

Chapter IV

Crossing the Limbo: Bridging Fantasy, Reality, and Readers of All Age Groups

A bias exists that children's fantasy literature is often devalued in comparison to the literature intended for adults. Discrimination in the context arises from the misconception that literature for adults is inherently serious, while fantasy literature, particularly children's fantasy literature, faces dismissal due to the label "fantasy". The label leads to the unjust perception that children's fantasy literature is less substantial, translating it as "imaginary" and, by extension, escapist in nature. The belief resonates with the statement of the acclaimed writer, Charles Dickens in the opening lines of the novel *Hard Times* (1854), in which he stresses that only facts have the power to shape young minds of boys and girls and ". . . nothing else will ever be of any service to them" (1). Consequently, an intermediate zone emerges, creating an invisible space, a limbo, between the literature for adults, often regarded as serious and substantive, and for children, within which falls children's fantasy literature like the select novels that are often considered as low-quality literature/low culture/low-brow or popular fiction ". . . for having juvenile characters and similar plots with every additional novel" by ". . . popular media outlets, such as newspaper columns and Reddit forums . . ." (Smit 55). Recognising the limbo allows a profound insight into the cultural and literary significance of children's fantasy literature that can be achieved through an examination of the classification of literatures as high and low to clear the arbitrary distinction between the rigid taxonomies of traditional canons. The advocacy highlights an inclusive understanding of what constitutes meaningful literature, paving way for a nuanced appreciation of the literary culture and the lives of readers.

Literature, which elevates the literary movement and the main texts related to it, falls under the category of high literature, otherwise known as canon, “a group of superior texts” (Hunt and Lenz 3). Svein Angelskår, in *Policing Fantasy: Problems of Genre in Fantasy Literature* (2005), explains that the terms “literature” and “popular literature” have been used in an overly simplified manner, not giving enough importance to the genres. The term “literature” typically denotes high-culture, canonised genres, that exclude works that fall outside the canon as non-serious and as low-culture, and “popular literature” is viewed under the pre-conceived notion that anything that belongs to the ‘popular’ genre is mediocre (Angelskår 27). Things become culturally visible when they are acknowledged by the cultural establishment which engages innately in art, intended for mature audiences. The select novels, as they belong to the genre of children’s fantasy literature, are often considered as the by-product of the sub-culture, and not high culture. Canonisation and adaptation go hand in hand as the select novels would not have been created unless the original source, the mythological tales, is of good quality and worthy of restoration, thereby giving the adaptation the ‘classic’ status.

The categorisation of high and low cultures is rejected by postmodernists who reject the affirmation that the existence of fantasy, especially in children’s literature which lies outside high-culture due its extreme popularity among the masses, do not form the criteria for the genre to be considered as low-quality. Dimitris Papanikolaou, in the article “Greece as a postmodern example: Boundary 2 and its special issue on Greece” (2005) writes that postmodern works defy “. . . cultural boundaries and rigid cultural taxonomies; [focus] on identities rather than identity; [open] a playful dialogue with the past and [avoid] aesthetic canons while not escaping aestheticization . . . [distrust] grand narratives and [privilege] space over time” (29).

Children's fantasy literature, as postmodern texts, actively engage readers in deciphering the meaning of the texts and reflecting on the possible meanings of narratives, aiding them to form their own conclusions. As a democratic form, the genre is free to experiment with strategies that confound the expectations of readers, simultaneously persuading them to actively engage with the content and playing a vital role in determining the value of literature and cultural formation of readers. The techniques blur the line between fantasy and reality in children's fantasy literature, adding to the corpus of literature and positioning it as substantial and worthy of serious consideration. Another limbo that represents a transitional space where the boundaries between the two realms of reality and fantasy converge and intermingle emerges, allowing for an understanding of realistic issues through fantasy narratives. Like the souls in the traditional limbo exist in a state that is neither completely in the world of their everyday lives nor in the realms of pure fantasy, readers who navigate the pages of fantasy narratives, especially those grounded in realism, find themselves in a literary limbo. They dwell in a literary twilight where the meeting of reality and fantasy creates a unique and captivating narrative experience, challenging their perceptions and expanding the understanding of the world.

Removing the myth around fantasy, that it is an escape from reality, T. E. Apter writes in *Fantasy Literature – An Approach to Reality* that “. . . Fantasy . . . must be understood as not an escape from reality, but an investigation of it” (2). The genre subtly imparts “information and values” that get automatically ingrained in the minds of readers when elements of fantasy are presented artfully and enticingly (Botelho and Rudman 214). Writers and researchers convince readers and critics that children's fantasy literature is for both children and adults. The writer George MacDonald, in answer to queries regarding his fantasy works, states in the essay “The

Fantastic Imagination” (1893) that he does “. . . not write for children but for the childlike, whether five, or fifty, or seventy-five” (317). Roger Sale in *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E.B. White* (1978) writes that “. . . children’s literature includes many books that older people, well past childhood, read and enjoy even when they are not reading with or for children” (1). According to the American critic Natalie Babbitt “. . .there is, in point of fact, no such thing as an exclusively adult emotion, and children’s literature deals with them all” (qtd. in Hunt, *Understanding Children’s Literature* 24). A significant observation is that writers like Phillip Pullman and Michael Morpugo who regularly contribute programmes related to news and cultural affairs also write for both children as well as adults, which makes it challenging to conclude that children’s fantasy literature is altogether an inferior genre (Reynolds 111). The effort of writers and researchers have resulted in a reduction of the size of the limbo in recent times, rendering the boundary between the literature for adults and children and, thereby, the distinction between the two groups, as two different entities, as permeable which is a radical style in children’s literature of the postmodern era. The shift signifies the departure from the traditional notion where children’s fantasy literature is “. . . not an antithesis of the adult world but an extension of it” (Gilead 291). A discussion on the role of adults as readers and writers of children’s fantasy literature would significantly improve the currency of the topic.

Adults are former children who read children’s fantasy literature as a revisitation of the simplicity of one’s childhood due to their nostalgia for the phase in their lives, as many of them “. . . often feel somewhat envious of a life so free of the constraints of everyday reality” (Woolley 991). Mark Twain writes that children’s fantasy literature “. . . pleasantly [reminds] adults of what they once were themselves” (Hartford, Preface). The “. . . straight forward stories of an undaunted journey from

ignorance to knowledge...” of the genre allow adults to embrace their sense of playfulness, and rediscover their childhood days as a time in their lives when they are unburdened with responsibilities of work, family obligations, and financial concerns that come with maturity (Encisco et al. 256). “Happy endings” in the stories provide them solace from the complexities of their current lives, reassuring them of a better future (Anatol xii).

As writers of children’s fantasy literature, adults have the power to determine how far boundaries might be set which makes them champions or visionaries and even obstructionists with the capacity to manipulate a narrative. The French literary critic Roland Barthes writes that “. . . texts generate their meaning out of their relation to literary and cultural systems, rather than out of any direct representation of the physical world”, and the genre includes serious subjects of non-conformity that are delicately layered as hidden messages on love, death, freedom, following one’s dream and adventure, bullying, and sketching of characters in shades of grey rather than as good or evil (Allen 12). Adult concerns about identity, knowledge, fairness, and justice are also shared in children’s fantasy literature, which represent a “. . . shared understanding of an equitable future. . .” with the younger generation (263).

The narrative world in the select novels is not an idealised, utopian world; instead, it transcribes reality and sheds light into the life and personal experiences of the other characters, enabling a polyphonic variety of narrative voices which convey “. . . [assurances] of authenticity and [enable] access to stories which draw attention to the social environment that produces underclasses or forms of exclusion from mainstream society” (Stephens 321). The narrative reflects the world of the readers by addressing various themes. The select novels touch upon bildungsroman and identity exploration. They highlight themes of social injustice, giving voice to the gaps and the

margins, which are concerned with issues related to diversity and inclusivity like bullying where characters serve as advocates for the voiceless; psychological themes like insecurities related to body image, self-perception, jealousy, egotism, impulsiveness, and teenage angst; neurodiversity, academic concerns, and disability; emotional aspects of loneliness, challenges and distractions, actions and repercussions; strong female characterisation; the dynamics of the friendship of female characters as well as females with male characters; family bonds; romantic relationships; ecological issues like global warming, environmental destruction, pollution, and overpopulation; dark themes like the grotesque, death, and loss of loved ones; and hierarchy and marginalisation. The select novels undertake a disenchantment of the enchanted, and enchant the disenchanted with themes that seek to emphasise their offer of “. . . an analogy with theory of mind processes employed in our interactions with real-life people and situations”, explained best, in relation to characters and instances from the select novels to convey their connection to reality (Silva 161-162).

The narrative is a rich tapestry of character development and identity exploration that underline themes of personal growth undergone by the characters as they confront challenges and learn about their true identities and abilities, the essence of bildungsroman, a “. . . basic pattern, as has often been observed, the rite of passage from childhood to maturity. At the heart of the genre is the change of status that comes with the initiation into new knowledge” (Ross 177). It serves as a mirror through which readers can reflect on their own journeys and the quest for self-discovery and significance.

The narrative imparts words of wisdom that small things can become significant, accentuating the experience of Dionysus when he was a mortal, about

which he says, “The people in my village laughed at me. They said I would never amount to anything. Look at me now. Sometimes small things can become very large indeed” (Riordan, TBoL 346). The theme is an eye-opener for readers and encourages them to recognise the potential for growth and transformation in their own lives. It serves as a mirror through which readers can reflect on their own journeys and the quest for self-discovery and significance, because:

. . . if you become a powerful reader of fantasy, you’re likely to become a more powerful reader of all texts. Fantasy novels are incredibly complicated. You have to figure out where the story takes place, what kind of world it is, who has power there, what the rules are. You’ll enter narratives that stretch over many novels; you’ll read hundreds and even thousands of pages. You’ll emerge, like the characters in these stories, changed. (Ehrenworth 3)

The change occurs as fantasy deeply “. . . fills a yearning, deep within us, the yearning to achieve significance” as the characters in the narrative also experience personal growth and find their own significance in the face of daunting challenges (x). The reflection of Dionysus is more than a mythological backstory as it is a metaphor for the emotional wounds inflicted by societal judgement that may lead to thoughts of self-inadequacies. Readers must imbibe the lesson of quiet resilience and overcome similar real-life situations. The Greek myths are pared down into a subtle narrative of emotional self-realisation where the storyline and are metaphorically used to convey the personal experiences of children who undergo a journey of transformation like the characters in the novels, transitioning from self-doubt to self-confidence.

Bullying is a recurrent theme in the narrative wherein the author highlights the insecurities of bullies and the importance of having one’s own identity and treating

others with kindness even in the face of discrimination. The theme is exemplified through the experiences that characters go through in their lives. Grover and Tyson cope with bullying by silently enduring it and not expressing their concerns. The bullying experienced by Grover exposes his emotional fragility and reveals the cruelty of the bully Nancy Bobofit at the mortal school Yancy Academy. Grover “. . . is an easy target. He was scrawny. He cried when he got frustrated”, and the susceptibility allows Nancy Bobofit to exploit his emotional nature by using his weakness against him (Riordan, TLT 3). The emotional vulnerability of Grover underscores the silent suffering of children who internalise shame, leading to withdrawal from society as a result of bullying.

Tyson, despite his massive strength and intimidating appearance, is portrayed as a soft-hearted character, subjected to bullying and teasing by demigods at Camp Half-Blood who make “. . . themselves feel good by picking on him”, but it highlights their insecurities rather than Tyson’s, serving as an important lesson in the select novels (Riordan, TLT 9-10). While Tyson is repeatedly made to feel bad by everyone at Camp who addresses him as a “monster”, Percy is teased not because of any personal oddity but for being Tyson’s half-brother. The narcissistic children of Aphrodite tease Percy asking him if he would like to borrow eyeliner for his “eye”, making fun of the fact that his half-brother is a Cyclops (Riordan, TSoM 67). The shared discrimination illustrates that bullying not only isolates individuals but others associated with them like Percy, resulting in an erosion of connections. Percy also faces bullying and discrimination at Camp Half-Blood from the authoritative character Dionysus who treats him with spite. He is physically attacked by the demigod Clarisse La Rue who tries to dunk his head in the toilet and also injures him with her spear. The narrative encourages readers to look beyond face value, shun

stereotypes, and emphasises the need to give attention and kindness to individuals who may be marginalised or treated unfairly due to their differences, highlighting that “Margins and edges gain new value. . .” in the narrative (Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction” 12).

In contrast, Nico di Angelo faces a unique form of bullying and manipulation at the hands of the ghost King Minos from the Underworld who seeks to exploit Nico’s power as he is a child of the Lord of the Underworld by pretending to assist him in resurrecting his sister Bianca di Angelo, in exchange for another soul, while the ghost king’s true motive is to bring himself back to life. Minos’s behaviour seems like that of “. . . a bully who used to convince other kids to do stupid things like steal lab equipment and vandalize the teachers’ cars. The bully never [gets] in trouble himself, but he [gets] tons of other kids suspended” (Riordan, TBoL 42). Nico, unaware of the intentions of Minos, initially places unwavering trust in him, but when Nico realises the truth, he sends Minos back to the Underworld by wielding his power of being the son of Hades. The manipulation of Nico by Minos shows that emotionally vulnerable individuals who seek comfort can fall prey to toxic influences, if not careful, highlighting the necessity for emotional clarity and critical discernment in choosing relationships. The situation illustrates that bullies can convince others to partake in negative actions and demonstrates the influence they can have on their peers, emphasising an individual’s need to develop an identity and moral compass, because young adults and new adults “. . . are already shaping their identities from the texts they consume” (Legouera 29). Despite being characters in a fantasy narrative, the characters mirror real-life struggles of children who face ridicule and discrimination from classmates, peers, or others around them. Their experiences elucidate the importance of recognising the value of individuals beyond surface

appearance. Eurytion, the mythical herdsman of the three-bodied mythical giant Geryon is an example to understand that one needs to adapt and work within the constraints of their morality and not blindly follow the footsteps of their mentor or be susceptible to their bullies, just as he refuses to adhere to Geryon's order to kill Percy, Annabeth, Nico, Tyson, and Grover, who are, after all, children.

The narrative elaborates on the theme of outward appearances, exploring the theme of insecurities related to body image, self-perception, self-esteem, societal standards of beauty, and the impact of external judgments on oneself, which are exemplified through the characterisation of the sorceress Circe aka C.C. who comments on Annabeth and Percy's appearance, insisting on "[unlocking their] true self" and their eventual transformation in TSoM. C.C. says that Annabeth is ". . . not showing off [herself] or [her] talents at all. So much wasted potential . . ." (Riordan, TSoM 173). C.C. insists on improving Annabeth's image and does the same with Percy, telling him that he needs "serious help" and needs to "unlock [his] potential", the first step to achieve which is to admit that ". . . you're not happy the way you are" (173). While C.C.'s words may be seen as constructive criticism, they also imply that Percy's current physical appearance is inadequate. C.C. implies that self-improvement is a universal desire and her words highlight the common struggles of humans with self-acceptance and body image. After listening to C.C., Percy becomes conscious of ". . . the first zit that had cropped up on [his] nose at the beginning of the school year, or the fact that [his] two front teeth weren't perfectly even, or that [his] hair never stayed down straight" (174). C.C. shows him an image of a ". . . cooler version of Percy Jackson—with just the right clothes, a colourful smile on [his] face. [His] teeth were straight. No zits. A perfect tan. More athletic. Maybe a couple of inches taller. It was [him], without faults" (174). C.C.'s remarks exploit Percy's inner doubts,

reinforcing the harmful standards that one's worth and confidence is linked to appearance, exemplifying that body-shaming can chip away at the self-esteem of youngsters. The instance reflects that societal pressure and external judgments can influence one's self-perception and the desire to conform to certain standards of attractiveness, especially among young readers going through puberty.

The physical appearance of the god Hephaestus, known for his exceptional talents and skills in craftsmanship, is noteworthy. He is described as "ugly" in the narrative, and his mother Hera throws him off Mount Olympus for being so, causing a rift between the two, which is an example of people being discriminated against or undervalued based on their physical appearance. The example challenges traditional association of divine beings with perfection, suggesting that marginalisation based on physical appearance is universal and can cause psychological wounds in anyone. The theme highlights the broader issue of discrimination and prejudice against individuals who do not conform to the beauty standards of the society, especially the younger generation when they are growing up. The examples accentuate the importance of recognising and valuing people for their abilities, character, and contributions, encouraging readers to reflect on how they perceive themselves and others in a world that often places heavy emphasis on physical appearance, especially when they live in a world where social media is suffocatingly filled with unreal images, and insane tips and tricks on achieving the appearance of their dreams.

Insecurities of self-esteem are also related to peer pressure, as displayed through the egotism and jealousy of Thalia and Percy towards each other in TTC. Their chilly relationship stems from the shared attention that they receive from their friends. Percy finds it hard to accept that before the resurrection of Thalia, their friends had relied solely on him for help, but afterwards, he finds it challenging to

accept that the attention he had previously enjoyed alone is now divided with Thalia where their friends expect her to “. . . save the day” (Riordan, TTC 14). Thalia summons Mist, a magical force that hides the supernatural from mortals, to manipulate the Vice Principal at Westhover Hall into letting them enter its premises and rescue the demigod siblings, Nico and Bianca di Angelo. Percy feels jealous of Thalia as Chiron teaches her how to use mist, and not him, leading to his insecurity that Thalia might steal his place among his friends and with Chiron. The subtle shift in attention leaves Percy emotionally displaced with feelings of inadequacy and a fear of being replaced. Percy yearns to be seen and acknowledged by his mentor and peers, which signals the emotional fragility that is masked behind his brave exterior. Thalia too is insecure of Percy’s power and expresses it by giving him electric shocks with her mere touch, which is a power that she inherits from her father Zeus. Thalia’s response is a manifestation of the emotional tension between her and Percy. Percy is additionally stricken with jealousy for Thalia and Luke’s friendship as he feels that she might choose them over him. The examples from the text mirrors real-life struggles that arise among the peer groups of young readers or their feeling of being overlooked by teachers, mentors, or parents, leaving them with a sense of exclusion, leading to passive-aggressive behaviour. The emotion is shared by the otherwise level-headed Annabeth who is jealous of Percy’s friend Rachel, thinking that Percy has a crush on her. The moment of insecurity shared by Annabeth allows readers to empathise with the emotional complexity of teenage romances and the conflicts they may trigger.

Impulsiveness and teenage angst are another prominent theme in the narrative. The impulsiveness of Clarisse is showcased when the Battle of Manhattan nears, during which she is preoccupied by the thought that the Ares cabin is constantly

overlooked. She acts incredibly stubborn and unreasonably rebellious by refusing to send her siblings to fight in the battle against Kronos, saying that she is fighting for the honour of the children of Ares, which echoes the emotional turbulence that children who struggle with identity and acknowledgement may experience. Clarisse is not the only one unwilling to fight. Percy is agitated by the unwillingness of the satyr Leneus, a lord of the Council of the Clovenly Elders, to fight the battle, whom he impulsively manhandles as the latter says that Kronos is unstoppable and will kill everyone. Percy's reaction showcases his inability to channel his frustration. The theme reflects realistic character development despite their supernatural abilities where they grapple with human emotions, vulnerabilities, and complexities of adolescence which allow readers to connect with the characters on a personal level.

The narrative indulges in the discourse about disability, neurodiversity, and empowerment, offering a unique and realistic portrayal of the themes that underscore the isolation and challenges that dyslexic individuals may face by encouraging readers to engage in meaningful discussions, fostering empathy, and instilling the belief that self-potential should be limited in the face of adversity. The tale helps in the identity formation of not only children but also in developing empathy among adults who might read it, making them see several struggles and perspectives of young adults.

Riordan says in an interview “. . . that children with [ADHD and dyslexia] are, “sometimes written off as lazy, unmotivated, rude, or even stupid” (qtd. in Bygstad 23). The narrative refers to the difficulties that children face at school in the hands of teachers who are ignorant of the conditions of their own students, like Percy's teacher Mr. Nicoll who keeps telling him that he is too lazy to study for spelling tests, showcasing the failure of the teacher to recognise the student's struggle with dyslexia, a learning disability. Such negative experiences affect the self-confidence of children

to the extent that they might feel unworthy of the praise of others. In the beginning, Percy feels as if the good teacher Mr. Brunner gives him too much credit as he does not consider himself to be a genius (Riordan, TLT 8). But Percy is told that Yancy Academy is not the right place for him, which makes him disappointed that Mr. Brunner, his favourite teacher says that he is not fit to be in the school.

Annabeth, as a central character in the select novels, exemplifies the theme of empowerment, even though dyslexia makes it harder for her to do something as simple as spelling words correctly, by pushing herself to be the best and demonstrating her full potential, using her knowledge to outwit the difficulties that lie ahead of her. The episode reinforces dyslexia as an impediment in academic and social lives of children, which can be an overpowering and isolating experience for them. The narrative gives hope to readers that their vulnerabilities and insecurities should not be allowed to limit their potential; instead, they must use their creativity and intelligence to triumph over challenges. It reiterates the power of literature to inspire and shape young minds which in turn becomes a positive influence on their personal development and self-confidence. The examples enable the rejection of the conventional image of being called “lazy” and “stupid”, which are demoralising. Additionally, the character Grover embarks on a path of acceptance and empowerment, confronting the societal concept of ableism. His unique nature-based skills, a challenge to conventional notions of disability, serve as an immediate asset in times of crisis.

The emotional journey of the characters, Percy, Nico, Tyson, Cerberus, and Briares in the narrative, delves into the theme of loneliness. Percy lives an isolated life, except for the affection showered on him by his mother Sally, his friend Grover, and the support from his teacher Mr. Brunner, before his transition into the life of a

demigod. A transformative shift occurs when Percy discovers Camp Half-Blood, a place where social interaction and camaraderie play a vital role in his development into a confident young man. Nico's loneliness is more visceral and enduring as he is ostracised by most demigods at Camp Half-Blood who are scared of him as he is the son of Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, and the power he wields over the dead. He says that his life is not easy, as the dead are his only company and realises that he will ". . . never be accepted by the living. Only the dead respect [Nico], and they only do that out of fear" (Riordan, TBoL 296). Nico internalises that a son of the Lord of the Dead does not "belong" among the living and withdraws emotionally, handling grief and rejection in solitude (344). He is subjected to loneliness, and as an introvert, his manner of handling loneliness is to isolate himself and avoid socialising. Tyson is aware that he is called a "monster" and feels isolated. However, he is determined to be "a good monster" as he refuses to internalise the labels imposed on him and his story serves as a powerful commentary on self-worth in the face of social rejection (Riordan, TSoM 71).

Cerberus, the formidable three-headed guardian hellhound of the Underworld, surprisingly behaves like a normal dog and poses no harm to Percy, Annabeth, and Grover as they trespass the Underworld and engage in a game of ball with the creature. The portrayal emphasises the importance of empathy, and serves as a poignant reminder that "Even . . . in the Underworld, everybody—even monsters—[need] a little attention once in a while" (Riordan, TLT 298). Briares, the Hekatonkheires (hundred-handed giant) who is capable of moving mountains, symbolises physical strength, yet he is emotionally fragile after enduring imprisonment in Tartarus, suffering torments at the hands of Kampe, a fearsome monster and the jailer of Tartarus. The ordeal reduces him to tears, rendering him as

vulnerable as a child, impressing the notion that even the most valiant can falter when they lack necessary support, and the presence of someone like Kampe who constantly undermines their confidence can have a devastating impact on their resilience. In the case of Briares, it takes the reassurance of young Tyson to rekindle his belief in his own strength, emphasising the positive role of encouragement in helping others overcome their emotional weaknesses and regaining inner fortitude. The characters reflect a spectrum of loneliness as some are victims of social rejection, others internalise their isolation, while a few rediscover their worth through bonds of trust. The select novels resonate with young readers who grapple with feelings of alienation and loneliness, and at the same time, offer them hope and validation.

In TBoL and TLO, the mythical maze Labyrinth and Pandora's box function as metaphors for challenges and distractions in life, respectively. TBoL resuscitates the strengthening of inner fortitude through the portrayal of the Labyrinth which functions as a place where one's worst fears take shape and as a metaphor for the uncertainties of life. The monsters and obstacles encountered by Percy, Annabeth, Grover, Tyson, Nico, and Rachel, as they try to find their way out of the confusing maze, symbolise the challenges one face in life, highlighting that one must always find their way back to their roots – fundamental beliefs and principles – even in the most bewildering situations.

In TLO, Pandora's box serves as an enlightening metaphor for readers by illuminating the consequences of the poor choices one makes in life, which often lead to negative repercussions with no other way than to endure it and experience it through. It is a metaphor for the distractions and temptations that divert people from their true paths and objectives. During the Battle of Manhattan, the arrival of the Titan Prometheus, offers a thought-provoking scenario as he entrusts the box (a jar, in

actuality) to Percy. As recounted in mythical tales, the jar “. . . contained most of the demons that now haunt mankind—fear, death, hunger, sickness”, but when the mythical character Pandora opens it, despite the warning that the object “. . . will follow [one] and tempt [one] to open it, no matter where [one leaves] it. It will appear when [one is] weakest”, (Riordan, TLO 272) the spirits except Elpis, the spirit of hope, as it “. . . would not abandon humanity”, are set free (141). Prometheus explains that if the demigods decide not to battle Kronos, Percy can open the jar and release Elpis, signifying surrender, whereas keeping it symbolises hope for victory in the battle. The instance reflects real life circumstances where distractions can lead individuals away from their true path and objectives, succumbing to temptations, often causing them to lose sight of their goals and priorities, making them suffer the repercussions as well. Unlike Pandora, who succumbs to curiosity that unleashed the evil of the jar unto the world, Percy suppresses his curiosity, choosing the right choice even though victory was uncertain.

In TSoM, Hermes’s criticism of the functions of heroes is an analogy for human nature as the god claims humans to be unchanging and selfish with the tendency to betray those around them. The messenger god says that heroes “. . . accuse us gods of being vain. You should look at yourselves . . . a selfish, ungrateful lot” (Riordan, TTC 124). However, during difficult times, everyone blames gods, as “In a way it’s nice to know there are . . . gods out there, because [people] have somebody to blame when things go wrong” (Riordan, TLT 168). As the goddess Hera points out, “. . . in times of trouble, even gods can lose faith. They start putting their trust in the wrong things, petty things. They stop looking at the big picture and start being selfish. But . . . You have to rise above the squabbling and chaos, and keep believing. You have to always keep your goals in mind” (Riordan, TBoL 105). The

themes are illustrated using the examples of gods who unleash chaos and destruction to merely prove their might, as well as by characters with the desire for safety and ideals like the minor gods and demigods who switch allegiance during the Battle of Manhattan in pursuit of power as they feel neglected by the Olympians for their role in maintaining balance in the world. Luke, joins Kronos with the realisation of the gods' selfishness and Ethan too takes the same side, with the thought that his mother, Nemesis might be honoured upon Kronos's victory against the Olympians, but both come to the sobering realisation that there is no turning back from the regrettable choices they made in life, except making amends. Ethan realises that Kronos does not embody the values and aspirations that he wishes to see in the world. He attempts to strike Kronos with his sword, but it breaks and a shard of the blade pierces his own armour, resulting in his demise. Luke stabs himself, in order to get rid of Kronos who has possessed him, bringing victory to the gods and demigods in the battle. The whole episode results in the tragic deaths of Luke and Ethan.

The reliance of the characters on Kronos proves that there may be people to help them, but eventually, everyone has to take care of their own lives as conveyed in TBoL through Hephaestus's pearl of wisdom that "All you can trust is the work of your own hands" (Riordan 191). The idea that people rarely offer help without expectation, is conveyed through the line that "There is no such thing as a free lunch" (Riordan, TLT 274). The reality is, there is a price for everything and there are be people waiting to take advantage of the vulnerability. Similar words of wisdom are uttered by Annabeth and Zoe who say, "The real world is where the monsters are. That's where you learn whether you're any good or not" (361) and "Sometimes mortals can be more horrible than monsters", respectively (Riordan, TTC 148). The select novels convey that no one is perfect and that everyone is bound by follies. It

does not excuse the perpetuation of wrongs with further wrongs. Impulsiveness is shown to be the root cause of one's fate, and the actions of people shape their destinies. Seeking reassurances and maintaining one's moral compass in the face of distractions and challenges are crucial lessons to be internalised from the select novels. There are also some people who are superstitious, with references from TTC that are illustrations of the superstitious practice of mortals, with "crazy ideas", who rub the toes of bronze statues at Hoover Dam to bring good luck or ward off bad luck (207). It highlights the human tendency to hold onto traditions and beliefs, even if they lack a clear explanation or evidence of effectiveness, if it means that they will gain something out of it, a false hope which if left unchecked can lead to one's downfall.

The narrative proves that actions are what matters and that waiting for good things to come to oneself is not enough as each person is the designer of their own life, and so, people must assume the responsibility of their own lives. The characters in the select novels go through trauma of some sort, but they are still empowered to shape their own stories and destinies, rather than simply following a predetermined metanarrative. As the protagonist, that is where Percy's significance lies. He learns that he has the power to choose his own path and to determine his own fate, rather than waiting for the prophecy to unfold and for life to take its own course.

The weaknesses and vulnerabilities of characters in the select novels are stark contrasts to the portrayal of strong female characters like Annabeth Chase, Clarisse La Rue, Zoe Nightshade, Thalia Grace, Bianca di Angelo, Rachel Elizabeth Dare, and Sally Jackson. Shelby Ward, in "Demigods and Diversity: A Critical Analysis of Diversity and Representation in the Books of Rick Riordan" (2017), notes that Riordan's portrayal of female characters challenges traditional notions of femininity

(13). Not all female characters conform to stereotypical gender roles, which is a positive step in showcasing diverse representations of women. The characters challenge and disrupt the established hierarchical order, contributing to an inclusive and equal representation of gender in the realm. Female characters in the select novels are above women who “. . . appear as damsels in distress, objects of romantic love or “rewards” for the brave hero” (Laszkiewicz 29). The narrative is a subversively feminist tale as it creates diverse and fully rendered female characters. Annabeth, Clarisse, and Zoe struggle for the acceptance of their fathers, Dr. Fredrick Chase, Ares, and Atlas, respectively, who fail to support their daughters emotionally. Dr. Chase fails to support and protect the feelings of Annabeth, who during her childhood struggles to cope with monster attacks. Ares cares only about the pride and glory that Clarisse brings him and ignores her otherwise. Atlas casts Zoe out from the garden of the Hesperides for the help she gives Hercules, without the permission of her family.

Annabeth’s role is a parodic model and an inversion of the pattern of male centric adventures in the select novels wherein even though Percy is the protagonist, Annabeth has exceptional problem-solving skills and acts as the voice of reason and the brain of quests and operations. She wields a celestial bronze dagger with expertise and holds on her own against monsters like the manticore and Laistrygonian giants. Clarisse is another fierce female warrior with a large body frame which “. . . [derails] the straight path of female encoded in tale [that departs] from accepted plots by questioning the authority of the “master” texts and the cultural norms that inform them from a minority position, but they also reveal the great diversity and hidden critical edge of the classic versions by exploiting their emancipatory potential” (Duthell and Rochere 14). Clarisse is the head counsellor of the Ares cabin, a position

that requires strength and leadership, especially in a cabin associated with the god of war whose children are portrayed as extremely aggressive. Despite the lack of emotional support from her father Ares, she strives for growth and excellence and succeeds in defeating a fearsome mythical monster, drakon, which eventually wins her the blessing of Ares. Despite numerous obstacles, she displays her tenacity and resilience by slaying the five-headed mythological snake Hydra, and overcomes the Sirens and the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Clarisse's achievements show that she is a fierce warrior determined to succeed by any means in all her endeavours. Despite her fierce and rugged demeanour, Clarisse is an honest warrior who refuses to accept the achievement of saving Camp Half-Blood from the attack of the Stymphalian birds, conferred upon her by Tantalus, the director of activities of the camp, which they originally achieve under the guidance of Annabeth.

Zoe remains determined and shows resilience in the face of adversity. She is depicted as the unwaveringly loyal lieutenant of the Hunters of the goddess Artemis and a formidable leader and fighter in battles. Zoe's dedication to the mission of the Hunters of Artemis and her determination to protect Artemis and her Hunters highlight her leadership skills.

Bianca, one of the Hunters, demonstrates emotional strength throughout the select novels. Her ability to make the difficult decision of sacrificing her life to save her friends Zoe, Percy, Thalia, and Grover during their quest to save Artemis and Annabeth from their kidnappers showcases her inner fortitude and courage. Bianca faces challenges and responsibilities which include caring for her younger brother Nico, when they both are in the Lotus Casino. Her resilience is evident in her determination to protect and guide Nico during the absence of their parents since their mother Maria di Angelo is dead and they are unaware that their father is Hades, the

god of the Underworld. They grow up as orphans for seventy years, especially when they are hidden in the Casino by Hades, where magic keeps them the same age as they entered it, to protect them from Zeus who seeks to kill them as they are born despite the oath of the Big Three to not sire anymore children.

Thalia, daughter of Zeus, does not have any evident rivalry with her father. She is a skilled warrior and a formidable demigod with powers over electricity that she inherits from him. Her physical prowess and combat skills make her a powerful and strong character in the select novels, wherein Thalia, ready for battle, is described as, "If you've never seen Thalia run into battle, you have never been truly frightened" (Riordan, TTC 22). Thalia's resilience is evident in her ability to endure challenges, including the sacrifice of her life, battling monsters, trying to save her friends Annabeth and Luke, when she is twelve years old. Her transformation into a pine tree for three years until her eventual resurrection, ability to cope with the time she lost while she was a tree, and her transition as the lieutenant of the Hunters of Artemis after Zoe's demise, reinforces her endurance and mental fortitude.

Human female characters like Percy's friend Rachel and mother Sally display signs of unyielding growth in the face of difficulties. Rachel possesses the ability to see through the Mist, who despite being a human in a world of gods, demigods, and monsters, displays selflessness, courage, and determination, guiding Percy, Annabeth, Tyson, and Grover into the dangerous Labyrinth, helping Percy during the Battle of Manhattan, and displaying readiness to host the Oracle of Delphi.

The narrative promotes female empowerment through the characterisation of Percy's mother Sally who is the primary caretaker of her son. She leaves her abusive marriage and pursues her dreams of graduating and eventually becoming a writer. Sally proves by example that one has to make one's own choices in life which reflects

in her words, “If my life is going to mean anything, I have to live it myself. I can’t let a god take care of me . . . or my son. I have to . . . find the courage on my own” (Riordan, TLT 352). In the absence of Percy’s father Poseidon, Sally raises Percy by herself, imparting important values and ethics to him, which underscores her maternal influence in shaping Percy’s moral compass and the significance of her character in the select novels. The message of empowerment encourages readers to think about their own lives, encouraging them to question the authority of those in power and to critically evaluate the stories narrated to form an opinion about it. Riordan, in the narrative, handles incredulity towards metanarratives by presenting a variety of characters and their lives.

Another important theme discussed in the select novels is about relationships like family, absence of parents, friendship, and romance, which shed light on what it means to be human, personal development, and the quest for identity. Family and familial relationships is an important theme woven throughout the narrative that teaches “. . . kids and adults alike, about the importance of family. [Riordan] wants to instil care for the natural world and each other without severing family-ties through Percy, an adaptable youngster, who is fiercely loyal to those he loves” (Bygstad 33). Riordan demonstrates that complex family dynamics is not a new concept, but has deep roots in mythology where broken homes, absent parents, separation, stepchildren, and attempts to get along with new parents are prevalent. He says that “. . . complicated family is not a modern thing; ‘You only have to read the Greek myths to see broken homes, widows, divorce, stepchildren, trying to get along with new parents’” (Williams). In Greek mythology, the family of the gods is divided because of the struggle for power between them, and since the gods are related to one another, it means that they are constantly in rifts with one or the other member in the

family. During the Titanomachy, the war of the Titans, the Olympians led by Zeus, waged war against the older generation, the Titans, who were led by Zeus's father Kronos.

The Olympians have frequent disputes and conflicts among themselves. Notable examples include the rivalry between Zeus and his siblings Poseidon and Hades, about who is more powerful; the ongoing power struggles and disagreements between Zeus and Hera, his queen and sister, due to Zeus's numerous affairs with mortal women and other goddesses; Hera's animosity with the hero Hercules as he is an illegitimate son of Zeus and her manipulations of demigods; the longstanding dispute between Athena and Poseidon when the people of Athens choose Athena as their patron god; the disagreement between Ares and Hephaestus over the affair Ares with the Hephaestus's wife Aphrodite; the punishment of Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods and gifting it to humans, incurring the wrath of Zeus, who as retribution, chains Prometheus to a rock where an eagle would feast on his liver everyday which regenerates for the cycle to repeat (Hesiod 521-529); Aphrodite causing love entanglements among the gods and mortals; Persephone's abduction which creates rifts between her husband, Hades and her mother Demeter; the sibling rivalry between Artemis and Apollo regarding the importance of their roles; Ares instigating battles among the demigods and gods; and Dionysus's conflicts with the demigods at Camp Half-Blood. The theme is exemplified through various characters, both mortal and divine, and it highlights the significance of forgiveness, understanding, and the value of family, which Riordan conveys aptly through his words saying, "Families are messy. Immortal families are eternally messy. Sometimes the best we can do is to remind each other that we're related, for better or worse . . . and try to keep the maiming and killing to a minimum" (Riordan, TSoM 258).

The absence of godly parents in the lives of their demigod children is a recurrent theme in the select novels. Percy's life is marked by the absence of his father Poseidon, but his mother takes over the reins of their family, raising her son with love, care, and protection, which Percy appreciates. He realises the importance of family through the broken bonds that he witnesses in the lives of his peers at Camp Half-Blood. His own close friend Annabeth is not only abandoned at birth by her mother the goddess Athena at her father's doorstep, but she is also estranged from her father as her stepmother is scared that her children might be affected by the monsters that Annabeth attracts, and her father, fails to support her through the situation. When Annabeth observes Percy and his mother's affection for each other and the intricate familial structure of the Olympian gods, she reflects on her own family experiences, learns the importance of forgiveness, and decides to give her father a chance to make up to her.

Luke too endures the abandonment of his father Hermes and his mortal mother's insanity that results in his troubled childhood. Scared of his mother's bouts of insanity and the inability to cope with her incapability of providing the love, care, and protection of an emotionally stable person, Luke leaves home and veers off course out of his morality. Percy pities Luke and thinks that he is fortunate to have an affectionate mother when the goddess Hestia provides Percy with visions of Luke's upbringing, helping him understand his past. The goddess reinforces the fact that no one is born evil and that circumstances lead them down the wrong path. She also makes Percy realise that spending time with one's family is a source of strength and support while everyone "rushes about" in a hurried pace due to their modern lifestyles (Riordan, TLO 100). The instance fosters appreciation for one's own family and for the families of others, serving as a reminder that family issues and complexities are

not unique to any specific era or culture and that good communication, empathy, and compromise are required to maintain healthy relationships, and some circumstances deem it impossible for some people to experience such nurturing relationships which must be recognised with empathy.

The select novels demonstrate the significance of friendship (including strong female friendships) and teamwork, challenging the traditional gender norms and emphasises that female characters can be multifaceted, independent, and capable of forming powerful bonds with each other and also with male characters. Percy and Annabeth share a deep and enduring friendship throughout the select novels as they support each other in numerous adventures, facing monsters, gods, Titans, and other opponents together. Percy's friendship with his loyal friend and protector Grover begins in the first book TLT and grows stronger as they face countless obstacles together. Percy makes special effort to help Grover from the entrapment by Polyphemus and also manhandles Leneus, when he does not agree with Grover's quest for Pan. In TSoM, Percy fully embraces his friendship with Tyson, a loyal and brave companion, not paying heed to others who made fun of him.

The narrative showcases the friendship between Percy and Zoe, when Zoe expresses her regret for bringing the inexperienced Bianca di Angelo into the quest to find the missing Artemis, during which Bianca dies. Zoe brings Bianca as she recognises her potential to replace herself as the lieutenant, when the need arises. During Zoe's lamentation over the failure of protecting Artemis and Bianca, Percy sets aside his personal differences with Zoe and consoles her. The instance emphasises the importance of friendship and support, particularly in challenging situations of grief and loss, making it a notable factor of the select novels.

Percy offers support and guidance to Nico who struggles with feelings of isolation and loss after the death of his sister Bianca. Percy's friendship helps Nico find solace and a sense of belonging, highlighting the importance of offering support to those in need. He convinces his father Hades to fight during the Battle of Manhattan, by reminding him that he is ". . . just as much of an outcast as [Nico is]!" He urges Hades to "Stop being angry about it and do something helpful for once. That's the only way they'll respect [Hades]!" (Riordan, TBoL 282).

The bond of Annabeth, Luke, and Thalia with each other, forms from the time they leave their home. The three characters harbour deep friendship and adoration for one another; both Thalia and Luke look after Annabeth as their little sister, but Luke's bond with them breaks when he descends into a path of darkness and joins Kronos. His affection for Annabeth is rekindled during the Battle of Manhattan, when Kronos is about to strike her, an incident that flickers Luke's conscience, enabling him to realise the danger he has put his loved ones in, which makes him stab himself and free himself and others from the threat of Kronos.

The narrative exemplifies the lengths to which friends go to protect each other and for the greater good like the friendship of Thalia and Percy, despite their rivalry between their parents Zeus and Poseidon; the mortal Rachel Elizabeth Dare's friendship with Percy, her willingness to help the demigod's quest to save Camp Half-Blood, her sacrifice to host the Oracle of Delphi, and her eventual friendship with Annabeth; Clarisse who first appears as an antagonist and a bully who later becomes Percy's friend as she undergoes character development as she matures and learns to work with the demigods from the other cabins at Camp Half-Blood; Charles Beckendorf, sacrificing his life to help his friends; Silena Beauregard and Clarisse's friendship wherein Silena is initially a spy for Kronos, but she later realises her

mistake and sacrifices her life to help the camp; Clarisse's forgiveness for Silena and the honouring of her memory; Tyson supporting the demigods despite their ill-treatment of him; and Luke's final sacrifice to save Camp Half-Blood, leading to Percy's acknowledgement of him. The narrative also highlights the theme of togetherness in friendship among the characters. At the end of the narrative, Percy seeks resolution with his friends and advocates for the acceptance of all demigods by their godly parents, which is a reflection of the strength and determination of the characters in working together to affect a positive change.

Romantic relationships, organic and supportive, as well as unconventional love entanglements blossom between characters in the select novels. The romance of Percy and Annabeth grows organically, rooted in trust, understanding, and unwavering support which, most importantly, avoids romantic clichés as the select novels are based on adventure and mythology and not a primarily romantic one. Percy also carries a teenage infatuation for Rachel, as he thinks that she is less complicated than Annabeth, but eventually realises that he is in love with Annabeth and not Rachel. Clarisse has enduring affection and concern for Chris Rodriguez, a demigod who supports Luke and Kronos's plan to oust the Olympians, when she finds out that he is mentally disturbed by the difficulties that he is subjected to in the Labyrinth. The characters face challenges and provide emotional support to one another. The relationships create a sense of belongingness and unity in Camp Half-Blood, and they demonstrate that even in a world filled with gods, monsters, and demigods, strong relationships and alliances are essential to overcome challenges and find strength in unity. The narrative also highlights adult romantic relationships between Sally and Paul Blofis as well as the romance of the gods Aphrodite and Ares, outside of the goddess's unhappy marriage.

The select novels delve into serious ecological concerns like the thought-provoking but age-old theme of pollution and preservation of nature, explored through characters and their interactions with the environment, which draw attention to the impact of human activities on the natural world. The merged worlds of fantasy and reality in the narrative indicate that the pollution caused by mortals in the mortal world also affects the mythological world and the life in it. In *TTC*, Percy expresses his disdain for fishing nets that harm sea creatures, which results in the suffering and death of trapped animals, saying that “It was bad enough they drowned porpoises and dolphins, but they also occasionally caught mythological animals. When the nets got tangled, some lazy fishermen would just cut them loose and let the trapped animals die” (Riordan 112). The theme highlights the consequences of human actions on the mythical world, underscoring the need for responsible environmental stewardship.

TBoL showcases the resistance of a Naiad to Percy’s request to use the water from her river to clean Geryon’s stables in the Labyrinth. The Naiad confronts Percy, emphasising her territorial rights, and explains to him about the pollution that the mythical hero Hercules previously causes her river and reprimands Percy saying:

You . . . think you’re soooo much more important than some little river, don’t you . . . This is freshwater territory, mister. The last guy [Hercules] who asked me this favor—oh, he was way better-looking than you, by the way—he convinced me, and that was the worst mistake I’ve ever made! Do you have any idea what all that horse manure does to my ecosystem? Do I look like a sewage treatment plant to you? My fish will die. I’ll never get the muck out of my plants. I’ll be sick for years. NO THANK YOU! (Riordan, *TBoL* 151)

The sequence highlights the adverse effects of pollution and the importance of protecting freshwater environments. Similarly, Grover the satyr shows concern for the Wilderness, his natural habitat, mirroring real-world conservation issues. Grover's frustration with pollution is revealed through a video game called "Virtual Deer Hunter" which reflects his desire to protect the wild from human exploitation and pollution as he shouts, "Die, human! Die, silly polluting nasty person!" (Riordan, TLT 263).

The ferryman of the Underworld Charon, is concerned about pollution caused by humans and criticises human behaviour, and draws a parallel between waste management in the mortal world and the neglect of the environment in the mythological realm, saying that "For thousands of years, you humans have been throwing in everything as you come across—hopes, dreams, wishes that never came true" (Riordan, TLT 289). Charon's worry springs from the deplorable state of the River Styx in the Underworld, that has become a symbol of human pollution which hints at the human tendency of the endless cycle of hoarding and disposing of material objects, which is "Irresponsible waste management, if you ask [Charon]" (289), as the river is now a swirl of ". . . strange objects—broken toys, ripped-up college diplomas, wilted homecoming corsages—all the dreams people had thrown away as they'd passed from life into death. Looking at the black water, I could think of about three million places I'd rather swim" (Riordan, TBoL 132).

Zoe bemoans the disappearance of constellations due to light pollution, lamenting that "Whole constellations have disappeared because of [it]" which sheds light on the far-reaching consequences of human actions (Riordan, TTC 177). The characters and their interactions with the environment prompt readers to contemplate the interconnectedness of human actions, pollution, and their impact on both the

mortal and the mythical worlds. The theme serves as a reminder of the importance of responsible environmental stewardship and thoughtful consideration of the consequences of human actions on their surroundings.

The issue of overpopulation is mentioned in the narrative as a metaphor of overpopulation in the Underworld which becomes overcrowded with souls of the deceased, making it difficult for Hades to manage a rapidly growing population. The metaphor encourages readers to contemplate the challenges posed by overpopulation in the real world where it can strain essential resources like water, food, and housing. It underscores the importance of responsible family planning, resource management, and sustainable practices to address the issues to ensure a balanced existence.

The narrative also comments on hierarchy among gods who are metaphorically represented to showcase the dynamics of power among various individuals and social groups or those in authority, but even gods are answerable to their higher authority. When Percy, Thalia, Zoe, Bianca, and Grover are chased by the mantichore in TTC, Dionysus uses his powers to distract mortals, not allowing them to remember anything about the supernatural interference while he defeats the monster, but to his disappointment he would not be able to make the state of forgetfulness of humans permanent as he would have to write a report about the incident to his father Zeus. Dionysus recalls with dissatisfaction that he hates "...writing reports to Father". However, it is a commendable practice, considering the fact that people will not be able to do whatever they please as that would lead to hypocrisy (Riordan, TTC 239). The select novels highlight Barthes's view that absolute power and verdict result in chaos, propelling the reader to acknowledge the past with its limitations, so that the road to transformation may be paved. The postmodern characteristic of the text is the justification of using fantasy to address contemporary issues, as every text is

confronted with “. . . the impossibility of living outside the infinite text” (qtd. in Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 9).

The select novels discuss discriminations and struggles caused due to hierarchy, which is a fundamental principle of the mythological world, that it affects the power dynamics among demigods, leading to the marginalisation of certain individuals. Susan Reddington Bobby writes in *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings* (2014) that “There has been a strange avoidance to discuss social class, ideological conflicts, and the false assumptions of numerous psychological approaches . . . literature and art cannot be fully understood without considering the socio-political-cultural context in which they are produced” (8). The gods themselves accept and maintain hierarchy as part of their world, whether they like it or not, and as a result, the system:

. . . differentiates children of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades from children of still major but less important gods, from lower-status mixtures such as Cyclopes, and from children of gods who, like Nemesis, do not belong to the divine Council. Although this system does not track race—for instance, Beckendorf, an African American son of Hephaestus, has considerable status, which suggests that Ethan’s Japanese surname is not part of the problem—it nonetheless functions to confer or deny power, and thus to alienate the marginalized. The gods take this status quo for granted, expressing little surprise or regret about the defection to the Titan camp of non-Council members such as Morpheus. (Morey and Nelson 249)

The narrative includes dark themes like death and Sally turning Gabe into a stone. Children are exposed to dark themes in the world, making it important to

address the issues in literature through guided discussions that help them be informed and aware of the topics which is preferable, rather than allowing them to contemplate independently and form unsupervised opinions.

The theme of death finds its place in the select novels, with insights into the emotional complexity of the character Nico in the overarching context of loss and grief. He embodies the perfect example of an overly excited innocent child, when first introduced in *TTC*, but transforms into an angry young man as the narrative progresses. Nico's rage stems from the grief of the death of his sister Bianca, igniting his raging power which he inherits from the Lord of the Underworld, and in the sequel *TBoL*, he is seemingly ready to kill Daedalus and offer his life as sacrifice to raise Bianca from death which indicates the fading of his innocence.

The sensitive and critical themes discussed in the select novels are introduced in a mild fashion that it reduces the risk of conversations that surround adults. However, the discussion hardly makes the select novels amateur stories, proving that fantasies are neither ideologically naïve and inconsequential nor a rigid genre. Children possess the ability to understand and engage with information and assert their interpretative rights as readers, as testified by the psychologist Jean Piaget, which Lisa Anatol reprises in her words that children:

. . . process written materials very differently than more mature, experienced adults . . . the typical thirteen year-old will understand a text in vastly more complex ways than the typical eight-year-old. In the concrete-operations stage (at the age of about seven), children can deal with generalizations but rarely interpret language beyond the literal textual meaning; by the age of about seven, they reach the formal-operations stage and can deal with abstractions and ambiguity;

eventually, the mature reader can reflect upon and comprehend motivations and underlying actions. (xvi)

Similarly, Eliphase writes:

New Developmental science shows that not only are children capable of separating fact from fiction but also that an attraction to fantastical things might be helpful to their learning. . . . When viewing fantastic situations with enjoyment, children keep acquiring knowledge, organize the information, analyze it, and later be able to create and judge or appraise what they see in their mind. (33)

“Donald Hasse” writes in “Yours, Mine, Ours? Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Ownership of Fairy Tales” that “both children and adults alike . . . can ‘reread and reinterpret’ the tales, thereby ‘assert[ing] their own propriety rights to meaning’” (qtd. in Bobby 11). However, it must be noted that adults – parents, teachers, librarians, and authors – recognise the covert social and cultural significance embedded in children’s fantasy literature more than children do. If children fall short in understanding the messages conveyed in books, adults must undertake the initiative and play an active and effective role in guiding their understanding of the genre, helping them to learn the right lessons. Susan Reddington Bobby, in *Fairy Tales Reimagined Essays on New Retellings* (2014), certifies that they “. . . hold ultimate power over the dissemination of tales to children” and can encourage existing forms to make the power of myths implicit in the lives of readers (11).

Riordan takes a step further and addresses parents and teachers “. . . whose tastes are implicitly recognized as earnest, improvement-oriented, and more deserving than children’s” through his website, <https://rickriordan.com/>, suggesting that “. . . the ultimate end of the series is didacticism” (Morey and Nelson 238). The role of the

family is the primary model of interactive system of a person and is significant in educating and teaching children. It serves as a blueprint for other relationships and help children to use it to learn to interact, bond, and form new acquaintances outside the family. Parents should take their children to libraries, help them in selecting books, and read it to them as bed-time stories when children are not old enough to read on their own, because the connection of a child to literature first starts with listening to stories. When children become old enough to read on their own, they will grow passionate about reading and make it a routinely habit, and once they do so, parents should devote a particular time for them to have discussions on what the book entails, associating their life to the storyline, as they have more life experiences than children, exposing them to several new possibilities and situations in life. Thus, the simple pastime of reading, has the capacity of becoming a deeply rooted passion and eventually become a part of one's routine. If the task of introducing children to the world of books falls on parents at home, then at school, it falls directly on teachers.

Teachers must work closely with children to nurture their interest and create suitable curricula and reading habits that should be formed through a variety of ways – “. . . kinesthetically, aurally, visually, and musically” – resorting to both educational and recreational activities (Gokce et al.158). When books are introduced as a medium of learning, students should not be made to feel as if they are being forced to learn.

G. Robert Carlsen and Anne Sherrill points out that the original mythological tales “. . . seemed to be written in a different language, were often very confusing, had meanings that were too vague to comprehend, and did not relate to [the] present-day lives”, making them too difficult for children to understand (qtd. in Wagner 66-67). Teachers must consider the emotional readiness of students while recommending books for them as they have the potential to contribute to identity formation (Engles

and Kory 58). They may utilise the reader response theory which is an effective method of teaching to help children engage with literature and assess their cognitive capacity. The difficulty leads children to prefer light-hearted books like the select novels over mythological tales as “Children, tweens and teens . . . mostly read for fun. They want a fast-paced novel that is easy to read and filled with action . . . Greek mythology fans and educators who also read in hopes of learning and discovering possible lessons layered within the story, [meet with] parents’ expectations of appropriate content” (Bygstad 30). The select novels are as “. . . multilayered, and . . . aesthetically pleasing in much the same way as the classics” (Connors 70).

Teachers should encourage students to write their opinions and the significance of books after reading them to develop their understanding of it. Going a step further, they should encourage students to review the “story in relation to its literary form, to use critical process in order to discover different interpretations for the story they are reading” which induces analytical thinking among school students (May 16). The student-teacher interaction is part of the critical literacy framework that promotes meaning-making by not just decoding the text but also understanding the power relationship between the author and the reader; removing the book from the author; exploring the subversive themes in books; and informing readers of a permissible choice to uncover hidden meanings, which lead to the construction of an informed reader, and not just a critical reader (Fabrizi). Through the method, “. . . children can learn to interrogate texts, to read “against” them so that their literacy is more critical than conformist” (Zipes, *Sticks and Stone* 30). The select novels can prepare children and young adults to eventually read the “source” material – the mythological tales – as the progression helps them build the necessary background and interest in the stories (Wagner 72). The method also enables teachers to take an

active role concerning children's blossoming maturity. The author Masha Kabakow Rudman expresses the weight on the role of teachers, in the book *Children's Literature* (1976), that "Educators have within their power the means to inculcate values; develop skills; influence attitudes; and affect physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and more development of today's youth and tomorrow's adults" which, thereby, contribute to the formation of their identities (1). Thus, the dynamics of educational practice are noticeable throughout the narrative, and it provides scope in cultural pedagogy and critical literacy; books like the select novels might be added to curricula, if they are not already. Additionally, as far as adventure stories like the select novels are concerned, recreational activities like ". . . sword training, chariot racing, archery, lava wall climbing, and phalanx training," help foster "critical lateral problem solving skills" which contribute to "a whole learning approach to the camp experience", cultivating "meaningful connections between history, mythology, literature, art, science, sports, current events, language and rampant creativity" and stimulate the urge in students to learn the educational content within them (Morey and Nelson 238-239). Moreover, as Diane Capriola puts it, parents appreciate the activities due to their educational nature (qtd. in Nawotka 18). Thus, myths can be made more accessible to children by aligning them with ". . . an anti-elitist, low-cultural view of the classics, [to promote] elitist, high cultural values" (qtd. in Morey and Nelson 240).

An engaging set of strategies for teachers might incorporate kinaesthetic activities that would help students think critically and imaginatively, like the inclusion of discussion groups and role-playing to bring characters in books to life, making it easier for students to understand the intentions of the characters. Enacting scenes allow students to actively engage with the material and gain a deeper understanding.

Teachers may prompt students with creative assignments by encouraging them to create characters, quests, alternate endings, and create new myths or retellings based on the cultural context of students, which will bring a cultural perspective to the stories, making them more relatable to the students. Drawing character profiles and outlining traits will help them visualise and understand the nuances of different characters. Reading books like the select novels which are mythical retellings with subversive tropes can broaden the perspectives of students to challenge stereotypes and normalise stigmas that surround disabilities, promoting inclusivity and empathy. The methods make learning more dynamic and interactive but also cater to the diverse needs and preferences of students.

A holistic understanding can be embraced by integrating technology into teaching to enhance the understanding of students. As storytelling evolves in the digital age, the select novels embrace digital platforms that provide opportunities for multimedia storytelling, where authors and creators can use digital platforms and technology to enhance the storytelling experience by shaping the way stories are told, providing a diverse and engaging reading experience, reaching readers through e-books, audio books, websites, movies, TV series, and video games. Audio books are a significant medium, particularly for visually impaired, travellers, or those looking for an alternative to reading physical books. The narrators often use voice variations to represent different characters, enhancing listening experience and can reduce the strain of reading from e-books. However, e-books address some of the limitations of traditional books and audiobooks, as they can store entire collections of works on a single device. They are also easy to carry and are cost-effective as compared to buying books for a considerable amount of membership amount and can be engaged as a way of embedding technology into everyday life in schools.

Riordan has two official websites, <https://www.readriordan.com/>, which serve as a hub for information on the author's works, updates, announcements, and news, related to the books written by him, and <https://rickriordan.com/>, dedicated to additional stories and the books he publishes under the imprint Rick Riordan Presents to publish books related to diverse mythologies and folklores, bringing attention to underrepresented cultures and mythologies in children's literature. Fantasy is a genre that has attained commendation not only in books but also in movies and games. The first two novels have been adapted into the movies, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* in 2010 and *Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters* in 2013. The movies have become a popular medium for bringing fantasy books to life, but have the limitation of time constraints. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* TV series was released on December 20, 2023 on the OTT platform, Disney+ Hotstar, announced on August 18th, considered as Percy's birthday. Role playing games like the *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* video game is dominant in the gaming industry and denotes the technical expertise in media production that allows for realistic portrayals of magical and supernatural elements, and also problem-solving skills and strategic thinking.

Teachers should be helped by librarians to ensure that appropriate books reach children in the right age group according to the subject and themes dealt in them. Together, teachers and librarians act as “. . . gatekeepers with their shrewd perspectives . . . not simply minding the aesthetic qualities of writers' narratives; they believed they were guarding the realm of make-believe that could take root in a child's eager mind” (Encisco et al. 256). Librarians should curate a diverse collection of books that cater to a variety of interests, genres, and reading levels that appeal to the current trends in literature, and regularly update and promote book recommendations. They should organise book clubs where students can discuss books

and conduct storytelling sessions and literary contests to make reading more enjoyable, interactive, and to create a sense of community. They should conduct friendly competitions like quizzes and book-themed treasure hunts, implement reading programmes or challenges like theme-based monthly reading lists to encourage students to set reading goals, and offer incentives like certificates and distribute prizes, upon reaching milestones. They should also invite authors to address the students once in a while which would help to increase their enthusiasm in reading. Designing quiet and cozy reading corners for students in libraries can make students more inclined to spend their time reading. A similar example of The Meriwether College Prep, a “. . . ‘progressive’ school in downtown Manhattan” that Percy attends where students “. . . sit on beanbag chairs instead of at desks, and . . . don’t get grades, and the teachers wear jeans and rock concert T-shirts to work” as found in TSoM promotes an unconventional approach of teaching and learning (Riordan 8).

Budding authors have the opportunities to play a significant role in fostering a love for reading and supporting educational initiatives by taking several proactive steps by actively engaging with their readers through social media platforms, author websites, and virtual events. Regular interactions such as Question & Answer sessions, live readings, and discussions about their books help to create a strong connection with their audience, encouraging more interest in reading. Authors can visit schools and libraries, either in person or virtually, to conduct workshops, readings, and discussions. The visits will inspire students and provide unique insights into the writing process, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation for literature. Authors should work closely with educators to develop supplementary materials that align with curricula. The materials might include discussion guides, lesson plans, and activity suggestions that help teachers integrate books into their classrooms more

effectively. Authors should enhance the reading experience by developing interactive contents such as companion websites, educational games, and apps related to their books. Interactive elements can make stories more engaging and accessible, especially for younger readers. They should write blog posts, articles, and essays that highlight the themes, characters, and underlying messages in their works. Authors can help educators and parents to guide discussions that promote critical thinking and literacy by providing deeper insights into their writing.

Authors should design creative assignments and contests related to their books. Encouraging readers to write extensions of the story, create alternate endings, or illustrate scenes that will stimulate imagination and engagement. Embracing digital formats such as eBooks, audiobooks, and interactive story apps, authors can reach a wider audience. Promoting the use of the formats in educational settings demonstrate the versatility of reading in the digital age.

Authors should recommend book lists that include their works alongside other notable titles. These curated lists can serve as valuable resources for parents, educators, and librarians seeking quality reading material for children and young adults. They should advocate and support reading programs and literacy initiatives. By partnering with organisations dedicated to promoting reading, authors should contribute to broader efforts to enhance literacy rates and foster a culture of reading. Authors should organise writing competitions, reading challenges, and other interactive activities that encourage readers to engage with their books and others. Prizes and recognition for participation can help to motivate students to read more and think critically about what they read. By taking these steps, authors should significantly contribute to creating a vibrant reading culture, supporting educational goals, and making literature a more integral part of the lives of students. In order to

establish the relevance of myths, mythical retellings, and fantasy literature, including children's fantasy literature, to a larger audience, readers, writers, parents, teachers, and librarians must widen their inquiry to include a greater variety of literary works.

The crucial role that children's fantasy literature plays in the intellectual development, learning process, and the imparting of knowledge that is appropriate for children, teenagers, and young adults shows that it is also applicable for new adults and adults. The role and its significance are accentuated by the paradox that while fantasy allows for the exercise of imagination and an escape from reality, it remains a valuable and even essential component for today's teenagers (Owen 77). Recognising that the joy of reading lies in the immersive experience of getting lost in a book, readers understand that the pleasure of reading extends beyond the individual and becomes a tool for social connection. Books serve as instruments of social pleasure and facilitate the establishment of reading communities, providing a unique space for readers to build connections among readers who share similar interests. Within the networks, readers engage in conversations, forming a community that enhances the overall reading experience and nurture meaningful connections among participants through an exposé of diverse perspectives and experiences of characters in books that broaden one's understanding of the self and reinforces personal identity, transforming them into better individuals.

The analysis situates children's fantasy literature, especially the select novels in a limbo, a space between the high and low culture (fantasy and reality), and between literature for children and adults. The chapter refutes the notion that children's fantasy is escapist, demonstrating the serious and relevant themes encoded in the select novels like bullying, identity, insecurity, neurodiversity and prejudice, female empowerment, family, friendship environmentalism, power dynamics, using

postmodern critique, illustrating that fantasy becomes a vehicle for confronting real-world concerns. The actions, choices, and transformations, of the characters, ground them as models of human strength and autonomy. The linkage of Greek mythological family dysfunctions with contemporary familial realities connects them with messy, real families. The parent-child estrangement and reconciliation, found family through friendship, and romantic relationships as emotional and not merely narrative devices, show that the themes contribute to identity formation, emotional intelligence, and moral development. The analysis of pollution, overpopulation, and environmental degradation in the mythical and mortal worlds is vital to record the ethical urgency to restore the environment. The portrayal of the administrative system of gods functions as a metaphor for human power structures and hierarchy.

The exploration of mythical and mortal worlds confirms the coexistence and interplay between the real and the fantastical. Situating the Greek myths in a contemporary American setting, the narrative exposes the construction of reality, a core postmodern belief, thereby blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality. The depiction of children and young adults grappling with identity, disability, and agency reflects a reimagining of myth from a modern and socially conscious perspective. The chapter interrogates traditional heroism, rejects the grand metanarrative of the flawless hero, and reconstructs it through the lens of neurodiversity of the demigod characters, their emotional fragility, and subaltern empowerment, resonating with readers. The individual stories of vulnerability and courage particularly those that focus on dyslexia, ADHD, and social exclusion advocate for postmodern inclusivity, undermining binary categorisations of normalcy and monstrosity. The inclusion of dark themes such as death and grief focuses on

confrontation of reality rather than sanitisation of reality that examines the tackling of emotional complexity in children's fantasy literature, in particular, the select novels.

The didactic undercurrent is often directed at parents and teachers to ensure that learning transcends textbooks, a distinctly postmodern gesture, embracing multimedia literacy and participatory culture. Libraries in schools are spaces that can blur the line between entertainment and education and interdisciplinary approaches can be used as tools to achieve the same. The pedagogical value of fantasy lies in its potential for critical literacy which the spaces can enable through reading against text, self-reflection, and aiding the construction of moral frameworks, achieved through book clubs, reading corners, author interactions, digital storytelling, and inclusive and immersive teaching practices. The analysis cements the argument that the select novels are great tools for community building which is crucial for transforming personal identity.

The exemplification of the contemporary American setting and the interpretation of the real-world struggles of the characters in the select novels, reflect the interplay between fantastical frameworks and realistic experiences, fulfilling the research objective – bridging of fantasy and reality. The objective, redesigning traditional storytelling methods, is further but partly met in the current chapter as it challenges the traditional archetype of the flawless hero, as addressed through character arcs. The chapter provides strong evidence that children's fantasy engages with deep, meaningful, cultural, social, and psychological discourse as can be found in the real-world thematic analysis of the chapter, which argues that the novels are tools for critical literacy, moral frameworks, and social engagement that elevates them above the label of low culture, justifying the objective – relieving fantasy literature of its secondary status. The chapter also perfectly matches the objective – to analyse the

positive impacts of the fictional reality in the select novels on the social reality of readers, as the chapter highlights that readers relate to the characters and imbibe the positive role of books like fostering empathy, emotional intelligence, and personal growth in the lives of readers through the exploration of pedagogical implications. The reworking of Greek mythology in the chapter through themes of present-day realities also reflects intellectual, social, and cultural commentary, satisfying the objective – construction and representation of myths in contemporary children’s fantasy literature in accordance with the society’s current intellectual, social, and cultural trends.