

**“Finding the Common Ground: A Critique of the Division Between Genre Fiction and  
Literacy Fiction”**

An Honors Thesis

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## Abstract

The concepts of genre and literary fiction have been present in literature for many years, yet the nature of this division continues to be debated. Genre fiction is plot driven, entertainment-oriented, and without emphasis on the human condition, while also being written with the intent of fitting into one or more categories known as genres. Conversely, literary fiction intends to portray grounded, character-driven narratives that showcase the human condition and contain artistic merit—to many, it is considered the superior of the two. However, many believe that this division is unnecessary. This paper breaks down the barrier between the two types of fiction by analyzing one series of works considered genre fiction (JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series) and two works considered literary fiction (George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*). These three analyses demonstrate how each work contains characteristics of both genre and literary fiction, despite their typical placements, proves that fictional works cannot be accurately divided into two types, as well as that no one variety of fiction is inherently superior to the other. To replace the binary division, this paper suggests a genre fiction and literary fiction spectrum, upon which works can be placed depending on the genre and literary characteristics their narratives contain.

Keywords: Literature, Genre Fiction, Literary Fiction, Division, Spectrum, Harry Potter, Nineteen Eighty-four, Frankenstein, J.K. Rowling, George Orwell, Mary Shelley

## **Introduction – The Division Between Genre Fiction and Literary Fiction**

As a young reader, I found literature served a multitude of purposes in my life. It first served as a means of escape. At the age of eight, I found shelter in the fanciful world of *Harry Potter*, a world far divided from reality, a world that served to protect me from the mundane aspects of my childhood. But in literature I found reality, as well. I learned valuable lessons derived from the lives of characters: *A Christmas Carol*, for example, imparted onto me generosity and compassion. Literature did well to suit my needs, and, having fallen in love with the craft, I chose to study the craft of writing literature.

Yet, as my studies expanded beyond high school, I noticed a stark divide in the works professors assigned their students. A strong focus on the literary canon—the works of the classical authors, Renaissance writers, The Lost Generation, and their modern equivalents—dominated the curriculum. When asked once by a student about opportunities to study the pieces of literature I read outside of the classroom, the “genre fiction” as it was called—the works of Tolkien, Rowling, and Riordan—my creative writing professor seemed taken aback.

“I do not focus on genre fiction, I prefer literary fiction myself,” she responded.

This professor’s sharp distinction between genre fiction and literary fiction inspired me to better understand the differences between genre and literary fiction. Genre had seemed only a method for categorizing type of novels—mystery, science fiction, horror, fantasy, or one of the many categories I would find at a giant bookstore—but now it had become a category in-and-of-itself.

Broadly speaking, the term ‘genre’ refers to the set of characteristics generally associated with the specific type of popular fiction being referred

to. All works of popular fiction belong to a particular genre or—as is the case with the likes of urban fantasy or weird fiction—are sub-genres combining recognizable characteristics from a number of genres (indeed, popular fiction is often described as 'genre fiction'). Popular fiction's reliance upon classification by genre is one of its most significant characteristics. (Murphy 46)

My intuitive association of genres of popular fiction with their location in bookstores, according to Bernice Murphy, was correct, but genre fiction also carries additional associations. The designation of genre fiction is stereotypically associated with orientations solely toward entertainment, plot, and simplicity. These works might be perceived in the popular mind as lacking complexity of character development and thematic purpose. Many books classified as genre fiction are propelled forward through a series of events and entertain their readers by providing a sense of escapism, but within the category of genre fiction also resides authors such as Atwood, Tolkien, Ishiguro, Rowling, Vonnegut, and more.

Works within the literary canon, such as Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, are set in the canon of literary fiction by the literary community—authors, readers, publishers, critics, and all others involved with literature—and perpetually kept there by the literary community. What unites these works as literary fiction, though? A definition of literary fiction is harder to find, but Charles W. Kent, in an article from *Sewanee Review*, offers these attempts: literature is “all the books—and they are not so many—where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, severity, and attractiveness of

form” (307). This attempt, however, lacks the definitive language necessary for the tasks it seeks to achieve. A later attempt identifies literature as “poetry, eloquence, history and philosophy, or the study of human morality” (308). This definition addresses the categorization that is so essential to the definition of genre fiction, but these categories fail to address the characteristics of literary fiction. A more complete definition appears later in Kent’s work: “Literature is the expression of thought in language; . . . where by ‘thought’ I mean the ideas, feelings, views, reasonings, and other operations of the human mind” and “the process of the most individual and innermost development” (308). In this definition, the human condition takes center stage, supplemented by “intellectual ideas” that aid the creation of realistic narrative reflective of the reader’s world (Malatesta). Ultimately, literary fiction aims to “provide a means to better understand the world and delivers real emotional responses” (Petite).

The division of genre and literary fiction, though accepted by some within my university’s English program, does not go without criticism; many believe it has created prejudice against genre fiction rather than creating two objective categories. In a 2010 article for *The Guardian*, author Stephanie Merritt expresses disdain not at the division itself, but toward the invited prejudice. “This artificial division persisted in the literary world I came to work in after university. Crime and thrillers were dismissed as genre fiction, which was – in those days, at least – scorned by the literary establishment. There was no prestige, it seemed, in writing genre stuff” (Merritt). Author Doris Lessing echoed Merritt’s sentiments in an interview for the *Boston Book Review*, saying that “what they didn’t realize was that in science fiction is some of the best social fiction of our time” (qtd. in “Boston Book Review Interview”). These statements, while voicing two prominent

writers' annoyance at the genre/literary binary, are representative of a belief I personally hold: truly, there should be no divide between genre and literary fiction, as many genre and literary works share the other's characteristics.

This paper will attempt, through the identification and analysis of several works' use of genre and literary characteristics, to prove the ineffectiveness of the binary categorization of genre fiction and literary fiction. Each work, representing one series considered genre fiction (*Harry Potter*), one more recent example of literary fiction (*Nineteen Eighty-four*), and one classical example of literary fiction (*Frankenstein*), will be analyzed to identify three characteristics of both categories. Works will be examined for genre characteristics such as: 1) emphasis on entertainment and escapism, 2) the prevalence of plot within the narrative, and 3) a deemphasis of the human condition. Conversely, works will be examined for literary characteristics such as: 1) the emphasis of character complexity, 2) emphasis of the human condition, and 3) realism within the narrative. In demonstrating these shared characteristics, I will further an argument in favor of dissolving the binary division of genre and literary fiction, and suggest, in its place, a genre/literary spectrum upon which works can be placed based upon their use of genre and literary characteristics.

### **Harry Potter – Genre and Literary Characteristics Within the World of Wizardry**

*Harry Potter* is one series of novels which straddles the binary division of genre and literary fiction. Starting with the publication of the first novel, entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (called *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the United States), the seven-book series chronicles Harry Potter and his friends' journey to defeat the wizard Voldemort, who desires immortality and global rule over both wizards and

“muggles,” the name used to refer to all non-wizarding individuals (*The Sorcerer’s Stone* 5). Each entry, however, focuses on individual storylines which feed into the larger, overarching narrative. The first novel shows Voldemort’s attempts to procure the Philosopher’s stone, while the second, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, shows a younger version of Voldemort harnessing the Basilisk—a large snake—to terrorize Hogwarts, the wizarding academy which acts as the series’ primary setting. These individual storylines serve to develop characters, interpersonal conflicts, and provide detail to the world that would otherwise go unstated. At its core, *Harry Potter* is a tale which embraces the characteristics of genre fiction. However, as do the previously discussed works, portions of the series contain characteristics of literary fiction, which suggests the series may not be suited entirely for its genre fiction categorization.

*Harry Potter* is remembered more so for its use of genre fiction characteristics. Entertainment and escapism are at the forefront of the characteristics defining this series, pushed by the whimsical, yet relatable characteristics of J.K. Rowling’s wizarding world. Every entry of the main series contains imaginative charm. Students are taught spells which defy logic: levitation and light-creation are simple magical spells channeled through wands. An endless assortment of mythical creatures—ghosts, giant spiders, goblins, and sirens to name a few—roam the hallways, courtyards, and thickets that create the larger whole of Hogwarts, and objects commonly seen in the muggle world have abnormal characteristics in the wizarding world: cloaks can make the wearer invisible while covered, special amulets can allow the wearer to jump forward and backward in time, and broomsticks let riders fly. These and the multitude of other magical elements help to create a fanciful, magical world derived from the reader’s ordinary, muggle world. Many, if not



all, of the stated concepts, are not new. Yet, JK Rowling creates an original, life-like world which utilizes these similar parts, allowing the reader to place themselves easily within the novels' environment.

Overlaying the aesthetics of the universe are the characters and narrative. The trials and tribulations of protagonists Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger are the main sources of conflict, providing necessary tension to attract the readers interest. Each entry poses a new threat within the coming-of-age tales: attempted thefts of immortality granting artifacts, attacks from mythical reptiles, and even secondary conflicts of sporting events and personal rivalries deal equally in complicating the heroes' lives. But the plot's development into a larger, cataclysmic event—and the promise of Voldemort's ultimate defeat—by the series' final entry solidifies any long-term investment. It serves as the culmination of the series' conflicts and the climax of a decade long plot.

The emphasis on plot connects *Harry Potter* further to its identity as a genre work. From the beginning, Rowling informs the reader of Voldemort's influence over Harry's life. He is the one who murders his parents and bequeaths him his iconic scar and fame/infamy in the Wizarding World. The novels may focus on smaller instances of Harry's life and development, but as mentioned, Voldemort's ambitions for global conquest and power connects the larger whole of the narrative. His introduction and death thusly book-end the series—Hagrid delivers an infant Harry to the Durley's residence after his parent's assassination in the first novel, while the final novel concludes after Voldemort's defeat at the hands of Harry.

Plot prevalence can be seen in the individual entries, as well. Often characters work toward the revelation or solution to a problem at the cost of notable personal development.

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* provides an example. Rowling's focus on her characters' foiling the plot of young Voldemort and the Basilisk fails to expand on their growth in the first novel. Harry once again proves himself to be a hero by facing the Basilisk during the climax, yet the novel's resolution varies little from the first. He once again quips with his friends as they reenter to the Muggle world. He has become more knowledgeable about his abilities through experience and education—his ability to speak to snakes was accidentally passed to him by Voldemort—, but he is otherwise unchanged. He remains the confident young man the reader left at the end of the first novel. The narrative lacks the meaningful reflection necessary to facilitate a change the reader would see in a literary story. Rowling's focuses on Harry's personal knowledge; his revelations feed directly into the expanding narrative.

Focus on plot lessens the presence of the human condition, as well, simplifying personal struggles to allow younger readers to enjoy themselves without considering the lasting impacts of traumatic events. Harry's mistreatment at the hands of the Dursley's—the habitual humiliation and isolation imposed upon him—rarely comes to the forefront as a major emotional hindrance. Rather, Rowling drops any scarring from his Muggle life in favor of normal personal growth. He demonstrates his wizarding prowess and proves his bravery without the handicap of lasting trauma.

In fact, the series' more startling events seem to act as passing remarks, rather than lasting images. Harry's run-in with the Basilisk leaves him lying bloodied on the floor, saved from a lonely death by the Phoenix which has accompanied him throughout the adventure. But as the story concludes, Rowling offers no reflection on the impact this event has on the young man. No resulting fragility or stress underscores the prose. From then on

the narrative consists of celebration; the conflict has been resolved, and the heroes may rest.

Another example can be found in the same text; Lockhart, the dark art professor in *The Chamber of Secrets*, demonstrates the negative impacts of magic and the trivialization of tragic events. At the conclusion of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Lockhart strikes himself with a backfired memory charm. This causes his memory to be wiped clean and, as a result, he has no recollection of his identity. In any context, even in a fanciful one, the ramifications of this occurrence are extreme. His career is over, and solutions to the issue are few. Yet, Rowling suggests that this fate is suitable. Lockhart's heroics and accolades which got him the position in Hogwarts are revealed to be fabricated. Rowling means for the reader to find enjoyment in seeing Lockhart "[peer] good-naturedly" (208) around the room. This humor does little to emphasize the danger of the situation and the incident's lasting impact. Magic has potentially ruined a man's life, but Rowling depicts the scene as an act of karma to entertain the younger audiences.

Alongside the genre characteristics within *Harry Potter* lie the literary characteristics, such as the representation the human condition, seen in Rowling's exploration of the prejudices directed toward "muggles" and "mudbloods." Muggles, or non-wizards, are at times seen as lesser in comparison to wizards. They serve as one of the primary targets of Voldemort's hatred in the series' overarching plot. However, this prejudice extends to people born from wizard and muggle parents. This comes in the form of "mudblood," a derogatory term suggesting the corruption of a purely wizard bloodline. Draco Malfoy, the rival of Harry Potter and secondary antagonist for much of the series, first uses this term in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* in reference to Hermione,

a character who comes from such a mixed background. He states, “No one asked for your opinion, you filthy little mudblood” (112). The use of derogatory language paralleling real-world terminology adds realism to an escapist-oriented experience. These instances provide examples of relatable conflict and adversity that establish *Harry Potter’s* “literary relationships to...social history, and politics” (qtd. in *Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter: Applying Academic Methods to a Popular Text*). The protagonists fight to prevent genocide and assure no one group claims superiority, much like existing campaigns, such as the *American Civil Liberties Union*, who oppose racial supremacy and strive to obtain equal rights for all living peoples.

Oppression occurs, too, in the treatment of house-elves, but the actions of some characters exemplify activism to grant these creatures rights. In the wizarding world, house-elves are a race of creatures subservient to an established master. They serve with unquestioning loyalty despite frequent mistreatment. Dobby, the house elf of the Malfoy family, is a victim of such a circumstance and aligns himself with Harry Potter out of rebellion. Hermione Granger, appalled by their mistreatment, acts in protest by forming the “Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare” (*The Goblet of Fire* 224). This initial action leads to the advancement of elfish rights later in Granger’s life as she serves on the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (“Harry Potter Secrets: Highlights of J.K. Rowling’s US Book Tour”). Once more, Rowling expresses the human condition through a demonstration of social reform. Just as civil rights were secured for marginalized groups in America and abroad, house-elves obtained rights all their own. They are not human, but they still portray the human condition.

Additionally, Rowling takes time to establish character complexity. Characters at times shine through the larger narrative. Draco Malfoy, for instance, demonstrates complexity as the series' narrative progress. He begins his journey as an elitist and bigoted child of a wealthy, pureblooded family and, subsequently, the product of their pureblooded views. Earlier mentioned instances of his wizarding hate speech—the use of “mudblood” in reference to Hermione Granger—validate this claim (*Chamber of Secrets* 112). His behavior only worsens as the narrative develops beyond the second novel. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* sees his increased allegiance to Voldemort's cause. *Order of the Phoenix* concludes as wizarding authorities arrest his father for fighting alongside Voldemort. And *Half-Blood Prince* sees him fulfill a larger role in Voldemort's schemes by aiding in the assassination of Dumbledore. But in *Deathly Hallows*, the final installment, Draco begins to appear conflicted in his ties to the antagonists. His actions become contradictory, lacking the harshness one would assume given his early motivations: he is meant to kill Dumbledore, but cannot bring himself to do it; he must fight against the protagonists throughout *Deathly Hallows* but prevents his allies from killing them. His actions after Voldemort's defeat fully consummate his development. Understanding the ramifications of the pureblood views passed on to him by his family, he actively opposes it, choosing to distance himself from the ideology. In doing so, Draco's character exemplifies literary depth. He is realistic and complex, expressing recovery from moral failings many people have experienced.

These examples of the human condition and character complexity allow for the elements of a realistic narrative within *Harry Potter*. However, many argue that the prevailing genre characteristics—entertainment and escapism, plot, and lack of the human

condition—invalidate the literary ones. By demonstrating instances of the human condition and character depth, *Harry Potter* manages to present a narrative partially grounded in realism. Characters react organically and face challenges consistent with those faced occasionally in reality. However, many critics point to the elements of genre fiction—the fanciful setting, emphasis of the plot, and aim for commercial success—that are just as persistent throughout the series as a means of invalidating the former. Professor Greg Currie of Nottingham University claims that “looking at the phenomenal success of Rowling’s creation – rather than its literary merit – would be more fruitful” (Rainey). The reasoning behind this claim is not unfounded. *Harry Potter* lacks much of the complexity seen in literary works. Characters often fall into a moral binary instead of a complex moral ambiguity. The fantasy world, though containing a wizard bent on purging those he deems lesser, is less mature and more kind-hearted than the bleaker landscapes of many literary works. Rowling lessens the severity of her story to accommodate a younger audience, but the frequent use of genre elements does not invalidate the presence of literary elements. Real world parallels and character depth still serve to represent a focus, if only briefly, on the human condition and character. The overarching narrative of the *Harry Potter* series contains both genre and literary characteristics, but with a larger focus on the former.

### **Nineteen Eighty-four – The Genre and Literary Characteristics of the Dystopian Nightmare**

Some literary works, like genre works, demonstrate characteristics of both genre fiction and literary fiction as well; George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* serves as an example. Published in 1949, the novel follows the life of Winston Smith, who lives in the totalitarian dystopia of Airstrip One and his efforts to rebel against the ruling government

power dubbed “the Party” (7). Throughout his journey, he becomes allies with Julia, his eventual lover, and O’Brien, a fellow employee of the Ministry of Truth. However, at the end of the novel’s second part, Winston and Julia are captured by the Party. The third part reveals O’Brien to be a functioning member of the Party who leads Winston’s interrogation. Following an indeterminable amount of time, the party releases the duo. But, having endured reconditioning, they choose to conform to the party’s unconquerable regime. The final lines proclaim this resolution, as they state “[Winston] had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother” (245).

As with *Harry Potter*, genre characteristics exist within *Nineteen Eighty-four*. These are first seen in how the novel provides entertainment value and escapism through the development of its setting. Orwell creates a realistic setting which captures the novel’s themes and tone. The first page expresses details which portray an off-kilter landscape differing greatly from the world of the reader. Winston, observing the clocks strike “thirteen,” battles “vile winds” to enter hallways reeking of “boiled cabbage” and surveyed by a large image of “BIG BROTHER” watching his every move (5). Orwell draws readers into the novel’s dystopian setting using description which elicits discomfort and unease. Later moments of respite from this unpleasantness are undermined by revelations in the novel’s third part. Winston and Julia, though able to lounge in the steeple of an abandoned church and sunlit grotto, discover these places were not isolated from the government’s reach. They were surveyed as they were in public and in their homes. The setting behaves as an oppressive force which draws the reader in; the atmosphere acts as an escape from reality for the reader to become immersed in Airstrip One’s destitution.

The romance between the protagonists, Julia and Winston, adds a degree of entertainment value and escapism as well, acting as a subplot with a thematic purpose. When Julia hands the note to Winston, proclaiming in “large unformed handwriting: *I LOVE YOU*” (90), their relationship begins. By extension, so does their rebellion against their totalitarian society. They devise plans to meet in secret: first, they hold hands in the crowded Victory Square, then they move to the grotto, the church, and the room provided by Mr. Charrington. They resolve to work as a pair with O’Brien, comforting one another with a vow of dedication to their cause. Both repeat the phrase “We are the dead” (182). However, their act of love and unity is, as *Nineteen Eighty-four* shows, “a political act, and so it must be destroyed, and Orwell uses its dissolution as final, terrible evidence of the scope of oppression” (Crouch). As agents of the party burst into their room, Orwell reveals the crushing reality of his universe. Despite their development and bravery, neither Winston nor Julia can surmount their society. In doing so, they function as elements of the setting, strengthen the sense of oppression felt by the reader.

Plot prevalence appears as Orwell crafts the lore of his novel’s universe through the perspective of Winston, exemplified as Winston reads “*THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF OLIGARCHICAL COLLECTIVISM*” (151), the novel provided to him by O’Brien. Orwell directly presents the reader with potential explanations of the intent and philosophies of Oceania and other superstates present in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. The chapter Winston reads—chapters three—allow the reader to learn the meaning behind the party slogan “*War is Peace*” (152). It serves as a summation of the super states’ never-ending military conflict, that, as all are unconquerable, acts to maintain the complacency of the masses and the power of the ruling classes. This information serves to advance the larger



plot of *Nineteen Eighty-four*: the creation of the new world, its current structure, and the total control over the populous the party wishes to achieve.

Working in tandem with *THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF OLIGARCHICAL COLLECTIVISM* are Winston's own experiences and reflections; these provide additional detail to the universe's narrative. As early as part one, chapter one, Winston conveys to the reader details regarding the party's habits and methods: the posters of "BIG BROTHER" (5), the party's slogans, the aversion to literacy, and the proliferation of other propaganda. Later still, in part one, chapter seven, he also records his thoughts of the proles', or the working class', need to revolt against the party and the time when he believed such an event was going to occur. All instances help to establish the narrative's greater purpose beyond its primary character: the desire to portray the development and maintenance of a totalitarian world.

With the emphasis of plot comes the de-emphasis of the human condition, seen literally in the regression of O'Brien's character. In the first two parts, O'Brien functions as a mentor to the aspiring revolutionaries within Winston and Julia, the former initially believing his opposition to the party due to how "something in his face suggested it irresistibly" (13). Events that follow seem to prove his suspicion to be correct: O'Brien becomes an indispensable ally to the duo once they are formally acquainted in his office. But part three subverts this allegiance, revealing O'Brien's true intentions. He is, in fact, still aligned with the party and has been throughout the novel. His allegiance to Winston is the consummation of a "seven year" plan to detain him (201). From this point forward, O'Brien undergoes a character regression. Orwell no longer allows for a complete understanding of O'Brien's personality and motives; these fall away in favor of furthering

Orwell's depiction of the party's power. O'Brien becomes near omniscient, predicting Winston's statements as he considers them, a clear parallel to the ever-present surveillance of the party. In a literal sense, Orwell strips away the human condition to increase the impact of his world, reinforcing the characteristics of genre fiction.

The literary aspects of *Nineteen Eighty-four* are just as clear, beginning with the remnants of the human condition within Orwell's universe. What Orwell ultimately hopes to achieve with *Nineteen Eighty-four*, in both its tone and tragic story, is the depiction of a cautionary tale of government control in a post-World War II world. The party, with tactics indomitable to the protagonists and, likely, all others who may oppose it, is intended by Orwell to represent a worst-case scenario; gone unrebuked and unchecked, humans, intent on creating a utopic society, can create political organizations which favor "power entirely for its own sake" (217), "utopia turned dystopia, the dream into nightmare" (Rodden). *Nineteen Eighty-four* demonstrates the human condition by showing the evil humanity can cause. The lust for power and dominance leads the party's member to obtain total societal control.

The human condition appears elsewhere; for instance, Winston's struggles are portrayed realistically. His journey within the narrative highlights human's ability to exist despite limitation. He keeps a journal even though he is under constant surveillance. He finds respite and love in Julia despite the practice of love being outlawed. He attempts to and nearly manages to participate in the dismantling of the ruling party. Winston's frustrations and successes become distinct and impactful when contrasted with the static and cold world he inhabits. These characteristics make his ultimate defeat even more heartbreaking. Rather than acting solely as an analog of humanity's inability to overcome

an unchecked government, he serves as a complex character forced to suffer the inhumanity of a totalitarian regime.

And with Winston's presence in the narrative, an argument can be made for *Nineteen Eighty-four's* focus on character, therefore increasing the characteristics of literary fiction it contains. As mentioned, Orwell's depiction of his dystopian world and its abilities to destroy freedom take center stage throughout most of the novel. Even as Winston and Julia develop personal complexity, their eventual submission to the party looms over them to devalue their efforts; their tragic ending consummates Orwell's cautionary intent. However, even if the characters' actions play into the development of the world, these actions help to establish their own development into dynamic characters, one of the rudiments of literary fiction. For example, Winston, though passive in the novel's outset, begins to embrace an active mode of rebellion during the first meeting with O'Brien. He welcomes the chance to "[fight] in the dark" (144). Julia does so, as well. Both her and Winston vow that they "are the dead" (182), signifying their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of a better future.

Alongside their development are their faults and further proof of the novel's literary characteristics. Winston is not a hero standing diametrically opposed toward all villainy. He exists as a person fighting to maintain human liberty and freedom, even if his desires are at times questionable. In part two, Winston recounts his thoughts of shoving his former wife, to whom he refers to as "an inconvenient person," off a cliff while hiking (112). (Julia's reaction, though out of naivety, is similarly harsh. She suggests that she "would have" pushed her (112).) These moments, though illustrating his desperation, also work to allude to personal downfalls: his anger has driven him to consider questionable acts with

little remorse. Julia's naivety, which Winston sees as a product of her youth, acts as her clearest flaw, manifesting several times prior to their capture by the party. Orwell depicts her as carefree and less cautious than Winston, enjoying the pleasures of their momentary freedom in Mr. Charrington's room over pressing concerns of surveillance. Additionally, she has less concern for the Party's motives. Allowing Winston free reign over his reading, *THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF OLIGARCHICAL COLLECTIVISM*, she does not express a desire to understand the apparatus of her oppression.

*Nineteen Eighty-four's* portrayal of the human condition and dynamic characters create a realistic narrative. Between the novel's status as a cautionary tale, Winston's struggles, and Winston's and Julia's development and flaws, the criteria of a literary work—the need for the work to better the reader's understanding of the world—is fulfilled. Orwell creates the characters within the novel's scenario to be human, to emulate the reactions and desperation of those forced to live in a hopeless situation. Their struggles are genuine and believable, just as their examined imperfections reduce them from fictional heroes to ordinary humans.

Moreover, the novel's emphasis on the threat of corrupt governments grounds the novel as a reoccurring social commentary. The overarching narrative, lying beyond the characters, warns the reader of government's potential power. Such anxieties continue to this day; after Edward Snowden leaked information pertaining to “the NSA's clandestine spying program PRISM” in 2013, sales of the novel's “*Centennial Edition*” leapt upward by 7,000% on *Amazon* (Zimmerman). Regardless of modern impacts, *Nineteen Eighty-four* remains a product of an uncertain post-World War II age. Orwell's cautionary tale will

continue to thrive as anxiety for the future increases, just as it will be remembered for its display of both genre and literary characteristics.

### **Frankenstein – A Classical Use of Genre and Literary Characteristics**

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, noted by the literary community as the one of the first pieces of science fiction, provides an example of both genre and literary elements. Published in 1818, the novel dictates the misadventures of Victor Frankenstein prior to, during, and following the creation of his monster. His grief over his mother's death and his prowess in chemistry led him to give life to a monster constructed from severed limbs and organs. Yet, upon realizing the he has created a monster, he feels shame toward his creation and flees, leaving it alone to face the world. The monster ultimately seeks revenge, which leads to the murder of Victor Frankenstein's friend, his brother, his fiancé, and, eventually, to his own death. The theme of technology's misuse and the dangers it poses are what has sustained the story's relevance both initially and into modern day. Technology is an ever-expanding medium within which horrors elicited from science fiction can be realized; the creation of a being which rebels against its creator acts as only one of many horrid scenarios which may play out. The exploration of such themes is one such reason for *Frankenstein's* "later twentieth-century entry...into the academic literary canon" (Rieder 67). However, many elements of *Frankenstein's* narrative profess the characteristics of genre fiction.

*Frankenstein* often portrays the characteristics of a genre work, the first character being its entertainment value. Genre fiction contains entertainment as one of the key facets to provide readers "an escape from reality" (Petite). *Frankenstein* does so by presenting an unrealistic scenario full of intrigue and tension. The narrative centers on Victor's creation of an artificial human being and the creator's struggles against it. These circumstances,

though tied to real-world sciences, are hyperbolic. The resurrection of an inanimate body was impossible at the time of the novel's publication. Despite Shelley's attempt at realistic reasoning for the monster's existence, it is still a work of her imagination created to build tension. Shelley intends for the reader to observe the abnormal tragedy as it unfolds and to be entertained by a sense of curiosity and intrigue toward the "unhallowed [art]" of Victor's craft (qtd. *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* 67).

*Frankenstein*, too, emphasizes the genre characteristic of plot as the monster's creation and its consequences serve as the narrative's primary focus. The novel's conflict begins immediately following the monster's creation. Horrified by its "yellow skin scarcely [covering] the work of arteries and muscles beneath" (35), Victor flees. His remorse then unintentionally motivates the novel's rising action. The cruelty encountered by the monster post abandonment, and the resulting anger it feels toward Victor, fuels the monster's later deeds: the murder of William Frankenstein, the request for Victor to create a mate, the murder of Henry Clerval, and the murder of Elizabeth Lavenza serve as acts of revenge against Victor. These events lead to the novel's climax. Enraged, Victor chases Frankenstein to the north pole and, ultimately, dies of natural causes. And the monster, realizing nothing remains for him in life, chooses to die as well. Through this conflict, Shelley demonstrates a plot centered on the struggle between creator and creation, motivating the reader to continue reading.

The final characteristic of genre fiction seen in this work, functioning as an extension of the plot, is a de-emphasis of the human condition. Many canonized literary works are focused on exploring human behavior and the hardships of life. Such stories function as realistic narratives which many readers relate to or recognize. Steinbeck's

depiction of the financial hopelessness of the protagonists in *Of Mice and Men*, or Miller's bleak discussion of America's growth and those it has left behind in *Death of a Salesman*, reveal the struggles of the protagonist, one victim of circumstances in the known world.. *Frankenstein* lacks this focus, however, as it remains steadfast in its plot. An ambitious scientist playing god and the destruction of his life at the hands of his creation does not resemble the circumstances of the average person. Victor serves as a vehicle in which to propel the story's conflict; his moments of emotion are only the byproduct of his role and unrealistic circumstances.

However, *Frankenstein's* reflection on the fear of technological misuse and divine retribution provides a lens into the literary characteristics of emphasis on the human condition. The influence of religion features prevalently throughout the novel, such as the monster's acknowledged similarities to Adam. "Like Adam," he states, "I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God, a perfect creature" (92). Shelley intends to convince the reader further of the sin Victor has committed. In playing god, Victor has brought upon himself an Adam, the monster, he cannot properly care for. Because of this, human society subjects the monster to the cruelty which shapes his hatred toward Victor. Shelley uses Victor as the depiction of a sinner faced with God's wrath, meant to deal with the consequences of his actions: after he feigns godhood, Victor's neglected creation terrorizes him. Such ideas of divine punishment ran rampant in England's predominantly Christian society. *Frankenstein* reflects this mindset, inviting the realistic concerns of technology and religion into an—at times—unrealistic narrative.

Just as an indirect connection to the human condition appears, moments of character prominence exist in *Frankenstein* as well, found in the monster's development throughout the narrative. Revealed in Chapter 11, the monster began his new life ignorant to most things: his senses, language, heat, light, hunger, and fatigue are first felt after he leaves Victor's lab. His knowledge of these concepts progresses as he wanders the wilderness, learning, too, the fear which his appearance causes. Several people flee from him before he finds shelter in a hovel by a lone cottage. Within this small dwelling, the monster undergoes a transformation into an intelligent and empathic being. His observations of the resident family allow him to gain an understanding of verbal communication, reading, writing, history, charity, and human interaction. What remains, however, is the inability to coexist. Despite his similarities to the group within the cottage—they too are revealed to be exiled from their society—his appearance prohibits their comradery. The family drive the monster from their home and abandon it afterward. This initiates another change within the monster, motivating his hatred of humanity and desire for revenge against Victor.

Readers see in this brief section a character who struggles with complex feelings. The depth of the monster's character is contained by the combination of his growth and human society's continual hatred; he has developed a disdain for humanity as he believes them to be evil. Yet, the monster's looming sense of loneliness complicates his hatred. He desires a partner to spend his life with and asks Victor to create him one. Even after Victor's refusal and ultimate death, the monster makes his remorse for his actions apparent. His concluding monologue voices his regret for his continued hatred and foul deeds, as "the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in [his] wounds until death shall close them



forever” (166). By undergoing his development, the monster demonstrates Shelley’s focus on character within the narrative.

Moments capturing the human condition and character come together to reveal the narrative’s realism. Though centered on an unrealistic conflict, *Frankenstein’s* connection to religious anxieties and character complexity allow the reader to find instances of realism within the novel. The fear of divine punishment was and, in some cases, remains just as prevalent as the effects of social prejudice; hatred breeds anger which begets isolation and remorse. Shelly captures these realistic ideas despite the narrative’s core being based in fantasy.

Ultimately, the literary community determines if *Frankenstein* is regarded as genre or literary fiction. It can be seen a horror tale produced with a focus on plot and for the sake of entertainment or as an exploration of cultural anxieties and characters of extraordinary origin. But, as *Frankenstein* contains elements of both genre and literary fiction, both are feasible. In this feasibility rests the potential for the questioning of genre and literary fiction’s division.

### **Conclusion – The Future of Fiction**

The binary division of genre fiction and literary fiction, though perpetuated during my undergraduate experience, is lessened when the analyses of *Harry Potter*, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and *Frankenstein* are applied to their categorizations within the division. Each work, or series of works, demonstrates the characteristics of both genre and literary fiction. In doing so, a noticeable give appears in the boundary which divides them. Parts of this boundary begin to fall away, revealing the common ground which stretches between them.

In *Harry Potter*, the genre and literary characteristics work in tandem to form the series' expansive narrative. Entertainment and escapism, plot, and a deemphasis of the human condition present themselves often; the wizarding world, the overarching narrative, simplification of human characters, and adherence to the fantasy genre fall in line with the definition set in place by the literary community and individuals such as Bernice Murphy. However, the series' use of literary characteristics defies its popular categorization as strictly genre fiction. When combined, Rowling's use of muggle and house-elf oriented prejudice to showcase the human condition and Draco Malfoy to display a complex character create instances where the narrative displays realism. The "intellectual ideas" (Malatesta) often seen in literary fiction shine through, allowing the reader to "better understand the world and [experience] real emotional responses" (Petite). *Harry Potter*, using genre and literary fiction's characteristics, proves, in one instance, the ineffectiveness of the binary division of genre fiction and literary fiction.

*Nineteen Eighty-four* follows suit, demonstrating the use of both genre and literary characteristics to craft its narrative. Genre characteristics manifest, primarily, in Orwell's attempts to develop the dystopian world of Airstrip One. Escapism is derived from his detailed descriptions of Winston's surroundings and the sense of oppression it creates. The prevalence of plot is manifest in Orwell's dedication to developing the lore of his world, either using in-world texts or Winston's personal experiences. This development, at times, comes at the cost of expressing the human condition: O'Brien's character regresses to signify the Party's control and further the depth of Orwell's world. Despite this, *Nineteen Eighty-four's* literary characteristics remain well defined. Not only is the human condition addressed by the novel's status as a cautionary tale warning of the potential horrors of

government control post-World War II, but Winston and Julia act as complex characters who feature realistic moral failings. These literary characteristics form a realistic narrative that, when shown in parallel to its genre characteristics, once again refutes the binary division of fiction. *Nineteen Eighty-four* does not fit snugly into the literary category, so its categorization proves to be partially inaccurate.

*Frankenstein*, just like the other works, calls into question the binary division through further depictions of both genre and literary characteristics contained within a narrative largely considered literary. Entertainment and escapism appear through the fanciful concept of creating a man from corpses. Plot emerges as the conflict between Victor and his creation escalates, leading to both their deaths. And the de-emphasis of the human condition follows each, as the story's circumstances—the conflict between Victor and the monster—are far divided from struggles of the average person. Conversely, *Frankenstein* demonstrates a complex character through the monster's complex emotional reaction to his creation, his abandonment, and his mistreatment. The human condition is shown by way of the conflict's connections to technological and religious anxieties relevant at the time of the novel's publication. Elements of a realistic narrative relating to the experiences of the reader lie within these two characteristics, coming together to sit alongside genre characteristics. Once more, *Frankenstein* illuminates the pressing truth; many works, regardless of categorization, do not exclusively contain the characteristics of their categorical designation.

As my education continues, I will likely continue to encounter the division of genre and literary fiction. However, I believe the evidence provided in this paper is enough to prove the ineffectiveness of that division. Works such as *Harry Potter*, *Nineteen Eighty-*

*four*, and *Frankenstein* contain characteristics of both types of fiction. These works' categorizations do not fully express them. And so, it rests mostly upon the literary community—authors, readers, publishers, critics, and all others involved with literature, myself included—to phase out the binary division which governs works' categorization as either genre or literary fiction.

I suggest replacing this binary division with a spectrum that does away with the labels which perpetuate this division, allowing the author and readers freedom in a work's designation; a piece of literature should be identified by its characteristics instead of the category which it most resembles. If a writer were to write a mystery novel containing mostly genre characteristics and some literary characteristics, it should be seen for both and placed on an appropriate position on the spectrum to accurately reflect its content. The novels discussed in this paper would be treated the same: *Harry Potter* would be placed in such a way to indicate its majority genre characteristics and its smaller emphasis on literary characteristics. *Nineteen Eighty-four* and *Frankenstein* would be recognize more so for their usage of literary fiction characteristics but also for their instances of genre characteristics. These novels' categorization would neither be exclusively genre nor literary fiction; they would be considered, simply, fiction, and they would be placed onto the spectrum in a suitable position.

Between the genre and the literary categories stretches a common ground which awaits a literary community willing to redefine the categorization of fiction. Within this common ground resides fiction's future, a spectrum which treats all fiction as fiction, untouched by arbitration and bias. It rests upon the literary community, myself included,

to understand the potential of fiction when taken beyond the arbitrary genre and literary labels, and to see, in full view, the true spectrum of literature yet to be recognized.

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