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Speculative fiction is a genre relating to texts that exhibit elements of science fiction, fantasy and horror. These texts aim provoke controversy and debate about possibilities that may arise in human existence, basing it on the lingering conjecture of ‘what if’. Composers of the texts achieve this by constructing alternate worlds whereby the fundamental mechanics governing that world resonate with our human world. As such, the ideas and scenarios depicted in the text can be found in the reality of our collective human experience. Essentially, texts of speculative fiction portray and challenge the societal paradigms of the historical context from which they emerge. The prescribed texts; Peter Jackson’s movie The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring, and Margaret Atwood’s novel The Handmaid’s Tale together with the supplementary material; Johnathon Keate’s poem *La Belle Sans Dame Merci* reflect the concerns of their respective historical contexts and the conventions of the genre by utilizing language devices. By doing so, they convey universal truths through their didactic impulses.

Peter Jackson’s movie is influenced from Tolkein’s original hence it has been constructed from the paradigms that permeated the context of the Cold War. The persistent and uncontrolled growth for power ideologies that pervaded the era manifests in the film through the exploration of the use and abuse of power. Jackson does this by fulfilling the convention of an alternate world, established through vivid combinations of special effects and camera pans which suspend disbelief. This sets the arena for the composer to challenge the paradigm of power, introduced through the voice-over in the

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films prologue which states “Men...above all desire power”. However, the ultimate misuse of power comes from the evil forces of Sauron, the seemingly invulnerable antagonist, described as “a great eye, lidless, wreathed in flame.” The ring symbolizes the power of evil as it is an ambivalent force that has the ability to waken the inherent evil in others, seen through Bilbo’s Gollum like professions “its mine”. Camera close ups together with dark, ominous lighting metaphorically captures the rings supernatural element and it’s evil.

Yet, like all epic fantasies, good is seen to rise against evil, but this is not before Sauron and his evil force attempt to divide and conquer, illustrated in the secret counsel at Elrond’s palace erupting into argument as a result of the ring. Frodo stares into the flames that ignite it as a cold voice chants, heightening the danger and suspense in the film. However, Frodo’s ability to resist the power of the ring illustrates his innate characteristics, which is a reflection of the speculative fiction convention of the protagonist holding unique attributes. It is rather ironic that Frodo is able to resist yearning for the ring, an attribute that the noble Borromir lacks. His desire for power illustrates his inherent flaw, which tempts him to towards irrationality. Also, Saruman’s choice to switch to the evil forces claiming that “you must join him” also highlights the flaw that imbues the characters. Here, Jackson is questioning man’s ability to remain sincere, which is a microcosm of the Hitler events during his time.

Altogether, Jackson reflects and challenges the paradigms of war. The social division that pervaded the 20th century is challenged in the movie through the formulation

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of the fellowship, which embodies the altruistic virtues of sincerity and solidarity. The microcosm of the Nazi rule is evident through the manner in which Jackson portrays the Uruk-hai, with symbols on each of their head, and the resistance that comes from the country equivalent of Middle-Earth. This tie in with the notion of corruption, seen through Saruman who's benign functions is only a façade, masking his true intentions of evil. This allows the composer to raise questions and provoke debate about the possibilities that may arise in human experience.

Johnathon Keat's poem *Le Belle Dame Sans Merci* falls into the fantasy/gothic aspect of the genre, through its construction of an alternate world, a hero on a journey and the incorporation of the supernatural. The poem is a short ballad in the form of a dialogue between a passerby and a knight. Keat's suspends disbelief by using symbolism and strong imagery to construct an alternate world beyond reality, characterised by morbid imagery of a "cold hill side" and "starved lips in the gloam" of kings and princes "with horrid warning gaped wide." The Knight, bewitched by La Belle Dame, a supernatural enchantress, has lost his strength and become "Alone and palely loitering." Through this, Keats challenges gender notions, which prompts the questioning of female power and its ability to conquer. She is a feminine fatal and gives rise to the fatal flaw of the heroic knight – his mistaking appearance for reality. This is evident in the poem through the imagery of "her eyes were wild," "language strange," "A faery's song" and her "elfin grot," which also form the supernatural elements of the text.

Consequently, the paradigm of masculinity is subverted with the ironic

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presentation of the Knight, who is “so haggard and...woe begone:” imagery that is contrasted to the idea of power and strength in stanza 6 beginning “I ser her on my pacing steed”. The enchantress has “lulled (him) asleep” which transports him and the responder into his “latest dream:” the fantastical world of the text where “pale kings and princess too,/Pale warrior...cried La Belle Dame Sans Merci/Thee hath in thrall!”. The knight, like his predecessors, has been enslaved by the enchantress, which not only evokes the theme of good versus evil but also adheres to the speculative fiction convention of a hero’s journey. The Knight must find his way out of this fantasy world, suggested by the dialogue of the passer by, “O what can ail thee, knight at arms.” However, the abundance of winter imagery, evident in "the sedge has withered from the lake...no birds sing", symbolically accentuates the Knight's solitary situation and foreshadows his death. This subverts the traditional prevalence of good at the end of speculative fiction texts. Therefore, this validates the text with the genre convention of provoking controversy and debate about the possibilities that may arise in human experience.

The combination of natural imagery with the supernatural, such as "honey wild and manna-dew," “a lady in the meads /Full beautiful” is an extension of Keat's alternate, supernatural world, which conforms to the 'what if' convention of the genre. Further, the Knight's transportation into an imaginative world, which he hallucinates in his dream, functions as a prophetic warning. Keat's use of demonic, ominous imagery of "pale warriors...hath in thrall" accentuates the crying of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and heightens the responder's sense of mysticism and provokes controversy, questioning

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whether man stands no chance against the forces of the unknown. Therefore, Keat's poem plunges itself deep into the speculative fiction genre by constructing a microcosm that challenges notions that are valid in the basis of our collective human reality.

On a different note, Atwood's novel The Handmaid's Tale falls under the dystopian sub-genre of speculative fiction. The historical context of Atwood's time reflected the fear by feminists that the gains they had made in the previous decades would be reversed by newly elected conservatives, criticizing their perceived excessivity of the sexual revolution. Consequently, Atwood extrapolates the potential of such reversion and explores its implications in an alternative world constructed on feminist sensibility.

Despite falling under a different sub-genre, Atwood's world still resonates with ideas of corruption and power ideologies, like those presented in Peter Jackson's film. Gilead, a totalitarian state, attempts to legitimize their regime in the name of God by using language as a tool of power. The names given to the Men such as "Angels", "Commanders of the faithful" carry religious connotations and do not reduce their worth to their bare biological functions. In contrast, the names given to the women such as "Wife," "Handmaid" and "Marthas" validate their worth upon the basis of fertility and their relationship to men, revealing their dehumanization. Women's bodies are only important because of its "central object", the womb being a "national resource." This reveals that a state which ensconces tight control on women's lives, purporting to protect them from the treacheries that pervaded pre-Gilead society, is actually removing any sense of "freedom". Atwood therefore introduces questions on the possibility of such a

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society coming into existence. By doing so, she subverts the paradigms of her time and challenges them in the alternate world.

Although the supernatural elements of the speculative fiction genre are not explicitly present in Atwood's text, religion plays an important role in patriarchal theory. The first epigraph is taken from the Old Testament in the Bible and refers to the biblical precedents for polygamy. This is crucial to the novel because the real power lies with Jacob while Rachel uses Bilah for her own purposes. The message is that patriarchal regimes often use the divide and conquer method, like that depicted in The Fellowship of the Ring, to secure control over women and to ensure man's exclusive hold on power. The patriarchal ideology serves itself as the seemingly invulnerable antagonist, therefore reflecting another attribute of the genre. However, ironically, Gilead's very structure institutionalizes sexual violence, as seen through Jezebel's: a night-club that offers the services of prostitutes to satisfy the desires of the elite. This readily dismisses the "return to gender roles" notion that the society was founded on. Through this, the paradigm of corruption is presented. It is clear that the Commander epitomizes corruption as Offred says "power is said to inspire...the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything". This sheds an ironic comment, that being despite the various controls used in Gilead, society is not completely repressed.

Another element of the genre is Offred's unique attributes that certify her as a feminist voice. Despite being told by Aunt Lydia to "clear [her] mind of such echoes", Offred has the ability to exist "apart from [her] body", thereby giving her the innate

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characteristic of preserving a “state of absence”. The Scrabble game she plays with the Commander seems like a trivial form of transgression; however, paradoxically it allows Offred to gain momentary freedom as it is in language that power lies. This ties in with the notion of freedom and challenges the paradigm of women’s rights that pervaded Atwood’s time. The novel concludes with Professor Pieixoto’s objective and analytical assertion that the Gilead customs were abolished. However, beneath the veneer is a sinister implication, that being that patriarchal ideologies still remain and women are still considered inferior, with the tone of “Are there any questions?”.

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