence is much more difficult, and more like a puzzle than a typical reading experience. Young readers may look for moments where they might see the plot developing in specific ways as a type of game. Those readers that waited in lines for the next Harry Potter novel or attended midnight release parties in costume are investing in this type of play. As sequences build, so too does the epic sense of anticipation and participation.

Stages four and five provide the closest understanding of what I mean by aesthetic competency. Once again, the extensive structure of epic literary worlds offers the appeal to a reader's growing aesthetic awareness and the desire to expand an imaginative experience through text. If stage two invests in how narratives build a world, making it concrete and real through logic, and stage three focuses on shared affective states, stage four marks the beginning of a reader's understanding of how the narrative and its features work to accomplish these responses in a unique way (M. Parsons 63). It is an appreciation for style and form, a combination of the cognitive processing that takes place in stages two and three, but with a greater awareness of what makes the world stand out as compared against other sequences. And finally, stage five is what we might think of in terms of achieving critical distance, a difficult feat once we come to care for a series of texts as a world. Fandom represents the far end of this spectrum. Fans of a world demonstrate both the familiarity and artistic awareness necessary to critique a world, and the confidence to do so in a manner we usually see only in critics and scholars; it is this aspect that is perhaps the most intriguing, especially amongst young readers. Interestingly, scholars like Perry Nodelman and Christine Wilkie-Stibbs argue that young readers quickly develop the

necessary repertoire to respond critically to literature, though this is often in terms of fictional worlds rather than genres. While a young reader may not have the experience to recognize intertextual references to works outside of the novels they read, many develop an almost encyclopedic knowledge of their favorite series and sequences, developing favorites among the many expansions of a narrative. It is at this stage that those same readers become willing to, at times, critique an author's choices or even add to a story domain in terms of pretend play and/or fan fiction (published or unpublished).

Approaching sequences as a genre that creates literary worlds allows us to recognize the narrative construct as an elaborate structural work and the establishment of a taste culture based on the foundation of a single narrative arc as it carries over and draws the reader further into a developing world from text to text. This suggests reading is an investment in imaginative worlds and literary play. Fictional worlds theory is a way to interpret a text or cluster of texts as a world. A fictional worlds reading of sequence fiction provides insight into a reader's response in terms of aesthetic appeals (an aspect of invitation) and interpretability. Engaging the atmosphere of a world offers insight into the ways expansive works establish and develop a community based on a literary niche. I will emphasize once again that while fictional worlds theory may trend towards reader response, it is a text-based theory that highlights intentional appeals as a method of garnering attention. Story expansion is an opportunity for the reader to compare what the extensional contexts suggest about an author's direction for the universe. Additionally, expansion maintains interest established through intratextual hooks by offering aesthetic variety and development in an imaginative space. Intratextual appeals that reinforce the early invitations and offer new avenues for holding attention demonstrate how comparing the multiple sources that make up a self-enclosed literary world work toward complicating artistic

tastes. Furthermore, the method an author uses to enhance the original investment may reveal interesting shifts in any number of representational and ideological directions worth considering.

Intertextuality for Young Readers and World Repertoire

Intertextuality is now relatively commonplace in children's literature discourse. Yet it has been taken up quite disparately and the various critical camps may be less well known. Most literary scholars are quite familiar with Roland Barthes and the poststructuralist attempt to move the text beyond the boundaries of the written word. The result is a much more ambiguous and less structured understanding of the elements that feature across, in, and, around the texts we read, especially with regards to young readers. It is difficult to posit any more elaborate theory of intertextuality in relation to children's texts because of the nature of the audience as readers with limited literary repertoires (see Nikolajeva, *Aesthetic Approaches* 41; Nodelman and Reimer 45; Wilkie-Stibbs 168).

Critics often highlight intertextuality situated around notions of literary repertoire, of genres and modes, as opposed to explicit references across worlds. These codes or scripts help readers find meaning in a text. They are not, however, what we might consider semiotic features of a work that attempt an atmosphere or culture of the text that evolves into an ethos. Instead, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva refer to "infinite intertextuality" and a "mirage of citations" (Barthes 16) that represent an open-ended circuit of meaning that breaks down any possibility of a finite or self-enclosed model. This understanding of intertextuality destabilizes any sense of a unique story world. According to Christine Wilkie-Stibbs, this model also necessarily regards the child reader as a disempowered, passive receptacle for the adult meanings already embedded in a text where children's literature exists only as a sub-genre of adult literature (168) and rejects the notion of a child reader with any critical understanding of her own creative and artistic tastes.

Such a model suggests the latter stages of aesthetic development and processes of aesthetic fluency are adult phenomena despite Parsons' evidence to the contrary.

Empirical studies of reader responses challenge previous assumptions such as those listed above. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs explains that intertextuality in children's literature functions like a game where the "processes through which children take ownership of a particular text preclude the imperialism of the text and author . . . [and] adults who write for children . . . consciously or unconsciously operate in and are influenced by the intertextual space which is the literature they read as children" (169). Wilkie-Stibbs explains that children, especially younger readers, engage with imaginative worlds instead of texts and authors, and demonstrate an advanced capacity for immersion into a story (167), and for this reason, what we read as children profoundly impacts our aesthetic development as well as our memories and adult perceptions of the imaginary, or the mirage of citations that Barthes refers to. Wilkie-Stibbs does note that despite a "demonstrable ability to take textual ownership through . . . intertextual references, the writer/reader relationship is asymmetric" (169). When approached as insulated structures or worlds, intratextuality is intentional and based on an author's pre-supposition of a reader's response to certain appeals that are artistic and stylistic, though these may cover over ideological or rhetorical significances. Empirical studies of child reader responses continue to demonstrate an intuitive ability to "own" textual spaces based on the semiotic structure of worlds and the grammar of a text as well as textual satellites or possible worlds (see Bloome and Egan-Robertson; Bromley; Cairney; Desmet). In fact, ethos creates literary habituses that empower readers over authors in terms of semiotic function.

In contrast, Gerard Genette seeks a more systemic and as a result less ambiguous construction of intertextuality than Barthes and the post-structuralists. He argues that literature is

constructed according to recognizable systems, which should be the object of study (Allen 94). He acknowledges the confusion that exists between genres (literary categories) and modes (natural forms of language), and instead “studies the relationships . . . which link the text with an archetextual network that produces meaning” (Allen 97). This textual networking is significant for what it contributes to the study of works that weave interrelated logics in and out of a shared base with an Actual world such as we have seen with the graphic novels that make up the Bone universe. Literary universes are what we might consider a representation of Genette’s macro-conceptualization of an archetextual network. Nikolajeva specifically mentions Genette’s intertextual categories in *Aesthetic Approaches to Children’s Literature*, calling the relationship that exists between related works such as sequences and narrative tie-ins anagrams with “parallels in plot, character gallery, imagery, and so on,” categories initially dependent upon a basic awareness of structure, and later of story significances such as theme (37). These tie-ins demonstrate an explicit intertextual relationship that mimics the intratextuality of a sequence, meaning each progressive addition develops the aesthetics of the world in ways that are both comparable and identifiable when read alongside the base story logic of the Actual, a story world most readers will already be familiar with and somewhat invested in.

Since intertextual allusions are a common feature in many children’s stories, Nikolajeva offers a lengthy, if general, introduction to the topic, including a discussion of the various forms that may come up in a critical discussion of the term. Of the forms established by Genette, intratextuality has the most bearing on a fictional worlds study. This subcategory considers an author’s links to his or her own works (Nikolajeva, *Aesthetic Approaches* 41). There are both micro and macro methods of criticism. Microtextual analysis looks at specific details while macrotextual analysis looks at an entire work. Within sequences and universes this might

expand somewhat. In many instances an entire novel is only one level of intertext. Nikolajeva explains that, rather than issues of similarity based on influence, intertextual analysis examines how “later text[s] develop motifs, patterns, or ideas from [textual] predecessors” (Nikolajeva, *Aesthetic Approaches* 35). By highlighting development instead of comparison, intertextuality and taste focus on fictional worlds as habituses with an affective incentive where immersion and critique are forms of play that an author’s mastery of form, and establishment of an *oeuvre*, encourages as a response over time.

The explicit nature of references as intratextual is what is important for identifying intentionality and encouraging invitation and immersion for developing readers. While Nikolajeva and other scholars consider overt references the least critically significant form of intertextuality and regard these as less complex than indirect allusions and influence (*Aesthetic Approaches* 38, 43), intratextuality is certainly the most semiotic category as it calls to mind a constellation of narrative significances that make up the fictional culture alongside the reference itself. In addition, intratextuality is the most affectively significant category based on theories of aesthetic fluency. Doležel, one of the only fictional world scholars to study semiotics and consider aspects of intertextuality, quickly disregards this category as well (see *Heterocosmica* 199-202). Yet the explicitness of intratextual references marks them as direct aesthetic appeals, an intentional context that appeals to young readers with limited repertoires and gives them a credible sense of fluency. More importantly, when Nodelman and Reimer discuss the “interconnectedness of literary texts” they argue that emphasizing sequencing in literature can help “carry the student to a higher level of [aesthetic] understanding” (45). I would add that intentional appeals or threads of aesthetic logic in tandem with a reader’s developing aesthetic fluency make each fictional world culturally significant to readers’ increasing interest and

immersion. The intertextual logic defines the ethos of a world and is meant to be wholly accessible as a semiotic element. Perhaps this makes this form of intertextuality less complex, but certainly not less meaningful. It is quite conducive to those features that Cadden argues are intrinsic to children's literature: invitation and immersion ("The Need for Distance").

Stories, like *Quest for the Spark* and *Rose*, are inherently archetextual, "carefully signpost[ing]" relationships to Actual worlds (Allen 99). Each of Smith's expansions is clearly marked as a "Bone novel," for example. While this is at the most basic an issue of marketing, Allen explains that labels such as these are also an issue of intertextuality and reception (99). Smith's use of archetextual ordering allows for certain omissions in a story based on what the reader already brings to a text; reinforcing stories as a part of a self-enclosed whole issues a promise of sorts to accept the pre-established elements of an Actual as true.

I will note the importance of the distinction between open and closed models of intertextuality here. A post-structuralist understanding of intertextuality emphasizes the ideological elements of children's literature in relation to the *real* world, while a structuralist or closed interpretation of intertextuality highlights aesthetics and analyzes the artistic and stylistic patterns of an Actual to determine the shifting/developing tastes of readers an author encourages in relation to an imagined world. Ideology takes a back seat in terms of discovering those features that both invite and immerse readers in the habitus. That said, of course, some discussion of the ideological and rhetorical significances certainly becomes important in terms of character, setting, and story since these will inevitably impact the aesthetics, as we will see in chapter two and my discussion of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* sequence.

Intertextuality works alongside both ideological and aesthetic points of reference, though the ideological has received more study for some time now, especially within children's

literature criticism where social and ideological studies are often privileged over aesthetics. The explicit intertextuality that makes up the structural basis for the literary worlds and universes that populate children's literature demonstrates purposeful intent to link novels and works in terms of aesthetics, however. Elizabeth Parsons notes that the "core conflict" of ideology with regard to the scholarship of children's literature is that "analysis is politicized around [the] question of values" (114). Ideological notions of cultural and social implications of stories and art are limited to *belief* systems and often call to mind negative associations implicit to dis-empowered reading. Yet cultural aesthetics are also important, as scholars like Michael Parsons and Nodelman and Reimer, whom engage with the aesthetic side of reading and art, remind us. Generic and artistic preferences, especially amongst fan cultures, allow socializing because of shared interests as well as beliefs. Categories of inter-texts that restrict free intertextual play are important here. While Wilkie-Stibbs explains that the goal of free intertextual play is to "[initiate] young readers into the dominant literary, linguistic and cultural codes of the home culture" and "amass a wide-ranging repertoire of generic possibilities" that post-structuralists engage with as open intertextuality (Wilkie-Stibbs 177), a fictional worlds theory for children's literature in many instances constrains the intertextual reading process to a degree necessary to highlight the semiotic elements of a world that solidify virtual presence and immerse young readers. Intertextual logic is not necessarily about relating back to the Actual from a realist position, where values are paramount for socialization processes, though this may be and often is a significant factor. Instead, intertextual logic seeks to constrain the literary repertoire to accessible models that act as a specific domain. This domain then creates an aesthetic habitus and reinforces an imaginative world as real and virtually habitable. It empowers the pretense of a narrative by continuing play through narrative expansion. So, while the intertextual features

(names, plot points, etc.) that ensure the relationship between works across the sequence and tie-ins may be textually simplistic, they are also important to the development of aesthetic fluency with regards to imagined habituses and taste cultures. Fictional worlds invest in limited literary repertoires that encourage confidence and narrative-aesthetic fluency.

Fictional Worlds and Universes

So far, I've relied heavily on the Bone universe to offer examples of the general theory of fictional and possible worlds with some explanation as to how sequences and literary universes complicate possible readings of social or aesthetic significances as the narratives shift and change to become more intricate and reduce elements of incompleteness (the defining aspect of most fiction). This, for the most part, sets sequence fiction apart as a genre, but also increases the likelihood of immersion and the development of an imaginative world into a taste culture based on shared literary interests and aesthetic fluency. A single Harry Potter novel would not have become the cultural phenomena that the sequence became, for example. Imaginative worlds like Narnia, Prydain, Hogwarts, and New Moon are examples of both children's literature *and* children's culture since children incorporate these representations, symbols, ideologies, and aesthetics into their everyday lives and play (Lewis; Alexander; Rowling; Montgomery). These texts function as an invitation for community and shared aesthetics in a way that single novels typically will not.

More importantly, sequences are more interpretable, less ambiguous fictional worlds. While this may make them seem less challenging from a critical perspective, sequences offer entertainment of a different sort that encourages the development of young readers through aesthetic appreciation, something we should encourage as lovers of literature. For instance, sequences offer a way to approach the articulation of a world's ethos, its semiotic signature, in

ways that offer the rare currency of positive affirmation as the reader gains successive aesthetic fluency with regard to the literary habitus. Authors of this genre, and in many cases their readers, participate in Thomas G. Pavel's notion of Magna Operas.

According to Pavel, Magna Operas are more complex as literary works, but less imaginary. He describes them as salient worlds that demonstrate a logical consistency that encourages a more precise understanding of fiction and results in a more dedicated sense of immersion (Pavel 64). In other words, they are fictional worlds whose construction through various media and/or genres exhibits a salient and recognizable form for deconstruction. These types of fictional worlds often include books of rules that both cement the higher-order considerations of the world and suggest a cultural following situated in an appreciation for the ethos and semiotic attributes of the story world. The merchandise is an accepted part of the world and its semiotic critique rather than a tool for marketing. Magna Operas represent an attempt to pinpoint the appeal that draws us in and keeps us coming back. Many of the more popular literary universes encourage compendiums that examine the intricacies of character, place, and plot written sometimes by the authors of the Actual, as is the case with the Bone universe, or by the many fans as is the case with Terry Pratchett's Discworld (see *Turtle Recall*). In either case, the publication of these rule books demonstrates the very real interest readers acquire in response to the logical and creative structure of their favorite literary worlds. Stand-alone novels will rarely achieve this sort of logical consistency, and even less frequently hold the attention of readers long enough to consider *how* a fictional world functions aesthetically.

World compendiums also clarify the important aspects of the ethos of a world as seen through the lens of aesthetic development and textual change. Many books of this nature begin to develop a physical presence through maps and other visual artifacts that challenge the

incompleteness of the fiction further in a form of multimodal interpretation, for example. This is especially true of children's literature where multimodal texts and transmedia story worlds are prevalent enough to be commonplace. There is a certain materiality that expansions like this encourage that meet expectations of pretend play typically associated with children rather than adults. Smith's *Bone Handbook* provides simplistic summaries of the characters that reside in the Bone universe (10-27). Then there are overviews of significant places, such as Granma Ben's farm and Lucius's tavern, as well as various narrative shorts. Also included, however, is a rat creature recipe for quiche that both commemorates a quirky running joke that appears in the *Actual* and re-emerges in *The Quest for the Spark* (Smith, *Bone Handbook* 32-35). Each of these is a form of expansion situated in playful responses, and an interpretation of accessible humor that appeals only to truly invested readers. As an aspect of character contextualized with rat creatures, this also marks a very specific aspect of the ethos of Bone.

The Art of Bone on the other hand is a compendium that reads as though it offers a much more in-depth analysis of Smith's process for creating the *Actual*. It includes paratextual excerpts on the planning for the possible story arcs that later expand the universe. It also details much of the minutiae that the more simplistic *Handbook* glosses over and is written more in keeping with the serious style of *Rose*. A contrast between the simple and complex emerges in the two available handbooks that clearly qualifies Smith's world as a *Magna Opera* and reinforces the dualistic ethos of the *Actual* where the *Bones* are comic interlopers in the fierce struggles within the Valley. More specifically, the *Bone* saga creates a contrast between the serious, high fantasy of the Valley visually characterized through realism and the often ironic, dry humor of the *Bones* portrayed with less detail and a move towards visual metaphor (see McCloud 36-38). This contrast continues in the two histories/mythologies that Smith creates for

his world. Apart from creating the back story for the relationship between Lucius, Granma Ben, and Briar (the Hooded One), *Rose* begins with a history of the dreaming and the dragons that establishes an almost biblical and certainly mythical tone for the narrative.

When the world was very, very new, and dreams had not yet receded from the waking day . . . The first dragon was a queen named Mim. And Mim was the keeper of all who dreamed. (Smith, *Rose* 2).

Language that mimics the creation story of the Bible in cadence and imagery sets the more realistic characters apart from the Bones through expansionist backstories. In *Tall Tales*, the language is more in keeping with a sort of folk history as narrated by Smiley Bone who is always irreverent as a character. Set around a campfire amidst a group of young Bone Scouts,¹¹ Smiley shares the history of the Bones in a series of tall tales more in keeping with Paul Bunyan and the hyperbolic stories of Daniel Boone (See *Stupid Rat Tales*). The prequel, spin-off, and handbooks all support the duality that makes up the ethos of the Actual; however, each addition, including the somewhat paratextual additions, also deconstructs the incomplete aspects of that Actual. So, each expansion is a savvy reconstruction of aesthetic logic and continuing fictional play, sometimes through theme and sometimes through character or place that remains accessible to Bone, carefully compossible with all other works in the universe. This complementarity is what maintains and supports aesthetic fluency while allowing readers to pick and choose favorites within the universe—the final stage of aesthetic development wherein the reader must interpret and critique a work in order to fully embrace it. So, the process of expansion encourages a deeper understanding and simultaneous ownership of the Magna Opera (the universe) that moves

¹¹ This is a play on the Boy Scouts, made apparent by the setting and uniforms Smith uses in the scene.

the reader through each of the aesthetic milestones that help engender an appreciation for art. It is this process that encourages young readers to take up fan fiction as a form of literary play.

Sequences and universes are an opportunity to approach the study of texts as whole bodies of imaginative experience and models of aesthetic logic and conceptualization. They also encourage scholars to study children's literature as cultural play and as a form of critical development where authors move readers through the various stages of aesthetic development via the use of intentional and interpretable structure. Since these elaborate story worlds demonstrate an intentional ethos and often a possible relationship with any number of expansionist, extensional novels, the logic that works such as these demonstrate offers a unique insight into literary studies as cultural studies with shifts in aesthetics and ideologies. The world of Bone is less incomplete, and, therefore what most fictional worlds scholars would call less complex. It is, however, an example of a well-developed, invitational and immersive work of fiction and a prime example of what texts can do as worlds.

Conclusion

In his discussion of fantasy worlds, Peter Hunt explains that critics of the genre argue that “a great many fantasy worlds do not cater to a developing mind at all: the real world may be seen as being full of arbitrary adult controlled restrictions, but for this is substituted another world, often of even more arcane restrictions” (Hunt and Lenz 4). The same may be said of any fictional sequence that invests in creating an imagined model of reality. Yet this assumes that the process of engaging and learning fictional rules lacks any developmental value. We might assume, however, that every fictional world is in some way a commentary on the real world and its rules even if it represents a desire to escape in some way (Hunt and Lenz 7).

Hunt and Lenz address the importance of fantasy as a genre in *Alternative Worlds*, but why have we not taken up sequence fiction and fictional or imaginary worlds as a genre as well? Nikolajeva offers a basic terminology for the relationships that exist between extensional texts, but her work does little to offer a theory that examines the logic behind a world, its imaginative construct with a recognizable/analyzable form, and the way it develops readers in any meaningful way. Instead the significance of literary worlds as genres of art has been overlooked in favor of examining specific examples. There are any number of critical studies that look at sequences individually. The Chronicles of Narnia, His Dark Materials, Harry Potter, and The Hunger Games have all been examined from a number of different theoretical viewpoints, just as an example. This does little to examine how the genre engages and advances an appreciation for the aesthetic logic behind its form, however. Instead, in an eagerness to publish on contemporary topics as cultural commentary, the methods of analysis of sequences often overlook the comprehensive aesthetics of structure and patterns of intertextual growth of a world. For instance, many of the critical sources about Harry Potter, including the two well-known critical anthologies—*Reading Harry Potter* edited by Giselle Liza Anatol and *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter* edited by Elizabeth Heilman—were released before the conclusion of the sequence, *The Deathly Hallows*. Concluding texts, of course, can vastly change the overall interpretations *and* responses to a lengthy series of texts (*if* the structure of those related texts has a clear beginning and end), and preclude any true critique at the very least of the structural aspects of the series. Aesthetics is, as I have already noted, lacking as a field of study for children's literature. My argument is that any generic understanding of sequences that demonstrate intentional and extensional contexts and a shared, accessible ethos must be taken up as an aesthetic or semiotic world to better understand its appeal to readers and the ways

individual examples (of worlds) balance between maintaining and developing a story world to create a story ethos that helps readers to expand aesthetic appreciation through creation and variance in terms of taste.

Once again, the cultural moment, which transitions audiences from fictional world (Harry Potter) to fictional world (Twilight) to fictional world (The Hunger Games) in books and movies seems to indicate that the time to take up this phenomenon is now. Scholars of children's literature are ideally positioned to address this situation in terms of the development of theory and study since many of the more popular examples are children's books or television and film adapted for children. Children's sequences, unlike their counterparts in other adult literary genres, enjoy the exceptional status of earning praise for creating the expansive worlds that encourage immersion, which is seen as intellectual play, whereas adult genres are typically relegated to the study of fandom and escapism. Within the study of children's literature, there remain pockets of critical prejudice that disregard the credibility of certain subgenres within the discipline as well. Sequences, often lumped in with series fiction, typically suffer this same fate, and are disregarded as critically insignificant by comparison. The trend in world building suggests that we can no longer afford this type of prejudice if we hope to understand the way the imaginative and cultural literacies important to children today are developing.

I should clarify here that, ultimately, my generic interest is in worlds rather than sequences. Sequences, like series fiction, build fictional worlds as an imperative, and are an obvious example of literature that invests in world creation; but spin-offs, cross-overs, prequels, sequels, and literature largely taken up in terms of marketing rather than aesthetics, all expand the fictional worlds of which they are a satellite in the same way and to the same effect—developing the structure of a novel into a cluster of texts that more appropriately creates a

universe and allows for growth of a semiotic habitus. All these expansions appeal to readers, young or old, that invest in the intratextual design of familiar elements. Nickelodeon's most recent spin-off to the Avatar: The Last Air Bender, The Legend of Korra series, is one such recent example—similar yet vastly different from the Actual world that the television show continues to adapt. Where this differs from formula fiction is in the world appeals, which are more exclusive, and a more specific repertoire. Doležel refers to intratextual links between worlds as translation (see *Heterocosmica*205). The implication is that references of this nature act as a shared language, with surrounding cultural significations or aesthetic dialects between texts (the visual blending of fantastic/cartoonish Bones and animals with the more realistic human characters as a contrast within the Bone universe, for example). Series fiction relies on certain formulas shared within the genre, but sequences and other possible world expansions rely on specific intertextual features on an elaborate, micro level that can more accurately be described as interworld rather than intertextual because of the aesthetic fluency that encourages strong emotional responses to these moments. Doležel adds that since world semantics travel via semiotic channels an aesthetic is conceptually understood as an artistic culture and an indication of worldness (*Heterocosmica*20). These features or channels may be linguistic, visual, auditory, narrative, generic, aesthetic, or some combination thereof (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 22). World semantics should, above all, however, be understood as exclusive—an ethos or social representation that is an indication of a three-dimensional, concrete understanding of worlds rather than a two-dimensional constraint of texts. There is an implied difference between stories that encourage conceptualization above and beyond the basic constraints of narrative, highlighting verisimilitude to the point of structuring imagined experience.

In some ways, a theory of possible worlds that emphasizes expansion and building layer upon layer of a world's aesthetics is not unlike comparative children's literature. It requires that we think in semiotic terms wherein texts function as a culture or habitus, one that grows out of shared literary and/or artistic tastes. A change within and across the texts within fictional worlds can be extreme or subtle. While a single world must share aesthetics, it does not necessarily imply that the various ideologies remain consistent, which is also an important consideration when examining fictional worlds. Even representations of childhood may change drastically in a single sequence, for example, and for any number of reasons.

Epic worlds as a literary genre assume the reading experience becomes more enjoyable as our imaginative models expand, however. And expansion is the key here as the growth and continuing changes to those worlds that we have already come to love ensure that our attention does not waver while our aesthetic appreciation expands and develops to include new avenues for exploration. As we add to the texts that initially grab our attention, we encounter the variation necessary to maintain our attention (Nodelman and Reimer 207). So, the epic worlds developed beyond a single story or episode allow for a more enjoyable reading experience as they encourage us as readers to both return to the familiar and experience something new at the same time. More importantly, we grow with and from the worlds that capture our attention so effectively as we come to care for the people and places that populate the worlds of our imagination; a comparative analysis between works in a universe can demonstrate the shape and manner of that growth.

An understanding of literature and narrative is dependent upon a reader's abilities to relate and transfer what they read to their experience in the real world, and some genres encourage this process more overtly than others. As critics of children's literature, it is important

that we remember that this process is inherently a playful one, however. There is currently very little by way of a theory that attempts an understanding of the ways in which we encounter a story world, and for what reasons. This means that we have no theory that takes up texts as play and pretense beyond individual reader responses, which is a seriously limited view on sequences as fictional worlds (which are imminently interpretable). Moreover, the last several decades of children's literature criticism emphasizes ideology as socialization rather than the socialization that occurs because of shared aesthetic tastes, another serious oversight. The former approach devalues considerations of *where we go* when we read a book to privilege what books may implicitly teach us about the real world. The aesthetics that underpin the formation of fictional worlds, and immersion into them, informs our tastes and perceptions of the world quite as significantly as a text's ideological underpinnings. The world of Comic Cons is vastly different than an academic conference, for example, but no less impactful for its participants.

In this first chapter I have introduced fictional worlds as concepts with possible worlds as in-roads into the study of spin-offs and other related texts. I have laid out the significant terms and the developmental benefits of the theory as well as how these might bear fruit for the study of children's literature. It should also be apparent, however, that the multi-faceted imaginative worlds and the plethora of new and inventive texts that are so familiar to us as children's literature specialists lay a foundation for developing the theory of fictional expansion beyond anything previously taken up by the fictional worlds critics whose canonical and even contemporary texts offer less by the way of textual play than children's fiction. In other words, I want to stress that we can contribute much to the further development of a theory of fictional worlds as well, beyond semantic understandings and moving into the purview of aesthetics (something that Heidegger begins and, much later, Hayot ostensibly continues). The intertextual

structure of the texts and worlds that make this genre such a valuable commodity within this field of study is an important demonstration of world ethos that most adult literature does not employ. World repertoire can tell us much about ethos that single novels simply cannot. World repertoire will also necessarily develop ethos in a way that is exceptional for the study of fictional worlds, as I will demonstrate more fully in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER II: EPIC STRUCTURE AND WORLD BUILDING:
PHILIP PULLMAN AND AESTHETICS IN
HIS DARK MATERIALS

In chapter one I discussed the ubiquity of related works and expansive story worlds in children's literature, but Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* provides a particularly interesting sample for applying a theory of world development across multiple works. Some of his additions are within a closed sequential Actual, an omnibus of the novels from the original story arc. Others are a series of possible, spin-off worlds. The Actual, as delineated in *The Golden Compass*, *Subtle Knife*, and *Amber Spyglass*, also represents something of a canonical epic. It is clearly intended for young readers and is already accepted as critically significant, with a fairly large body of scholarly work in response to the original sequence (see Hunt and Lenz; Lenz and Scott; Barfield and Cox). There is, however, little to no scholarly attention in response to the newer additions to the universe, especially those released in non-traditional mediums such as Pullman's audio-books or Kindle e-books like *The Collectors* released in 2015. Additionally, in the paratextual material presented in later print editions alongside the novellas that Pullman authored, he seems to have changed directions somewhat over time in terms of those elements that are thematically foregrounded. This is an important aesthetic consideration, as it reshapes the most likely interpretations of his world for readers, who have come to regard the world based on its total design.

Alongside thematic revisions to story, Pullman engages with the imaginary world in new ways involving artifacts that seem crafted to complement his thematic changes even further. This makes his fictional universe a notable work regarding the aesthetic milestones a young reader might reach since it equally balances familiar features with new directions in semiotics.

This is one of the key components of my argument for the value of taking up sequences as a genre with specific structural and aesthetic constraints. By highlighting how these changes work, I will illustrate some of the benefits of the self-enclosed framework as a literary form that appeals to an ongoing process of appreciation alongside personal taste development, sometimes in new and previously unexplored artistic directions, through large scale world building.

The last chapter introduces the importance of world building and narrative expansion beyond an Actual. This chapter will place more focus on the concept of expansion. Expansion shapes imagined responses into more concrete representations with thematic arcs, and sometimes with new socializing or ideological elements as well. Works that create elaborate possible worlds are also significant in that they create inroads for new experiences in taste and literary and/or artistic appreciation, and often change dramatically after drawing readers in through intratextuality (or intratextuality across accessible works in a universe). The process of expansion through thematic, plot, character, and stylistic intratextuality is necessary for epics to work. Notably, quite a bit of the existing scholarship on His Dark Materials highlights intertextuality as foundational to Pullman's story and structure since it is a reworking of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (see Hatlen; King; Matthews; Scott; K. Smith). However, this focus on Milton fails to acknowledge the intratextual aesthetics that Pullman builds to create a fictional world extant through accessibility and foundational frameworks. For readers unfamiliar with *Paradise Lost*, and even those who might miss the connection, the ethos and intratextual framework Pullman establishes early in the first novel of the sequence is what draws readers into subsequent works within the Actual, and encourages readers to continue as the world expands further to reach the epic proportions specific to the genre as well as to Pullman's plot and story.

Building is a key word with sequences since the starting point for how a reader reacts to a fictional world happens quickly in response to the reading, but also requires structural maintenance or consistency across a large body of text that may span two, three, five, seven, or any number of novels *before reaching a conclusion*. I will reinforce that the self-enclosed aspect (an Actual requires a clear beginning and end) is a requirement of the genre and aids immersion into the fictional world. Such enclosure constrains interpretation and accessibility; these both directly impact believability, which is equivalent to truth in fiction (Ronen 33-42). These constraining features can be read as the larger part of a world's ethos. While this sense of a separate world that is as complete and yet complex and expandable as the one in which they live is not something young readers can always articulate, it is nevertheless recognizable through the textual relationships that develop across sequences where patterns between books shape character, theme, plot, and style in ways that demonstrate this consistency throughout. It is structured and reliable, while allowing for creative expression through expansion as well.

Yet these accessible characteristics have little to do with the literary influence of Milton, Blake, or the Bible in Pullman's story world (Hatlen 88-91). Most young readers will remain unaware of the subtle and more overt interweaving of literary works and archetypes such as these; however, they will likely begin to recognize the patterns of style and thematics of the present text they are reading early on as they become invested in the story. The remaining sections of this chapter will look at how an intratextual ethos progresses before examining how possible worlds adapt and expand an Actual in new ways to appeal to the development of creative expression and critical insight (the latter aesthetic stages), which sequences and epic world building encourage. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of these developmental milestones regarding Pullman's universe.

Ethos

From this point forward, I suggest a methodology for the study and interpretation of the ethos as the foundational element of a literary universe. This begins with a discussion of the ethos of an Actual before addressing how possible worlds expand and create opportunities based on narrative gaps that provide direction for the likeliest ways to grow a world even further. The ethos is the only real limiting factor for expansion from novel to novel (text to text) as plots can be revised by shifting perspective to create a new “truth.” By contrast, the basic discourse of story is more tightly bound by and as the ethos develops across an Actual. As readers invest more heavily in the developing ethos, they reach towards the latter developmental stages of aesthetic awareness and at the same time demonstrate an element of mastery if not articulation of an ethos. For this reason, the creative refashioning of a familiar world, one established in an Actual, involves a certain measure of risk for authors. Readers engaging with the intratextual constraints established through a sequence already gain a measure of acquisition or aesthetic fluency. But it is this acquisition of ethos that draws readers back into a world to engage with *new* possible worlds within the universe as they experience familiar pleasure (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 370). Any addition to a fully realized story world is already subject to a level of critique that most single narratives never receive from young readers. Worlds established through sequences are constrained by specific stylistic rules in ways that limit an author’s choices just as surely as they open others. Authors must play by the rules they establish in an Actual, and this becomes a dialogue of sorts between author and reader in a process of creation and critique that many of this genre expect to engage in. I argue that the continuation of a story world after an audience has already worked to achieve the early aesthetic milestones, which mostly deal with the process of comprehension, makes reaching the latter aesthetic milestones

much more likely. Possible worlds help to transition young readers into fans and finally critics as a result of this expectation (see Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 7).

To understand the ethos of His Dark Materials we begin with *The Golden Compass*, as it serves as the introduction to the story world. Pullman establishes two levels of narrative significance early on that shape how the universe functions: an adult sphere that relates the political intrigue and social hierarchy that are the driving force behind Lyra's adventure, and the young adult sphere that places the action in the adolescent language and concepts of Lyra and Will. The child/adult dichotomy shapes the narration and action of the world. Sometimes representation of Lyra and Will's immediate social sphere works in tandem with the representation of the adult world they orbit and helps transition them from child to adult with little trouble. Sometimes their adolescent perspectives reveal an arbitrary opposition to what they expect to be moral or correct social behavior, highlighting inconsistencies between the two. The reader is consistently aware of the shades and complexities of these spheres as they initially orbit and ultimately merge by the conclusion of the sequence. Lyra, the main protagonist, and later, Will, are the fulcrum by which the push and pull between these narrative perspectives are made known, as well as the main focalizers (though there are other adult focalizers, including the narrative voice itself), hence the sequence's designation as children's literature.

Pullman initially contrasts the way Lyra sees the world alongside adult focalizers, such as the Jordan College's scholars, Lord Asriel, the Gyptians, Lee Scoresby, or Serafina Pekkala, to name a few. This leads to a journey that eventually results in a complex self-awareness. The child protagonist becomes increasingly aware of (and moves beyond) the petty political intrigue of the adult world into a realm of morality and ethical reasoning that sets her apart. At the same time, she begins to better understand the manipulations and ideological differences between the

factions that war with one another in the world around her. This will later shape a redemption of sorts that is facilitated through the overt double consciousness of Pullman's style (Squires 86-89).

Structurally, it is the first three chapters of *The Golden Compass* that work to establish the explicit openness that Pullman relies upon for representing the dichotomy between child and adult (3-49). First, Asriel is quick to recognize Lyra's ability to comprehend nuance, and he uses this to his advantage. When he catches Lyra in the Master's study and is about to send her away, Lyra reveals the Master's plot to poison Lord Asriel (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 11). He makes the quick decision to encourage her rather than maintaining the normal boundaries between the adult/child spheres.

Since you're in there, you can make yourself useful. Watch the Master closely when he comes in. If you tell me something interesting about him, I'll keep you from getting further into the trouble you're already in. (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 12)

Asriel is not exactly relying on Lyra here as he has already accepted the reality of foul play, but he *is* encouraging her to observe in such a way that she begins to learn more about the adult world that she orbits, up until this point, somewhat incidentally. Hidden away, Lyra watches Asriel's political maneuvering. Once the dramatic situation is established, Pullman returns to establishing the narrative situation where the world as viewed through the eyes of child focalizers competes and collides with the adult sphere. When Lyra asks if she can come with him to the North, Asriel pauses; this pause is important since Asriel is the first adult character to recognize the potential that Lyra possesses despite her age.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her as if for the first time. His daemon turned her great tawny leopard eyes on her too, and under the concentrated gaze of both of them, Lyra blushed. (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 22)

It is in this narrative moment that the veil is first lifted between the two spheres of influence, when Lord Asriel acknowledges the potential that Lyra possesses. Almost immediately after, Pullman switches focalizers and follows a conversation between the Master and the Librarian. In terms of story significance, this passage is important because it introduces the alethiometer, which Lyra first reads just as intuitively as she reads the adult situations around her. It also introduces a prophecy that revolves around Lyra, predicting that her inability to understand the significance of what is happening around her will result in her betrayal of a friend (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 24). Before the passage concludes, the Librarian goes on to explain that it is “the duty of the old . . . to be anxious of the young,” before adding that it is “the duty of the young . . . to scorn the anxiety of the old” (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 24) suggesting the inability to comprehend the complexities of these two spheres objectively is central to what is to happen. The push and pull of this narrative dichotomy complement¹² the plot and situate Pullman’s explicit narration as a part of the ethos of the Actual in this way.

Pullman reinforces this opening narrative structure once again in the third chapter, fully cementing the ethos. It is in this chapter that Pullman overtly addresses the narrative situation. The narrator explains that “just as [Lyra is] unaware of the hidden currents of politics running below the surface of College affairs, so the Scholars . . . [are] unable to see the rich seething stew of alliances and enmities and feuds and treaties which was a child’s life” (Pullman, *The Golden*

¹² Eric Hayot argues that complementarity between all story elements is what shapes a story into a concrete representation of a world beyond the text. He describes it as a feature of “worldness” (23-30).

Compass 26). By handling the complexities of a child's social interactions in this way, Pullman suggests that his voice will indeed be flawed, but the overt illustration of opposing ideologies, both adult *and* child, as equally complex will make up for this. Pullman's ethos is a working illustration of the irony of narration where adult authors attempt an adolescent authenticity of voice that creates a dichotomy peculiar to children's literature (Cadden, "The Irony" 132). He makes this generic, literary quirk central to the story itself and its narration with both child and adult focalizers, broadening the audience and adding to the complexity of style through aesthetic complementarity. The journey that Lyra and Will engage in is an attempt to make sense of these competing child/adult voices in order to embrace an identity true to themselves once they mature. It is not about obtaining functionality in the world, but self-awareness.

Since Lyra and Will are the primary focalizers for the sequence it is inevitable that their characterization becomes a part of the initial ethos. Pullman establishes Lyra Belaqua as a character with the inherent ability to manipulate the system of the Actual, with an emphasis on the intuitive quality of her ease to adapt to situations. She has a keen sense of adventure, as the opening episode illustrates, and can disregard rules without much conscience, as the narrator explicitly states. More important, though, is her tendency to observe the interactions of others around her. She is a storehouse of information, able to reason quickly about the hidden meanings involved in situations as we see by her ability to read the golden compass. We might initially highlight the way this situates gender since Lyra is continually struggling for agency in ways that scholars such as Roberta Seelinger-Trites argue are typical of feminist children's novels (*Waking Sleeping Beauty* 4); however, Lyra is quick to cede much of her agency later in the sequence (but *still within the Actual*) and accept more traditional gender roles once Will's character is introduced to the narrative. This suggests that Lyra's struggle is situated much more

firmly within the child/adult dichotomy that is both backgrounded by the generic attributes of the story as a work for children and foregrounded through Pullman's narrative style and voice. Thus, while *The Golden Compass* clearly fits with what Seelinger-Trites might refer to as a feminist children's novel, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* would undoubtedly read as less so. This is only one example of the ways that the structure of sequences shifts theoretical readings due to the nature of genre as expanding across works and into worlds. Aesthetic concerns such as narrative voice are a necessarily consistent feature of world development due to intratextual ethos, for both series and sequences, but ideological elements may shift more easily since they are less intentional and frequently even unconscious on the part of an author.

The conclusion encourages an interpretation of the arc that foregrounds the levels of agency and moral understanding Pullman grants between adults and children. The conclusion of an introductory story within a sequence provides a frame for comparing backgrounded and foregrounded information for the remaining additions to the sequence, as opposed to series novels that work independently and intratextually within the universe. In a sense, the conclusion of *The Golden Compass* is the introduction to the Actual or main arc. In this instance it is pivotal to foregrounding an emphasis on the child/adult dichotomy and the upcoming action for the next installment. As Lyra is determining what she should do next, having failed to save Roger, she bases her decision not on any real moral understanding of the situation, but as a reaction against those that she sees as morally compromised—her mother and father (traditional figures of adult authority). She relies heavily on Pantalaimon's evaluation of the situation noting that dust is the central focus of the conflict.

Dust. [Lord Asriel] is going to find the source of Dust and destroy it And the Oblation Board and the Church and Bolvangar and Mrs. Coulter and all, they want to destroy it too. (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 292)

From this Lyra can reason that “[b]ecause . . . *they* all think dust is bad, it must be good” (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 292). Her initial moral reasoning is more about obtaining agency than any real conscious understanding of why things are either right or wrong. More important, at this point in the sequence she sets herself against the constraints placed on her as a result of her status as child and not necessarily her gender by reacting against all the adult institutions at play (including Mrs. Coulter).

How we define agency is similarly important to this reading. Since agency, which Robyn McCallum and John Stephens define as the “action of either countering or violating [social constraints]” (368), becomes Lyra’s defining motivational factor within the initial narrative that frames the world, understanding exactly what she is working against is a key component of characterization in the novels. For this reason, character and plot significance become somewhat interchangeable within the Actual and encourage readers to make the intellectual leap overtly as they must actively seek out the reasoning behind Lyra’s actions as reactive against the political moves made by adults.

Returning for the moment to the issue of immersion, this merging of multiple story elements together in terms of structure and significance is notable. McCallum and Stevens identify narration and characterization as the discourse features of story most likely to help young readers identify and connect with a story (362). Doležel agrees with this interpretation in terms of world development, though he applies action theory as the basis for reading these aspects of a fictional world as uniquely significant to semiotic immersion (*Heterocosmica* 55-

56). He highlights the role of plot and character as factors that render an ethos believable and true. More specifically, the agents or characters control plot elements. Sequences that develop the story of a single character or small group of main characters necessarily develop the correlation between character and action more deeply. The actions they take dictate reactions in other characters and events as well, and narration determines the subjective truth of fiction in much the same way that rhetoric can shape reality through perception (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 59-61). Plot and dialogue reveal motivation to accomplish this, and motivation shapes plot. These are the interactions between story significances, but it is clear that character actions are less subjective than the other elements as action is an intentional element of story grammar. For scholars and more advanced readers especially, when story significance, or the “organization of social attitudes and values” that reveal subjectivity (McCallum and Stephens 362), complements the other aesthetic features like narration and characterization, immersion becomes much more likely and the imaginative realization becomes more concrete. This is what Pullman accomplishes so effectively—complementarity. So, a solid fictional world is necessarily highly intentional in terms of aesthetics if not ideologies. The complementary structure that Pullman establishes, creating an ethos that uses motivation, character, and plot in concert to highlight the adult/child dichotomy that is most typical in children’s literature, is one reason that I would argue Pullman’s sequence was so critically acclaimed by scholars as it immersed both adult and young readers in that which makes children’s stories generically unique.

The Subtle Knife continues complementing the basic ethos with the establishment of character and action through Will, who also demonstrates that reading social cues is necessary for survival in an adult world. Will is a darker, less reckless character who reads the social cues around him more consciously and less intuitively than Lyra. Lyra’s tool of choice is a compass,

which guides, while Will wields a knife that takes both skill and precision. So, while the motivational structure between the main protagonist and the plot of the sequence continues to highlight the adult/child dichotomy established in the introductory novel, the second book develops further towards making self-awareness the guiding theme of the narrative, and for this reason it can be read as an intratextual aesthetic or a part of the main ethos of the sequence. Reading development requires tracking foregrounded elements and thematic elements carefully from novel to novel before situating the patterns together as a whole to interpret significance.

That said, repetition from novel to novel is not just a nod towards intratextuality. It makes reading these patterns far more likely for young readers and creates a pleasurable reading response by establishing aesthetic fluency as a result of textual familiarity that keeps readers invested in the world as the plot and story world progress. For this reason, *The Subtle Knife* introduces Will in much the same manner that we see Lyra for the first time, thus highlighting their similarities and differences together. Like the beginning of the first book, the second novel begins with a dramatic situation that places a young protagonist at the center of a highly nuanced form of adult-themed intrigue. *The Subtle Knife* begins with Will begging an elderly acquaintance to care for his ailing mother while he is away. The urgency of his request is heightened by an air of secrecy and the obvious reality that his mother is mentally ill. The reader is quickly made aware that Will's mother has questionable mental faculties, though there is some truth within her delusion as well since people really are out to get her and her son. It is beyond the knowledge and comprehension of the young protagonist's full understanding, but Will, like Lyra, instinctively adapts and acts to gain some measure of agency and control of the situation. Additionally, readers quickly learn the characteristics that motivate Will just as they did with Lyra. Whereas Lyra chases adventure and companionship, Will is guided by fear and secrecy, is

independent to the point of social isolation, and demonstrates a level of protective care for those in his circle that challenges aetnormative assumptions of appropriate behavior for a child character. Additionally, his role as caretaker makes him much more aware of the complexities of the adult world, and how these complexities control him as a child since he must manipulate the system to keep his family together. He is aware that if the truth of his situation is revealed they will be separated. He is constantly hiding and searching for safety through anonymity, which positions his character as a direct contrast, and potential complement, to Lyra's.

His independence is a key contrasting characteristic here in that he does not demonstrate the same extroverted need for approbation that Lyra does. Interestingly, this is reinforced by Will's lack of a daemon throughout most of the narrative, and it is this lack that also indicates daemons as a defining plot feature of ethos. Daemons are a foregrounded element even when absent from a protagonist. It is not until near the conclusion of the sequence that Will finally meets his daemon and solidifies this plot device as a rule of the world's ethos. Daemons exist, though a person may not be able to see or interact with them, even when multiple worlds exist alongside what we might consider the primary reality within the fantasy structure of a multidimensional world. At the same time, this development calls attention to the notion that Will is more certain or sure of his actions, or his ability to act as necessary, than Lyra, who first relies heavily on dialogue with her daemon and then on Will and his ability to make decisions about what they should or shouldn't do. And finally, he is established as a child character who will take lethal action against adults in order to accomplish what he feels he must, further challenging an aetnormative hierarchy that positions adults above children in terms of power, authority, and obeisance. It is this initial characteristic that draws Lyra to Will when he is described by the alethiometer as a "murderer" (Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* 28). Rather than

inspiring fear, Lyra immediately relaxes. As a murderer, unlike most children, Will is a “worthy companion” since this marks him as both useful and powerful (Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* 29).

The introduction between the two characters reinforces Lyra’s concern for agency that the conclusion of the initial novel establishes. This makes this introduction aesthetically intratextual in terms of the structural, sequential framework. Pullman’s beginning creates patterns in both characterization and plot development that demonstrate tight control of the direction of the story as it continues to expand episodically.

The basic character traits listed above, a basic unwillingness to accept authority as anything other than arbitrary, mean that Lyra and Will rarely rely on adults, and instead seek to do what’s right within morally complex situations by constantly assessing the decisions available to them. More importantly, they assess these situations according to their developing values rather than in accordance with the arbitrary standards of the adult world. That is not to say that Lyra and Will seek the sort of anarchy available within a world run by children. They are both uneasy and disdainful of the way the children run Citigazze, a city whose population is entirely made up of children as a result of the spectres attacking adult daemons in *The Subtle Knife*.

Pullman does not mask the moral complexities of the universe. They are, in fact, foregrounded and frequently addressed in terms of a young character’s frame of reference as well as an adult framework through the dialogue of adult focalizers such as the witches, the Gyptians, the Church, Mrs. Coulter, Mary Malone, and others. So, an interrogation of socio-political conflicts and moral behavior is once again central to the primary ethos of Pullman’s world. To suggest that the multiple story arcs that frame the motivations of adult characters only move the plot forward is clearly an oversimplification in a Bildungsroman, or coming of age, sequence. At the same time, most of these social complexities are only tangentially related to the contextual

framework that Lyra and Will have access to, reminding us that the narrative is directed as much towards the moral and ethical development of readers as it is to the character development of its protagonists.

The Amber Spyglass begins in a different manner, breaking away from the pattern that the first two novels create. Trilogies and larger sequences are useful tools structurally in terms of narrative development across a world because these allow not just for patterns to develop (it only requires two novels to successfully create a pattern after all), but because they allow for disruptions to patterns already established and can demonstrate greater emphasis on a specific direction/interpretation of a narrative as a result.¹³ All of the His Dark Materials sequence is episodic and therefore reads like short but either concurrent or chronological plot developments. Yet the beginning structure of the first and second novel follow a pattern that the third breaks from stylistically. *The Amber Spyglass* is not necessarily an episode that begins *in medias res*, but rather it is an Actual, intratextual continuation of the conclusion of *The Subtle Knife*. It begins *at the moment* the previous novel concludes. The opening of the previous two novels in the sequence can each be read on their own as independent episodes, though intratextual elements quickly appear within *The Subtle Knife* as it progresses. The stylistic change in the first chapter of the final book is a signpost of sorts that important transitions are beginning in terms of plot and story significance, and in the case of the trilogy, that a climax is nearing. While young readers may not have the critical skills to articulate this nuance, they *will* likely have the aesthetic fluency to recognize this change on some level, causing tension to rise instead of the

¹³ The Harry Potter sequence is a good example of this as the final novel breaks from the typical setting at Hogwarts, and instead becomes a more traditional quest novel. Arguably, a young reader is more likely to read the narrative significance of the novel differently because of the change in structure (see Winner 103)—though this may be an unconscious response in reaction to the disruption of aesthetic fluency.

pleasure that familiar artistic or literary patterns call to mind considering this expectation (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 373).

Lyra and shortly thereafter Will are still a focus for the opening action in the third novel, but the perspective or the focalizer is an important break in pattern as well. This book begins with an adult focalizer who is now unsure of her ideological/moral position. This uncertainty is within a context wherein Lyra and Will are increasingly aware and certain of the moral complexities at play as they are working together to achieve a more thorough understanding of the situation as the plot progresses. Instead of this growing certainty, Mrs. Coulter is at war with herself, and even her daemon is aware of this uncertainty.

Her daemon was discontented. He didn't like what she was doing here . . . and when he tried to express his concern, she brushed him away. He turned his back, contempt in every line of his body. (Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* 7)

This is one of the few moments when a character within the world is at odds, *in a true disagreement*, with his or her daemon. Characters and their daemons may interact and even help shape their actions and reactions together as if debating on a topic, but real discord is atypical within the world as Pullman develops it. Mrs. Coulter herself is unsure why she risks herself for Lyra. She is described as wondering “whether she had gone mad” in one of the few moments where she demonstrates truly moral behavior (Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* 8). Squires suggests this is one of the pivotal moments when Pullman illustrates that moral ambiguity is an adult problem within the context of the sequence, and Lyra’s character and behavior should be contrasted directly with her mother’s. Lyra is increasingly confident in her moral decision making while Mrs. Coulter, who has been reliant upon the Church, is shaken by her inability to accept the judgment of that institution as moral and right and is left without any real sense of a

moral compass to guide her (Squires 86). Lyra's morality is self-aware while Mrs. Coulter's is institutional.

The child/adult dichotomy is still a foregrounded concern in this opening scenario. The narrative still begins by placing the child protagonist within an adult world where events are primarily moving outside of their control, but in this instance the adult lacks the certainty and understanding of situation instead of the child. The roles have been inverted in such a way as to subtly call attention to the discrepancy in pattern and once again suggest a change has occurred. In this case, another indication of the progression towards the final climax is situated in ideology, and not simply style.

Ethos and Thematic Patterns

So far, we have discussed narrative choices in terms of style and perspective in addition to certain plot elements that make the world's design unique. As I have indicated, the most obvious structural significances in terms of theme are apparent only through the patterns that arise when looking at the Actual as it develops across these novels. The patterns are frequently backgrounded and foregrounded as necessary to indicate their growing significance. So certain themes may garner more emphasis as an Actual or its possible worlds continue to expand as well. In the case of Pullman's work, it is notable that possibility and world building are important themes/concepts across the texts, and not just the moral and social development of the characters that facilitate the literary allusions to works outside of Pullman's world. His *Dark Materials* is a world about multiple worlds, though this only really becomes apparent (foregrounded) at the conclusion of the first novel.

Lyra's first insight into the adult world of political intrigue does not just focus on the issue of Dust. The background of the photogram that Lord Asriel shows the scholars in his bid

for funding includes a city in the sky, and Lyra learns that something referred to as the Barnard-Stokes theory suggests that there are more worlds than their own (Pullman, *The Golden Compass* 18). *The Golden Compass* begins with the idea of another world and concludes with a bridge into another world. *The Subtle Knife* moves between three different worlds, and *The Amber Spyglass* moves between several (Squires 31). The concept of multiple worlds is increasingly important to the setting of the imaginative framework of Pullman's sequence and eventually underpins the morality of the choice and sacrifice that Will and Lyra make as well when they are forced to close all but a single window between worlds. Consistent with Pullman's overall style, His Dark Materials is a literary universe or imaginative world that hinges upon aesthetic juxtaposition—child/adult and familiar/strange (Squires 2). The latter dichotomy forces the characters and readers to leave their comfort zones and consider new situations and possibilities, while the former dichotomy encourages a revision of morality in the universe.

With increasing structural significance placed upon the notion of multiple, possible realms a new aesthetic dimension is added beyond the intertextual allusions that underpin the original Actual and its story significance. Lyra's and Will's joint conflict highlights these two competing themes (multiple worlds and morality) and working levels of story significance within the narrative. The first is linked to the intertextual works that Pullman intentionally relies upon for influence and emphasizes the moral dilemma that the children encounter when they must sacrifice their individual happiness to free the dead in *The Amber Spyglass* (Pullman 537-545). It is this decision that completes the prophecy of which Lyra is the key figure and signifies the conclusion of the Actual. Yet as chapter one of this study argues, all fiction relies heavily upon gaps to function. While one level of story is complete, the final level of Pullman's narrative (in terms of significance) is never-ending since it is based upon the concept of possibility and

inherently implies continuous fictional gaps. Will and Lyra may close the windows between worlds, but the reader is aware that those worlds exist within the fictional framework of Pullman's imaginative world. The two levels of story significance working in tandem mean that when one avenue concludes, another is just beginning for the reader. In this way the conclusion of the Actual, while fulfilling the generic constraints of a self-enclosed sequence, also appeals directly to the creative impulse in readers to continue filling gaps. It backgrounds the *story* in favor of foregrounding the *world* in a method similar to series fiction. By the time the Actual concludes, and prequels, sequels, or spin-offs are added to the universe, this backgrounded theme of world building becomes a primary, foregrounded focus as it is reinforced through both plot and structure as well as the expansions that follow.

Possible Worlds and Expansion

As I have already noted, Squires points out in her study of Pullman's epic that the notion of multiple worlds is a concept that becomes increasingly significant as the sequence progresses (31). What she fails to emphasize is that one effect of this is that world building is an increasingly foregrounded *process* as a result. People may assume that most readers invest in characters more than any other aspect of a literary world, and this is typically a safe assumption. This is in part because characters are significantly shaped and developed, or rather understood, by their actions and reactions¹⁴ within the framework of plot¹⁵ and thus world (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 55-58). Characters are associated with those parts of the imaginative world that they inhabit since a narrative situation consists of a character as actor, the plot as action, *and* the

¹⁴ Lisa Zunshine argues this is the primary cognitive function for readers when reading in *Why We Read Fiction*. She regards reading fiction as an evolutionary function of biology rather than a process situated in aesthetic appreciation and entertainment.

¹⁵ Point of view, focalization, and dialogue are features of narrative discourse while plot/action controls story significance and elements of characterization (see Stephens 18).

setting. These three elements make up what Doležel describes as an agential constellation (*Heterocosmica* 97-98); they are vital to the function of naming and the process of characterization (*Heterocosmica* 225). In other words, characters are more than a few simplified characteristics. They are entire clusters of imaginary contexts. By establishing a sequence where the two primary focalizers originate in entirely different realities, multiple representations of worlds can never be far from a reader's mind. Pullman seems to have an intuitive understanding of this not only within the context of the Actual sequence, as a study of the ethos has illustrated, but as a world builder as well. He takes full advantage of this system of naming with regards to the spin-offs that later add to the original sequence. More importantly, he uses names as intratextual appeals before frequently moving in entirely different aesthetic directions that build the universe in a new way that combines both the early and latter stages of development.

Lyra's Oxford is the first novella that expands His Dark Materials. The title makes the association between character and place plain and creates an immediate appeal towards the interest and investment readers will likely have in the novella—that is, the continuation of Lyra's story. Lyra as a main protagonist of the Actual is an obvious site of interest for fictional gaps the sequence leaves available for expansion. The title also suggests the structure and development the expanded possible world will take in terms of medium and theme. Indeed, the complete set of novellas that develop the world/universe beyond the original transitions away from the adolescent Bildungsroman into a more theoretical attempt at understanding the relationship between world building and storytelling. The first expansion does include a short episode with Lyra at its center, but her Oxford (the place) is the focus, or main “character,” of the book. It is clearly a development of place/world rather than character as is typical of most stories.

Understanding the function of proper names makes this important distinction clearer and more purposeful. Unlike real people whose names function logically as rigid designators (Pavel 36), fictional characters are more like “abbreviations for . . . clusters of properties” built up within agential constellations (Pavel 36-37). Yet the more a world develops and the more a character “exists” as a part of a well-imagined Actual, the more rigid these fictional associations become. An aesthetic feature of sequences is the ability to develop characters with names that function as rigid designators much like proper nouns since epic story arcs offer something like a fictional embodiment. Pavel explains that a well-actualized character typical of lengthier works can be endowed with an almost ontological significance due to the investment a reader makes (37). He also notes that it is the “particular practice of writers and critics to speak about characters in fiction” as though their names *are* rigid designators like the proper nouns of the real world, likely as a result of the creative investment these groups place in a story world (Pavel 37). It is important to note here that a distinction between scholars and fans as critics of imaginary worlds is unhelpful since both roles demonstrate a similar investment and critical turn of thought regarding the construct. Instead, the level of devotion fans demonstrate when discussing their favorite fictional universes suggests the same type of critical insight, though certainly with different goals in mind, making the imagined aspects of a world similarly concrete for both fans and scholars.

Pullman, like most authors of epic worlds/sequences, intuitively makes use of this semblance of reality to control and shift the focus of the reader for expansions of the universe. There are important aesthetic considerations for spin-offs and other similar narratives when considering a character’s transition from fictional being to something more like a three-

dimensional person with thoughts, feelings, and recognizable motivations.¹⁶ Upon the conclusion of a sequence, a character's traits are static or fixed. Developing a character whose story continues beyond the conclusion of an Actual sequence or arc of characterization means acknowledging a character's more rigid, definitive status upon the conclusion of the Actual. This can be problematic from a creative standpoint, especially in the case of characters that became developed over a course of numerous works and have an established pattern of dynamism. A spin-off, or possible world, paradoxically has less room to develop a character who must be accessible to the overall cluster of traits, events, and even places from an epic Actual, the context that now functions as rigid designators of "identity." The more developed a character is in an Actual, the less room for change in a possible.

Pullman's success as the author of *His Dark Materials* means that he gives up control somewhat to his readers when continuing to develop the Actual. His initial ethos and main characters are established and accepted. His decision to focus on developing the world rather than Lyra's character in *Lyra's Oxford* is less risky and allows for greater creativity from an aesthetic standpoint as his additions are less likely to be challenged by the familiarity with the original sequence. Any change in characterization is likely to be met with a negative response since Lyra's character is already fixed; dramatic shifts in characterization are improbable since it is well-established by the first novel. Pullman achieves more by transitioning away from characters and into place as a central or foregrounded focus. Lyra's name in the title is a grab for attention, a similar appeal to the early aesthetic milestones that draw in readers based on subjects of interest, but she is not really a key figure for *this world* within the universe. Her time as the

¹⁶ Lisa Zunshine explains that even without substantial character development reading for motivation is basic, human behavior when engaging with story, a behavior that is psycho-social practice for real-world encounters.

central focus of attention remains situated in the Actual, while the possible worlds develop in new directions instead. This is how epic and possible worlds guide readers through one process of aesthetic growth and development before creating new inroads and pathways for artistic tastes to develop in unfamiliar though relatable directions.

Careful maintenance of the Actual ethos must remain since this is the feature that draws readers into the new world and solidifies the relative link to the world the reader has already fully invested in. In many cases ethos also positions the readers as fans, and authors may rely on this to overcome any inconsistencies in genre, medium, or plot that might normally have encouraged a reader less familiar with the world to lose interest. Expansions rely more heavily on feelings of aesthetic affirmation to overcome doubts a reader may have about new aesthetic avenues or the repurposing of old ones. These new directions become a challenge of sorts to accept the creative and expressive goals of an author. The expectation is that a fan, rather than outright rejecting a noticeable departure from the author's previous work, will seek to critique the creative expansion instead (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 15). Possible worlds may rely on the omission of the most elementary aesthetic milestone, a reader's basic taste orientations such as attachment to a character or plot pattern, in favor of the aesthetic affirmation that accompanies the basic constraints of intratextual narratives.

His Dark Materials, like most adolescent sequences, is a Bildungsroman. The quest to come to a sense of moral self-awareness is the foregrounded story significance. Neither of these is the case for the possible spin-off narratives. *Lyra's Oxford*, the first of the novellas, creates a thematic arc for the series of possible spin-offs. To a certain extent, this work acts as a sort of bookend for Pullman's expansions. Each smaller novella, by establishing and demonstrating recognizable patterns, shares certain themes regarding content and design. Yet Pullman carefully

sparks the interest of his fan-base by offering an intratextual link through a character, place, or plot element that addresses a gap in the world that the self-enclosed structure of *His Dark Material*, as the Actual, creates.

The link between Lyra and Oxford, the centrality of the fictionalized place to her characterization, is made apparent explicitly by Pullman in *The Subtle Knife* when Will sees her “wide-eyes helplessness” in the face of encountering a similar but different Oxford in his world.

He couldn't know how much of her childhood had been spent running about the streets . . . and how proud she'd been of belonging to Jordan College, whose Scholars were the cleverest, whose coffers the richest, whose beauty the most splendid of all. And now it simply wasn't there, and she wasn't Lyra of Jordan anymore; she was a lost little girl . . . belonging nowhere. (Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* 70)

In this way Pullman uses story to demonstrate the link between place and identity, and illustrates, once again, the power of proper names within imagined worlds.

Lyra is so closely intertwined with the version of Oxford that *His Dark Materials* fictionalizes that it is the most likely method of addressing what happens to Lyra after her story--though not her world--has concluded. In fact, Pullman specifically notes in each novella, beginning with *Lyra's Oxford*, that the gaps in a world (unlike fiction) are filled with stories “that hadn't yet happened” (Preface).

The structure of the novella is important, though. It is, to a certain extent, an appeal to a thematic as well as imaginative/generic shift in the content the reader is encountering. *His Dark Materials* is an Actual story world, or a world developed through story. *Lyra's Oxford* no longer prioritizes story, however. Instead, the already imagined world becomes the foregrounded focus.

The work includes minutiae accompanied by a sort of critical directive to create story. Pullman introduces this concept before Lyra's story even begins, in fact.

This book contains a story and several other things. The other things might be connected with the story, or they might not; they might be connected to stories that haven't appeared yet. (*Lyra's Oxford* Preface)

Pullman's preface is not only a description of what is contained within the book--*more* than simply a story about Lyra and the Oxford of her world--but also things or artifacts that he goes on to describe as "tattered old bits and pieces [that] have a history and a meaning" that lead to a path that "is a story, of course" (Preface). Most of the preface deals with how to use the things or minutiae that Pullman includes; more importantly, these fictionalized artifacts make up half of the content of the novella. Much of *Lyra's Oxford* can be read as an experiment in world building as much as the intratextual story expansion typical of spin-off possible narrative.

Lyra's Oxford and *Once Upon a Time in the North* both make this transition in focus from a Bildungsroman wherein two young protagonists travel through an intertextual re-working of Milton and Blake to reinforcing a world of Pullman's *own* design. The pattern that arises across possible expansion is noteworthy as it signifies an intentional transition away from the Actual to develop new aesthetic avenues that, in this instance, enhance the epic design of the Actual. More precisely, the possible transition from intertextuality (related stories/influence) to intratextuality (intentional design through overt reference) is important and encourages the highest level of aesthetic development by incorporating a shared design and not just a shared ethos. Thematically, theological questions become less important while possible worlds, possibility, and world building move to the fore for each of the works that seem to exist separately. *Lyra's Oxford* is almost didactically structured to focus a reader's response on world

building as a function of storytelling. However, Pullman makes this transition through medium more than story. The plot of *Lyra's Oxford* is less significant than the supplemental materials that develop the flora and fauna of the literary universe. *Once Upon a Time in the North* makes paratextual materials designed in correlation with the story a part of the story in inconsequential but still obvious ways. The first two in the series of novellas that expand *His Dark Materials* clearly privilege marketing for fans of the Actual sequence as a collector's item; the goal seems to be to make the collection of items, the materiality of this process and the artifacts of an imagined world that this realizes, the central focus of the story and text. And for this reason, paratext plays a much more pivotal role than is typical of most children's literature, and in the analysis of Pullman's possible worlds (see Cadden, *Telling Children's Stories* vii-x).

Artistic design is a major emphasis for the new thematic elements of ethos, and the author initiates this through the link between form and content, what Hayot describes as the most effective design for concrete world building (32). Both novellas that demonstrate this complementary creation between art and story include a fabric cover with an engraved illustration that quickly identifies the works as more than a typical, mass market production (see Fig. 1.).

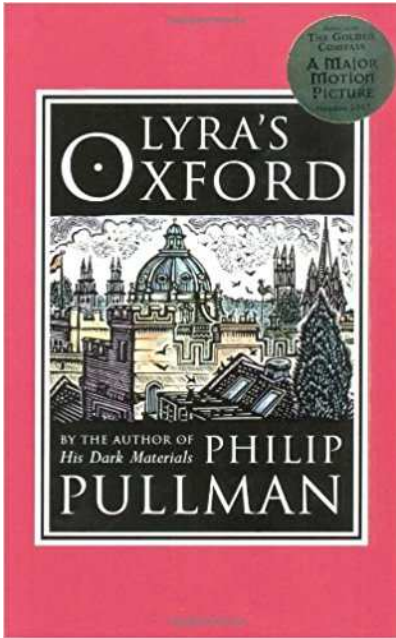


Figure 1: Fabric Book Cover with Engraved Cover Art; Amazon.com. “Lyra’s Oxford Book Cover.” 2007, <https://www.amazon.com/Lyras-Oxford-Philip-Pullman/dp/0375843698>

Lyra’s Oxford also includes a back-cover description that describes the novella as “a beguiling new episode . . . *and other matter* never before seen in this world” (my emphasis). The phrasing is quite specific as the other “matter,” such as postcards and travel brochures (including a fold out map of Oxford), take up more space and focus than the short story episode about Lyra as a teenager (see Fig. 2. & Fig. 3.)

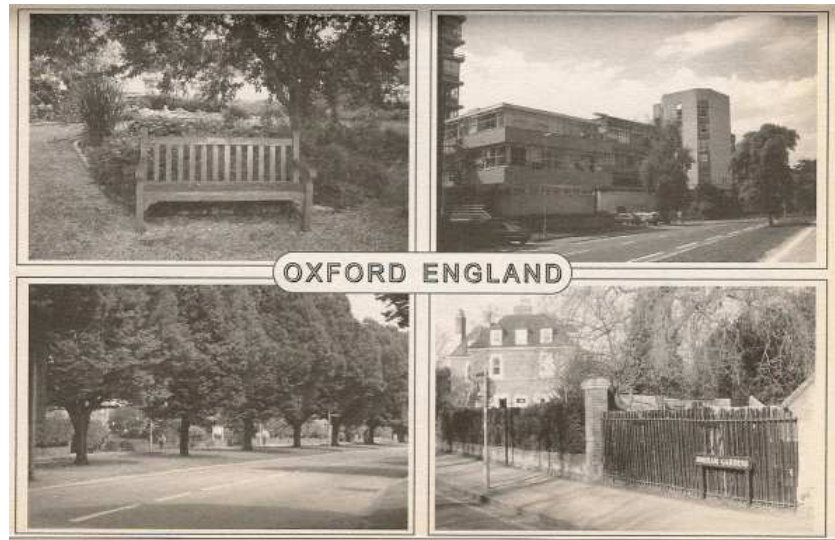


Figure 2: *Lyra’s Oxford* “Extras” Paratext; Lawrence, John, Illustrator. “Mary Malone’s Postcard.” *Lyra’s Oxford*. JPEG from His Dark Material wikifandom.

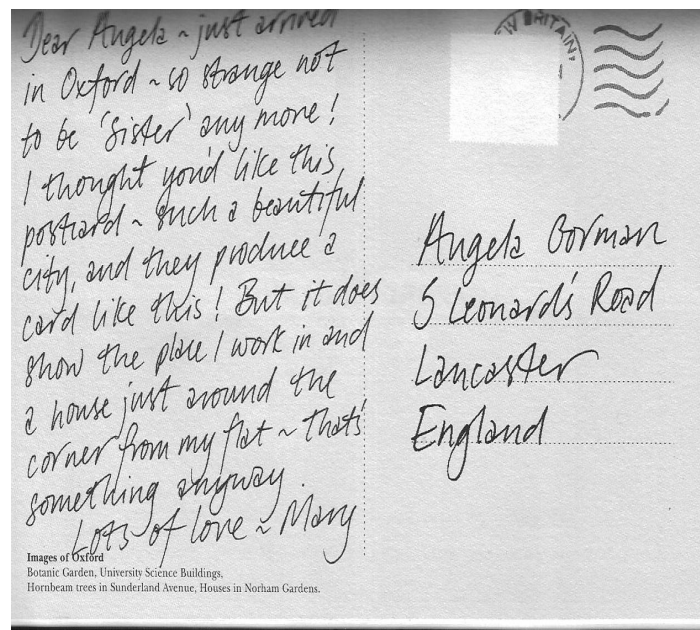


Figure 3: *Lyra’s Oxford* “Extras” Paratext; Lawrence, John, Illustrator. “Back Side of Mary Malone’s Postcard.” *Lyra’s Oxford*. JPEG/Scan *Lyra’s Oxford*.

These “extras” add a semiotic or culturally-oriented aesthetics element. Note that Mary Malone’s post card includes typography reminiscent of handwriting as a personal touch. As Mary is a key character in the Actual, this is an appeal to maintain the reader’s attention when

interest in the added material may wane. These illustrations or artifacts also add a multimodal appeal that reinforces the realism/verisimilitude of the work, while Pullman *strongly* suggests *how* the reader should interpret these semiotic and concrete elements through his Author's note. Pullman's note begins by stating that the book "contains a story and several other things" that are connected with the story and "trace a line of a story that hadn't yet happened" (*Lyra's Oxford*). He then concludes by adding that the book (the story plus the additional paratext), is "partly about that [story telling] process" (*Lyra's Oxford*). In this way, he models the process for expansion and adds a participatory aspect to the world that can only increase the emotional attachment his readers already have. This participatory element is further foregrounded by the nature of the "extras," some of which require the reader to unfold or pull out parts in order to view/read them.¹⁷ This emphasis on the random flora of the world is consistent with the story and art that backgrounds Lyra in favor of developing her (also Pullman's/the reader's) Oxford, though. It is also an interesting manipulation of medium. There is a careful disorder that couples with the theme (seeing stories in everyday life) that makes the medium unclear. Is *Lyra's Oxford* a book, art, or simply a record of the random life that inhabits Lyra's Oxford—something of a scrapbook? He carefully constructs a possible world that utilizes all aspects of story and medium so that the intentional construction of the world positions the reader to engage to maximum effect and affect.

As Fig. 4. illustrates, *Once Upon a Time in the North* similarly follows this semiotic design and creates a pattern across the possible world expansions that suggests theme even as the works are separate (not sequence, but series fiction).

¹⁷ While this may seem unremarkable for books that are also considered collector's items, these are not typical examples of interactive books for children. The "extras" are replicas of real forms of texts people may encounter as with the examples of maps and brochures.

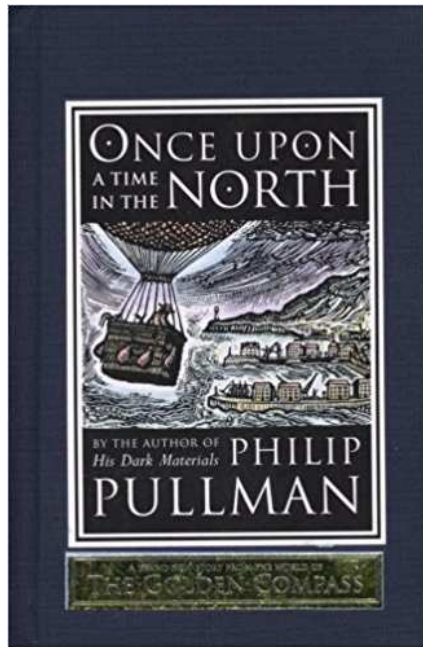


Figure 4: Fabric Book Cover with Engraved Cover Art; Amazon.com. “Once Upon a Time in the North Book Cover.” 2007, <https://www.amazon.com/Lyras-Oxford-Philip-Pullman/dp/03758436981>

Like *Lyra’s Oxford*, the second work in the series of spin-off novellas also includes back-cover description with an emphasis on the episodic nature of the story (though this novella is certainly a much lengthier and more developed episode). The inscription reads as follows:

Another mesmerizing episode from the universe of His Dark Materials [and] contains other teasingly authentic memorabilia and clues, together with a thrilling board game, *Peril of the Pole*. (Pullman, *Once Upon a Time in the North*)

Story and artifact continue to work together to weave a transition in ethos from epic story to semiotic, concrete world-building. This book, also artistically designed as a collector’s item and similar enough to the first in the series to highlight the shared theme, reinforces the aesthetic principle that *Lyra’s Oxford* establishes through its design and appearance. Reinforcement is a key word in this instance. Series fiction may reinforce the ethos and aesthetics of a universe

through intertextual elements, but it does not build—that is, develop or alter that logic—in some way. The distinctive difference between sequence and series remains true. The term memorabilia I note above is quite specific and does change Pullman’s strategy for design somewhat, however. The additional illustrations and paratext exist within the narrative and give the memorabilia a metafictional story quality that constrains the participatory element and highlights the artifactual in a way that *Lyra’s Oxford* did not. For examples, Lee plays Peril of the Pole, and reads the guidebook for piloting his balloon (see Fig. 5 & Fig. 6.).



Figure 5: Peril of the Pole Board Game; Board Game Geek. ‘Image of “Peril of the Pole.”’

Illustrated by John Lawrence. *Once Upon a Time in the North.* 2010.

<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/35602/peril-pole>

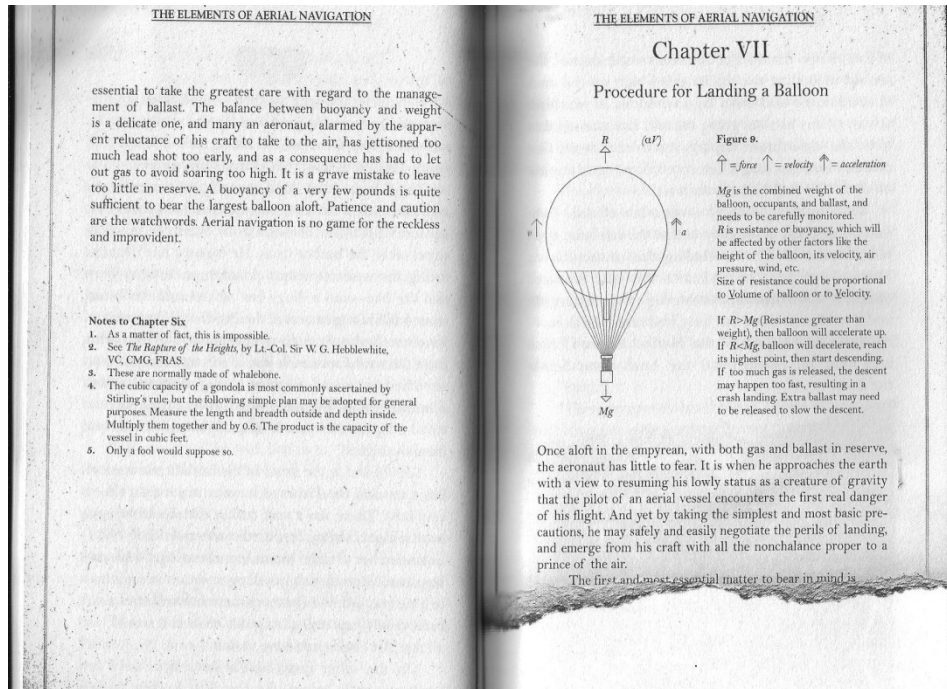


Figure 6: *Once Upon a Time in the North* “Extras” Paratext; Lawrence, John, Illustrator.

“Aviator Guide for Hot Air Balloons.” *Once Upon a Time in the North*. JPEG/Scan Lyra’s *Oxford*.

All of the paratextual features relate in some way to the story.¹⁸ Instead it seems more like a representation of Pullman’s claim in *Lyra’s Oxford* that things, or the bits and bobs of culture, link to stories. It is not necessarily encouragement to participate; instead it is evidence of the initial claim. The creation of the game is further tangibility of the flora of the world, and this possible episode, for example. Whereas the extra materials develop a history of links between context and artifact, and are unremarkable in relation to Lyra’s short episode, *Peril of the Pole* and the additional extras in the episode written about Lee Scoresby are a part of the story that the reader is likely to be more invested in, making it more likely the reader will take up the paratext in more meaningful ways.

¹⁸Pullman adds paratextual development to his stories in other His Dark Materials works such as the Omniverse.

Degree of investment is a pertinent consideration for the development of each possible expansion. While *Lyra's Oxford* answers questions about what happens after the conclusion of the sequence to a character of interest, *Once Upon a Time in the North* answers questions about what happens to a character of interest before the sequence begins, *and whose story is a gap within the Actual*. In many cases readers conclude a sequence with a sense of investment in the work since the imaginative construct is complete. Instead, the expanded possibilities that suggest remaining gaps or incomplete aspects of the fictional world (time, places, and events that move concurrently with the Actual) are more important. Pullman has described the novella as a story about Lee Scoresby and Iorek, whose relationship is introduced but never explained in the original sequence (qtd. in Craig).

Yet the relationship between Lee and his daemon is foregrounded far more frequently in terms of plot within the narrative, and Lee actually learns about the species his daemon chose as a form (something even the daemon is described as being surprised about later in the novella).¹⁹ Lee is 24yearsold when the novella takes place and both Lee and his daemon, Hester, initially believe her to be a jackrabbit. Lee and Hester move through the narrative as a pair, making sense of the intricacies of the events happening around them in a small town that is a political hotbed, and act as sounding boards for each other in the same way the Actual establishes and the short story within *Lyra's Oxford* maintains; this suggests that daemons are the most basic element of ethos for the world, rather than any intertextual allusions or themes. This is further reinforced by the conclusion of the novella when Iorek Byrnison informs Lee and Hester that he is obviously a

¹⁹ Pullman also notes in this interview that he specifically designed *Once Upon a Time in the North* to match *Lyra's Oxford* with the notion of making the novellas into a matched set. Amanda Craig, "Once Upon a Time in the North by Philip Pullman," *The Time*, 22 March 2008, Arts section.

man of the Arctic because Hester is an Arctic Hare (Pullman, *Once Upon a Time* 110). The pre-existing relationship with Lee is the fictional gap the possible world seeks to fill. By merging extensional contexts (this gap) with intentional contexts (the bond between human and daemon as linked to identity), Pullman encourages an optimal response for returning readers and fans that aligns with his intentional theme as developed by his possible expansions. In terms of characterization, Hester's species may seem ironic, but it demonstrates how dependent upon the reader's ability to infer deeper meaning of the intentional design of the Actual from a possible world and its compossible status. Lee is most frequently referred to as a Texan in the Actual sequence. I have already established that certain contextual elements become rigid designators that act similarly to proper nouns, and on the surface this naming suggests Lee's link to Texas as a major aspect of character. Yet, if we read the ethos as primarily dependent upon the relationship between human and daemon with a foregrounded link between character and place (Lyra and Oxford, for example), the complex constellation of narrative traits that endows Lee with an imaginable character is not his link to Texas, but the North Arctic. Hence, Hester's species is not ironic at all, but is a signifier of Lee's multifaceted scope of characterization within the universe. The relationship with Iorek the polar bear is more remarkable than other aspects of Lee's characterization (his Texan status). So, Lee's characterization is dependent upon a gap in the Actual story; the suggestion of a back story is a representation of character in this instance. The intentional structure of *His Dark Materials* foregrounds possibility and extensional contexts through setting, story, and even characterization.

Change and development is still a major factor, however. While *Lyra's Oxford* still includes an episode about the young adult heroine despite its emphasis on the concrete representation of world and storytelling, the second novella includes no adolescent or young

adult characters and reverts to the style more consistent in representation of the adult world that Lyra only begins to understand much later in the Actual. *Once Upon a Time in the North* is only questionably related to children's literature through its link to characters that exist originally within a sequence written for that audience. It does, however, support Pullman's theme in *Lyra's Oxford*, which designates place as a defining element of character. As I demonstrate above, just as Jordan College of Oxford is a part of Lyra's characterization, the Arctic North is a part of Lee Scoresby. Themes, even mediums and genres, may change across possible expansions of an Actual world, but ethos is as fixed as those elements that define characters upon the conclusion of their story. I suggest it in the first chapter of this study that compossibility (and not just accessibility)²⁰ with the Actual represents something of an emotional contract between author and reader as a result of the aesthetic fluency that keeps the reader invested.

The ethos that develops across the novella seems shared because of the thematic patterns that develop despite, not as a result of, the self-enclosed structure of sequences. The possible spin-offs share a theme, but do not develop that theme across the novellas as a result of intratextual design, unlike the Actual. Each of the spin-offs could stand alone as a separate though related work. They certainly continue to develop the concrete qualities of the world as the universe expands, though, just as other series fiction is able. So, there is an existing logic about world building, artifacts, and filling gaps that builds across *Lyra's Oxford* and *Once Upon a Time in the North* in different ways; yet, the thematic connection relegates this aesthetic development to issues of art and process rather than story significance, and highlights semiotics

²⁰ Recall that compossibility differs from accessibility in that shifts in the Actual focus occur, but avoid challenging aspects of ethos that define the world and sustain the willing suspension of disbelief. Accessibility, on the other hand, aligns and reinforces the intention of the Actual in all ways (these are typically overt aspects of intratextuality in a universe).

(the merging of art with cultural significance). This shift in emphasis, as much as other inconsistencies, suggests there is no arc or narrative link specific to the epic genre, sequences. We might read this as an emphasis on the process of creation rather than reader investment. Pullman's additions are experimental more than anything else, and the scientific quality limits the type of affective engagement a reader, even a fan, is likely to experience.

It is important to examine why Pullman might choose to expand his universe with works that function more like a series rather than continuing with the same generic constraints of the Actual. This choice loosens his control on the overall design of the world somewhat, since the shared theme creates something *like* a story arc and offers a strong suggestion for interpretation through intentional contexts. Reading connections between works is still a form of aesthetic fluency. He revitalizes a sense of incompleteness (remember this is the playful aspect of reading fiction) by introducing new gaps as models of synthesis of form and creativity through the lack of an epic or overarching design. This method appears to be a suggestion for ongoing development and play within the world even as it presents these new and more concrete, material representations. As a result, Pullman positions the fan/reader as the driving force behind the storytelling aspects of the possible expansions; possibles, by design, demonstrate a de-emphasis upon canonicity established by an Actual. Instead there is an expectation for change and ongoing development.

Pullman's expansion, *The Collectors: A His Dark Materials Story*, is another interesting manipulation of genre and medium, and acts as further evidence of the shift in primary audience (though fans may include both children and adults, especially given the fact that the first book of the sequence appeared in 1995, so original child fans have become adults in the interim). It is a title based entirely on a reader's commitment to the Actual since it was released in a non-

traditional medium and with no real advertising. The story, released first as an audiobook, is also the final addendum in this study of Pullman's fictional commentary on story and world building.²¹ It situates the narrative as one more part of his intentional links between artifacts/items (flora) and storytelling, even as the tale that follows reminds the reader that this small world is constrained by the same basic ethos of the Actual world. It demonstrates similar patterns in structure and theme as *Lyra's Oxford* and *Once Upon a Time in the North*, expanding on the story of the more pivotal characters from the original sequence.

This expansion is also quite different from the other works that expand the universe, though, emphasizing the relationship between genre and medium much more significantly. The narrative only subtly addresses the link between story and material things, leaving this connection up to interpretation rather than more overtly referencing the connection as he does with the previous novellas. *The Collectors* was written as something of a cross between a ghost story and an urban legend, and once again, Pullman uses medium to complement the design of his possible world. Rather than a traditional printed edition, the story was released as an audio book, read by Bill Nighy for Audible.²² Like the other novellas, it is a relatively short story that is just over 30 minutes in length. The story is of a legend that surrounds the subject of a portrait, a woman who is later identified (through context—such as her marriage to a diplomat, affair with a noble, and birth of a child hastily covered up—rather than name) as Mrs. Coulter (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:08:25-00:09:01). A history of tragic and frequently violent accidents

²¹ Pullman has recently released another expansion to His Dark Materials, *The Book of Dust*, which continues developing the concept of storytelling and world building as a process of filling gaps and recognizing possibility. However, this work is slated as a lengthier sequence (organized around a pre-established arc) rather than a series (related but separate stories within the universe).

²²*The Collectors* is now also available on Kindle.

surrounds the string of buyers who add the painting to their collections (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:00:01-00:07:52). To add to the mystery, most buyers intrigued by the beautiful woman in the painting also inexplicably end up buying a small bronze statue of a monkey with a hideously snarling face without any clear reason for doing so (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:07:52). It is as if the monkey, which clearly matches the description of Mrs. Coulter's daemon, follows the painting through some supernatural force, driving the buyers of the painting to reunite the pair.

Pullman's story is ideal for the audio medium as it mimics traditional ghost stories and urban legends shared socially. The story begins *in media res* with two Oxford scholars talking about the painting/sculpture set and its unusual history over drinks just after dinner at the college. Since Pullman's universe relies upon primary focalizers for point of view, the story moves from character to character without any narrative interruption, once again reinforcing the oral and social aspects of the tale. And the dark ethos of the story, its violence and mystery, remain consistent with the characterization of Mrs. Coulter from the Actual. The legend surrounding the painting feels like gossip rather than truth, but the genre itself relies upon an atmosphere of possibility (the possibility that the stories *just* might be true) to function, continuing the complementarity between story, medium, genre, and theme that Pullman makes use of consistently as he highlights the aesthetics of his universe through the series of possible worlds.

In keeping with most ghost stories, the tale that Horley, the scholar who has purchased the painting and the statue, shares with the second scholar, Grinstead, seems farfetched. Not only does a violent and mysterious history surround the two works of art, but the expression of the woman in the painting seems to change, if only in how the viewer sees her. One moment the woman appears alluring and sexy, the next she seems monstrous (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:01:26). She is always captivating and intriguing, however. Horley relates one of the more

tragic stories to Grinstead, explaining that one buyer seemed absolutely obsessed with the painting, unable to let it go. His wife begged him to get rid of the piece as the woman seemed to her to be the embodiment of pure evil (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:10:05). Instead, the man returned the next day with the statue of the monkey unable to explain why he had even purchased it. The woman became so afraid that she contacted a local priest and asked him to exorcise the painting. The next day the couple awoke to find the body of the priest with his head bashed in and the statue of the monkey beside him on the floor. No one could explain the death, and the man quickly sold the painting (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:10:05-00:11:00). Horley goes on to explain that he would discount the stories as superstition, but there is a trail of letters, police records, and newspaper clippings that support each tragic story (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:11:10). Once again, the violence and destruction are ultimately accessible/familiar to readers of the Actual. This reinforces that the nameless woman in the painting is in fact Mrs. Coulter. More important to the continuing reinforcement of theme the expanded series demonstrates, though, is the emphasis on the links between everyday artifacts and story. Each item seems to tell the story.

As the story progresses, Horley's beliefs are challenged. Grinstead reveals that he knew of the stories and knew that the real story is even more difficult to believe. He knows who the woman is; he was once her lover. More important, he explains that this is possible despite the 100-year history surrounding the painting and its subject because she is from a different world (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:15:03-00:18:30). Here Pullman adds an interesting element that is worth commenting on as it seems to intuitively support the hierarchical relationship between Actual and possible worlds. Each small element within the possible worlds is dependent upon the Actual to some degree. The Actual achieves an emotional reality for readers that gives it a

sort of primacy. Grinstead's claim about Mrs. Coulter is the real story. From a character position he assumes some special relationship or insider knowledge of this fictional "truth" even though he knows Mrs. Coulter only as Marissa Van Zee. His diegetic presumption that he is an insider with special knowledge—and can gift that to Horley—is similar to the status of a reader with prior knowledge of an Actual. Grinstead (and through the course of the story, Horley) have equivalent status with the reader. The irony in this situation is only clear to those with prior knowledge of the Actual, though there are cues to suggest an intratextual relationship. He uses this fictional situation to create a complex network of insiders and outsiders and heighten reception of the story through development of the world.

Grinstead continues in this vein, the privilege of his insider status growing in tone, as he explains that things leak between worlds from time to time before adding that there is a different aura to those things from other worlds if one (Grinstead) *cares* to look (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:18:25). He explains that "Marissa's world," the world with daemons, is unique; it is the truest world (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:20:52-00:20:68). This clearly demonstrates the prime status of the Actual sequence, but ironically works within the narrative to characterize Grinstead further. He is aware of the existence of the Actual world, but his relationship with Mrs. Coulter is the only thing that ties him to that world. He is thus relegated to the status of a satellite. He is more like an afterthought though he clearly sees himself as privileged.

As Grinstead is sharing this revelation, Horley finally removes the statue of the monkey from the box that it was shipped in. It is at this point the listener hears the type of tragedy that accompanies Mrs. Coulter and her daemon's legacy in action, and, from an oral perspective, it has the benefit of being a first-hand account in the long list of tragedies described. Horley, who has listened to Grinstead's story with struggling breath and increasing panic, finally chokes and

explains that he can't breathe. Instead of calling for help, Grinstead leaves the room long enough to smoke before casually returning to find Horley dead (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:26:22-00:27:44). Grinstead displays the same callous disregard as Mrs. Coulter in this moment. I would suggest, and many readers will intuit, that Grinstead likely sees an affinity between himself and Mrs. Coulter, a shared status as insiders. Yet, he is not like Mrs. Coulter, and the readers who are aware of the difference between Mrs. Coulter and Marissa Van Zee are likely to recognize this as well. Grinstead's knowledge is limited, not unlike a reader who encounters a possible world without the benefit of the Actual world that it expands. And so, his access to any truth of her character as Mrs. Coulter is also limited.

The story supports this reading. Grinstead takes the painting, leaving the statue, with the surety that the statue²³ will follow in its own time (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:29:25). He is secure in his position in relation to Marissa Van Zee, and has no reason to believe the seemingly supernatural powers that surround the painting will impact him. Yet, moments later when he is leaving the college with the portrait of Mrs. Coulter in hand, Grinstead is struck by a taxi and killed (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00: 29: 28). This maintains the generic style of the urban legend, but more importantly it supports the Actual characterization of Mrs. Coulter as dangerous and obsessed with power (a narrative move that contradicts any reading of Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel's sacrifice in the Actual as redemptive). Grinstead is positioned as a character who presumes equal status with Mrs. Coulter, and is also situated as someone with a desire to possess her through the painting (Grinstead posits a supernatural aura that compels buyer after buyer to obtain the painting earlier in the story). Readers familiar with the Actual will know that only

²³ By this point in the story the painting and the statue have achieved a clear supernatural status that keeps the items in proximity in the same way that Mrs. Coulter and her daemon were in constant proximity.

Asriel was ever successful holding Mrs. Coulter's interest and love—so, Grinstead's presumption foreshadows the climax as his death is in part a result of compossibility of character. While young fans may not be able to articulate this complex intentional context, it does situate the climax as a moment of aesthetic fluency and satisfaction for fans/insiders. The falling action supports this and helps listeners to connect Grinstead's death with this interpretation. The next day two scholars place the painting that is found just outside the college back in Horley's room next to the statue, explaining they will decide what to do with his belongings later. One scholar mentions that poor Horley died of anaphylactic shock, unaware that he was allergic to a type of nut that was in the dinner they all shared the night before. They take a moment to look at the painting, suddenly drawn to it when the scholar asks his peer who the girl is. His response is that he's not sure, but she does look pleased with herself (Pullman, *The Collectors* 00:31:45).

As a stand-alone work, *The Collectors* is a somewhat unremarkable, though interesting ghost story. Within the context of the other, similarly constructed possible expansions that seamlessly coordinate medium, genre, and theme, however, it becomes more important. Like the novellas that precede this final invention, Pullman coordinates medium, genre, and story to good effect. Just as most ghost stories are shared orally, *The Collectors* was released not in print form, but instead as an audiobook through Audible in 2014. It is the final piece that links the theme of possibility and world building together and establishes this maneuver as a pattern. It also solidifies the relationship between humans and their daemons as a defining element of ethos by maintaining and foregrounding this aspect within each story. And while *Once Upon a Time in the North* builds upon the logic to merge parts of the designed memorabilia as story part/artifact,

The Collectors elevates artifact to the level of myth even as this emphasizes the human/daemon relationship as sacred.

To conclude, in each of the possible expansions that develop Pullman's Actual sequence the author blends medium and story to careful effect, and creates small, possible worlds that develop the realism of the Actual for the His Dark Materials universe. In this way he transitions the reader through the first and second aesthetic milestones explained in chapter one and elaborated below in a way that appeals more strongly to the creative/expressive stage of aesthetic development and works to establish an appreciation for the process of world building through storytelling. Altogether this means that one of the more notable aspects of what is arguably Pullman's best work, the literary world constructed in His Dark Materials, is also one of the most neglected features of study, and that is the genres that constrain it (sequences/Actuals and spin-offs/possibles). Yet genre must be read as more than content in this instance. It must be taken up as form. Pullman authors excellent fantasy, but he is a master at form. And the sequential structure and ongoing expansions that further develop His Dark Materials into a fully realized imaginary world is a key factor of what makes Pullman remarkable as an author and gives the sequence the epic quality that is so defining and memorable.

Aesthetic Significance and Stages

The commitment readers make when beginning a sequence suggests an appreciation for the process of immersion into a fictionalized space since it requires more time and effort to commit to several novels as opposed to the commitment to time spent reading a single narrative. It is important to keep this in mind as a key component of the genre and an indication that readers of these novels expect a greater magnitude of character and plot development from an

author of a sequence. This is the epic quality of sequence fiction, and I will emphasize once more that it is an expectation of young readers whom seek out this genre as well.

The flow of time is one of the most obvious ways that epic stories and story worlds create a more realistic sense of story. Walter Ong suggests in *Orality and Literacy* that the most obvious difference between story characters and real people is that reality does not stop just because a story concludes. Expansions of completed stories, and epic worlds especially, imply that the action surrounding characters in the fictional world is ongoing. They imply the forward movement of time and progress. Spin-offs and sequels such as *Lyra's Oxford*, *Once Upon a Time in the North*, and *The Collectors* function by filling in gaps that are inherent in the Actual fiction, and thus seem to contradict the world's status as fictional in the process—they are in particular an appeal to the second aesthetic stage where young readers find pleasure in the realism of an artistic object. Ong explains that “episodic structure [is] the natural way to talk out a lengthy story line if only because the experience of real life is more like a string of episodes” (145). He adds that the novel that develops once society transitions from oral and episodic narrative to print culture “made the definitive break with episodic structure” and realism (Ong 145). Novels simply do not have the structure to simulate the flow of real life in the same way that sequences do. Once a sequence concludes, having drawn readers into engagement on all levels of aesthetic appreciation,²⁴ possible worlds become the easiest method to continue this simulacrum.

²⁴ Series fiction may incorporate the same episodic depiction of time as sequences and spin-off narratives, but they lack the structural depth of an epic world to engage the latter levels of aesthetic appreciation in terms of the appreciation for creative expression within a world constrained by its own set of rules. It does not encourage the recognition of form and semiotic mastery, only accessibility.

Series and sequences both demonstrate this mimetic representation of time as a world builds and builds from text to text; however, sequences still maintain the same tightly organized narrative structure of a singular novel since the world as a whole is still classically plotted rather than formulaic (Ong 147). This is a feature of the genre. The result of this balance between the mimetic structure of episodic (oral) storytelling and classic novel (print) structure is also characterization specific to literary universes. Ong explains that an aesthetic quality of modern print culture is round characters that are deeply interiorized, or characters whose motivations become the emphasis of most narrative (150). Yet sequences that maintain epic proportions of episodic plot have enough action and dialogue that the motivations of flat characters seem just as clear as the interiorized round, dynamic characters indicative of the modern novel;²⁵ or rather, the intuitive process of speculation that takes place when readers encounter narrative is given enough contextual information surrounding characters to intuit motivation without insight into the actual thoughts of characters. Sequences specialize in flat characters that seem round.

It is not quite personification, but it is a similar concept as applied to the minutiae of world building. Pullman's novellas all imply that the bits and bobs of *His Dark Materials*, like the characters within it, and like the real world, have stories that connect and interweave around these items as well. He teaches readers about the process of world building by creating and highlighting gaps before filling them. He simply suggests through his experimentation that the types of gaps might change and expand when creating and playing in worlds rather than stories. Pullman's intentional thread seems situated in the complex relationship that exists between fiction, believability, and truth—a relationship that revolves around imaginative processes and immersion. These gaps are not necessarily limited by story parts such as narrator and chronotope

²⁵ Harry Potter is an excellent example of this process.

since, as an imagined world, they mimic reality rather than story. In this way world building is not the same thing as building a story using specific elements of discourse. There is a subtle difference in that reality follows different rules and *works* differently than story as Ong explains. Pullman is more than a writer; he is a world builder.

Margaret Mackey takes up the ways in which Pullman uses mimetics as a method to make unfamiliar elements in his fantastic world more concrete while establishing affective links to create positive connections for readers (62). She explains that his representations of unfamiliar environments like the North rely on heavily romanticized depictions and remain vague enough to encourage readers to freely associate those spaces within the world to affective links already established rather than creating their own (Mackey 63-63). In many ways, we see the same principle of affective repertoire at work in the intratextuality between novels or the framework of the sequence that makes up the Actual as well as the intraextual cues that link subsequent possible additions. By establishing an ethos of competing child/adult dichotomies situated in morality and ethics early on and then relying on the reader's acceptance of these rules to develop other aspects of the story world, Pullman also accepts that a positive affective link exists between that ethos and the reader. This affective link predicated on ethos is, as I have argued, a generic feature of sequences. In fact, it is the affective link rather than the contextualization that is important to establishing and maintaining reader investment, since it presumes enough interest to immerse within the patterns of plot and characterization already established rather than beginning anew as a single narrative novel would.

The maintenance of ethos can be a problematic endeavor from an author position though, as I note earlier in my discussion of Pullman's spin-offs. In many ways this methodology relies heavily on merging aesthetic milestones and rushing the reader through them without pausing to

build an appreciation for the work itself. It relies on early familiarity instead. Yet, according to Jenkins and other scholars of fandom like Francesca Coppa, Kristina Busse, Karen Hellekson, and Abigail Derecho, this familiarity with Actual worlds—canonical story worlds—means the reader quickly jumps to recognizing possible worlds as a creative expression of the form of the Actual, or original work.²⁶ A reader’s tendency to actively critique and judge a possible world as either acceptable or unacceptable happens very quickly in the aesthetic experience (Hellekson and Busse 10). Sequences may emphasize the second and third stages of aesthetic development, but possible worlds correlate with the third, fourth, and fifth stages where readers move from an appreciation of expression to situating a work within its broader context and finally judging the work as acceptable or unacceptable, good or bad (M. Parsons 24-25).

The expansions that Pullman creates use genre (as a spin-off) and subject (world building and possible worlds) to appeal to the second stage of development, which is tied to a reader’s ability to assess the representational realism of a work. In these expansions, Pullman’s design demonstrates consistent complementarity of the Actual he has created, as well as how its processes and places mirror real world processes and places. The narratives and textual designs that expand *His Dark Materials* are carefully comprehensive at all aesthetic levels. This careful construction is likely to appeal most strongly to those readers that achieve the third stage of appreciation for art wherein the reader develops a desire for creativity and expression of a form (M. Parsons 88). By using all aspects of the narrative and its genre to good effect, Pullman can ensure the quality of the reading experience, thus making it more intense through his mastery of

²⁶ See Henry Jenkins *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* and the anthology, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse for a discussion of readers as fans that invest in story worlds through expansion and creative development of “canon” characters, story arcs, and intratextual allusion.

style. More importantly, Hayot explains that an author's creative synergy in terms of structure and content is far more likely to make a reading experience interesting and engaging, and in this manner literary worlds achieve a sort of imaginary status as a culture (32). Furthermore, Parsons notes that "intensity and interest guarantee that experience is genuine [and] . . . really felt" (23). Those story worlds that fully engage the form on all levels, using medium and genre to complement story are also the most likely to achieve the sort of creative synergy that creates an engaging reading experience.

Pullman's transition in medium and genre for the possible expansions of His Dark Materials seems to mark either a purposeful or intuitive understanding of this aesthetic situation. *Lyra's Oxford* moves away from his traditional storytelling medium and instead highlights world building as a process which foregrounds the form of Pullman's storytelling process. *Once Upon a Time in the North* departs from his Actual world in ways that will be recognizable to those familiar and well-versed with the original sequence. The setting of the novella is a hostile, political world where children are unsurprisingly absent from the story. This may remind readers of Lord Asriel's warnings to Lyra that the political world is not a place for children. Pullman's position as author does not seem to change in terms of this ideology as Lyra never does quite fit into the adult world; she simply acquires an understanding of it that allows her to take the shape of a young adult instead. This indicates that Pullman's audience has shifted from children and adult readers to the more specific denomination of fans. It also means that the release of the final novella, *The Collectors*, as an audiobook and e-book is likely to be encountered only through active research on the part of a reader. It is further indication that the arc of possible worlds is directed to those readers and listeners with the status of a fan. Pullman's novellas are not actively marketed to the same extent as his other works, and instead rely only on

information gathered from his personal website or by looking for the specifics on the titles (requiring foreknowledge of what those titles are). I will reiterate here that once a reader identifies as a fan, she is far more likely to comfortably engage in critique of an author's design (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 11). Pullman expects to be critiqued. This move from reader to fan is important on another aesthetic level as well though, one that I will cover in more detail in the next chapter. First, it is important to note that in many ways each of the possible expansions are a departure from a typical linguistic structure in terms of storytelling. They move towards a more artistic style of world building that manipulates multimodality to achieve a semiotic construction of the world. They undertake a *concrete* imagining wherein art forms take on specific meaning as they allow readers to engage with the world in a physical way, with an understanding of the artifacts as elements of creative expression within the medium. What I want to reinforce is that *all elements* of the Actual and its possibles that exist within His Dark Materials as a literary universe become the medium as a world. Fictional worlds theory is a study of epic worlds. It acknowledges readers as thinkers and stories as imagined constructs—the place readers go as they read and respond to a well-developed story. More importantly, it considers how certain genres and author techniques enable readers to get to this point. The universe constrains an aesthetic culture that I argue is situated in an acceptance and understanding of ethos that readers participate in and with.

CHAPTER III: AVATAR THE LAST AIRBENDER AND MULTIMODAL SEMIOTICS:
READING AN ANIMATED TELEVISION SEQUENCE

The previous chapter provided a model for an analysis of ethos and aesthetics of a traditional sequence and its developing universe. This chapter seeks to answer the questions that arise out of the complexity that multimodal sequences, such as those developed in graphic novels, film, or television, add to discussions of epic story worlds.²⁷ I want to remind readers that within the context of this study I recognize children's literature as more than a literary genre. It is also an academic discipline whose scholars collectively decide upon issues of canon and scholarship. As I note in the Introduction, some of the factors I considered in choosing the story worlds to examine are directly related to this conceptual division. The Last Airbender is clearly a children's show, for example, since it was developed by a network dedicated specifically for a young audience. In this respect, Dimartino and Konietzko's story world meets elementary definitions of children's literature.²⁸ As for the second aspect, television is a mode of storytelling frequently dismissed by academics as critically insignificant despite its cultural importance. For this reason, any story world developed specific to this medium is unlikely to be taken up as a canonical work of children's literature, though I would argue that it is a canonical world in the *repertoire* of many contemporary adolescents and young adults. It is an example of a complex, well-developed multicultural story world, but issues of medium may challenge the universe's acceptance by critics.

²⁷ As the last chapter's discussion of semiotics notes, aesthetics expands into the realm of an artistic culture once readers begin actively participating with/in the story world.

²⁸ Hunt notes in his general description of children's literature that it is one of the few genres to be defined by its audience. He adds that cultural concept of children is more specifically defined by Perry Nodelman as stories that "teach what it means for girls to be girls and boys to be boys" (Hunt, "Introduction" 8).

Scholars and other adults have certain expectations about the stories considered acceptable for children. There is a well-established cultural belief that appropriate content for children should be both educational and entertaining. Still, the idea of educational television is a relatively recent staple of children's programming, a requirement of "core programming" only established in 1990 by the Children's Television Act ("Children's Educational Programming"). These programs often appear at designated times that clearly identify the show as educational, not unlike our approach to learning as something that takes place primarily in schools and during the day. Shows like *The Last Airbender* that fall within one category (entertainment) are less obviously educational since the social elements are less overt than in educational programming. The universe treats important cultural topics such as war, colonialism, and the influx of unfamiliar technology in ways that make *The Last Air Bender* an exceptional example of contemporary multimodal storytelling. The sequence is less didactic than educational television; instead the show takes up issues young readers might see in canonical novels, though in a medium more familiar for many young people.

Kim Reynolds describes children's media and television as "a curious and paradoxical cultural space . . . that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive" (3). In other words, multimodal stories like *The Last Airbender* are full of contradictions that result from relatively new technology and "popular" mediums meeting existing cultural expectations for how children's literature is conceptualized as a genre that must edify as it entertains. Television and film are much more highly regulated than traditional children's narratives. The classification of these is more stringent and reveals many of the socio-cultural expectations we assign to childhood (Davies 8). Looking at these stories more closely can reveal a great deal about the cultural context that currently constrains the concept of

childhood as well as the changing state of literacy development in a new media world (Yates 162).

The three-season sequence of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, created by DiMartino and Konietzko, is one of Nickelodeon's more successful ventures designed to meet expectations for quality in children's television, a demonstration of Viacom's interest in taking chances for the sake of a well-made, extended story. DiMartino explains that when he and his co-creator pitched the idea for the show, they broke form and pitched for "over two hours, describing the four nations, the characters, and the entire story-arc—all three-season's worth" (*The Art* 12). Nickelodeon executive Eric Coleman was so impressed by the proposed venture he made an offer to begin development of *the full project*, an incredibly unusual occurrence in television where seasonal ratings typically determine whether a show will continue production beyond a single season (DiMartino and Konietzko, *The Art* 12). This divergence also ensured the structure of the television show became that of a sequence as opposed to the more simplistic formula structure of television where multiple arcs develop a world instead of a single, more complex storyline; this intricacy ensures appeals to the middle stages of aesthetic development. *The Last Airbender* is an anomaly that encourages a more thorough, embodied response to a story world by enhancing the structure and intentional design through medium.

Ethos

The idea for the show began from the creators' enjoyment of the fantasy sequences *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, both narratives that create worlds of epic proportions (DiMartino and Konietzko, *The Art* 12). Less interested in creating a replica, though still invested in the idea of an epic story world where the arc takes primary concern over episodic elements, the pair incorporated their interest in "Asian cultures and philosophies, traditional martial arts, yoga,

anime, and Hong Kong cinema to create [their] own mythology” (DiMartino and Konietzko, *The Art* 12-13). Notice the early emphasis upon epic structure as well as the desire for both faithfulness to various multi-cultural genres and aesthetics.

DiMartino and Konietzko’s decision to stylize their world with an Eastern base corresponds with other trends for Nickelodeon²⁹ and makes subtext more easily identifiable as subversive as a result. In his discussion of anime on Nickelodeon, Brent Allison explains that the subculture that surrounds anime in America frequently aligns with other subversive fandoms, for example (118). He notes that though this animation style is typically “reliant on a non-Western medium of entertainment for [the] locus of . . . cultural sense-making,” young audiences have embraced the style of animation as anti-status-quo (Allison 119). Nickelodeon’s programming decision to highlight anime as a popular genre for the network is an affirmation of the company’s mission to embrace television dedicated to its silent audience, and “gives rise to a subculture attempting to separate itself from mainstream [adult] society . . . maintaining” that separation to shape unique communities of taste (Allison 119-120). Even though the *Last Airbender* stands apart from other Nickelodeon series due to its unique structure, it can still be read like the other works in the main body of Nickelodeon’s textual framework in terms of intertextual, semiotic signifiers or cues of the genre’s unique animation stylistics like those described by Allison.

²⁹ Davies argues that children’s tastes “have an element of subversion . . . a celebration of ‘childish things’ that self-consciously challenge or mock adult norms of respectability, restraint, and “good taste” (160). Nickelodeon provides a network space that acknowledges this and turns the tables through media ventures that place adults in “humiliating situations” (Davies 160).

The Last Airbender sequence meets multiple quality-based criteria imposed by international standards of production based on these stylistic choices.³⁰ The epic structure and generic pastiche couple together for a basic mythology that *precedes* the story like Smith's attempt to solidify Bone as a world through *Rose* and enriches the foundational characteristics of the world to enhance a false sense of realism (Eco 86). The imagined world is paramount in this scenario and suggests a different approach for the way that visual and audio storytelling build a construct that a story arises out of (instead of a story that creates or effects a world). The creators first seek to make the concept, the ethos and basic narrative structure "physical and tangible," a necessary approach when dealing with multiple authors working together across multiple modes in teams (DiMartino and Konietzko, *The Art* 26). The result merges the generic elements with those elements of medium that control the basic parts of story—the visual and audio—and results in this instance in the concept of "bending," that is, the practice of gifted humans manipulating natural elements to specific ends (DiMartino and Konietzko, *The Art* 26). Specific plot elements require development at a multimodal level before a more generalized story can emerge. New media composition prioritizes multimodal logic in story creation and envisions a story world not just as a narrative but also as an artistic composition. The viewer's

³⁰ Just as the quality of children's books are measured by adult publishers, parents, and educators, producers of children's media use a standard mission established in the World Summits on Children and Media (Davies 55). Davies' discussion of media notes that "The Children's Television Charter remains the 'mission statement'" that sets standard guidelines to measure content and quality of children's media and entertainment (55). This charter in various similar, adapted forms is the basis for media producers in more than 88 countries (Davies 57), and while the charter simply provides guidelines for production of children's media rather than legal restraints, adherence to the codes and standards determines government money and support allocated to media groups (55). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) uses the Children's Television Charter as a guide to determine issues of license renewal and fines that result from violations of the Children's Television Act of 1990 ("Children's Educational Television").

attention is spread across issues of story and medium, a combination of plot, dialogue, music, and illustrated movement that gives the world an ethos that is based upon ancient Eastern civilizations that balance the earth and its surrounding elements and adolescent concerns such as family relationships and interactions with peers. The characters and setting complement one another and ensure the quality of the imaginative design of the world (Hayot 38). Furthermore, bending creates a narrative world steeped in action and movement that combines the visual and audio³¹ to foreground the spatial mode as opposed to simple visuals. This draws in viewers in the same way that long shots that move quickly to close-ups will (Kracauer 311). The spatial emphasis along with the narrative arc, essentially a quest narrative, establishes an ethos that maximizes all possible effects of the AV medium (Hayot 47). At the same time, the story quickly moves into concepts more familiar to Western, adolescent audiences (family and friendship). These themes are situated in a war-torn world where the heroes and heroines are the key actors in a resistance movement against a nation—pitting children against entire adult institutions through “bending,” a manner of fighting that visually imitates dance and disguises the violence of war under a façade more acceptable to social norms. This choice to highlight movement as a central focus of the narrative and aesthetics is reinforced immediately through a title sequence that opens with a montage of birds-eye visuals, elaborate examples of the four types of bending, and close-ups on key adolescent characters set to the backstory of the lost avatar, Aang. The narrative structure is immediately apparent in this sequence as well. Katara’s voiceover concludes with the simultaneously ominous and hopeful remark that “[she] believes

³¹ I discuss the impact of using an entirely instrumental soundtrack to engage a physical viewer response later in this chapter.

Aang can save the world” (DiMartino and Konietzko, Avatar). The arc of the sequence is clear within the first three minutes of every episode.

Film critic Kracauer notes that narratives with an emphasis on catastrophe, acts of violence and/or terror, death, and the atrocities of war overwhelm consciousness and transition viewers swiftly into a different reality (311). The subject matter of *The Last Airbender* is ideal for the creative goals of DiMartino and Konietzko as well as the AV medium, though problematic for children’s television. Television frequently censors these types of conflict, especially for younger viewers during programming periods more likely to appeal to families (Davies 158). Nickelodeon’s decision to air *The Last Airbender*, despite its subject matter and in a prime-time segment, positions the sequence as a more cinematic venture, adding to the epic ethos that underpins the venture. Other narrative elements situate the creation and production of *The Last Airbender* as more cinematic than typical television series as well.

Kracauer notes that at least two groups of AV movement are phenomena “natural for the [cinematic] screen”: chases and dance (303-304). Aang’s quest to end the Hundred Year War between the Firelord and the other three nations positions him as hunted. The Firelord actively seeks the destruction of the Avatar, first through the exiled Prince Zuko and later through the ruthless Princess Azula. The cinema chase is a “complex of interrelated movements in motion at its extreme” and establishes a course of the most “suspenseful physical action” (Kracauer 304). Aang’s narrative movements are set amidst a highly intentional backdrop that is an intensely choreographed and attention-grabbing arc. Kacauer’s second visual category, dance, also foregrounds carefully choreographed movement as a basic feature of ethos. The martial arts that underpin the everyday reality of bending create a backdrop of movement that mimics dance in its preciseness and transitions violence into a safer form of visual interaction that is both popular

with Western audiences and ensures a multicultural focus. Kracauer explains that the staged quality of dance makes these movements more cinematic than realistic (304). So, once again the visual backdrop of the Last Airbender is typical of cinema and a more epic form of television. DiMartino and Konietzko's intentional design sets the quality of the Actual apart from other animated television series through film techniques that encourage a more enhanced viewing experience.

The title sequence also quickly introduces other key elements through the intra-diegetic narration. The world of benders includes Eastern concepts and philosophies that are distinctly adult, including nations that foster exclusive ideologies and incite discord between them. Yet, the narrator is an adolescent, and the plot is situated in the actions of adolescent heroes and heroines who function, for the most part, without any adult supervision. The show illustrates how ideological structures function, but only through the lens of adolescents who in turn must frequently manipulate and work around those structures. The title sequence, for instance, transitions between the ominous, oppressive conflict (adult world concepts and concerns) and the more lighthearted play of children (thematic ideals such as friendship and fostering hope). Aang giggles and zips through the scenes with ease and apparent joy as the intra-diegetic voiceover is narrated by Katara. The opening is also a formulaic reminder of the primary arc when specific episodes may temporarily veer away from the main narrative.

Since the resolution of conflict can only come through the efforts of adolescent heroes, and the violent backdrop of war is addressed through careful aesthetic maneuvers that craft a distinct ethos that instead foregrounds genre and multiculturalism, The Last Airbender adheres to the same constraints on content that Reynolds explains is typical of children's literature and media (10). The show challenges the violent backdrop of war by utilizing certain cinematic/epic

narrative devices. These creative choices situate the ethos in a canon of similar Nickelodeon programming by pushing the boundaries of acceptability to actively illustrate the cultural construction of childhood as an additional site for conflict.

The Last Airbender is essentially a traditional quest narrative and Bildungsroman. Nickelodeon has developed a reputation for providing a variety of programs with a special emphasis on genre blends and transmedia storytelling (Bazalgette and Buckingham 84; Davies 89).³²The network's willingness to include genres with counter-cultural, carnivalesque appeal has earned international popularity. Within this context, The Last Airbender represents a sort of playful generic fusion of discursive forms that are increasingly familiar and meaningful to young viewers. As non-Western and post-colonial styles of animation, anime and steampunk elements encourage subversive or nontraditional interpretations and responses even in young readers (Noh). These animation styles are now staples of Nickelodeon's programming.³³ The anime and steampunk aesthetics are signifiers that certain subversive themes and/or ideologies are present, and are key elements of the Actual ethos. The generic fusion of these elements into an essentially Eastern story of war and conquest is further indication of the tension and critical social commentary embedded in the show that is available through critical reading despite

³² Transmedia in this instance may mean subtle changes in animation styles that allow for story world crossovers such as the *Jimmy/Timmy Power Hour* that features a merging between the *Jimmy Neutron Show*, created by John A. Davis and Steve Oedekerk, and *The Fairly Odd Parents* created by Bruce Hartman.

³³ As Viacom increases emphasis of non-Western genres and styles, Disney also increases emphasis on the same multicultural genres and styles through the works of Hayao Miyazaki (anime collection). Growing popularity of anime and steampunk through the competitive interests of Viacom and Disney/Studio Ghibli make the subversive cues iconic amongst Western children and ironically render "appropriate" or "approved" interpretations of the styles as subversive more likely.

assumptions about intended audience. The ethos of the Actual is, in many ways, a challenge to young viewers to transition to more critical responses situated in complex transmedia aesthetics.

Ideological considerations become, in the instance of genres like steampunk, important considerations of ethos. Some scholars complain that the postmodern fictional games that steampunk engages in “evacuate the real historical sensibility in favor of connotations of pastness and pseudohistorical depth . . . [and] the history of the aesthetic styles displaces ‘real history’” (Rose 312). However, this is unlikely with regards to *The Last Airbender* since research was a key component of its development. Due to quality concerns, the creators were adamant about maintaining the authenticity of the Eastern representations in their images of writing, clothing, and architecture as well as music, movement (fighting styles and dance), and philosophies (DiMartino and Konietzko, *The Art*). The Victorian steampunk that exists to various extremes throughout the narrative seems to act as a signifier of real-world ‘pastness’ that suggests certain culturally specific conflicts related to that era of colonization in type and effect. While this sub-textual information is covert, like most intertextual elements, it is frequently recognizable for those fans that seek out this generic trend in fiction (Rose 15).

Jenkins notes a similar trend in adolescent fans of anime as well (*Fans*, 32). Young viewers recognize the artistic style as a signifier of underlying cultural significances (Jenkins, *Fans* 32; West 6). Anime and steampunk stylistics encourage a low-level aesthetic milestone that engages interest in art while the manipulation of these appeals in the narrative speak to higher levels of creativity and mastery of form by blending the generic tropes to achieve greater story significance. These methods encourage a deeper aesthetic response that develops many viewers into fans of media aesthetics and helps to create new intertextual avenues of interest for new stories as well. Nickelodeon’s marketers and media backers use this to facilitate interest in

other programs, further evidence of the importance of ethos to understanding literary worlds and universes.

As a literary trope, steampunk acts as a metaphor for cultural clash consistent with The Last Airbender's war between nations. A Western anachronism within an ancient Eastern world of fantasy indicates a struggle for the balance between powers in this instance as the colonizing force incorporates destructive technology against smaller villages and tribal cultures. In both the original and its spin-off possible expansion, the steampunk aesthetic is indicative of a preoccupation with developing industry and change within a world steeped in the past as well as a general site for the rising conflict, the continuing colonization of other elemental nations by the progressive Fire Nation's oppressive regime.

Though it is not a foregrounded concern, there are at least six episodes in the original sequence that deal with the issue of technology as a destructive, non-progressive force, and this theme remains a visual link to the Fire Nation as an encroaching evil that destroys the natural world. The Earth is an important part of each major culture due to elemental bending. So, steampunk war machines leave trails of ash in the air and on the ground, with the snow-covered landscapes of the South and North Poles providing a stark contrast that visually cues battles between good and evil, purity and contamination. Likewise, the machinery is linked to large armies that overwhelm the various background vistas that make up much of the epic artwork of the ongoing sequence. The background is predominantly volcanic oranges and reds with a smattering of black and grey, a fine dusting of soot upon everything. This contrasts with the other nations that rely on cool colors such as light browns, rich greens, or light blues and whites.

The pilot episode introduces the concept of colonization with the Fire Nation as a technological powerhouse that conquers more primitive nations to acquire their resources

through industrialized warfare (“The Boy”). The Fire Nation is preceded by ashes falling ominously on the clean snow of the South Pole just after Sokka and Katara find Aang in an iceberg. He begins the sequence as a literal piece of the past frozen in time. The confusion and fear of the tribal water clan, set to ominous background music, ensures the Fire Nation is viewed as an evil threat. Initially, technology would seem so as well by association. More importantly, this association allows for the inclusion of subplots and secondary themes within the primary arc. It reinforces the structure of the show as a sequence while it allows for the more formulaic diversion of series television as well. Meanwhile, diverting from the main storyline allows the development of covert elements that are difficult for a less savvy audience to identify and interpret from intertextual, generic cues (like steampunk elements). At the same time, episodes that are less obvious in development of the primary arc also meet seasonal limitations specific to the medium of television and add verisimilitude to the narration of the war; battles, skirmishes, the ups and downs of war, and the ultimate outcome/climax could not be portrayed with any real depth in a single season. Instead, associating thematic subplots with cues from the main arc helps meet generic constraints of both medium and content, cue generic significance, and develops the general flow of nations embroiled in war. Spacing the main story arc over multiple seasons in the manner of a literary sequence that spans multiple volumes allows for the development of the world and its aesthetics so that covert meanings may become a part of the adventures of the protagonists and the more overt conflict. It becomes an interpretive cue to develop intertextual repertoire through intratextuality.

The character, Aang, is an important symbol in terms of generic significance. He comes to represent the past, present, and future of the bending world in a manner like the anachronistic effects of the steampunk elements. He has spent 100 years frozen in ice as a war rages on. He

battles in the present to end the war by restoring balance between all nations to ensure a peaceful future. Balance is also an acceptance of progress and an embrace of the past and what it means to remain connected to a world inextricably linked to the four elements in the face of that progress—a thematic motif that the episodes foregrounding steampunk emphasize. Aang is also young enough to embrace change when necessary. This is important because much of the technological and cultural progress that spans the world of *The Last Airbender* and its spin-off, *The Legend of Korra*, seems indicative of the encroachment of the West upon an Eastern Other in the form of generic appropriation. Acceptance of the encroachment of Western influences means an embrace of an ethos bound up in the Western ideals of the creators, which impacts elements such as the interpretation of anime,³⁴ characterization, and dialogue, for example. Aang and his friends wear clothing and live in spaces typical of the Eastern region and period, but their dialogue is clearly contemporary and voiced by American actors and actresses. Aang’s character, which exists both in and out of time, is like what Rose argues about steampunk fiction and animation—that it is frequently a manipulation of history that “explores the intersections and limitations of the various textual ways in which we access it” (316). Access to multicultural ideas is important for quality concerns of children’s media, but the manner of this access in *The Last Airbender* is both overt (through carefully researched animated visuals) and covert (hidden behind the steampunk additions to the anime sequence). DiMartino and Konietzko thus use counter-cultural generic tropes to access post-colonial, multicultural issues through aesthetics, but only for those viewers able to interpret careful cues. Like other Nickelodeon programs, *The*

³⁴*The Japanification of Children’s Popular Culture*, edited by Mark West, identifies several common stylistic features of anime that are inconsistent with *The Last Airbender*’s focus on cultural authenticity rather than style.

Last Airbender meets and challenges regulations, but the depth of this careful design is dependent upon sequential structure.

“The Southern Air Temple” from Book One (season one) and “The Painted Lady” from Book Three (season three) are examples of the signifying episodes that highlight the different sides of progress within a world that would seem to regard such progress as anathema to the traditionalist, spiritual aspects that are foundational to The Last Airbender’s ethos. These episodes act as examples of a backgrounded ethos moving temporarily to the fore to develop intratextual concepts. In “The Southern Air Temple,” Aang comes to terms with the notion that not all progress is bad when he meets a group of nomads responsible for desecrating a Southern Air Temple as they seek to make the space habitable. These are not Fire Nation colonizers or enemies, but refugees. There is no opportunity to mark the nomads as evil. The refugees also include one of the many characters with some form of disability within the story. The son of a Davinci-esque inventor that leads the group moves about in a gliding chair that gives him movement and access within and around the temple despite partial paralysis. Technology cannot be easily classified as a threat when it clearly has beneficial effects in certain instances such as this. At the same time the inventor provides designs for war machines to the Fire Nation in exchange for protection of his small group from the annihilation. Aang eventually works with the inventor to free them from Fire Nation influence, situating traditionalist values alongside progressive technology. Note this example appears relatively early in the sequence, giving the concept time to develop across other episodes with less emphasis after the initial introduction of these concepts. Overt treatment of the theme provides guidance for understanding the critical connotation of the steampunk ethos once it has been backgrounded once more.

In contrast to the first example, “The Painted Lady” is an episode that highlights the danger of progress to the natural world. Aang and his friends come to a village in the Fire Nation that is overrun by pollution and sickness due to nearby factories that pollute the river. The river provides water and food for the villagers along its bank, and the people suffer for the Fire Nation’s weapons production and military advancement. Katara dresses as the patron spirit of the River, the Painted Lady, and goes out night after night in secret to sabotage the factories and halt production. She continues with this until a confrontation is forced, and with the help of her friends and their bending convinces the occupying soldiers that Katara is an angry spirit. The soldiers flee, allowing the villagers to clean the river. It is at this point that the river spirit, The Painted Lady, manifests itself to Katara and gives her thanks for her interference on its behalf. Unchecked progress means the spirits (the traditionalist aspects of the Last Airbender world) will act. The importance of balance between the past (nature) and the future (technology) is the focus instead of balance between elements. Further reinforcing this thematic concept overtly continues to encourage a young viewer’s ability to identify backgrounded steampunk elements as a motif within the sequential story arc. This technique continues in “Imprisoned” when Aang and his friends encounter a village of earthbenders imprisoned for using their bending powers. They are forced to mine the coal that powers the naval fleets for the Fire Nation. Progress, in this instance, becomes synonymous with invasion and colonization as the episode is not set within the Fire Nation as “The Painted Lady” is, but instead takes place in the Earth Kingdom. It provides a global perspective that situates these anachronistic elements firmly within the fictional context just as Rose suggests is typical of Steampunk as a stylistic trope (315).

Shortly following “Imprisoned” is “The Spirit World: Winter Solstice”, parts I and II. The first episode begins with Aang, Katara, and Sokka landing near a forest that has been burned

to the ground during a battle. Described as a scar upon the land, this is the first time that Aang mentions that he is supposed to be a protector of nature. The revelation that the Avatar acts as a bridge between the spirit world and the real world follows. Aang struggles to understand his role throughout the episode while an angry spirit plagues a nearby village because of the forest's destruction. Ultimately, only acting to reassure the spirit that the land will heal can bring the village peace. However, Aang is able to convey this message across the spirit plain after he accepts there *can be* a balance between man and nature, the past and the future—a concept introduced covertly in a previous episode (“The Southern Air Temple”), now expressed overtly in a latter episode. Themes and characterization develop alongside an expanding setting and plot. This process is inherent to an epic work, yet atypical for children’s television where entertainment television receives less funding and emphasis on quality than its educational counterpart (see Davies 155-157). And *The Last Airbender Actual* develops across seasons as well as episodes, developing the complexity of the Actual to expand reception in a manner that offers a broad spectrum of developmental aesthetic milestones, from the early stages where generic fusion appeals to audiences based on various subject oriented touchstones, and the development of an appreciation for realism and verisimilitude, to recognition of ethos elements. As the world continues to develop visually, filling in the flora and fauna that makes the imagined space more complete and appealing, the complexity of ongoing characterization through manipulation of generic tropes (anime and steampunk, for example) and modal forms (instrumental/musical and visual intratextuality) highlights the artistic mastery of the composition. The world is both more concrete and playful as the components are realized and synthesized in new ways to develop the plot.

Later in the sequence, once young viewers have had an opportunity to encounter and master stylistic maneuvers from the ethos, steampunk elements add action and intrigue with less emphasis on thematic expression; these elements are backgrounded. There is an implicit assumption by the creators that young viewers recognize story significances by now. Instead the sequence shifts from discursive moments and appeals to the early milestones to allow for in-depth development of the main storyline once more where the ethos is well-established and the story world emphasizes mastery of its established generic forms. In “The Drill” Aang and Katara work together to destroy a monstrous drill set to tunnel through a wall that resembles in size and status The Great Wall of China (more anachronistic, steampunk play). This wall is the final barrier between the Fire Nation and total domination of the elemental world. In the story, the ancient Earth Kingdom stronghold is an explicit metaphor for the racial and ethnic tensions inherent in colonization as the Fire Nation makes multiple attempts to invade and conquer; this metaphor with the drill as an entailment suggests real-world events and history within the fictional context (Rose 312). This is one example of the way the sequence allows for multicultural interpretation with real world and imagined significance and reinforces that television sequences have critical value like their literary counterparts in traditional, print mediums. It is clearly recognizable, but also makes use of the backgrounded generic elements to demonstrate a mastery of the fictional form (the rules and components of the Actual).

More importantly, the steampunk elements demonstrate the world of the Avatar as a world at war. Most of the technology that exists within the narrative is devoted to weapons, which reminds viewers that the dance-like bending has a more sinister component that can have violent consequences. Indeed, two of the three season finales include epic battles in which the Fire Nation appears as an industrialized force that thoughtlessly promotes the destruction of the

natural world and ends with the death of pivotal characters. The end of Book One includes Fire Nation General Zao's attempt to destroy the moon, the source of waterbending, despite knowing this will throw the entire world out of balance ("The Siege of the North, Part I"; "The Siege of the North, Part II"). The result is the sacrifice of the North Pole's princess (and Sokka's first romantic interest). Additionally, Aang achieves what is called the Avatar state *without any real control* and wipes out an entire Fire Nation naval fleet in response to the General's foolish decision-- a dramatic demonstration of the consequences of war.

The four-part finale of the show in Book Three introduces an army of airship dirigibles and metal tanks set to destroy *everything* and depicts the struggle quite vividly, set to the accompaniment of a full orchestra ("Sozin's Comet, Part I"; "Sozin's Comet, Part II"; "Sozin's Comet, Part III"; "Sozin's Comet, Part IV"). While most of the *mise en scène* uses long shots with an open background to illustrate the size and scope of this battle, the color is oppressive, overwhelming the background with reds and oranges so similar that fine details are frequently lost and appear shadowlike. It is difficult to focus on any single animated element. Instead, movement and sound control the tone and pacing of these final episodes until the final showdown between the Firelord and Aang occurs.

Aang is not only attempting to stop the Fire Nation, however; he is ultimately attempting to stop the influx of progress that has moved in the most negative direction imaginable, towards the destruction of all the Eastern philosophies that underpin the bending world. The finale brings together the backgrounded and foregrounded story arcs as Aang faces the Firelord and his friends infiltrate the airship armada and turn the technological warfare against itself.

These episodes and elements call attention to the conflict between the Eastern traditions and technological progress through stylized visual and narrative additions to the anime story

world that also work to develop the main conflict (the war). Yet, the sequential structure is what allows for this depth of world building and ideological conflict, a depth that reflects the sort of realism that only comes from the multiple seasons of rising action, tension, and story development that season finales depicting battles within a longer, more treacherous war makes possible. For example, Aang and his friends lose several battles and often retreat before the conclusion of the sequence. The intentional design of the story ensures that the ebb and flow of time and action within the plot must inevitably climax with an indisputable victory between good and evil—a victory that secures balance over a destabilized world ruled by tyranny. The emphasis on rising action across seasons is a clever way to create a sense of realism to the story despite its fantastic backdrop and aid viewers with internalizing the narrative ethos.³⁵ Television is an ideal medium to accomplish this sort of epic storytelling.

Story Cycles in Sequence Fiction

While theme is an important part of any story world, the developmental structure of steampunk aesthetics discussed in the last section will have illustrated how sequence fiction can also develop other in-depth aspects of narrative such as characterization. Because of the narrative cycles that subplots in television encourage, patterns within the main arc establish other story significances as well—Bildungsroman/identity development and carnivalesque elements, for example. These story significances can develop more efficiently and in greater detail during sub-plot episodes and allow for a greater depth of characterization and world building at the same time. The relationship between the Firelord and his son Zuko, who alternately hunts and then helps Aang and his friends throughout the show, is an example of this. There is a complex

³⁵ Ronen and Ong both establish an emphasis on chronotope as one method to enhance narrative realism and maintain the willing suspension of disbelief (44; 111-116).

mirroring that becomes apparent as the sequence develops between Aang, Zuko, and the ancestral relationships they share in relation to the Avatar. Aang experiences the life of Avatar Roku (Zuko's maternal grandfather) through a past life, and Zuko's paternal grandfather, Firelord Ozai, initiates the 100 Years War that the current Firelord continues to wage. Seelinger-Trites notes that "[m]uch of the humor and virtually all of the teenage rebellion . . . rely on carnivalesque departures from the status quo to lull the adolescent into eventually embracing it" (*Disturbing* 35). Sequences provide opportunities for narrative maneuvers such as this by introducing cycles of power that rise and wane as the world develops. This cultural flux moves from background to foreground as necessary to emphasize cyclical patterns as mini-arcs. One such mini-arc, for instance, is Zuko's personal struggle to regain his honor and return home, a thematic strand that runs alongside the main arc in episodes such as "The Blue Spirit", "Zuko Alone", "The Crossroads of Destiny", "The Beach", and "The Avatar and the Firelord". Fairytales accomplish maneuvers such as this through archetypes of plot and character that are immediately recognizable to experienced readers. Sequences introduce multiple levels of story that complicate the main arc, so that mini-arcs can be achieved through patterns of symbolism.³⁶ Zuko's relationship with the Firelord is a clear example of this. Zuko is both a representation of the status quo and what the future can hold—hence he is as key a figure within the narrative as Aang. And his development over the course of the show changes dramatically from season to season, making him one of the more interesting characters. He has developed a large following of more than 10,000 fans that continue to develop his character beyond the sequence that concluded in 2008 ("Zuko Fan Club").

³⁶ These patterns are most frequently thematic and metaphoric in nature.

As with the developing steampunk ethos, comparisons between Aang and Zuko become apparent in the first season of the show to suggest the possibility of carnivalesque patterns of adolescence and coming of age. Both Aang and Zuko currently exist outside of the power structures that control The Last Airbender world but are still subject to those same structures. Their movements and interactions while constrained by the Fire Nation's war are a "nonofficial . . . and extra-political aspect of the world" (Bakhtin 197). Zuko's role as an exiled prince and Aang's role as the primary antagonist of the Firelord require both characters to frequently run and hide from authority figures. They build what Bakhtin describes as a "second world and a second life outside of officialdom" (Bakhtin 197). This patterning continues throughout the first season and much of the second season until Zuko is provided with a choice to either accept Aang and the changes he represents for the world (and the Fire Nation's authority) or reintegrate into the official order with acceptance from his father to perpetuate the order and status quo in the penultimate episode of season three. The connection between Zuko's choice and the status quo is explicitly stated in a speech that Zuko's Uncle, Iroh, makes to Zuko in "Lake Laogai" (DiMartino and Konietzko), begging his nephew to choose his own destiny. Notably, like the steampunk elements, the carnivalesque symbolism develops incrementally in the background, just as Zuko's character develops. He is paradoxically more real and archetypal as a result of this sequential maneuver.

By the third season, Zuko finally takes his Uncle's advice to look inward and decides for himself that his destiny exists outside of the authority of his father, and that his destiny is to restore the balanced, universal order of the bending world, where the Fire Nation exists alongside the other nations in keeping with the earliest traditions of firebending. He stops fighting Aang, and instead becomes his master, teaching Aang about the final element he must control to defeat

the Firelord (“Firebending Masters”). This relationship reaches its zenith in “Firebending Masters” when Aang and Zuko learn the sacred significance of the element. They learn that dragons were the first firebenders, and after completing an ancient form with the last two remaining dragons, Aang and Zuko undergo a type of ritualistic judgement wherein they learn the truth of firebending; its power comes from the sun. While dangerous, it ensures the protection of all life for mankind. Rather than destruction, it is about rebirth and life (Bakhtin 9-10). Aang and Zuko are visually represented as yin and yang in this episode, a repetition and fulfillment of the season finale of the first season where they met as enemies at the North Pole. This time they are allies and friends and bring balance instead of discord. By the end of the sequence it becomes clear that while Aang must defeat the Firelord, it is Zuko’s duty to replace him and usher in a new era (Bakhtin 15). Rather than do away with the status quo, he ensures that it continues in a manner that maximizes the sacred foundations that underpin the mundane in a truly carnivalesque maneuver.

So far, these examples of thematic patterning represent only a few episodes across different seasons that develop character and plot with story significances outside of a primary, foregrounded arc that centers around the war, enriching the story world in the process. The carnivalesque and steampunk elements illustrate the opportunity that a well-developed sequence provides for adding depth to a story world and its primary arc. A sequence allows for multiple backgrounded story arcs and/or thematic threads to cultivate fully without detracting from the foregrounded conflict. This garners interest in new aesthetics while the added depth develops to maintain interest in a story world that demonstrates increasing verisimilitude by complicating the way the chronotope moves and develops (Ong 84). When I refer to a structural/narrative depth that is inconsistent with series fiction, it is this somewhat ambiguous concept that I refer to, these

signifying story elements that build to expand the aesthetics and story world *without competing against the main arc*. Sequences are simply *more*. Young readers/viewers frequently recognize and embrace this distinction as a type of fictional play that is situated in a mastery of form—not narrative form, but the form of world building, while maintaining the narrative complexity that ensures the latter aesthetic milestones are still engaged. The constraints of the main arc that do not exist in series fiction are what encourage these final stages of imaginative development and play, though. Generically, sequences are structured to provide developmental stepping stones that are dependent on the larger structure maintaining and developing an arc. This is true across mediums, but a television sequence additionally allows for appeals to other modalities to enrich the story world according to additional embodied responses.

Medium

Medium is an obvious element of the Actual ethos because it determines the depth of the semiotic experience since the world is multimodal and therefore already concrete. There is an element of realism specific to sensory experience that engages milestones specific to the second stage of aesthetic development. According to Hayot's explanation that the success of a literary world is dependent upon the way in which the micro and macro elements work together (in tandem versus reacting against),³⁷ the complementarity between modality, narrative, and motif/theme is what achieves the semiotic or cultural feel of a text as a world (36-37). Any discussion of an AV story world must acknowledge the multimodal components of the work.

³⁷I will note that contrast is still a valid aesthetic principle, and in no way works against the success or failure of a text as world in terms of design. Juxtaposition between elements still demonstrates structural or thematic complementarity in this case. Hayot's argument is based on the level of intentionality a world displays, where the elements are considered intentional rather than seemingly random.

Friedberg notes that one of the more significant effects of the digital revolution upon film as fiction is the level of control the audience maintains in response to a story (915). Instead of the passive reception of cinema, and to a certain extent television, the advent of digitized media introduces “interactive ‘usage’ instead of passive spectatorship and produces profound changes to our sense of temporality” (Friedberg 916). Multimodal worlds function compositionally. Interactions between time, space, and action are pivotal to achieving a sense of interactive story in AV story. Much of early cinematic theory acknowledges the link between the visual and spatial modes in film, for example. The early work of German dramatist, Lessing, in his classic essay “Laocoon,” argues that all “visual arts organize their materials spatially while the poetic [verbal] arts organize their materials temporally” (Braudy and Cohen 283). Braudy and Cohen explain the visual grammar of the medium as dictated by “angle and distance of shots, rhythms and patterns of editing” (283). Erwin Panofsky argues that control of the medium through unique and specific possibilities for narrative expression effect a dynamization of space that ultimately “spatializes time” as the visual and verbal achieve compositionality (qtd. in Braudy and Cohen 284).³⁸ So, the visual, spatial, and verbal aspects of a sound track control the basic grammar of world development and the concrete composition. At the same time, the music, a feature that is necessarily backgrounded though still affectively significant, contributes to the reader’s emotional-embodied responses to the narrative. The creators of AV stories must weave each sensory, technological component of the story together to achieve the same sort of imagined interactivity of language. Character, place, and action become concrete as a result of medium though. The sensory elements facilitate the process of internalization. Thus, a key component of

³⁸ The visual, spatial, and dialogue elements of AV define the intentional action while the tone and other audio elements such as the background music/instrumentals guide the viewer’s response to the tone of the story.

analysis of new media story worlds should be discussions of the different multimodal features within this weave before re-contextualizing the composition with a new understanding of how each part ultimately encourages specific responses in viewers. The composition of these elements in various episodes of *The Last Airbender* demonstrates the importance of medium to an interpretation of the intentional design for reader engagement.

It is clear that the discussion of multimodal representations requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the individual components as well as the compositional combination of these parts. Development of high definition television increases visual verisimilitude, and surround sound enhances the early milestones of aesthetic response as virtual worlds overtake reality through coordination of the flow of sensory information to overwhelm the senses and create concrete representations of fiction more present than reality, for example (Friedberg 922). Bateman and Schmidt refer to this as “multimodal braiding” and suggest that a complete analysis of AV works requires un-braiding individual components before returning to the big picture (91). Narrative structure and significance are important factors of ethos, but compositional aesthetics of audio, visual, and spatial *mise en scène* also control the ethos for an AV story world. Christian Metz explains that semiotics, beyond detailed discussions of genre and intertextuality, also allow for precise work on the layers of specific codes or language that medium and mode introduce (Stam 212). Metz’s definition of the cinema’s “matter of expression” includes five categories situated in multimodal expression that can be viewed as forms of semiotic or aesthetic logic: image, dialogue, noise, music, and written materials (Stam 212). These categories, adapted for medium, offer a more precise underpinning for the critical emphasis placed on dialogue, written material, and image that most filmic readings prioritize. Instead they highlight the compositional structure of AV stories and allow for discussion of the braided parts of the

composition. In other words, to acknowledge the intentional design of a multimodal story, it is important to translate the modal codes or languages in play, and some critics have already begun the process of decoding the braided parts of cinematic media with various overlap. I adapt a similar language to Metz and Brady and Cohen to refer to aspects of multimodality in the following section.

While Metz suggests one set of categories based on previous theories of aesthetics and semiotics, I suggest a slightly different set based on contemporary discussions of multimodal analysis that highlight medium and the action theory that develops epic stories into worlds. Three modalities stand out as central to how an AV story world is composed to become epic. Viewers, of course, still focus on the verbal foundations of a story, though there is an added visual/thematic and audio/thematic quality that should likely be grouped more in line with narrative associations instead of simple features of style. Action theory in AV stories highlights movement and the braiding of visual and audio elements to achieve a measure of spatial significance that requires narrative interpretation separate and apart from Metz's categories as well, for example. The three modalities—image, space, and sound—have all been taken up quite thoroughly if somewhat experimentally as individual modes, but there is little theory in place as to how these then collaborate with or complement each other. It is this collaboration, especially between image and space, and the triangulation of these three aesthetics that provides narrative and stylistic significance. The composition these modalities produce demonstrates a world's complementarity and cohesiveness to achieve a more concrete effect (Shimamura and Palmer 27).

Bateman and Schmidt propose a multimodal methodology for television and film analysis to understand the hybridization of multimodal stories: juxtaposition, transformation, and/or

synthesis (91). Adult films and television may use more avante garde or postmodern manipulation of modes that juxtapose or synthesize the aesthetic logics or lines of semiotic literacies. This strategy situates one form against another to create new avenues of taste out of the available forms. Most AV material for children falls into a third category of hybridity where the visual, audio, and spatial (through movement) coordinate the modes in a form of nesting where “one medium appears inside another to shape new content [braiding] one sensory channel or semiotic function . . . with another more or less seamlessly” (Mitchell 401), further emphasis that children’s multimodal narratives typically use the type of complementarity and aesthetics that achieve world/epic status through cohesiveness of form. Transformative hybrids are modified “in the direction of another [different mode] by the addition of certain properties” (Bateman and Schmidt 91). Direction and production transform visual scenes and the space allotted to the image on the screen into high impact movement sequences, for example.

In *The Last Airbender* the emphasis on movement complements the quest narrative and keeps the three modalities fluid (in motion) to meet story expectations. This narrative and multimodal emphasis coordinates modes moment to moment with a musical score that encourages an embodied response.³⁹ Stomping and firm fighting stances accompany thumping, pounding drums, while visual sequences that foreground the movement of air and airbending rely on wind instruments. Movement transforms the modes from individual threads of sound and image into representations of the spatial mode that situate viewers in time and space.

³⁹ “Embodying Music” by Arnie Cox argues instrumental scores create verisimilitude of movement in AV mediums that encourage second stage milestones like literary world building where the emphasis is on concrete, realistic representations (4-5).

Visual and Spatial Modes, The Image Track

Gunther Kress notes that visual representations are metaphoric, and in some ways even more abstract than linguistic expressions of the same process, but there are other advantages to the visual mode as an actual representation (53). AV storytelling centers around a modality that inherently places special emphasis on the basic flora and fauna of a story world without the constraints that lexicalizing these same backgrounded features creates. Kress notes that it is no accident that entire generations consider the MGM adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* to be the canonical representation of that world (53). Some literacies are simply better-suited to basic world-building processes situated in an appreciation for realism and verisimilitude as a result of their link to an embodied response. The visual mode ensures immersion if not attention. The metaphor becomes concrete—a shared metaphor for an entire narrative audience. The visual action and space of an AV story requires less creative response than a verbal/written composition, but it does ensure a more communal and therefore semiotic aesthetic experience since the visual and spatial elements are an intentional component of the story world.

Visual units of storytelling function slightly differently than the verbal/linguistic mode and have separate foundational units of analysis in film. The most basic unit is not recognized by film scholars as image, but scene. Syd Field defines a specific unit of action within a film or filmic story (132). He describes the scene as the following:

The physical necessity of changing the position of the camera [is a requirement] for each scene or shot in a new location . . . Generally, there are two kinds of scenes: one, where something happens visually, like an action scene . . . The other is a dialogue scene between one or more [characters]. Most scenes combine the two. (Field 135)

The most important aspect of the scene, though, is that something must happen to move the story forward. Like the larger story world, each scene has a clear beginning, middle, and end that is usually signified through point of view and constrained in time and place (Field 134). The more editing and cutting a scene includes, the more advanced its structure and the more work required by a viewer to interpret what is happening visually in the narrative (Field 135-136).

Many well-known directors employ panoramas and long shots to create a simple yet visually extensive setting in contrast with literary sequences, which require lengthy passages to accomplish a phenomenology and tone of similar scope. John Ford especially favors this visual style of scene and sequence (Wollen 565). Ford uses the long shot and lengthy scenes with little cutting or editing to create a sense of epic symbolism associated with nature, and minimizes circumstance through visual vastness and calls to mind sacred significances (Wollen 567). Dimartino and Konietzko use an animated version of this technique in their show. Setting and place are major elements of the visual *mise en scène* of *The Last Airbender* that indicate the universal and epic significances of Aang's journey similar to the carnivalesque patterning noted earlier. The *mise en scène* complements the narrative structure of the show, braiding the visual and verbal.

Returning for a moment to the thematic importance of movement to the *Last Airbender*, the transformational relationship between the visual and spatial modes is also important to any discussion of AV storytelling as well. Movement is the visualization of actors in space/place. Gunther Kress notes that in the "written mode there is a requirement to lexicalize movement" (52). Written movement is a representation or a process for naming rather than the meaning or actualization of the process (Kress 52). Kress is clear that any attempt to lexicalize motion necessarily results in basic misinterpretations of spatial relationships in literary fiction as a result

of connotation and cultural association (54). This may call into question the veracity of the fictional “truth” as shared between readers, but less so with viewers. The emphasis that AV storytelling inherently places on the intentional design of early milestone aesthetics of appreciation for realistic depictions not only makes the fictional space (the world) more concrete—the AV medium makes the fictional experience truer through an enhancement of the embodied elements of story the verbal modality simply lacks (Ronen 68).

Audio Mode, The Sound Track

Robert Stam notes that in the 1970s filmmakers began to invest greater time and effort into the creation of the soundtrack, having realized its importance to the success of a film (213). It is at this point that more literary theorists began to pay precise attention that had previously only been afforded to the image track and dialogue, instead of maintaining the “conventional view [that] sound [is] a mere addendum or supplement to image” (Stam 213). For example, Christian Metz argued that “spatial anchoring of aural events is much more vague and uncertain than that of visual events. The two sensory orders don’t have the same relationship to space” (367). The ambiguity that surrounds the issue of cinematic sound positions an audience for affective responses (Metz 367). Metz explains that, in particular, the musical score is situated in semiology, or the overall aesthetic project, while the visual and spatial are actually limited somewhat by phenomenology, or the action of the story (368). Film theorists such as Mary Anne Doane argued that sound is actually “married to the image” (374). Both Metz and Doane were interested in how cinematic storytelling synchronizes the visual, spatial, and audio aesthetic. Interestingly they both align the aural aspects of cinema (specifically musical score and off-screen narration) with intentional control of the viewer’s affective response. Metz describes the aural element as controlling tone (unbounded by language and image) while Doane suggests the

aural element provides depth to the image (bound by the image) (367; 375). Theories such as these argue for recognizing the implicit intentionality that multimodality incorporates into story to shape aesthetic response instead of limiting analysis to traditional narrative elements.

Developments by scholars like Metz and Doane reinvigorated an emphasis in medium over narrative analysis of cinema that provides a general understanding for the importance of audio analysis of cinematic stories. Unlike image, sound reproduction involves no dimensional loss through reproduction, and affords greater artistic intent and control of the medium, for instance (Stam 214). More importantly, while image is bound in space, sound is not. Instead, as it “penetrates and pervades space, it holds a heightened sense of presence” (Stam 214), which means that sound as a mode controls more of the atmosphere/ethos of an AV story than image can. Stam explains that a film without sound “creates an uncanny feeling of flatness” and suggests that “recorded sound thus has a higher coefficient of reality” (214). This does not mean that sound is less mediated, however, or even less fictional. It simply suggests that aesthetic responses to film indicate a greater mimetic impact by those narratives that codify and control sound to a greater extent. Relative to the aesthetic milestones that Parsons proposes, this also means that the background soundtrack shapes the visuals of AV stories into an understandable code; it affirms the realism by adding fictional cues for understanding those multimodal representations and encourages a mastery of the visual form by braiding the two (visual realism with audio fiction/metaphor) together. In the case of the Last Airbender this means the symphonic background can construct an epic ethos more easily than the many panoramic screenshots by suggesting an affective interpretation for what the young audience sees.

Understanding how the audio mode can encourage an interpretive understanding of image is important. Arnie Cox discusses a theory of musical meaning based on affective,

metaphoric reasoning and bodily experience pertinent to the importance of musical score to television and film. He explains that recent studies highlight the role of the body in the construction of meaning, referencing studies performed by Saslaw, Zbikowski, Brower, and Larson that demonstrate “how musical imagery . . . is partly motor imagery . . . related to the exertions and movements of our skeletal-motor system, and in the case of music this involves the various exertions enacted in musical performance” (Cox 1). He notes the mimetic hypothesis works through several principles that explain how we comprehend music “by way of a kind of physical empathy” (Cox 1). According to the mimetic hypothesis, when we take an aesthetic interest in things like story or film “our responses can be understood as if we are implicitly asking, *What’s it like to do that*, along with the corollary question, *What’s it like to be that?*” (Cox 2). A large part of how people answer these questions is concerned with what is referred to as mimetic motor imagery (MMI) based on past engagement with dance (Cox 2). More pertinent to the field of aesthetic and literacy development, early engagement with music is informed by imagery related to how an instrument is played (Cox 2). For example, MMI is evoked through the swaying movement of the bow across the strings of a violin, the striking force of the hands against drums, and the intake of breath and deep exhalation of breath necessary to play a wind instrument like the flute or harmonica. These memories inform the overt imitation that makes dance moves and styles intuitive to certain musical compositions (Cox 3-4). These actions are physical/embodied and become associated with physical states that control the “dynamics of blood chemistry and of the skeletal-motor system” (Cox 4). When we imagine in response to music, we “covertly imitate . . . [without] the executions of the motor actions, which are inhibited while the changes in the other systems are attenuated” (Cox 4-5). There is a neural relationship between action and imagery. The background music that is frequently overlooked in

filmic stories controls an important part of the physical and emotional responses to the imagined context.

In relation to the field of aesthetic and literacy development, then, we can apply Cox's notion that the overt imitation that informs MMI and underpins intuitive dance is "plainly evident in children . . . and continues throughout our lives [becoming] subtler and more covert as we mature" (Cox 2). The invitational appeal of music develops relatively early in children (Cox 7), and the imaginative processes of MMI that develop out of this early form of response encourage a physical, concrete imaginative context for music. In other words, even young children gain a physical understanding of situation and story by the addition of music and neural association.

The Last Airbender uses certain instruments to complement specific types of bending in the Universe. Airbending moves are typically illustrated alongside flutes, while earthbending, like any of the shorter conflicts or fight scenes, is illustrated to a backdrop of drums. According to mimetic hypothesis theory, this evokes neural associations to achieve an embodied response for the imaginative context that complements the choreographed illustrations; the image and sound track work together seamlessly to create a more thorough world representation. Additionally, more epic battles are accompanied by a full symphonic score that encourages a physical response similar in scope to the narrative moment. The consistent emphasis of an instrumental soundtrack throughout the sequence is an intentional example of the epic quality, and a compositional feature that transforms the visual realism from a second level milestone into mastery of the fictional form (epic). Again, the complementarity of the story is central to the positive reception of the world.

Possible Expansions

The Legend of Korra is another spin-off series that offers insight into the re-visioning process of an Actual world. The intentional contexts of a television Actual necessarily shift to meet the needs of expanding a work in a medium with stringent quality and marketing requirements. Like Pullman's latter addition to the His Dark Materials universe, certain avenues of aesthetics are given focus and others backgrounded as a basic process of possible world development. Legend of Korra provides new approaches to The Last Airbender story world to maintain interest and expand the aesthetic repertoires of the original fan-base. More important, it clarifies important aspects of the Actual ethos based on the general reception of fans and decisions made in response by Nickelodeon. It suggests that sometimes those aspects that creators feel are seminal to the original composition may not be the only definitive parts of an Actual. In television especially, possible expansions may not always align with either the original fan-base or the marketing goals of a media group, and the realities of network ratings make audience response a much more participatory aspect of television writing/design. The Legend of Korra diverges dramatically from the canon Actual and steadily loses the support that ensured the show's success. Though the Legend of Korra received positive reviews overall, evidence suggests that it was less successful with Nickelodeon's target audience and may also be considered a less aesthetically challenging story world by fans of The Last Airbender.

Jenkins explains that fan culture is unique in that "rather than passively consum[ing] shows [they] exploit the texts of the series to serve their own interests through fan created fiction, art, and music" (*Fans*, 24). Such behavior is consistent with the latter stages of aesthetic development where milestones include creativity and an appreciation and mastery of form. It is also demonstrative of the deepest levels of immersion in a story world, an indication of virtual

status (Duffet 264-65). Interestingly, the body of Jenkins’s work positions active fandom as cultural behavior that develops in early adolescence and often peaks in young adults. Much of his work focuses on youth culture and its interaction with contemporary media.⁴⁰ As the leading scholar on the cultural phenomenon of fandom and new media, Jenkins’s emphasis on these practices as an important part of adolescent and young adult responses to storytelling is significant. The few empirical studies released by major fan-sites suggest a link between participatory fan culture and the young adult response to transmedia/television storytelling as well. FanFiction.Net released its first long-term study of the demographics of contributing authors in 2011 with the following results:

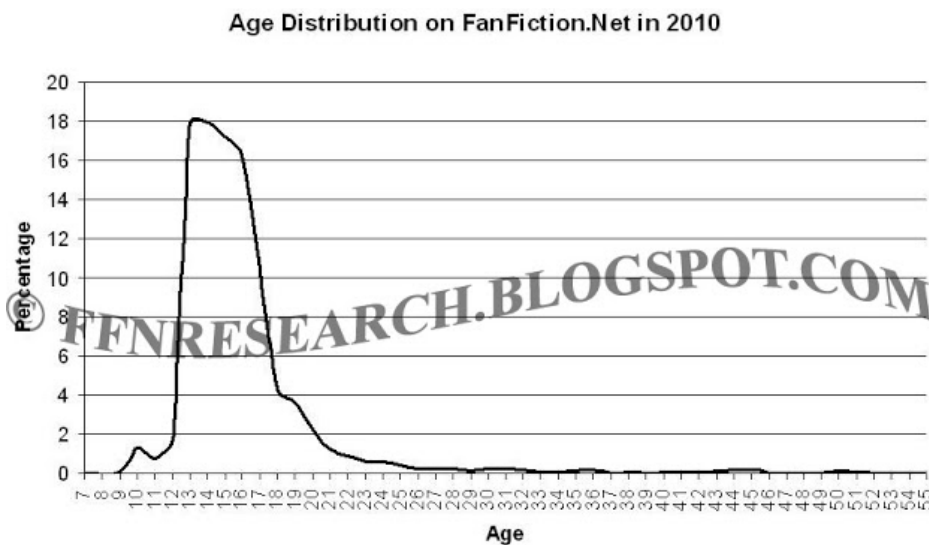


Figure 7: Fan Fiction Statistics, Numerics and Unique Research about FanFiction.Net by FFN Research. Linkejimai!. www.ffnresearch.blogspot.com 18 Mar 2011.

⁴⁰ Jenkins’s study of the intersections between youth culture, fandom, and media studies begins with *Textual Poachers* and continues in the following: *Convergence Culture; Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers; Spreadable Media*; and culminates in *Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*.

According to the graph, 80% of those who revealed their age are between 13 and 17 years old. Based on their surveys, the average age on contributing authors is 15.8 years of age (“Fanfiction Statistics”). While scholars find empirical studies of fan-fiction response problematic,⁴¹ media groups that conduct regular surveys to assess business practices and viability find that fan-fiction authors predominately self-identify as young adult (“Fanfiction Statistics”). According to these studies, aesthetic mastery appears to peak at this age range based on creative practices in response to story worlds.

Surveys of fan-fiction authors that contribute to the most popular transmedia story worlds like *Last Airbender* and *Legend of Korra* on sites such as Fanfiction.net, LiveJournal, Wattpad, Potionsandsnitches.net, and others provide generalized results that can and should shape future hypotheses of adolescent and young adult aesthetic practices and mastery of story world forms. For the purposes of this study, however, the interpretation of data on these responses has different implications about extensional contexts and genre as applied to the relationship between *The Last Airbender Actual* and its possible spin-off, *Legend of Korra*.

DiMartino and Konietzko’s vision for *Legend of Korra* is the story of the next *Avatar*, but with an emphasis on concerns that are more likely to appear in the day-to-day lives of young adults: romantic relationships, politics, and career choices, for example. These foregrounded concerns limited the show’s ability to draw in new fans from Nickelodeon’s target adolescent audience to build the original fan-base and ensure the ongoing success of the series. It also suggests that generic issues of audience may be an important part of ethos as well. Terry Pratchett has successfully expanded the adult *Disc-world* universe to include children as an

⁴¹ Fan fiction studies are notoriously difficult to conduct, limiting the field of real data. Most statistics and demographics are performed by the media group instead of impartial, outside researchers.

audience, but his Tiffany Aching novels are designed to draw young readers into the universe through the Wee Free Men sequence in the same way an Actual establishes fully developed worlds before introducing expansions. His universe uses an Actual design for a possible spin-off to initiate and fully integrate young readers into his adult fantasy series—a subtle difference that further suggests the value of sequences as an immersive genre in contrast with series fiction. Interestingly, Pratchett clearly differentiates between child and adult audiences with this example. The child/adult audience distinction particular to children’s literature as a genre may be a definitive element of ethos.

Interestingly, the announcement venue for the release of Legend of Korra is evidence of Nickelodeon’s attempt to appeal primarily to the Last Airbender fanbase⁴² instead of Nickelodeon’s typical, primetime adolescent/ “tween” audience (Davies 158). The series was officially announced at the San Diego Comic-Con on July 22, 2010 (Farley). Though the show was largely deemed a successful venture by Viacom, The Legend of Korra’s ratings declined steadily from season one through season four before the show transitioned entirely to a streaming internet series.⁴³ According to Nielsen ratings and ratings released by IMDB.com, the original fanbase never demonstrated the same appreciation for the show.

Christopher Farley notes that “at [the] time, DiMartino and Konietzko explained that they were not attempting to change the fanbase, and more mature themes would be broached”. Their decision suggests the creators saw the success of the Actual as strongly situated in issues of theme and world design rather than story development. In particular, the themes were more

⁴² Accounting for the length of the Last Airbender three season sequence and Nickelodeon’s target age range for evening programming of 12 years of age (Davies 158), the original Last Airbender fan base would have “aged up” to highlight young adult interests.

⁴³ IMDB.com records the ratings history for all television shows included on the website.

mundane rather than the epic or mythic story of Aang, and Korra's story develops formulaically with the structural features of a series rather than sequence. There is no arc that builds the development of character, setting, plot, and story significance in tandem. These changes are superficial in terms of world development, but remarkable with regards to genre.

Jenkins suggests that canon, and an author's Actual design (including genre) is a central concern for fans (*Fans* 67). According to Ronen's discussion of world building, sharp contrasts between works in a universe can be read as a diversion from fictional truth, the most pressing concern for the imaginative construction of a literary work (48). Canon is truth for fans, and this will include most aspects of Actual ethos; one element of ethos for world building *may* be a distinction between series and sequence fiction. Possible world responses must recognize reader expectations for the extensional contexts. Drastic changes to a canon work (Actual) are likely to be rejected out of hand.⁴⁴ The possibility that *The Last Airbender* was defined also by its audience in the way of most children's texts is a potential factor (an interesting question for notable elements of ethos). The cancellation of *Legend of Korra* has been attributed to a "combination of (relatively) low ratings and themes too mature for the channel [that] have caused it simply not to fit into their line-up" (Tassi). Senior contributor to *Forbes Magazine* Paul Tassi argues that this theory "does make *some* amount of sense [since the] *Legend of Korra* is a very "adult" show."

⁴⁴The importance of canon in fandom has resulted in a system of language that identifies possible adaptations to categorize fan works in recognizable ways for other participants. For example, works of fanfiction include tags that warn of changes to canon characters that are characterized differently from the original work of influence (OOC), and non-canon stories are identified with an AU (alternate universe) tag.

Yet, the demands of the medium play an important role in the development of televised possible worlds as well. Unlike the Last Airbender, where story quality was the inspiration for production, Nickelodeon's decision to go ahead with Legend of Korra was based largely on the phenomenal success of the Actual program. And Legend of Korra, unlike the Last Airbender, is conceptualized around marketing issues instead of story or quality of story. DiMartino and Konietzko established a character based upon the number of female fans of the Actual and the adoration the fans expressed for the many headstrong female characters of the original Actual, a single component of the proposed story (Farley). The show is limited by the scope of the creative project/story and the limitations of the method and approach for its intentional design.

Popular fan-critics of the shows note the generic distinction. Issac Price of *TheOdyssey.com* describes this extensional context in the following:

Korra takes the Avatar franchise in a different direction. Instead of self-contained episodes with their own stories contributing to a large, overarching plot for the whole series, *Korra* episodes are primarily focused on the story of the season, with each season having its own plot that may or may not have a major impact on the seasons that follow. He goes on to say that this “kind of structure makes the show feel more like a series of challenges to be dealt with rather than the kind of grand adventure presented in *Avatar*” (Price). Once again, the epic elements of the Actual set the quality apart.

The Last Airbender won multiple awards for the quality of the program such as the Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation Emmy in 2007, the Best Animated Television Production Produced for Children Annie Award in 2009, the Outstanding Children's Programming Genesis Award in 2007, and—perhaps most pertinent to this study—the Favorite

Cartoon Kid's Choice Award in 2008.⁴⁵ Each of these awards is based on the compositional reception of the story world, *the world as a whole*. In contrast, Legend of Korra predominantly received sound and voice actor awards that note the success of specific modes within the story world.

Other aesthetic characteristics also suggest that the possible evolution of the Actual was mainly handicapped by genre and audience concerns. Beyond the structural changes and the emphasis on more mundane, young adult issues for Korra's different storylines, most of the changes to the Actual were quite superficial. The most obvious additions are the various evolutions of bending techniques. The first season returns to the concept of blood bending introduced in the final season of *The Last Airbender* in "The Puppet Master." The villains are referred to as terrorists throughout the season and have clear associations with real world experiences of Western children familiar with the events of 9/11. The association to blood bending, a skill introduced when notions of good and evil are more clearly defined instead of the spectrum that Korra introduces, resolves any confusion about who is good and bad within the framework of the first story arc.

The second season maintains an emphasis on political ideologies with a focus on anarchy, a more developed notion of the terrorism introduced in the first season. This season continues to expand the possibilities of bending. Combustion bending is the ability to cause explosions by focusing firebending through a third eye tattooed on the forehead introduced through a firebending assassin and dubbed "Combustion Man" by Sokka, appearing in "The Headband," "The Beach," "The Runaway," and "The Western Air Temple" of the Actual. In the original

⁴⁵ IMDB.com also records the awards given to each television show included in their database. All information on awards is taken from IMDB.com.

sequence the skill is limited to a single firebender, but *The Legend of Korra* develops this into an entire tribe of political activists through the love interest of the main villain of season two.

Season two also expands earthbending to include lavabending. These additions are interesting novelties, but align with only the most basic of aesthetic milestones, those that appeal to a pre-existing style or taste without any further development of the form. The creative expansions are nominal and don't encourage a deeper understanding or use of the narrative grammar of the universe. For experienced readers and fans of the universe, these expansions may grab attention, but they do little to maintain that attention.

The tendency in *Legend of Korra* to rely on existing styles and story lines instead of developing new concepts is noticeable in other ways as well. Zuko makes seven different cameo appearances in season two of *Legend of Korra*. Katara and Toph also appear briefly in different seasons in ways that do not develop the story but serve to excite fans of the *Actual*. Again, these types of maneuvers are primarily appeals to early aesthetic milestones as they don't really expand any other story world characteristic beyond time and place or setting. Appeals to the original fan-base are an ongoing aspect of any possible spin-off, but *Legend of Korra* only utilizes very basic extensional strategies. This may be another reason for the minimal success of the show. For example, *Legend of Korra* fails to make use of the complex structural benefits of sequence that position television as more distinctly cinematic. Yet the epic themes and story development of the *Actual* make *The Last Airbender* a television story that is credited with changing how people think about children's television and animation (Barr). The possible receives no such accolades despite its popularity.

Legend of Korra does develop some interesting and playful lines of aesthetics though, specifically those linked to the steam punk anachronism the *Actual* establishes. The stylistic

development is quite different from traditional notions of steampunk, however, and has been referred to as neo-steampunk by fans of steampunk drawn to the series based on the show's incorporation of steampunk elements ("The Legend of Korra"). These neo-steampunk elements are less anachronistic than stylistic in the spin-off, indicative of fictional significances as opposed to real-world significances. The possible expansion progresses chronologically from Victorian-aged stylistics to a more modernist style that includes flapper dresses and hairstyles. The world transitions from steampunk dirigibles to neo-steampunk automobiles and airplanes.

The music also changes. The instrumental pieces written and orchestrated by Jeremy Zuckerman remain, though they now use jazz and ragtime styles. Movies (called "movers") and boxing style bending matches are given minor story arcs within the new series. The character Merrick, introduced in season two, is a clear allusion to eccentric genius Howard Hughes, who produced films in the 1920s and 30s ("Howard Hughes: American Manufacturer"). These expansionist elements of flora/fauna expand the setting of an Actual that worked to unite the nations into a Republic City where all benders now live together. This technique, the adaptation of an element of ethos (steampunk) to continue development of the Actual, is a diegetic element rather than a specific use of steampunk. It is an intratextual appeal that relies more on the second aesthetic milestone and developing verisimilitude and realism. Legend of Korra uses this method of ethos development as an indication of the passage of time (chronotope) within the universe instead of a simple thematic thread, an intentional element of form instead of an ongoing appeal to the early aesthetic milestone based on initial taste preferences. All of these intratextual elements suggest that Legend of Korra is a period piece that expands the anachronistic steampunk ethos. Ironically, this narrative move reduces the complexity of the Actual as a multicultural story world where the steampunk element is an ideological frame of

reference for viewing colonialism. As a composition, the possible spin-off is very accessible to the Actual and focuses on story world form—an appeal to fans of the Actual. From a fictional and possible worlds lens, the success of both ventures for Nickelodeon demonstrates the value of stories that progressively stimulate the later aesthetic milestones for young audiences over simplistic appeals to the beginning stages of aesthetic development.

Extensional contexts require a delicate balance. Overt intratextuality and accessibility to Actual elements encourage readers with an Actual repertoire to *quickly* immerse themselves in a world that is both familiar and new (different). The Legend of Korra provides this as evidenced by the early success of the series. Yet, based on an understanding of the stages of aesthetic taste development, investment in the imagined experience requires an *ongoing aesthetic* challenge. Complexity is a requirement of deep immersion. Here is where The Legend of Korra ultimately failed, and in large part this failure can be attributed to the limitations of series fiction (which lacks the emphasis upon nuance and story development).

Conclusion

From the reading of The Last Airbender universe that this chapter proposes, where the original sequence is an Actual world that develops into a less complex possible television series, interesting discussions arise about the ways that authors frame stories. These methods can achieve different levels of reader interest and investment while encouraging specific responses through multimodal and generic design. Film sequences are increasingly popular, but so are television sequences like The Last Airbender, Flight 29 Down, and the Clone Wars that break the traditional model of formulaic, series storytelling. Epic sequences like The Last Airbender are

aesthetic challenges that advance readers; they are fictional Magna Operas⁴⁶ that appeal to an increasingly participatory, media-oriented world by providing an imagined space to play. The popularity of sequences is in large part a result of the aesthetic challenges the genre raises. This may impact network decisions to invest in quality of story over the limitations that seasonal assessments of ratings place upon series fiction (a staple of television media). Networks like Disney and Viacom are increasingly aware of the benefits that long-term investments in story may bring despite the financial risks these pose. I would argue this is largely a phenomenon specific to children's network television and programming, though.

Yet, New Media storytelling and generic adaptations of the sort discussed in this chapter necessitate approaching the story worlds with new methods and a different set of literacy competencies in mind that acknowledge medium specific benefits and limitations for aesthetic engagement. For example, Roderick McGillis describes the ongoing canon-wars that continue to push stories like *The Last Airbender* to the edge of significance in English and Humanities while Cultural Studies and Communications embrace new media and eagerly anticipate the complexities that medium plays in composition and design (346-347). This compositional approach embraces the stories that are more pertinent to today's children as well as the common modalities that communicate these stories more effectively and comprehensively for readers who struggle with immersion in verbal texts. Traditional methods for reading classic works of literature fail to acknowledge the different aesthetic logics that inform and craft many

⁴⁶ See Chapter I of this study for more in-depth commentary on Magna Operas as epic stories. Thomas Pavel devotes two chapters of his semantic study of epic literature, *Fictional Worlds*, to his discussion of the discourse construction and imaginative appeal of works that develop and play in fictional forms established by an author, or authors that devote a specific set of rules and characteristics that guide the shape of their world alongside the plot that develops (43-72; 113-135).

contemporary stories like *The Last Airbender*, and the challenges that different text-types pose to the basic cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension. Changes in media and communication change more than how we interact. These systems also change the way we *think*.

When studying multimedia, multi-genre sequences such as *The Last Airbender*, the interpretative and canonical emphasis is on what Zohar Shavit terms the “literary polysystem” (112). Children and adolescents maneuver between modalities (visual, audio, spatial, linguistic) to make meaning of boundaries blurred by mediums and genres that push and pull separate cognitive and embodied responses alongside conventional narrative methods to compose a holistic textual world. Today’s youth are no strangers to complexity. The increasing popularity of in-depth fictional worlds suggests they revel in intricate story worlds, often unaware and sometimes unable to articulate the depth of their aesthetic play. This all simply means that the problems and challenges of today’s youth are different from those faced by previous generations, and fiction is a space that embraces this cultural truth. It is the role of teachers and adults to recognize and answer new social and educational challenges. We provide the language and systems of interpretation that address the various methods of response to engage the interpretations of the genres, mediums, and texts that inform how we share stories. And it is through thoughtful pedagogy that this is most likely to develop. It is our role to bridge that gap. Unbraiding, examining, and then re-braiding the formal elements of new media stories like *The Last Airbender* provide engaging opportunities to begin this process of adapting our responses and pedagogy to meet the needs of contemporary children and adolescents.

CHAPTER IV: RESPONDING TO FICTION:
CONCRETE IMAGINATION AND
FICTIONAL WORLDS

So far, this study has examined the likely responses textual elements of a fictional world encourage through the intratextual patterns and intentional structure that arise across diegetic texts; however, most critics since W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley introduced the concept of the intentional fallacy acknowledge the reader as the key figure in a reading experience. Additionally, many author anecdotes and memoirs suggest that childhood is a particularly impressionable period for experiences that engage with memorable fictional worlds. For instance, Francis Spufford dedicates an entire memoir to recording the fictional worlds that left indelible marks on his adult identity in *The Child That Books Built*. Claudia Mills notes that she and many children's book authors get their ideas from childhood experiences and the "extremely vivid" stories recalled from that time (376). She adds that rather than formal training in narrative development, many children's authors "learn [their] craft simply by reading and writing" (376), further developing skills and practices begun in childhood. It would seem that many of the authors that create the fictional worlds of today are those most experienced in reading and responding to fiction during childhood.

This raises the question: is it the stories or the child's engagement that results in such deep and meaningful reading experiences? Common sense dictates that the best results come from a combination of the two, but a child's typical pattern of response encouraged or enabled by certain stories rather than some innate, cognitive characteristic may have some impact as well. Some books are simply written so as to immerse a reader more readily in an imagined experience, but younger children are also culturally conditioned to approach stories in a playful

manner. Children may seem to respond intuitively to fiction in ways that make it concrete and understandable, but the strategies they use are taught early on through playful and entertaining activities such as drawing, dancing, and pretend play. Alternately and unfortunately, adolescent, young adult, and adult readers frequently decry these methods of response as simplistic or elementary.

The following chapter is an interrogation of the impact of fictional worlds on readers. It is broken down a bit differently from previous chapters. The focus is on response. Instead of analysis of a world, I will explore the responses and strategies of response that encourage a deeper, more memorable sense of imagined construct (fictional world). I include two sections based on the most significant reasons for these (response and response strategies) in application to sequence fiction and world building. The first section is a short ethnography of the reading experiences of my oldest sons as they engaged with what is now a favorite story world, Tui Sutherland's *Wings of Fire* sequence.⁴⁷ As they read, I made note of some of their habits of response and the discussions that we had as they became more deeply immersed in the fiction.⁴⁸ I conclude this section with a short discussion of their demonstration of specific aesthetic milestones as they internalized and engaged in the fictional world, having made note of when their levels of interest seemed to peak and wane.

⁴⁷ Sutherland's sequence now includes a spin-off sequence as well. Similarly, a graphic novel adaptation of the *Actual* sequence is in the process of being released. For this reason, the boys' interest in the sequence remains high despite having concluded the *Actual* story some time ago.

⁴⁸ I will note here that my boys are familiar with the process of sharing stories. We frequently discuss specific episodes of interest and some of the games that they enjoyed playing around the dinner table and throughout their day, for example. That this is typical behavior instead of behavior specific to a classroom is important to note since they are more likely to engage in educational forms of response on their own as a result.

The second section shifts away from the reading experiences of children to focus on adult readers, particularly on adult educators that struggle with reading engagement.⁴⁹ Interestingly, many of the higher education students that I have encountered struggle with reading, and do not self-identify as readers despite their interest in education (many even demonstrate anxiety when they know they will need to read regularly). I am differentiating here between reading comprehension and the ability to understand a story, and reading engagement as the ability to enjoy a story. Adult readers in my study that struggle in this area also frequently demonstrated an unintentional bias against the methods they expect children to employ during elementary and middle level education. There is an expectation for children to respond to texts in certain ways that may even be dictated by professional training in college, but many adult educators find the idea that they might benefit from similar forms of response silly. This bias is similar to the bias that surrounds children's literature, a genre that adults frequently regard as too simplistic to be academic, critical, or culturally significant.⁵⁰ My proposition is that many adult educators who may not have well-developed response practices to fiction are able to comprehend stories but struggle with internalizing and processing fictional worlds as a result of this bias. Adults often conflate comprehension with aesthetic processing or internalization, neglecting the quality of the response.

Reading Response and Multimodal Play with Asa and Cameron

Observing my children as they read is an interesting experience that has initiated a more nuanced understanding of series and sequences as the genres that establish expansive fictional

⁴⁹ My discussion of adult student responses will be referencing data collected under IRB protocol # 2012-0139.

⁵⁰ Chapter three of Beverly Lyon Clark's *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* discusses this bias in detail (48-76).

worlds by engaging young readers. Simply put, the responses my children had to sequences that they were reading never seemed to apply in response to either novels or series.⁵¹ While Cameron already identified as a reader and found the process of imagining the fiction he read quite natural, Asa found maintaining interest in typical novels and even some series more difficult. Yet, Asa was wholly interested and engaged when reading the different sequences that initially caught his attention. The obvious question that arose was why that might be the case.

A story world may encourage more meaningful responses based on its intentional design, and my initial response to the question of why Asa found sequences more engaging than other works of fiction was situated in what I was interpreting from the narratives. At the same time, Cameron often moved from one sequence to another in a manner that suggested no real or lasting significance. He found the sequences themselves engaging, but not necessarily memorable or notable. Instead, Cameron's interest was sparked through the social interactions that took place when he shared a story world with someone else in more developed ways, something that happened across sequences due to the advanced amount of time spent focusing on a single narrative arc. Once he began to see his brother Asa take interest and invest in a familiar sequence he quickly picked the story world back up again in a way that solidified the fiction into what this study regards as an epic world or *Magna Opera*.⁵² Two things encouraged this change in Cameron's response: a shared reading experience (a sense of community) and further developing short responses during the reading process that required some meaningful mastery of

⁵¹ As noted in chapter one, series have the same internal structure as a novel despite intertextual references across a universe.

⁵² See Pavel's *Fictional Worlds* for discussion of saturated fiction and salient worlds (57-61; 62-64).

the form/shape of the world (these usually began with a multimodal response before transitioning into group pretend play).

The boys expanded their understanding and dedication to the world as they shared the process of response⁵³ between each other just as Henry Jenkins describes in his body of work on fanfiction. The deepest and most meaningful responses the boys demonstrated to stories they have encountered came from works they shared with one another, but only after beginning a process of participatory response and engagement similar to fandom. These responses revolved around the mastery of a world's intentional form, and the deepest responses often demonstrate some creative synthesis and expansion of that form into other types of playful responses. Responses of this sort signify an engaged understanding of the book where fiction transitions to worlds or spaces for play—a response to the intentional form mastered more easily during different forms of multimodal response.

Asa

As I observed Asa's behaviors, I realized they were situated in imagining concretely (sometimes through pretend play, but usually he began by creating artistic representations). I realized that I was seeing a young reader develop a habit of reading through a sense of world development that scholars such as Bruner, Winner, Eco, and Doležel all mention in their scholarship on multimodality or aesthetics and fictional world building. Joan Menefee reminds us that children's artifacts, such as drawings, are neither "simple [n]or unmediated" (226). Rather the children are "artist-creators" who demonstrate and communicate "aesthetic principles" equivalent to verbal texts (Menefee 226). Her studies of children's drawings identify

⁵³ The boys even shared the reading process as well, opting to go back and read whole novels together aloud for fun.

this process as a communication strategy and a “natural and necessary developmental stage” based on a child’s unique perspective and imaginative processes (Menefee 227). Creating an environment that highlights different modes of interpretive response can therefore enhance immersion in the more playful/meaningful forms of response (Shea 7). And the more complete a story world becomes with fully realized flora and fauna, the more likely a reader is to transition to more complex issues of character and form, story elements that maintain interest past the initial peak.

Asa began to illustrate parts of the Wings of Fire world by referencing those pictures and passages that were an approved/published aspect of the books like the image below, which mirrors the cover of the first book in the sequence.

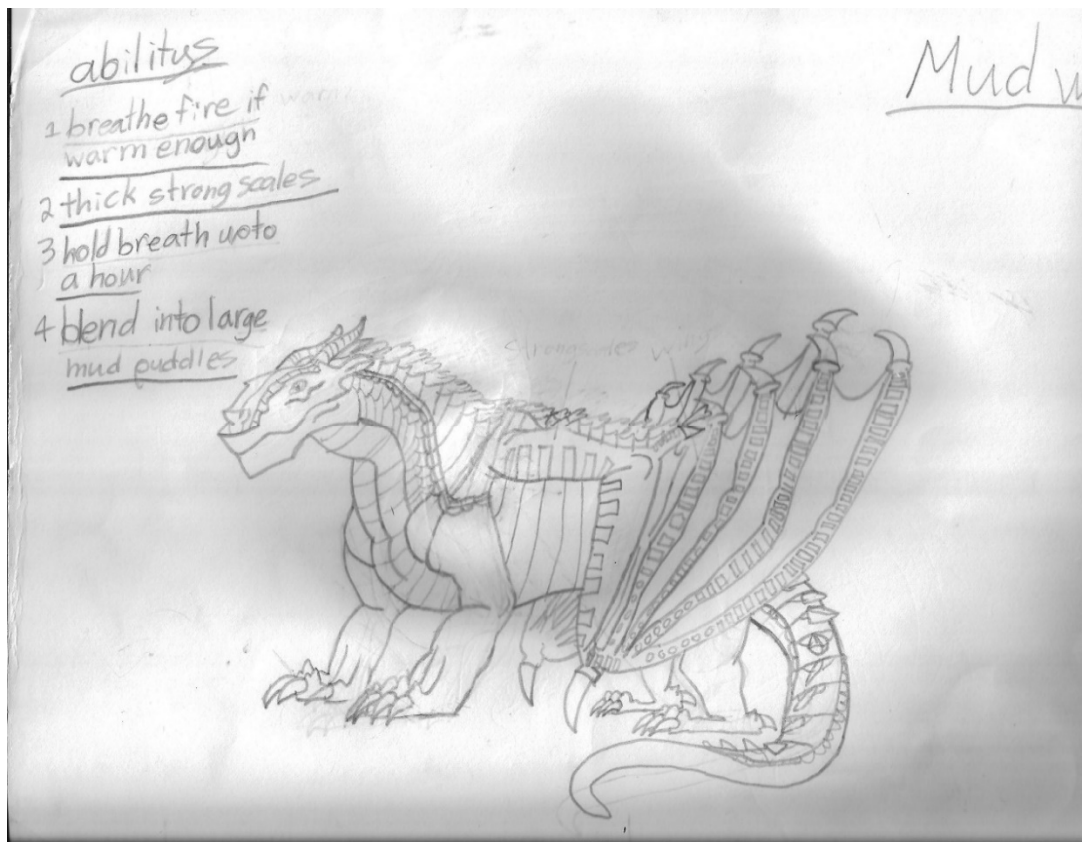


Figure 8: Asa (10 years old), First Illustration, a Dragon from Tui Sutherland's Wings of Fire Sequence. Includes a description of the dragon's abilities.

Asa's response is a demonstration of early, second stage aesthetic milestones based on verisimilitude. Talking with him about his art revealed that he felt more strongly about those pictures that he had drawn for himself than the original illustrations, however. His visual responses helped him to internalize the stories more concretely than simply viewing the illustrations. Additionally, any drawings were posted by Asa, his father, or myself in the places that Asa frequented, from the wall-space around his bed to the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator door. The more his internalized responses to the world filled the spaces where he lived and played, the more his pretend/dramatic play began to incorporate aspects of the fictional world. This process transitioned Asa from early aesthetic milestones dealing with an appreciation of realism/verisimilitude, to an appreciation for the form of the fictional world (a fantastic representation despite realistic associations), and finally to synthesis and creative play using the form of the world.

Asa's artistic responses helped him transition from the verbal to a more visual composition of the world, giving him a concrete internalization. It is important to note that developing his responses, even when based on images from the book, provided Asa with a sense of ownership that signified his transition from comprehension to full engagement and immersion into a fully internalized form. The image below is one of the first pictures that Asa drew when he began responding to the Wings of Fire books.



Figure 9: Asa (10 years old), Illustration, the Map of the 5 Dragon Kingdoms from Tui Sutherland's Wings of Fire Sequence. Modelled from the map that appears as front matter of Book 2.

I recorded the following interaction just after Asa asked me to post the picture on one of the kitchen cabinets for display.

Asa: This is the map of the five kingdoms.

Mother: Did you make that up?

Asa: No. There's a map at the front of the first book.

Mother: Why did you draw it then? You could just look at the map if you wanted to.

Asa: But this one is mine.

Asa's illustration is an exact replica. He adds nothing of his own, but the process of putting pencil to paper was enough to encourage a feeling of ownership despite the lack of new ideas.

The act of illustration also gave him an internal representation, one that was personalized and more complete as a result.

Asa demonstrates the tendency to represent verbal worlds physically in other modes as well, suggesting that response provides a form of mental clarification. For example, a common reading response to his children's books has been to share the book with his brothers, reading aloud. This process often leads to Asa inventing tunes to accompany the songs or ditties that frequently appear in works like *The Hobbit* and other quest narratives as he imagines the characters singing, and voices that to his brothers. These multimodal activities frequently take place in his earliest responses to important story worlds, suggesting that things like pretend play are a more advanced form of response situated as much in mastery of the form of the world as in the internalization of the world that ensures immersion.

Interestingly, Asa spoke of his initial nervousness when singing the songs from the *Land of Stories* as he read to his little brother, Peyton.

Asa: I wasn't sure how it should sound?

Mother/Jordana: Does it have to sound a specific way?

Asa: (long pause) "No?"

It is important to note that Asa experienced reading aloud as a form of interpretation. It is a performative response that clarifies the audio component of the verbal form of the text he was reading. His rendition of the song makes the world more concrete—a second stage aesthetic milestone that reinforces the verisimilitude of the story world; however, his unwillingness to sing the song incorrectly demonstrates the power a reader originally invests in an author. Asa's early response demonstrates a close adherence to the rules the author establishes for the Actual. Later responses to the same sequence demonstrate a better grasp of the form of the world (its

intratextual ethos and foundational components) through a willingness to move further away from the author's intentional design towards synthesis of the Actual world or Asa's interpretation of the text. By the time Asa finished reading the sequence to his little brother, he was also leading elaborate quests that took place within the arc's main events but outside of the action and inventing characters adapted from other fairytales in a similar style to that which Chris Colfer uses in *The Land of Stories* as he acted out adventures within that same universe.⁵⁴ His playful responses demonstrate a clear understanding of and adherence to canonicity, and demonstrate Asa's transition from a reader to a fan whose focus is expansion of the world (Busse and Hellekson 6).

Cameron

Cameron demonstrated similar patterns in thinking and response, but used methods of response guided by his desire to share and participate in a reading community as well. Asa's preferred style of response is situated in his dominant literacies. He considers himself an artist and better understands things represented visually. Cameron excels in traditional literacy, reading and writing, for example. Though Cameron participated in Asa's playful response activities, his predominant literacy still displayed a central focus of how he perceived/internalized the world (through language—the verbal mode); this became apparent the more that he attempted to use Asa's methods. The following is a representation of the style and type of drawings that Cameron produced as they read the books together.

⁵⁴ Colfer's sequence is a metafictional quest narrative that adapts familiar characters and situations from fairytales and other canonical works of children's literature, like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*.



Figure 10: Cameron (12 years old), Illustration of an Early Episode (the Escape of the Dragonettes from Their Cave and Adult Teachers) in Tui Sutherland's *Wings of Fire* Sequence. Note that while Cameron was older, his illustration was far more simplistic than his brother's. While this is partially an issue of skill, he clearly spent less time and effort on his illustration as well. Yet, Cameron created an identical number of illustrations during the period they read the sequence, and he requested they appear beside Asa's drawings in the kitchen (he posted his illustrations around his bed just as Asa did). His increasing enjoyment was linked primarily to the process of sharing his imagined experiences.

Cameron, who is less artistic but still quite imaginative, shared his illustrations orally after developing very basic artwork as we posted them.⁵⁵ His drawings usually consisted of a

⁵⁵ Our family openly discusses daily activities. Discussion of the drawings and different pastimes they participate in during their day is a pattern for my children beyond reading response, however.

single character situated in the setting where particular plot events took place. Speaking with Cameron about his image revealed the following:

Mother: What's this?

Cameron: That's Clay. He's a mudwing. He's about to fight his way out of the cave so the dragonets can escape.

Mother: Wow, that's a lot. (Looks at the picture again)

Cameron: Well, I can't draw all that (laughs), but it's what happens.

After hanging and discussing his picture, it became clear that Cameron's very basic illustration of a dragon was a visualization of an entire episode from the novel. This reinforces notions of action theory characterization, naming, and proper nouns in fiction noted in Chapter II of this study, where specific words or phrases acquire constellations of narrative context.⁵⁶ Characters become a focus for readers because they acquire a host of contextual features situated in the story (Pavel 36-37). The illustrations gained visual context as Cameron spent time connecting verbal associations with the characters and images he drew as representations of story.

Cameron spent more time and effort participating in activities that he would not have when reading alone. Though the scope was narrower and the number of drawings fewer than Cameron made in response to the sequence than those of Asa, who is predisposed to artistic illustration, the drawings that Cameron did produce were usually begun alongside his brother. Since Cameron's strongest literacy is already situated in the verbal mode, he did not struggle to internalize the content; but he was able to develop a stronger sense of visual literacy to better articulate his internalized world to other visual learners (such as Asa). Additionally, as Cameron

⁵⁶ In this instance, images acquire narrative context instead of the word or phrase the image replaces.

continued reading the sequence, his pictures began to fill in with greater detail. Similar to Asa's earliest illustrations, Cameron's settings and dragons slowly became more elaborate. At first, they seemed unnecessary for developing the world even though Cameron was clearly enjoying expanding his responses alongside his brother, but the talks we shared as we posted his drawings suggested this was not necessarily true.

Mother: So, does this help you then? Does it make the story better?

Cameron: No. I can see it better now, I guess . . . in my head.

Mother: You don't draw as much as Asa though.

Cameron: I don't need to.

They weren't necessary, but they had the advantage of providing additional complexities to aspects of the world that kept Cameron fully engaged as he continued to play. It was his approach to the fictional world that maintained his interest beyond the other sequences that Cameron also enjoyed.

The pretend/dramatic play that Asa and Cameron engaged in began in much the same way as their visual responses, but these instances were more frequent after an intense period of illustration and story discussions between the boys. Early games were based on enacting story events from the book with small moments of improvisation that developed aspects of world, plot, and character. Neither Asa nor Cameron pretended to be one of the dragonet protagonists. Instead they chose their favorite dragon types and added themselves to the pre-existing plot as new characters. Before long, the story spun in new directions based on these small additions, and Cameron and Asa became the main protagonists with the dragonets filling in as supporting roles. The process of visualizing the story seemed to encourage a deeper understanding of its structure and form as well. They both follow basic rules set by the intentional design of the story

world, though they don't verbalize those rules unless someone attempts to play in a way that challenges the ethos.

Another important aspect of this process of multimodal response was the effect it had on the depth of their aesthetic engagement. As the boys internalized and took greater ownership of the Wings of Fire world, the more meaning and significance the books had on the boys and their reading patterns. Library visits initially focused on any type of book with dragons as the main characters, and sequences received the most excitement as they chose books on regular library visits. These included books like Chris D'Lacey's Last Dragon Chronicles⁵⁷ (Asa) and Christopher Paolini's Eragon sequence⁵⁸ (Cameron). Both boys eagerly discussed their new sequences together, but their pretend play still revolved around the Wings of Fire sequence even after they had read all of the books and moved onto new fiction. While the depth of their engagement in that world did seem to act as a guide for future reading experiences, the lack of multimodal responses to new reading experiences may have hindered their engagement with those stories somewhat as they had less complete internal representations. The books were clearly appreciated, as they discussed the readings over dinner and during other activities, but they never engaged in any type of play situated in an internalized representation of the new worlds, while Wings of Fire continued to hold their attention as demonstrated through ongoing expansionist play.

Summary

Observing Asa and Cameron was enlightening on a number of levels. It revealed several things about their process of internalization. Though Cameron could not really draw, he had no

⁵⁷ A sequence that includes different dragon types as the main characters and a prophecy as the focal point of the main arc.

⁵⁸ A sequence about dragon riders.

trouble picturing things in his head. Asa, on the other hand, had a difficult time picturing certain stories. This made him less likely to enjoy those stories with language that was less visual, with more emphasis on audio and spatial elements of setting and scene. Yet, Asa could address this by specifically focusing on creating visual responses to what he read. This helped him to construct a more concrete interpretation of the world. It became a design in a more literal sense. Multimodal response encouraged him to engage second stage milestones and pushed Asa past verbal constraints to internalizing the world. He was then able to focus and engage with more complex aspects of its form. Asa needed a three-dimensional quality to develop the verbal components of the text to make it less incomplete. Asa was filling gaps of a cognitive rather than fictional sort. His intuitive response strategies encouraged Asa to overcome the obstacles the language posed for his process of internalization.

Engagement was slightly more nuanced for Cameron, however. When I asked whether or not drawing helped him to get into a book, Cameron was mostly indifferent or skeptical. He was drawing for fun,⁵⁹ not because it developed the world in significant ways that he could not already engage in. It did encourage his interest, though. As he began to think in more focused, unfamiliar ways, he began to master separate forms or aspects of the world as well. As his visual representations became more nuanced, so did his pretend play (a new development for Cameron). While Asa has always been far more likely to lead the dramatic play they engage in together, Cameron developed scenes of his own only after he had been drawing and illustrating

⁵⁹ It is important to note that Asa always felt that his responses were play. I never ask him to draw or pretend play in response to the reading he does outside of school. After discussing how their pictures seemed to encourage deeper creativity in response to the world they were imagining, though, both boys began to think more deeply about the process they were engaging in as well—especially Cameron, who was slightly older than Asa at this time. Both boys now use these strategies when they struggle with books they read for school, though they also still use the same practices at home when they find a sequence especially interesting and engaging.

for some time. He seemed unaware of this connection, but an ability to visualize the world more concretely did seem to encourage confidence in elaborate expansions that were unusual for Cameron. Asa's visual responses encouraged Cameron to engage the world differently, while Cameron's predisposition to talk about and analyze the novels was a model that Asa followed as they progressed through the series together as well. Developing a literary community and participating in response methods that were sometimes outside of their comfort zone resulted in a more thorough reading experience and a more concrete imagined world for both boys.

Representations and Landscapes in Literature

According to my teaching philosophy, subjectivity and its representations have always been a pivotal concept to the study of literature, especially for the study of children's literature wherein the author dictates possible subjectivities for an audience with a different level of autonomy in society. However, in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner suggests two necessary aspects specific to the representation and imaginary construction of textual worlds: subjectivity and landscapes. Analyzing and understanding representations of subjectivity, while complex, are not unusual or unexpected methods for responding to literature, and as such often come easily to students who engage quite readily with investigating themes, metaphors, symbolism, ideology and rhetoric. Analyzing and understanding representations of fictional landscapes are, surprisingly, more difficult for students who are often unfamiliar with conceptualizing this element as requisite of literary response. We most often encounter this aspect of a text unconsciously, relegating setting (an over-simplified term in regard to textual world creation as a mental model) to the background when responding to a novel.

A brief explanation of the concept of mental models is beneficial here. Pablo Pirnay-Dummer et al. examine real-world mental models from a pedagogical standpoint, noting first that

“[m]ental representations are widely viewed as having a language-like syntax and a compositional semantic” (67). They acknowledge that the mental representations, in many ways, rest upon an individual’s mastery of language itself, and the ability to create tangible representations out of words (intangibles). Hence the key to understanding the tie between mental models as a concept and fictional worlds is representational believability. Pirnay-Dummer et al. additionally note that “once [a] representation of [a] world drops its sense . . . decision-making and behavior get more and more chaotic—or at least less foreseeable” (67). It is here that the effectiveness and entertainment aspects of a fiction fail. Since mental models are “*types of representations, [that] rely on language and use symbolic pieces and processes of knowledge to construct a heuristic for a situation*” (Pirnay-Dummer et al. 67), mental models constructed from real-world communication are subject to the same processes *and* limitations as those formed from fiction. As such, the multimodal construction of language⁶⁰ inhibits the mental models of fictional representations by disrupting the heuristics of a concrete and embodied experience of the world (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Readers will necessarily have cognitive strengths and weaknesses when interpreting different modes of representation based on their individual embodiment and experience.

To an experienced reader of novels, these processes are not especially problematic; but for inexperienced readers, or students who do not actively identify as readers, constructing mental models often requires a more conscious effort. Students sometimes lack the necessary context for visual, spatial, and/or audio imaginative responses. A city may lack architecture, a quest narrative the necessary movement through space, or a character may lack a distinctive

⁶⁰ Recall that Chapter III of this study discusses the cognitive impact of audio, visual, and spatial references that are embedded in verbal communication.

grain to his or her voice. An inability to connect with a text is no surprise without this level of imaginative invention. As such, readers unable to understand the multimodal inflections of a linguistic text when creating mental models of a textual world respond in 2-dimensional rather than 3-dimensional ways. As a result, a story remains words on a page rather than a script acted out in the mind's eye of the reader.

In contrast, what Spufford describes as his response to reading in his memoir *The Child that Books Built: A Life in Reading* is a good example of the imaginative principles necessary to engage with a text and accomplish linguistic transference to a multimodal mental model. I often reference the following passage to my students when proposing multimodal response as a necessary step to understanding active engagement with a story: He describes a silence that precedes a “script of sound” and the “text’s soundtrack,” his response to the “book’s data” or the literal words on the page (Spufford 1). Shortly after this response Spufford claims “[he’d] be gone . . . Reading catatonically” (2). This experience is what my students might describe as “getting into” a novel, which is simply the ability to allow a mental representation of story—action and world representation, both pivotal aspects of story landscape—to supersede a person’s immediate surroundings. It is simply an imaginative response or, in the case of reading novels, transference from the linguistic into a multimodal imaginative response and an internalized reading experience.

Notably, Spufford suggests an emphasis in audio engagement for his cognitive processing or internalization while reading novels, describing the words on the page as scripts and soundtracks that combat the noise of the world outside (1-3). Likewise, my own response to literature seemed to highlight a particular or dominant mode, one reflected in the language of novels I enjoy (and rely upon as course texts). It quickly became apparent that my students were

also inclined to engage with texts where the language appealed to a dominant mode of interpretation. A study of two courses that I taught with a focus on multimodal response as a method for improving reading engagement included a majority of students that were visual thinkers. Despite this, their responses were largely static, lacking the additional texture that spatial and gestural modes add to scene description. My pedagogical challenge, then, was to facilitate methods that would enable them to add this texture to their mental models.

Imagination, Multimodality, and Reading Response

Multimodality was an important determiner in Cameron and Asa's imaginative processes for reading which they both developed through different forms of playful response. An awareness of this encouraged me to place this within the context of my literature classroom. Responses to literature in education often overemphasize the analytical, hence the focus on character subjectivity in literature study. In Bruner's discussion of Jakobson and the Prague School of linguistics, for example, he refers to an entreaty to "make [the text] strange" and prevent automatic reading, which is essentially an intuitive, internalized response to a narrative (22). While this is a noteworthy technique, automatic reading is often indicative of an ability to master a process of verbal internalization, which encourages attention from a reader through aesthetic fluency and may help to create lifelong readers. The successful internalization of a verbal text is a reward in and of itself. This includes readers such as Cameron, who enjoys the activity of reading instead of reading particular stories. Bruner's comment is an admonition to slow down and allow the flora, fauna, and ultimately the structure and form of the narrative to enhance the reading experience, making it personally significant and memorable in addition to concrete. Bruner suggests that immersion will not necessarily maintain attention long term and that interest in reading may ultimately wane as a result.

Automatic reading is beneficial to immersion, but it requires a mastery of verbal/written communication that many readers struggle with in a society that foregrounds visual and audio visual communication.⁶¹ What Bruner notes about automatic reading is significant because this applies to modes of language and thought, the micro-discourse of stories, and not just narrative. Authors may unintentionally make a text strange or disjointed for particular readers/thinkers by appealing more consistently to one sensory mode over another.

Cornelia Funke, a popular children's and young adult author whose texts I often incorporate in my children's literature survey classes for teachers, appeals to the audio mode throughout much of her novel *Inkheart*, for example. The following is a brief excerpt from the introduction to Funke's book:

Rain fell that night, a fine, whispering rain. Many years later, Meggie had only to close her eyes and she could still hear it, like tiny fingers tapping on the windowpane. A dog barked somewhere in the darkness, and however often she tossed and turned Meggie couldn't get to sleep. (1)

Whispering rain and dogs barking clearly appeal to the audio mode as well as actions that emphasize a sound in addition to an image, such as rain falling, fingers tapping, and tossing and turning in a bed; but closing off other senses, especially sight, serves to heighten this response as well. The character's eyes are closed, and there is a surrounding darkness from which the sound emerges. In the textual moment above, the language covers over the visual and emphasizes a linguistic construction of sound. The result is to make the visual strange, something I argue will

⁶¹ Walter Ong argues that we are currently experiencing a period of secondary orality that inhibits deep, metacognitive comprehension (102-110). He argues that audio visual communication which mimics oral, face-to-face communication is now the dominant form (110-113).

prevent automatic reading for visual thinkers. Hence it is not unlikely that a visual thinker will struggle with the process of automatic reading *and*, as a result, the construction of an intuitive mental model or imaginative response the textual moment above might produce. In contrast, an audio thinker will likely read this language as an imaginative appeal and display an inclination to create a mental model in accordance with the description.

The multimodal analysis of language demonstrated above is an easy process for students to emulate and allows students to discover the linguistic modes of novels for themselves while revealing possible reasons for struggling with particular texts. This, in turn, allows the teacher to incorporate reading response strategies to overcome language that may act as a preventative of automatic reading and internalization. It is for these reasons that I incorporate multimodal analysis of the language in narratives as a standard form of story analysis in my literature classes.

Literature is a form of multimodal communication. Readers use a form of semiotic analysis during the interpretation process, achieving specific milestones as they overcome obstacles to comprehension and engagement with increasing ease and efficiency. The semiotic, multimodal de-coding of language is based on three basic principles. First, language itself is considered multimodal as it “draw[s] on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to meaning” (Jewitt 14). Moreover, a multimodal understanding of language as a system of interpretation “does not take language as its starting point . . . where language provides the conceptual tools, framework, and processes for understanding all forms of communication” (Jewitt 15); rather, the full sensorium is involved in communication as conceptual tool, framework, and process. That thought processes, or responses to readings in particular, may take shape outside of the context of language and linguistic practices, or that such responses may precede the ability to conceptualize such responses in a concrete form that may

then take shape in language, is a significant departure from the traditional study of literature, especially at the university level.⁶²

The second principle acknowledges that “each mode in a multimodal ensemble is understood as realizing different communicative work” (Jewitt 15). Once again it is important to acknowledge the multimodal status of language as a system of representation. As such it encompasses a variety of modes that communicate different things, such as image, sound, gesture, gaze, posture, and movement, as well as spatial structure. Furthermore, Carey Jewitt notes evidence in pedagogical studies of multimodality that “these representational forms [make] different demands on the learner . . . different modes have different potential effects for learning, the shaping of learner identities and how learners create reading pathways through texts” (15). Within each verbal story, the different modal systems represent possible pathways for understanding the story that intersect with the other modal systems throughout to construct a fully internalized representation of the narrative. She goes on to say that “language as the principal, if not sole medium of instruction, can at best offer a very partial view of the work of communicating in the classroom and beyond” (Jewitt 15). The ability, and sometimes the inability, of students to respond through language to novels reinforce these ideas.

The third and final principle is that “people orchestrate meaning through their selections and configuration of modes” (Jewitt 15). It is this that underpins my strategy for response that enhances the internal representation of a story world. The third principle also conceptualizes

⁶² Oddly enough, multimodal responses are not atypical at the lower levels of education, but lose emphasis as a form of valuable response as students begin to reach higher levels of education and aesthetic processing (an emphasis is placed on written interpretation of literature in upper level education). Notably, this educational transition in literary response coincides with a significant developmental moment for most students. As adolescents and young adults move into puberty, a time with drastic physical changes, the reading response focus transitions to cognitive processing.

“meanings in any mode [as] interwoven with the meanings made with those of all other modes co-present and ‘co-operating’ in the communicative event” (Jewitt 15). For this reason, a modal response pedagogy regards non-linguistic response as a step that precedes rather than replaces the linguistic. Communicative events are, in this case, the novels read and responded to as a course is taught, but this principle is highly significant in that it reflects the vast majority of interpretations and responses available for students before a final interpretation (mastery of the world’s form) is even attempted. No student will respond in exactly the same way to a single text, in part due to the multimodal structure of the language and the students’ abilities and proclivities to note particular modes. The unique nature of response is a longstanding educational paradigm within the study of literature, and with the rise of radical pedagogies, the value of student readings and interpretations of classic and new texts receive emphasis in most literature courses. However, most pedagogies continue to privilege traditional linguistic response. Highlighting the multimodal processes of conceptualization that underlie the structure of language, which constitutes the primary mode within the novel as medium, enables a more complete understanding, for students and teachers, of how and why individual responses differ, as well as how teachers might intervene to enhance engagement with and enjoyment of texts by facilitating more confident and complete comprehension.

“New” versus “Old” Technology

Re-shaping how and what we define as technology and its purpose is one way to embrace the multimodal component of stories and reading response to develop reading engagement in today’s higher education classrooms. Eva-Marie Simms regards reading as a “mind-technology” (22). In the spirit of Heidegger, she sees technology as “extract[ing] the essences out of human abilities by instrumentalizing them and by depriving them of their original lived context” (Simms

22). The benefit of such extraction is the worlds of virtual experience this opens up for people, allowing for shared cultural understandings that would otherwise be largely unavailable. Yet, Illich explains that “when human experience becomes technologized, a double process of intensification of some experiential elements and the de-contextualization and reduction of others can be observed” (qtd. in Simms 22). Different technologies highlight different sensory experiences. Literacy transforms language from a phenomenological experience to an abstract one that then relies upon a reader’s ability to overcome the “resistance of body and senses” while projecting new sensations out of the “symbolic structure that the web of sentences creates” (Simms 28). It is the ability to create a mental projection, a new context out of a process that centers upon de-contextualization that is often problematic for readers. Simms notes that “the child’s imagination fills the gaps in the text, [and] supplies what is not there” (28); but each reader’s experience of a text is unique precisely because readers reflect individual gaps during reading *in spite* of a text as well, attending to some things and skimming over or ignoring others according to what helps create the imaginative experience necessary to invest in the development of a mental model. I argue that these gaps reflect an embodied and multimodal element that allows the reader to project a second set of sensations over the present. In other words, literature, even traditional novels, must be conceptualized as a linguistic appeal to the multimodal conceptualization of virtual worlds. As such, literature is a type of mind technology that shapes experience into new understandings. It is imperative that educators acknowledge this in literature classrooms.

Since each individual creates his or her own gaps alongside those already present in a text, this presents an educational opportunity. The language in literature that encourages and discourages imaginative responses reflects patterns of thought also available in the ways students

talk about a reading experience in discussion. For example, in a Foundations of Children's Literature survey course that I taught, I wrote excerpts of student responses to a discussion about a character on the board. Most of the descriptions were visual adjectives about the character's appearance. In fact, the most frequent student response began with "I pictured her as. . ." There were a few descriptors that dealt with how a character acted, thought, or sounded, but these were few and far between, and often required some prompting. Once the list was completed, I asked the students if they felt the character was flat or round—well developed or fairly standard and stereotypical. The entire class agreed that the characterization in the novel was round and felt the main protagonists were well-developed and wholly believable as real people. As a result, they were startled when I pointed out that most of their discussion on characterization described only a superficial appearance of the character. The students' recall from the text was focused on visual elements of the language. The aspects of characterization the students highlighted reflected their strengths in multimodal conceptualization particular to the students involved in the discussion. As such, the discussion helped inform the class about the dominant mode of imagination and reception—visualization. It also helped inform me as to the modes the students struggled with as I identified gaps in student responses. Technology in the class is meant to aid and develop missing sensory data. I brought music into the classroom to engage the rhythm and tone of the story through sound, and students used pencils and paper to draft maps that recorded where the action took place, for example. These basic utensils are as likely to aid in the internalization process and fill in gaps in comprehension as computers, computer programs, and other new and exciting apps.

Approaching reading as a mind-technology suggests an answer to one of the more significant dilemmas that I encountered when incorporating multimodal responses to literature in

class: how to utilize technology effectively in those responses. Access to computers, software, and apps are more likely available to schools with more resources and funding than some low-income institutions; this may be beyond the resources of certain schools and situations, especially with student populations that already struggle with literacy and reading engagement. As already established, reading and multimodal response is not limited to new technology and computers, however. If books are mind-technology, dramatic play with props is a form of embodied technology that frames gestural response and spatial comprehension. Pencils, paper, scissors, glue, string, etc.: these are all forms of technology that enable a reader to frame and constrain a response based on the activity that is attempted. These basic materials facilitate the transition from mind to materialization, and consequential internalization. This reality, about what constitutes technology and why, is frequently overlooked. So, while I allow students to incorporate their personal technologies, encouraging laptops, iPhones, iPads, and iPods in the classroom, part of my pedagogy is to re-shape the student's understanding of technology as any type of aid for a multimodal response that aids in the process of internalization. Computers and other devices do come in handy for aspects of visual characterization and audio response, but this is a very limited understanding of multimodality. In the children's literature course that I mention above, for example, visual, spatial, and audio modal responses were all attempted in response to different narratives, but I encouraged any tool or strategy that frames a specific mode to better internalize the reading experience.

The approaches that I discuss are an aspect of a play-based curriculum, and have interesting results similar to those that Cameron and Asa demonstrated when responding to *Wings of Fire* when applied. Olivia Saracho studies the benefits of play and guided methods of response for literacy development in children in *An Integrated Play-based Curriculum for Young*

Children. She explains that one reason literacy development occurs more intuitively in the early years is the way that young children approach the world (Saracho viiii). Their experiences are situated in “play, exploration, and imagination” (Saracho viii), all aspects of creative or high-level thinking as well as the multimodal response strategies that I regularly employ. Similar to adding different forms of technology to the literature classroom, the environment that adults provide can facilitate literacy development and high order thinking.

Since “children’s early literacy experiences usually take place in a natural context” such as the home, Saracho suggests different literacy-enriched play centers that mimic this environment and home-technologies to ensure specialized experiences that develop specific types of literacy (212). She suggests that the material aspects of children’s imaginative thinking are shaped by their immediate environment when the spark of imagination first ignites (Saracho 212). Some traditional literacy centers include Manipulative Centers based on spatial movement on game boards (Saracho 213) and Dramatic Play Centers “with appropriate props to develop stories and reproduce social interactions” similar to those within the context of a narrative (Saracho 216-217). The centers revise what constitutes technology and enable a different response in an organized, creative way. Other common centers include Writing Centers with materials to “[write] in sequence stories . . . [draw], color, and attempt to write stories as pictures [later] dictated . . . to the teacher” (Saracho 214). Two additional centers are the New Technology Center that incorporates different types of technology into play and drafting and the Themed Literacy-play Center that organizes children’s experiences around recognizable themes of a teacher’s objective-oriented design (Saracho 215; 217). The themed Literacy-play Center is ideal for approaching story worlds based on discussions of ethos that encourage readers to unlock the different aesthetics like a puzzle oriented around “world literacies.” In all of these

examples, the learning goal or response strategy frames the technology supplied and the learning environment.

The Centers, materials, and emphasis on environment that Saracho argues enhance literacy development in very young children seem like obvious strategies for introducing mid-level readers who struggle with immersion to literary worlds and aesthetic communities already structured to encourage development milestones, but these approaches are either so obvious that they are taken for granted rather than emphasized for more advanced readers or playful responses are considered “beneath” older students. How, then, might such strategies be modified for the university literature classroom?

Multimodal Framing of the Response

Visual Response

Visual Responses are perhaps the easiest and most natural modal responses available for students in today’s literature classrooms, though it requires some forethought and preparation on the part of the student.⁶³ The image below is an example of a student’s attempt to compile visual representations of characters that “keep up with the complex names and language” of a text set in a fictional medieval town.

⁶³ These assignments often required students to bring visuals with them to class where we would insert them into reader response journals during small group discussions that described the reasoning behind the choices made for representing the visuals used.

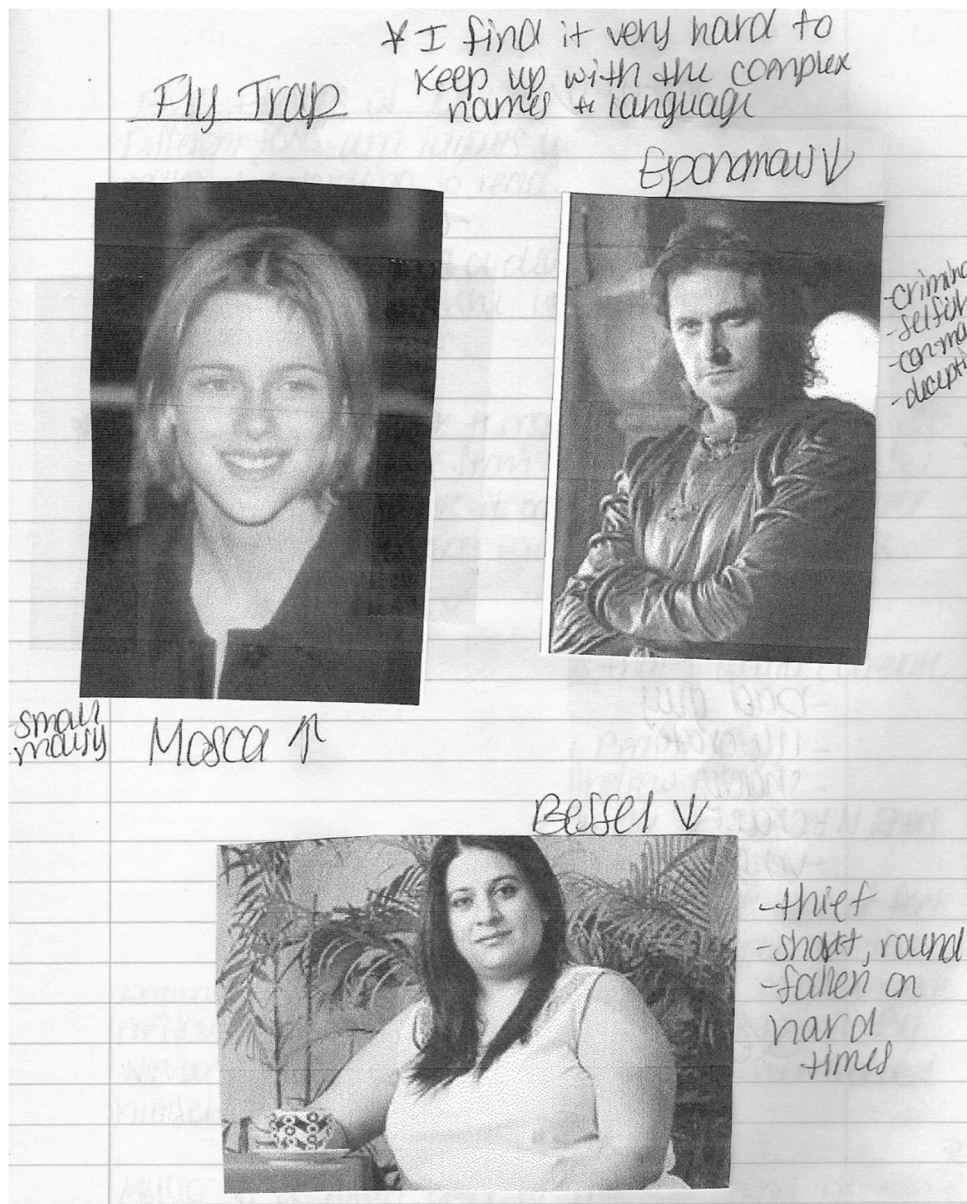


Figure 11: Student Assignment Visual Characterization and Response. Used by permission granted under IRB # 2012-0139.

Next to the visuals are small notes that describe the more recognizable, and often intangible, characteristics the student associated with the character through the accompanying visual representation. From this it is apparent that certain visuals demonstrate cultural qualities to the student, such as “fallen on hard times” and “criminal, selfish, conman, deceptive” (see Figure 11). Though these are not necessarily visual elements, the pictures represent these qualities

accurately enough to provide a tangible context for intangible elements of characterization. In another example the student adds visual representations of setting, explaining that the road and wilderness described by the author are as significant as any character, suggesting that the student recognizes the same significance of mental landscaping to imaginative and reader response that Bruner argues for in his discussion of the creation of textual worlds (35).

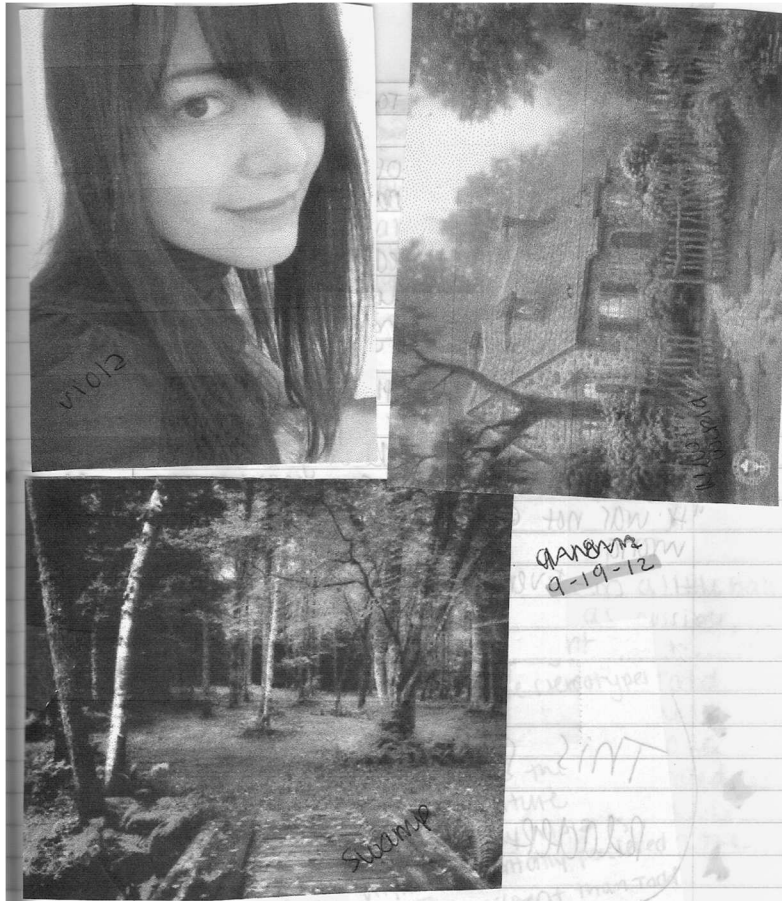


Figure 11: Student Assignment Visual Characterization and Response, Sample 2. Used by permission granted under IRB # 2012-0139.

Interestingly, the responses in Figure 11 and Figure 12 are by the same student, who clearly notes the significance of setting and place in the novel, *Fly Trap*, while apparently disregarding it in response to another. The student never attempts the representation of setting in

Figure 4 despite its significance within the novel.⁶⁴ Instead, the student focuses entirely on visual characterization. Upon questioning, the student admitted to understanding the significance of space and place within the second novel but confessed that she could not picture the medieval setting. She added that it was difficult for her to get into the book, whereas she was easily engrossed in the story associated with Figure 12. Upon further reflection she explained that she could “picture” the action (like a movie in her head) of one novel but not the other. To the student, *The Knife of Never Letting Go* read more as a series of static images of characters. From this response it became apparent how dependent the visual, spatial, and gestural modes are upon one another as well as the constraints that *multimodality* may place upon the imaginative response of a reader when one mode is disabled for one reason or another.⁶⁵

Spatial and Gestural Response

In the same class a student performed an ethnography on the Harry Potter sequence as a textual and cultural phenomenon. The student’s study demonstrates how dependent upon the acquisition of mastery over spatial and gestural modes a response can be. Having read the books and deciding to do her project on something she was already familiar with, the student proceeded with an additional participatory component of the assignment and became a member of a web game called Pottermore. Originally intending to play the game for two days, the student instead became engrossed in the activity. This response becomes apparent in the essay the student

⁶⁴ The visual representations in Figure 4 are in response to *Fly Trap* by Frances Hardinge, where the main protagonists are trapped in a medieval town that appears one way during the day and is completely different during the night. Hence setting is a critical aspect of the narrative, one the student chooses to overlook in her response.

⁶⁵ Gunter Kress (Multimodality 2009) and other scholars of multimodality emphasize the social aspects of semiotic communication, arguing that an inability to recognize a message is often due to a social-cultural disconnect. Historical and multicultural settings often create disconnect for readers within the visual mode while dialect results in disconnect with the audio mode.

produced in the transition between external and internalized language within the ethnography. She begins her discussion of Pottermore in the following way:

One of the latest aspects of the Harry Potter culture is Pottermore. This is a website that began in 2011 for the first one million fans to complete “The Magical Quill Challenge”. It is now completely open to the public. Pottermore is an online interactive experience . . . To begin the process of Pottermore, one must see if they are magical. Once you are deemed magical, you see your name amongst all the famous and infamous characters in Harry Potter including Harry himself, Ron, Hermione, Malfoy, Luna, and so many others. (Student Essay)

Notice the referencing language “one,” “they,” “you,” and “your.” All of this is indicative of the external point of view, and suggests a certain objectivity or distance of the student’s analysis of the phenomenon. The language begins to change, however, once the student notes that “as you explore the chapters you begin to remember the things you read as a child and become more and more engaged in the story” (Student Essay). Notably, the exploration the student speaks of has multimodal components less explicit in the linguistic (verbal) source text. The student describes using the mouse to physically (and via the computer screen visually and spatially) maneuver through the processes she had previously only read about in the novels, altering her remembered experience with the additional multimodal phenomenon.

She follows this connection between the exploration and her remembered experiences of the text immediately with the announcement that “[g]oing to Diagon Alley for the first time was invigorating” (Student Essay). Though the referent is left out, it is clear that the student has transitioned from the previous use of you to a more personal, subjective connection. The student is describing an emotional response to *her own* trip to Diagon Alley, suggesting that she has

become engrossed in the fiction herself and achieved a state of internalization, of deep reading engagement. This continues as she describes *her* sorting and *her* feelings of nervousness as the sorting would “determine her future and friends for the next seven years” (Student Essay). Furthermore, when discussing this response with the student she admitted that she really had not engaged with the books⁶⁶ until she had invested in the multimodal Pottermore game that altered the initial textual world with the visual and spatial components. She is now re-reading the series in its entirety (4,100 pages of narrative), a significant response from a student who did not characterize herself as a reader or engage deeply with the same story.

From this assignment, in addition to the visual responses that students participated in during the class I mention (which became increasingly focused on setting as the semester progressed), it became apparent that spatial responses might also encourage the development of a text as a tangible imaginative construction. In response to Roald Dahl’s classic children’s novel *The Witches*, for example, one student found herself returning to the representation of the main character hiding behind a screen as he spies upon a meeting of witches in a hotel. While this initially seems to be a simple, visual representation (and peers within the group suggested she draw diagrams to represent this response), the student found such representations highly inadequate. It lacked what she described as the texture of her imaginative response. “He’s anxious and crouching . . . listening to what they say and trying to see . . . but he’s scared to look too.”⁶⁷ I suggested the group act out the scenario as the student looked on. The student’s peers

⁶⁶ Though the student had read the books, she admitted no real emotional connection, even neglecting to read past the fourth book.

⁶⁷ Notes from anonymous student comments recorded from a discussion of project rationale that concluded the multimodal group session (1-29-13). Used by permission granted under IRB # 2012-0139.

within the group were enthusiastic and eagerly participated in acting out the situation; yet, the student became increasingly frustrated as they attempted to represent her response. “You’re moving around too much! He’s spying, but he was scared to breathe even!” It was at this point the student set out a piece of construction paper and placed a small cotton-puff on the paper from the box of materials that I kept on hand.⁶⁸ She then situated several more in rows upon rows to indicate the number of witches present in the scenario. Finally, she constructed a barrier out of popsicle sticks between the rows and the “boy” in the back corner. “It’s like this . . . and he’s sitting there and she’s sitting there the whole time.”

After further discussion the group agreed that the student’s response wasn’t so much visual or gestural (as the attempt to act out the scenario had demonstrated) as spatial. The student had an acute awareness of the character’s precarious position in the room that had clear associations with a sense of impending threat and even doom (as the anxiety and tension the student described demonstrates). The imaginative response was situated in language that emphasized these elements. The character is “watching the hands of those [witches] in the back” (Dahl 68), “[gets] a glimpse under the chairs of several pairs of stockinged feet” (Dahl 69), is “imprisoned in the same room and . . . can’t escape!” (Dahl 70), and “[knelt] on the carpet behind the screen, hardly daring to breathe” (Dahl 71), for example.

⁶⁸ I kept a box of the basic materials that I keep at home for Asa and Cameron to craft and draw. I found that when I labeled the box with an official, technical name such as “Multimodal Supplies,” the students were willing to use the materials with less skepticism about the activity. Separating the activity from the activities they took part in as younger students and children seemed to make the assignments socially acceptable. When I pointed this out to my students at the end of the course, and revealed that the supplies were identical to those that my young children used at home, the students simply laughed—but the bias was very real during the course, especially from students that were not enrolled as elementary education majors.

After listening to the student explain her response to her peers, it was easy to find instances in the text that encouraged her specific imaginative response. The student, however, was not initially able to accomplish this. It first required prompting as her response was to plot and story, the language already enacted as a mental model. It became necessary to break such moments of recall within the novel down into smaller representations and unpack the language within each notable section in connection with the mode that demonstrated the most accurate representative form for the individual student. It was a time-consuming process, but students appeared enormously satisfied upon completing a successful multimodal discourse analysis. This is now a technique that I typically use at the start of the semester to encourage close analysis of the micro, linguistic discourse of the stories we read in class.

Audio Response

Audio response is a strategy that can be difficult to incorporate in teaching effectively, but the results can also be quite beneficial to helping readers who struggle with reading engagement but enjoy music. It was initially difficult for students to separate visual from the spatial and gestural modes of discourse in reading responses and language analysis in the class that I discuss, but the students struggled much more significantly with the audio mode. At the same time, audio responses became the preferred method of engagement for a large percentage of students who admitted to struggling with investment in reading. My own interest in the connection between the audio mode and the cognitive processing of fiction came about largely through chance, but has since revealed a serious gap in student responses to literature (especially to a genre such as children's literature that incorporates language and structure to support reading aloud and *sharing stories* orally).

Having assigned *Inkheart* to the students in my class, I decided to listen to the audio book rather than re-reading the text. It was not until I began listening to the sequel, *Inkspell*, on CD that I was struck by the construction of fictional voices as an imaginative response to the novel. The first book was read by an actress that fit my construction of how the main characters *sounded in my head*. I immediately rejected the vocal characterization of the second novel, however, read by the well-known actor Brendan Fraser. I could not, in fact, even manage to listen to more than four chapters before I became so irritated that I gave up listening to the audio book. It was at this point that I recognized how dependent my own mental models were upon the audio mode and my ability to *imagine voices*. I actually hear characters speaking in my head, and discussions with Cameron and Asa revealed that they also have this ability to imagine in audio. When I began specifically questioning students about their imaginative responses, however, I began to notice that many of them, especially those that did not already identify as readers, did not have the ability to imagine the audio aspects of a narrative. One student, however, immediately understood what I was implying with my questions. Discussion in class revealed that she had struggled with reading as a child, though she felt the ability to master specific modes could be developed through study⁶⁹ to overcome certain challenges. To help develop her reading skills her mother encouraged her to read novels along with their accompanying audio books.⁷⁰ After relying upon this technique for about a year the student began to develop an audio imaginative response to fiction without relying on the audio adaptation. The student also reflected that it was at this point when she began to regard herself

⁶⁹ Many schools already provide headsets to allow students to read along with an audio narrative. This is the method my student used until she had developed her sense of auditory imagination to include this aspect of a story.

⁷⁰ The student cited the Harry Potter series as well as A Series of Unfortunate Events as two examples of popular fictional series that helped her during this period.

as a good reader, and more importantly, as someone who enjoys reading. After hearing about the success of the student, the class became quite serious about reflecting upon audio imaginative responses to texts.

Though the class did spend some time listening to excerpts from audio books and practiced strategies for reading aloud to an audience, the focus was upon audio *responses* to novels. One valuable assignment asks students to create soundtracks for texts that correspond with the narrative arc and/or tone of the novel. Asking students to find music that demonstrates emotional tone allows students who may feel disconnected from or disinterested in a text to find a personal connection in a way that in-class discussion does not. Attempting characterization through song is another form of audio instruction available for literary analysis. For example, in the example included in Appendix I, the student discusses characterization through musical genre, listing songs that fit with what the student describes as the “hard-rock feel” of the text. Furthermore, the student is able to account for things like character development through this same methodology, explaining that a “more mellow” music is appropriate for the main protagonist at the beginning of the book while several hard rock songs, such as “Sabotage” by the Beastie Boys, “Partly Hard” by Andrew WK, and “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns ‘N’ Roses, fit “the ‘new’ Piper” (see Appendix I). More importantly, the student demonstrates awareness, after participating in these exercises, that certain modal responses complement certain novels better than others. She notes in the reading response that this particular novel, *5 Flavors of Dumb* by Antony John, emphasizes the emotional and cultural significance of music, describing music as “a main part of this text” (see Appendix I). The student goes on to explain that the music the author includes is “supposed to make you *feel* a certain way” (see Appendix I,

my emphasis). It is a natural progression to use similar techniques to acquire the language to respond to the feelings the text encourages in the student.

Student responses to both of the audio assignments above were quite positive. Many students who previously claimed indifference to the novels where these responses were employed later described a more significant connection with and understanding of the text as a result. Several students claimed to have attained a clearer emotional response to the novel after the audio response assignment and admitted in the second-class discussion that it had become a class favorite. Hence the musical/audio emphasis allows students to connect emotionally with a text and provides a method for capturing that emotional response in a tangible, analytical format that enriches class discussion as well as individual response.

Summary

While language is unquestionably recognized as the premiere form of communication in society, it unarguably presents certain limitations—limitations that become most apparent in literature classrooms with inexperienced readers of, and responders to, literature. Foremost among these limitations is a student's ability, or rather inability, to form and shape mental landscapes, a process largely dependent upon modal interpretations of language. Popular storytelling today does not emphasize the linguistic in the same way as a literature studies course does. Instead, texts utilize multimodal communication and storytelling techniques specific to television, magazine, and computer technologies rather than novels. These technologies require less effort on the part of the receiver to create a mental landscape, relying less on multimodal imagination and more on multimodal composition and storytelling methods. In other words, novels require students to fill in more modal gaps in order to create a mental model from a linguistic text (traditional novels in most cases).

Approaches to the study of embodied cognition, which highlight the construction of mental models, are multiple and varied. The effects of this movement on the study of literature cannot be overstated. How these approaches change the application and pedagogy of teachers in a literature classroom are also significant, though, and get far less emphasis. John Black, Ayelet Segal, Jonathan Vitale, and Cameron Fadjo note an increasing trend, for example, in cognitive psychological approaches to narrative that emphasize “evidence for modal (sensory) representations and mental simulations” (qtd. in Winner 198). Hence the multimodal construction of language and thought is also clearly gaining ground in literature scholarship. At the same time, methods of multimodal response in literature classrooms are problematic due to limitations in available technology, while utilization of older technologies are often regarded as “elementary.” The demonstrable benefits of merging multimodal analysis and response, however, suggest that further research into the effects of emphasizing these processes in today’s literature classrooms may add to how we think about traditional novels.

These methods can and should be used in literature and education classes where students do not identify as readers to aid those students in the process of immersion in preparation for improving reading comprehension and literacy development. Teachers should be prepared for these methods to be met with resistance for the same reasons and cultural misconceptions that shape people’s view of children’s literature, however. Student evaluations of the course that used these multimodal response methods varied. Those students who failed to see value in the activities frequently disregarded the value of a children’s literature course and saw the texts as simplistic before response, evaluation, and critique began. Similar to the reading process, a willingness to participate and engage will inevitably be the deciding factor for success. Notably,

however, a significant portion of the class cited an improvement and added enjoyment of the reading experiences as a result of the methods.

Conclusion

In the Preface to the *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Shelby Wolf et.al. argue that our approach to understanding how reading develops must engage the “normal practices” of that process, and place readers, texts, and contexts together in a comprehensive system (xi). They go on to explain that “the book may be at rest when found on a shelf, in an adult’s hands, at home, or in a classroom, but young readers are on the move, and they often pull the book out of its stillness into a whirl of play, voices, media, and memories” (Wolf et.al. 1). This truth problematizes the “image of the silent, isolated child-reader” and explodes “the presumption that words on a page can exist only in the mind” (Wolf et.al. 1). What Wolf et al. remind us is that children are different from adults in how they approach most things. Children exist in a world that constantly attempts to constrain the differences that make the child exceptional until they finally reach the exalted status of adulthood.

People respond differently despite the narrative cues and story grammar an author uses irrespective of age; they face different reading/imaginative limitations based on their reading abilities. Many of the performative responses that children like Cameron and Asa as well as students in schools demonstrate while reading impactful books point to areas where they excel. Reinforcing the role of these modes in shaping an internal representation of a world can help immerse readers more easily in a verbal story. Illustrations, pretend play, games, maps, and more all play roles in helping young readers imagine and immerse in meaningful ways.

The goal of this study was to examine the exceptional genres in addition to the reading practices of children to attempt a better vision of how books come alive and become internalized

fictional worlds where readers, for a time, leave the trappings of this world behind. This study is only a beginning, but I will highlight two factors that require ongoing study to form a complete picture of reader, text, and context with regards to young readers and the construction of fictional worlds that carry the sort of weight to impact a reader for a lifetime. First, this study concludes that certain narratives are intentionally designed in such a way as to easily peak and maintain the imagination. The scope of sequence fiction is ideal as it provides the cognitive space and the development of character necessary to saturate the text and become salient (Pavel 105). Second, and perhaps most important, children often excel at imagining from fiction as a result of their *approach* to fiction. Childhood is a time of socially acceptable play that enhances cognitive experiences. It may be necessary to point out that adults may be nostalgic more for the way they approached reading fictional worlds as children than for the fiction itself. Though certain narratives seem to facilitate the process of imagining and engaging readers, young readers attempt the processes that seek out these aspects of fiction and those aspects that are specific to their strengths through play. The methods a child uses when responding intuitively to fiction that initially piques her interest are just as available to adults; perhaps it is the inherent social bias that exists around the image of the child and her world that prevents adults from entering the imagined spaces as surely and deeply as they once did as a child. Now, as I teach courses in children's literature and ask the teachers of tomorrow that inevitable question—"So, how many of you are readers?"—my goal is to enlighten those students with a negative view of the reading experience about the possibility of a new approach. My goal is to demonstrate those characteristics that make children's literature exceptional examples of story worlds, before suggesting exceptional response strategies to engage that fiction as worlds. Fictional worlds theory reminds us that literature is all about possibility and play.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT ASSIGNMENT AUDIO

CHARACTERIZATION AND RESPONSE

Five Flavors of Dumb

- Different texts and layouts within the book make it interesting to read.

- Piper's embodiment as a deaf person makes ~~man~~ the implication that she is "other" from the very start.

~~Why~~ Piper is the narrator + main character. This means that we see things from her point of view. This is significant because it makes the book a matter of perspective + opinion rather than having a wholistic and "fair" POV.

- As I read, some of the songs that I would correlate with the story are:

- Sabotage by: the Beastie Boys
- Party Hard by: Andrew WK
- Welcome to the Jungle by: Guns N Roses

These songs have more of a hard rock-type of feel, which goes along with the "new" Piper. In the beginning of the story, I would have chosen more mellow types like Smells Like Teen Spirit By Nirvana, which the author actually mentioned himself.

Music is a main part of this text and is supposed to make you feel a certain way.

re-reading