

The Diversity Quota:
Diversity in Science Fiction and Fantasy

Rebekah Teske
Tischer Departmental Honors Paper
Katherine Orloff
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Introduction

"The process of casting a movie has many complicated variables, but it is clear that our casting choices should have been more diverse. I sincerely apologize to those who are offended by the decisions we made."¹

Alex Proyas, director of *I, Robot* (2004), *Dark City* (1998) and *The Crow* (1994) said that, after there were accusations of whitewashing in his upcoming film *Gods of Egypt* (2016). But what is whitewashing, and why is it so bad that Proyas had to make a public statement regarding the accusations?

White washing, to put it in the most basic of terms, is when a character that is meant to be from a non-white culture is portrayed by a white actor, normally in film or television. Animated films are sometimes accused of this practice as well, but it is easier to ignore than in live action productions.

This is something that you've probably seen before - in *Aloha* (2015), Emma Stone played the character Allison Ng, who is supposed to be one quarter Chinese and one quarter native Hawaiian. Of course, Stone is a white actress, and following the controversy of her casting in the film, Stone apologized, stating,



Emma Stone as Allison Ng

"There's a lot of conversation about how we want to see people represented on screen and what we need to change as a business to reflect culture in a clearer way and not in an idealized way. There are some flaws in the system... My eyes have been opened in many ways this year."²

¹ Mendelson, Scott. "Lionsgate Responds To 'Gods Of Egypt' Whitewashing Controversy." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, November 27, 2015.

² Smith, Nigel M. "Emma Stone Says Aloha Casting Taught Her about Whitewashing in Hollywood." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, July 17, 2015.

Aloha has a 20% on Rotten Tomatoes currently, and only a 40% on Metacritic. *Gods of Egypt* was nominated for a Golden Raspberry for both Worst Picture and Worst Director. Does that mean that the market will take care of itself? That the missteps made by the people in charge will eventually lead to some sort of equilibrium of diverse casting and more sensitive portrayals?

Well, not exactly. While there is certainly now more of an outcry to include more diverse casting, there is a long history of non-white roles being played by white actors. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), for instance, stars English actor Alec Guinness as the Arab Prince Faisal. Or *Scarface* (1983), where Al Pacino plays Tony Montana, a Cuban-American. These are critically acclaimed films that have been able to get away with this type of behavior.

White washing isn't the only problems Hollywood, television companies, or publishing houses have had in the past. Their crimes range from exclusion of non-white or LGBT characters/actors, to offensive stereotypes of said groups, to the afore mentioned white washing. However, there have been areas that have always been open to these groups of "others": fantasy and science fiction.

Fantasy and science fiction are the two areas of fictional creativity that leave themselves open to creating completely different worlds – worlds different than anything anyone has ever seen before. That means that they are able to add diversity into their worlds in what *should* be an easy transition. But do they succeed?

In some ways, yes. The book series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, an urban fantasy series and its later sequel series and series set in the same universe like *Kane Chronicles*, *The Heroes of Olympus*, *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*, and *The Trials of Apollo* are all rich with characters with different backgrounds, ethnicities, gender and sexual identities, and more.

Most characters within the series are diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, and the lead character in *Magnus Chase* is a homeless teenager. But *Magnus Chase* also has a deaf character

and a gender-fluid character who is also Muslim. The lead character of *The Trials of Apollo* is canonically bisexual and the leads from *The Heroes of Olympus* include a Cherokee character, a Chinese-Canadian character, an African-American character, and a Puerto Rican character.

The writer of the novels, Rick Riordan, has been outspoken about introducing more diversity into fantasy novels. He has even partnered with Disney-Hyperion Publishing to create “Rick Riordan Presents” to help promote and publish authors from more underrepresented cultures and backgrounds. Because of the background of his series’ as it stands, Riordan admits that most of the books will probably have more of a bent towards action, myth, humor, and folklore, saying:

“Over the years, I’ve gotten many questions from my fans about whether I might write about various world mythologies, but in most cases I knew I wasn’t the best person to write those books. Much better, I thought, to use my experience and my platform at Disney to put the spotlight on other great writers who are actually from those cultures and know the mythologies better than I do. Let them tell their own stories, and I would do whatever I could to help those books find a wide audience!... I am not writing the books and I don’t tell the authors what to write. This is not like using a ghost writer or ‘assistant writer’ to write my ideas. These are original stories generated by the authors – their intellectual property, told their way, with their characters and their sense of humor. The worlds they create are their own.... For me this is a way to give back for my success. I’ve been very lucky in my career. I want to use my platform to help other writers get a wider audience. I also want to help kids have a wider variety of great books to choose from, especially those

that deal with world mythology, and for all kinds of young readers to see themselves reflected in the books that they read.”³

In many ways, Riordan is one of the authors most admirable for his willingness to both create opportunities for authors from different backgrounds but also introducing his own diverse characters into his writing. In other words, Riordan puts his money where his mouth is.

Other authors, however, seem to have trouble with similar approaches. J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, introduced some characters that were diverse in cultural background, sexuality, and race, unfortunately did not always hit the mark. Characters like Padma and Parvati Patil bring some welcome diversity to an otherwise extremely white class, but characters who identify as non-heterosexual or transgender do not show up in the text. Dumbledore, one of the main characters, has been confirmed as gay by Rowling in interviews, on social media, and other sources, but as of 2019, never in any material that was canon to the universe. Writer Devan Coggan pointed out a very important dimension of this non-existent canon confirmation: “Does Rowling’s LGBT representation really mean anything if it isn’t actually represented in the text?”⁴

Coggan has a point, and while Rowling seems to be well meaning, she doesn’t seem to have much faith in the text when it comes to representation. Cho Chang, an Asian character in the series, has become a bit of a talking point when it comes to representation. Her name, two Asian surnames (hailing from Korea and China) seems at first just like an author’s attempt to make a character “sound” Asian without much attempt to justify the naming choices. This could be true,

³ “Rick Riordan Presents.” Rick Riordan. Accessed April 25, 2020.

⁴ Coggan, Devan. “J.K. Rowling’s Long History of Discussing - but Not Depicting - Dumbledore’s Sexuality.” EW.com, March 19, 2019.

but as some people have pointed out it could be a deliberate choice by Rowling. English and American names can be comprised of two surnames or two first names (McCoy Robertson or Hunter Aaron, for example) as well, so why can't this Asian character have two surnames? Others have pointed out that her role in the story is anything but affirming for Asian readers.

Chang is sorted into Ravenclaw, the house for the wisest and most intelligent students, which supports the stereotype that Asian students are naturally the smartest in a classroom setting. While that may seem like a bit of a stretch, it is undeniable that Chang spends almost all of her time in the novels as a tearful mess, crying over one boy or the other.⁵ This may be more forgivable, as she was grieving over the loss of her boyfriend Cedric Diggory in *The Order of the Phoenix*, but as Diana Lee points out,

Yes, Cho was sad about boyfriend Cedric Diggory's death and confused about her developing feelings for Harry so she was crying, pensive, and sad most of the time, but JK Rowling intentionally set up Cho as weak to make Ginny, Harry's eventual love interest and a White woman, look stronger. This may not have been intentionally racially charged, but it is important to think about because discrimination and prejudice are oftentimes not only about intentionality. This is a theme that recurs in mainstream films and stories – women of color appear as minor, brief, undeveloped characters to set up the 'real' relationship for the main White characters later in the narrative, and the more we see it repeated with no alternative portrayals, the more it has the potential to seem “natural.”⁶

⁵ Hartswick, Elizabeth. “Let's Talk About Cho Chang.” *The Odyssey Online*. The Odyssey Online, July 27, 2017.

⁶ Lee, Diana. “‘To JK Rowling, From Cho Chang’: Responding to Asian Stereotyping in Popular Culture.” *Henry Jenkins*. Henry Jenkins, October 9, 2013.

This was almost certainly not Rowling's intent with the character of Cho Chang, but it is what is read in the pages nonetheless. So what does this mean? Should characters of diverse backgrounds never be handled unless they are done so respectfully or by a member of their respective culture? That doesn't seem right either – Riordan is a white author, yet he has done a lot of good for diversity in children's entertainment.

In this essay, we will look at three different pieces of media in the genres of science fiction and fantasy in three different forms of art: television, film, and book, to determine how diversity is implemented in each, the response from consumers, and the reasons why each source handles the material in the way that they choose to.

Section 1: *Star Trek* and the First Interracial Kiss

Racial tensions in media are nothing new. But they certainly weren't the most important topic on Will H. Hays' mind when he was crafting the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code. In the 1930s, most films were free of regulation (beyond state and local censorship boards), and consequentially became odious to the more conservative Americans. Hays, a Republican and Presbyterian deacon, was asked to put together a code that would help regulate the movie industry and preserve moral purity among the general populous.

The Hays Code was meant to regulate *movies*; however television was not far behind the film industry. The Hays Code was adopted widely in 1934, following the introduction of the Catholic Legion of Decency.

The Catholic Legion of Decency was an organization formed to petition Hollywood to produce less "objectionable" films. Archbishop Cicognani called for the "purification of the cinema which has become a deadly menace to morals." Originally a coalition with other groups, such as Protestant and Jewish leaders, the Legion of Decency slowly became a Catholic organization as they were the predominant group. They staged boycotts and protests against the industry, and the economic pressure due to these protests was so great that the studios were forced to cave. At first the Hays Code, named after Director Will H. Hays, was largely a set of guidelines and was generally ignored, but when he left the position and Joseph Breen took over as the director, the Code became very strictly enforced. Breen, a staunch Catholic, used the book *Decency in Motion Pictures* by Martin Quigley (another Catholic man) as the basis for his version of the Hays Code. The Legion of Decency followed suit, and kept their own lists of qualifying

movies. An “A” movie was acceptable for the whole family, a “B” was morally objectionable, and a “C” was “Condemned”: a movie no practicing Catholic had any reason to go see.⁷

Electronic televisions became available commercially in 1938,⁸ so it’s no surprise that the broadcast networks closely followed the Hollywood decency standards.

I Love Lucy, which premiered in 1951, faced problems when its star, Lucille Ball, became pregnant with her first child. According to reporter Robert Bianco, the pregnancy caused a dilemma for the production team:

“In a TV fantasy world, Lucy Ricardo's pregnancy...was a major risk. The plot worried CBS, which was afraid viewers might pause to consider how Lucy got pregnant — a thought process the twin beds were designed to circumvent. But the show was allowed to proceed, with one stipulation: The word ‘pregnant’ was never uttered. Lucy was ‘expecting.’”⁹

While some of Hays’ suggestions were similar to standards of good taste that still exist today (such as banning the portrayal of “children's sex organs” and insisting that some subjects be handled with care and good taste – such as the “branding of people or animals”), other part of the code seem simply ridiculous to us today. Men and women could not sleep in the same bed, for example. Hays also included a rule that sympathy for criminals was not to be portrayed, and most TV shows *and* movies followed this code.¹⁰

A common question regarding the Hays Code is why a studio would bother to follow it in the first place if it affected the content of their movies to such an extent. The simple and bothersome truth is that if they did not abide by the Hays Code, their movies would not be shown at theaters.

⁷ “‘Censoring the Silver Screen’ a History of the Legion of Decency.” *Patheos*, February 29, 2016.

⁸ Hur, Johnson. “History of the Television: From The 1800s To Current Time.” BeBusinessed.com.

⁹ Bianco, Robert. “10 Turning Points for Television.” *USATODAY*, 9 Feb. 2004.

¹⁰ Lewis, Jon. *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

At the time that the code was implemented, the major studios, largely, owned their own theaters. The companies were free to screen whatever films they chose. With this freedom came the somewhat underhanded practice of only showing the films produced by that company (these studios are generally broken up into the “Big Five”: Paramount, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Loew's (MGM), and RKO Pictures and the “Little Three”: Columbia Pictures, Universal Studios, and United Artists). What this meant long term was that films made by independent filmmakers were strangled and killed before ever being screened and innovation stalled because they couldn't get theaters to show their pictures. *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et al.* was the Supreme Court case marking the practice as unlawful and put an end to the old “Hollywood studio system,” as this practice was known.¹¹

All of this meant that after 1948, when the Paramount case was decided, studios had to first sell their theaters to independent companies or owners, and then rely on said theaters to screen their films. The Hays Code had been in effect for almost 15 years, but as independent theaters became more common it became more difficult to sell movies without the approval of the Production Code Administration (commonly referred to as the PCA), which had to approve any and all movies before they could be distributed. To cut down on time wasted, most major studios would choose to submit their scripts ahead of time to the PCA and cut out any objectionable portions of the material before filming began. This could also sometimes lead to the PCA literally cutting portions of the script out, leaving entire scenes out of the final version of the film. A film that passed the PCA's tests would be given a seal of approval upon release.¹²

In real terms, what this came to mean is that independent theaters could now pick and choose which films they were going to show from any studio. Many chose only to show films that

¹¹ *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 U.S. 131 (1948)

¹² Doherty, Thomas. “The Code Before 'Da Vinci'.” *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2006.

had the approval of the PCA and held the seal from the corporation. Because things like “sexual perversion” (in more modern times we understand that to be portrayals of homosexuality and in some cases transgressing gender norms) and miscegenation¹³ were off limits and would have either hit the cutting room floor before filming even began *or* the film would not have been approved by the PCA and theaters could have refused to show the movie, this led to a sea of stories with very little variety in their characters. People of color were allowed to interact with one another and white characters, and be portrayed on film, but they *could not* have a romantic or sexual relationship with a person of another race. This was the same case with homosexuality – which was sometimes alluded to, as was miscegenation, but never portrayed outright – and it brought more than half a century of stories where diversity was stifled by outdated laws that could not be challenged without a very good chance that your film would never see release. It was a culture that was afraid to challenge the status quo, but this culture also spread to other forms of entertainment by the time television became a widespread form of entertainment.

This deferment to the attitude of the Hays Code continued in broadcast television for many years, but after the 1950s, there was a change to the approach of once taboo subjects in broadcasting – in 1964, an episode of *Peyton Place* aired that centered on an illegitimate child. This is in direct contrast to the code, which urged for the “institution of marriage” to be handled sensitively and for good taste to prevail in all things,¹⁴ but soon the stipulation that miscegenation (sexual relationships between people of different races) could absolutely *not* be shown would be challenged in network television as well.

It was about this time that the Legion of Decency enters the public light again. In 1964 they published a review of a selection of motion pictures from August 1963 to August 1964. They

¹³ Lewis, Jon. *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry*.

¹⁴ Lewis, Jon. *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry*.

claimed that only 51 of the 270 films they had reviewed received the coveted “A-1” rating, and besides Walt Disney Motion Pictures, no major production companies seemed interested in making content that was decent for the entire family.¹⁵ With the introduction of *Star Trek* on broadcast television, unfortunately the Legion would not get its wish.

Star Trek originally aired starting in 1966. It became a vessel through which social issues could be explored. Nick Farrantello, a writer who grew up watching the series, pointed out in a journal published by the American Humanist Association that:

“[*Star Trek*] allowed us to examine the core elements of controversial issues without all the emotional baggage that went along with them. It's easy to dismiss the genre when you have grown-up fans walking around in costumes and silver make-up, but ST employs disarming tools to tease core arguments from their tired rhetoric. Here pundits, smoke screens, and slogans are stripped away and we see a subject as though for the first time. We get to test whether the rules we create to guide our lives work in any world or are just arbitrary constructs. And back in the late 1960s, no science fiction did this better than Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*.”¹⁶

Nowhere is this more true than in the episode “Plato’s Stepchildren,” featuring one of the first interracial kisses broadcast on national television.

The famous interracial kiss between Communications Officer Lt. Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) and Captain Kirk (William Shatner) takes place during episode 10 of season 3, and was aired on November 22, 1968. The premise of the episode sets the crew of *The Enterprise* approaching a

¹⁵ “National Legion of Decency Asks More Family Films of Hollywood.” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1964.

¹⁶ Farrantello, Nick. 2009. “STAR TREK Made Me and Atheist.” *Humanist* 69 (4): 31–36.

planet of humanoids who have contacted them, requesting assistance. Their leader has fallen ill and needs a doctor's assistance.

The humanoids are telekinetics named Platonians (after the Greek philosopher Plato) who, after Kirk refuses their request to leave Chief Medical Officer Dr. McCoy (DeForest Kelley) with them in order to help nurse their people back to health, decide to humiliate the captain and his men. With their telekinetic abilities, they force Kirk and First Officer Spock (Leonard Nimoy) to act out romantic scenes with their crewmates: Uhura and Nurse Chapel (Majel Barrett).

Kirk and Uhura share a moment of intimacy during the ordeal, Uhura admitting:

"I'm thinking of all the times on *The Enterprise* where I was scared to death...and I would hear your voice from all parts of the ship, and my fears would fade. And now they're making me tremble. But I'm not afraid. I am not afraid."

Then the kiss. And according to Nichols, the episode aired and... nothing. No backlash, no mass burnings of the disgruntled fans' paraphernalia. The world continued onward with no real signs of the outrage the network was terrified could have occurred.

There were letters from fans asking her what it was like to kiss Kirk, and Shatner received letters asking him what it was like to kiss Uhura, but except for one disgruntled segregationist who admitted, "I am totally opposed to the mixing of the races. However, any time a red-blooded American boy like Captain Kirk gets a beautiful dame in his arms that looks like Uhura, he ain't gonna fight it,"¹⁷ there was no outcry following the episode's premiere.

Nichols later said that she was not aware of how important her role on the series was until she was approached by Dr. Martin Luther King who told her, "Whether you like it or not, you

¹⁷ Nichols, Nichelle. *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories*. Boxtree, 1996.

have become a symbol. If you leave, they can replace you with a blonde-haired white girl, and it will be like you were never there. What you've accomplished, for all of us, will only be real if you stay."¹⁸

Roddenberry was always reluctant to tackle religion within his material, but even in subsequent material was perfectly willing to tackle more sensitive topics. What racial relations were to the 1960s and *Star Trek: The Original Series*, non-heteronormative relationships and identities were to the 1980s and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Dr. Beverly Crusher (Gates McFadden) is given a major role in the two examples of a shift away from the conservative views exemplified in early 20th century media in the episode "The Host," which is the episode 23 of season 4. Crusher begins a romance throughout this episode with a Trill negotiator named Odan (Franc Luz). But the episode ends in tragedy - with Odan being mortally wounded.

Trill, however, are symbiotic aliens that transfer from host body to host body, taking their feelings, memories, and relationships with them from body to body. Odan, host body mortally wounded, transfers into a new *female* host (played by Nicole Orth-Pallavicini). When Odan comes to Crusher in her new female body, Crusher rejects Odan's advances, saying she doesn't feel comfortable with Odan's female form. Odan accepts this and kisses the inside of Crusher's wrist before leaving.

There were some criticisms that came out after this episode aired. The most glaring and obvious one is the backlash for the hinted homosexual relationship between Odan's new host body and Crusher. But in the years since the episode has garnered some reproach from LGBT activists for Crusher's failure to accept the person she loves in a new body. Some have argued that it is

¹⁸ de Yarza, Carlos. 2017. "Star Trek -- Where No Genre Has Gone Before: Application of Mittell's Television Genre Theory to the Star Trek Series."

hypocritical for Crusher to have no problem with pursuing an alien lover, but that she drew the line at a female lover. There were also questions about whether portraying an alien character as homosexual (or as not caring about gender orientation) was inherently portraying sexual orientations other than heterosexual as alien themselves.

The concept of homosexuality and transgender individuals was fairly new to the small screen, especially being handled as a serious character and not for comic relief. But much of *Star Trek's* material would go into uncharted territory, whether it be LGBT representation or racial tensions. A lot of that willingness to explore such topics can be attributed to Gene Roddenberry.

Roddenberry was the creator of *Star Trek* and was a renowned humanist and philosopher at the time he pitched *Star Trek* to NBC. A World War II veteran who had flown 89 combat missions and had been awarded both the Flying Cross and the Air Medal, he became a staunch opponent of military conflicts later in life. He stated that his main philosophy is “based upon the great affection I have for the human creature. I mean a tremendous affection.”¹⁹

This is certainly obvious in his work, beginning with his original pitch for *Star Trek*, which included, amongst other characters, a Latino navigator, a female second-in-command, and an alien science officer with red skin and a forked tail. Some of this was kept for the original pilot, which was picked up by Desilu Studios (originally owned by husband and wife Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball of *I Love Lucy* fame; Ball was president at the time that *Star Trek* was in production with Desilu). But the navigator was scrapped, and the science officer was changed to what the audience would come to know as the half-Vulcan Spock (Leonard Nimoy) for the pilot episode “The Cage.” However, problems immediately began to arise. Executives felt that both Spock and Number One (the female second-in-command, played by Majel Barrett) would not be accepted by the audience.

¹⁹ Alexander, David. “Gene Roddenberry: Writer, Producer, Philosopher, Humanist.” *The Humanist*, March 1991.

They also voiced concerns that the show was “too cerebral” for said audience. But instead of dismissing the show outright, the NBC executives ordered a second pilot, and Roddenberry, in a bid to keep his show from failing to impress NBC a second time, cut Number One from the series, though Spock was kept.

In the end, Roddenberry did get a diverse crew: Uhura, from the “United States of Africa” and Japanese-American helmsman Sulu (George Takei). The other crew members were a mix of European-American and ethnically European. In fact, “The Guide to Star Trek,” which was given to prospective writers and directors, explained that the *Enterprise* crew was “international in origin, completely multi-racial.”

Roddenberry’s legacy did much to improve our understanding of what science fiction could offer. It is not just a laser lights show or a Flash Gordon rerun. Instead, it can be a powerful force for progressive thinking. Or a thought experiment on the human condition. Or, if you would rather just enjoy the cheesy special effects and hammy acting, a new media phenomenon for the 20th century science fiction fan in all of us.

Section 2: *Star Wars*' Troubled Racial Ties

In December 2014, *Christian Science Monitor* published an article titled, "A Black Storm Trooper? 'Star Wars' Awakens Forceful Debate about Race." The content wasn't anything special – it was a simple news story about the trailer for the new *Star Wars* movie, *The Force Awakens*. But the fans' reactions to John Boyega, an actor cast to play a stormtrooper, was truly disturbing. The article quotes several of these upset fans, who posted on social media complaints about Boyega's casting. Specifically that he was black.

In the comments section for the trailer for *The Force Awakens* (which had come out only a few weeks prior to the article), a comment called out J.J. Abrams, the director, for "pandering to the politically correct-obsessed social justice warrior types." There were also accusations of "race-mixing" that made their way into the debate.

"So why is there a black storm trooper in the new Star Wars movie?" was one fan's complaint on the discussion threads on ign.com. "They're supposed be all white. I'm tired of this political correctness [expletive]." ²⁰ The problem with such a complaint is that stormtroopers, while clones, are clones of the bounty hunter Jango Fett, who was played by Polynesian actor Temuera Morrison.

However, there is also an argument that the time period that *The Force Awakens* (2015) takes place in *Star Wars*' canon is past the period in time when clones were in wide use in any of the Imperial armies (or in the Empire's successor, the First Order). Most stormtroopers and recruits were non-clones and were trained as children to fight for the First Order. Of course, at the time this trailer was released, many of these details were shrouded in the mist of Disney's recent

²⁰ Goodale, Gloria. "A Black Storm Trooper? 'Star Wars' Awakens Forceful Debate about Race." *Christian Science Monitor*, December 2014.

acquisition of the property. No one knew how much of the original lore from the expanded universe (meaning anything included in a book, video game, graphic novel, or generally *not* a movie from the two already released trilogies) was going to be used, and no one had seen the script yet, so it was up to our imaginations to decide what this new movie was going to be like.

The problem with this freedom, of course, is that now there were several fans who came forward to spew racist sentiments, upset that their franchise had somehow been ruined by a more inclusive cast (conveniently forgetting Lando Calrissian, played by Billy Dee Williams, and Mace Windu, played by Samuel L. Jackson, both prominent black characters in *both* previous trilogies).

However, this inclusion of black actors in prominent roles does not exclude Star Wars from making a few bumbles in the past when it comes to the racial coding and stereotypes of their characters. Will Brooker, an avid Star Wars fan and contributor to the *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* in April 2001, was disturbed by the somewhat racist connotations he viewed in



The Phantom Menace (1999). He specifically mentions the Neimodians as having “caricatured Japanese accents.”²¹

For context, the Neimodians are a race known in the Star Wars universe for their business skills as well as their greed. They have no reservations about enslaving other sentient races and, as a bug-like race, the lower class Neimodians are kept on a restricted diet to ensure they never emerge from their “grub” stage. There are also accounts of these lower class Neimodians being assigned to a task and split into two teams, and to ensure competitiveness the Neimodian overseer would allow the winning crew to eat the

²¹ Brooker, Will. 2001. “Readings of Racism: Interpretation, Stereotyping and The Phantom Menace.” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 15

losers.²² But there is one other detail that requires exploration. Within the first scene of the film, Qui-Gon Jinn comments:

"These Federation types are cowards. The negotiations will be short."

According to Brooker, he noticed several parallels between the description of the Neimodians and the racist portrayals and stereotypes of the Japanese, writing:

"American sociologists described the culture as 'a bustling hive of bees all servicing the queen,' and 'a closely-disciplined and conformist people—a veritable human bee-hive or ant-hill.' A poster from 1945 depicts the Japanese as a vile insect, the 'Louseous Japanicas' who deserved extermination. The Japanese soldier was 'treacherous and cunning' with a 'genius for guile, hatred, torture, inscrutability.' As Dower shows in his final chapter, this discourse was revived in the 1980s when the United States attributed Japanese economic success to 'deviousness,' untrustworthiness and a lack of ethics: 'the language of war ... applied to the battle fields of commerce.' The expansionist military threat had been replaced by an expansionist trade threat, but the attributed characteristics were virtually identical—and identical to the characteristics of the Neimoidians, according to the Dictionary. 'Cowardly,' 'arrogant,' 'deceitful and willing to kill for ... commercial aims,' the Neimoidian Trade Federation is 'cautious by nature' but 'careful to hide its acts of extortion and manipulation behind lies and protests of good faith.' The picture captions emphasize that Neimoidians use a 'wheedling expression' or an 'underhanded gesture' to persuade others of their false sincerity."²³

²² Fry, Jason. *Star Wars: Aliens of the Galaxy*. White Plains, NY: Studio Fun, a Readers Digest Company, 2016.

²³ Brooker, Will. 2001. "Readings of Racism: Interpretation, Stereotyping and The Phantom Menace." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 15

Now, there are some other good points in Brooker's argument against racist stereotypes in the other characters in *The Phantom Menace*. Specifically he looks at Watto and Jar Jar Binks. At



Jar Jar Binks

the time of the film's release, there were several accusations that Binks was a racist caricature with an exaggerated Caribbean accent.²⁴ Brooker was surprised to hear this interpretation of the character, and upon doing more research found there was precedent for Watto to be read as an offensive Jewish caricature as well. Images of undeniably racist interpretations of Jewish men often portray

them as "sneering and scowling with a hook nose and snaggle-tooth."²⁵ This is, unfortunately, very similar to what Watto is designed as in the movie.

However, there is a difference between the Neimodians and Jar Jar Binks and Watto. The main difference is the former race are, in the movies, portrayed by actors in heavy practical makeup and latex masks.



Watto

Watto and Jar Jar Binks are purely CGI characters. Another consideration is Jar Jar Binks *was* played by an actor on set and this actor's voice and physical performance *was* interpreted into the CGI character – and that actor was black. Ahmed Best was a relatively unknown black actor when he took on the role, he had no idea the controversy that the role would spark. In fact, he eventually contemplated suicide over the hate and backlash he endured, saying, "I felt tired of having to defend myself and defend my work. I felt tired of having to fight back against racism and the racial stereotypes."²⁶

It also has to be considered that many of these decisions in the design process were made far before voices were added to these characters: as aliens, their designs are a) up to interpretation

²⁴ "Star Wars Accused of Race Stereotypes." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, June 3, 1999.

²⁵ Brooker, Will. "Readings of Racism: Interpretation, Stereotyping and The Phantom Menace."

²⁶ Nordine, Michael. "Jar Jar Binks Actor Ahmed Best Opens Up About Racism-Fueled Backlash." IndieWire, January 5, 2019.

and b) were not voiced until production began, and many of the complaints about the characters had more to do with the accents used than any design elements. Jar Jar Binks, as an alien, does not *look* like a Caribbean stereotype, but the voice may have been the difference between people taking him as just another alien versus a blatantly racist caricature. The same could be said for the Neimodians, but the potentially racist elements of Watto are harder to ignore.

That all being said, the research done into these different races seems impossible to ignore. According to Brooker, Jar Jar's "orange skin coloration was a last-minute choice 'when research revealed that few underwater creatures were green,'" and in the case of Watto, he was "the result of an experimental sketch." Brooker quotes Terryl Whitlatch, who, with a background in zoology and anatomy, was given the task of designing the alien creatures, as saying, "I had done a portrait of an ugly, cherub-type thing with tiny wings ... George saw it, suggested we give it duck feet, and Watto was born."

The Neimodians, on the other hand, "were shaped by practical and financial considerations; originally intended 'as organic versions of the mechanical droids that make up the Neimoidian army', their 'complex, fantastical design was ultimately simplified when the decision was made to portray the characters wearing animatronic masks.'"

To that end, Brooker concludes that, in at least Jar Jar's case, there was a lot of research and thought that went into his design. That "Jar Jar a painstakingly devised amphibian based as much as possible on a scientific rationale."

But what about the Neimodians mark them as offensive stereotypes of Japanese men? Well, a few things: Asian men in decades past were often portrayed by white men in "yellowface." Similar to blackface, yellowface was a costume or make up choice that exaggerated certain features of their chosen ethnic group (in this case, Asians and specifically East Asians) on white actors. This included buck teeth, slanted eyes, and accented English. The Hays Code forbade miscegenation,

so when a role called for a mixed race relationship, a white actor was normally given a yellowface makeover so that the movie would be approved by the board.

This decidedly anti-romance stance against Asian men was not only brought forth in the era of the Hays Code: Many Asian men in other movies and TV shows are shown to be either asexual, predatory, or emasculated.

In asexual cases, they are shown to completely shun all contact with women or to relationships as a whole. This is an attitude sometimes taken up by samurai movies or by movies where the Asian character is second billed to the white lead – and usually the lead is the one who ends up kissing the romantic lead, not the Asian side character.

The second stereotype is seen in movies such as *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007) where the Pirate Lord Sao Feng attempts to rape female lead Elizabeth Swann (about ten minutes of the film *was* removed from the Chinese release of this film, all featuring Sao Feng, so it seems that Disney was aware of the cultural connotations of this portrayal – and yet decided to use their racially insensitive version in the general release of the film anyway).²⁷

The emasculated Asian man most typically appears in comedies. They make inappropriate jokes or advances towards women, are generally nerdy or awkward, and quite often make fools of themselves. *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *Fargo* (1996) both include this stereotype, as does *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) which goes the extra step of including yellowface. These examples are just mainstream touchstones for how Asian men that not only make them uncomfortably sleazy or awkward around women, but a lot of the time portray Asian men as cowards.

²⁷ Fong, Timothy P., Valerie Soe, and Allan Aquino. 2012. "Portrayals in Film and Television." In *Asian Pacific American Experiences: Past, Present, and Future.*, edited by Eunai Kim Shrake and Edith Wen-Chu Chen, 180–91. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

In the case of the Neimodians, they represent the first and third traits. Neimodians are a bug-like race that goes through a larvae stage and are shown to be cowardly and sniveling, begging for their lives without an ounce of dignity and willing to let others take their punishments or be their meat shields. This is not a great case for *Star Wars* having exceptionally great representation or sensitivity, but there's one more thing that needs to be explored before passing judgement: perception.

We can complain all day long about how offensive something is, but is it really that racist or stereotypical of a portrayal if no one else can see it? Brooker, in his studies, ran a psychological experiment using the Neimodians, Jar Jar Binks, and Watto as his litmus tests. He showed participants clips from the movies and excerpts from other *Star Wars* material about the characters and had the participants fill out a questionnaire asking things like "what do you think their cultural/religious background is inspired by?" Then Brooker had his participants read articles critical of the representation of minorities in *The Phantom Menace* and retake the questionnaire. Finally, he gave them a crash course on historical stereotyping and what those caricatures look like and once again had them take the questionnaire. His results were intriguing to say the least:

"Watto was described by a Pakistani student as being 'like a modern day drug dealer' and by an Arabic woman as 'an Italian mafia member ... even the way his appearance is, short and chubby, all link in to the "mobster" stereotype'. Even more significantly, the Neimoidian character reminded a Tunisian woman of 'Saddam Hussein, or any other dictator', while another, from the United States, suggested that 'Daultay Dofne represents the evil Trade Federation, which invades peaceful civilizations ... is this representative of America?'"

The participants in the initial viewing had a very distinct idea of what these characters did and did not represent, each having a different interpretation. This is not good or bad, but merely an observation on how people, not being primed to accept something as a racist caricature, fail to see what others interpreted. Once again, there is no evidence to show that George Lucas or his creative team set out to make these designs out of malice or a desire to make fun of an ethnic group.

After the second questionnaire, the participants began to see the racial stereotyping Brooker saw as well, now that they had been exposed to the concept, saying things such as:

“... after reading this it shows they are purposely making implications of the stereotypical Jew...

... after reading this text the stereotypes became clearer and after being exposed to the data I would rate the movie as extremely racist...

... I didn't see it before, but after reading this I can see it more....

... from the readings it seems like he portrays a Middle Eastern background...

... as they mentioned the accent, the way Watto looked, I began to realise that all of them are being stereotyped...

... all this just struck me, when I saw the movie I didn't think of all this at all...”

Brooker also pointed out, however, that going into the third questionnaire several participants expressed frustration that they felt the evidence they were being given was forcing them to conform with the belief that the movie was racist and that all three characters were caricatures and offensive to different ethnic groups.

Ahmed Maasarani, one of the few who staunchly refused to see the characters in any way intentional stereotypes, said:

“My answer is the same for all categories. George Lucas’ intention in creating *Star Wars* was never to create racial stereotypes. He gives particular human accents and mannerisms to alien characters so that audiences can empathize with and understand the characters...Lucas purposely imbues his fantastical alien characters with cultural mannerisms and accents that we are accustomed to so that we can universally empathize with the alien characters ... for example, the Jedi are based on the samurai culture. The director was influenced by the classic Kurosawa samurai films.”

In my estimation, Maasarani is not wrong. There are only so many types of characters you can create before you have to start pulling from somewhere that isn’t your own head. Even then, you are using your own cultural experiences and building based on that – but for film makers, especially in such a saturated place as the United States, that can get boring. So we turn to other cultures for inspiration and sometimes (a lot of the time) we can be a bit clumsy with how that inspiration is handled. But because films are also open to interpretation, and enough people come to the same (offensive) interpretation, you may have failed as a filmmaker to make some distinctions in your work.

But, as one of the other participants said when filling out the questionnaires, “I am sorry. I do not want to think about it anymore, because I love *Star Wars*.”²⁸

²⁸ Brooker, Will. “Readings of Racism: Interpretation, Stereotyping and The Phantom Menace.”

Section 3: Tolkien and Hitler

In 1941, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*, wrote to his son, “I have in this War a burning private grudge against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler.”²⁹

This is certainly obvious in his most popular series of stories, the aforementioned *Lord of the Rings*, which at its core is a reflection on the futility of wartime. The people and places represented within its pages are threatened by war, and did not ask for it to come to them. Yet they must defend their home, in order to push back the invaders and the evil that they bring with them. Tolkien’s message is clear: only through conscientious effort can evil be stopped – apathy is not good enough.

But despite his admirable message there have been some criticisms that has bubbled to the surface regarding his work.

John Yatt, writing for The Guardian, wrote,

“The Two Towers is the story of the battle between Isengard and Rohan. In the good corner, the riders of Rohan, aka the ‘Whiteskins’: ‘Yellow is their hair, and bright are their spears. Their leader is very tall.’ In the evil corner, the orcs of Isengard: ‘A grim, dark band... swart, slant-eyed’ and the ‘dark’ wild men of the hills. So the good guys are white and the bad guys are, erm... black.”³⁰

This may not have been Tolkien’s intent – to write races as allegories for wholly good or wholly evil in real world ethnicities, but it’s hard not to see it with descriptions of the Easterlings, enemies of the free people of Middle-Earth, as humans who ride mûmakil (known as oliphaunts and

²⁹ Wainwright, Tom. “The Hobbits versus Hitler.” *Times Higher Education Supplement*, no. 1700 (July 15, 2005): 5

³⁰ Yatt, John. “Wraiths and Race.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, December 2, 2002.

resemble elephants), have sallow or olive skin, dark eyes and black hair, and use scimitars. It's hard not to see them as stand-ins for the Orientalist ideals of the savage man of the Middle East.

But Tolkien was not the first to use fictional races to demonstrate anxiety about race in our modern world, and it was not uncommon in the early 1900s for this type of literature to be widely circulated. George MacDonald's 1872 novel *The Princess and the Goblin* also examines the anxieties about race and evolutionary degeneration, and H.P. Lovecraft's novella *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, published in 1931, explores similar themes. However, Lovecraft was well-known to be a racist of dramatic proportions even by the people of his time. So what does that mean for Tolkien? Well, there is some evidence to suggest that, while like every author he is influenced by the views and social norms of his time, he was not creating narratives that were meant to portray black people as dangerous, "other" beings with only pure evil in them and Middle Eastern nations as traitors to the good people of the world and savage raiders.

The first evidence to suggest that Tolkien was not intentionally creating these aesthetic connections to real world cultures is his letters to his son, as mentioned above: Tolkien hated Hitler and what he stood for. University of Glasgow lecturer Dimitra Fimi wrote that Tolkien "denounced 'racialist' theories, refused to declare Aryan origin to secure a German translation of *The Hobbit*, and railed against Nazi Germany."³¹

She's not wrong – in the letter he wrote in response to the request for confirmation of his Aryan heritage Tolkien wrote, "But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people... the main part of my descent is... purely English," and in a later letter when a person commented on

³¹ Fimi, Dimitra. "Was Tolkien Really Racist?" *The Conversation*, December 6, 2018.

the Nordic influences of Middle-earth, he wrote, “Not Nordic, please! A word I personally dislike; it is associated... with racist theories.”³²

But why would so many people associate his aesthetic choices for racial stereotyping? Well, a part of this has to do with the medieval philosophy that Tolkien used to frame his work, known as the “Great Chain of Being.”

The general idea of the Great Chain of Being is that all people and all things are in a hierarchy, a ladder that stretches from God down to the Devil. In Tolkien’s case it starts with Eru Ilúvatar, god of Middle-earth, then the Valar (the minor gods), then the Maiar (the angels), the elves, the men, then the dwarves, beasts and creatures, and finally the monsters (the orcs and similar creatures). This is an early cosmic hierarchy that Tolkien built, so it may have changed as time went on. This in turn meant that certain races within *The Lord of the Rings* are arbitrarily higher or lower on the ladder – and this cosmic hierarchy is both moralistic as well as physical. The overall idea is that the higher on the chain the race is, the better both morally and physically the race is. The orcs are on the bottom, not only for their grotesque forms but also for their innate evil. So does this mean that they were meant that they were meant to be the stand-ins for the “least lovely Mongol-types”³³ that Tolkien compares their appearance to in his letters? Well, not necessarily.

Tolkien struggled a lot with attempting to explain the orcs’ origin. There is no official version of events, but in the works released after his death by his son Christopher Tolkien the generally agreed upon origin for the orcs is that they were once elves, but through Melkor (the embodiment of evil and a Vala) they “by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved.”³⁴ This seems to suggest that the orcs are only evil because they have been molded to be so, that there is some deep brand that

³² Fimi, Dimitra. “Revisiting Race in Tolkien’s Legendarium: Constructing Cultures and Ideologies in an Imaginary World.” *dimitrafimi.com*, December 2, 2018.

³³ Fimi, Dimitra. “Revisiting Race in Tolkien’s Legendarium...”

³⁴ Fimi, Dimitra. “Revisiting Race in Tolkien’s Legendarium...”

Melkor, later known as Morgoth, has placed so deep into them that it cannot be dug out. Which portrays them as a much more tragic archetype – and yet they are still terrifying. They are too far to be saved, like a stormtrooper in *Star Wars* or a zombie in any apocalyptic movie: the orcs can be mourned for what they once were, but cannot be saved.

Moving up past beasts and creatures, the dwarves are mentioned next. They were originally imagined to be evil creatures, but Tolkien seemed to have dropped that in the final form of the story. Still, they are portrayed as lesser than the other races in many ways. While the elves are the favorites of Ilúvatar’s creatures, seemingly perfect, immortal, and without folly, and humans were also his creations, the dwarves were not. Created by the Vala Aulë, he wished to have someone to teach his craft to, so he created the Seven Dwarf Lords. While Ilúvatar was upset at Aulë, he did not allow Aulë to destroy the dwarves, even after Aulë recognized his mistake and offered to discard his creation to make up for it.

This puts the dwarves in a curious position of not having been part of Ilúvatar’s plan for Middle-earth. They are also looked down upon by the elves, who seem them as inferior creations and a bawdy, greedy people. The dwarves don’t think much better of the elves, and this is never framed as a *correct* reaction on either party’s behalf, so Tolkien is clearly not intending anyone to take a “racism is good” message out of this portrayal.

As with any author working with a genre that requires great imagination (such as science fiction or fantasy), Tolkien often draws inspiration from the world around him. This is where some of the more questionable aspects comes from, such as the descriptions of the Easterlings and the characteristics of the orcs, but sometimes this can be unavoidable. Sometimes, however, it is quite deliberate. In his letters Tolkien comments that the dwarves are supposed to be based off of the Jewish culture, asking,

“The dwarves of course are quite obviously - wouldn't you say that in many ways they remind you of the Jews? Their words are Semitic obviously, constructed to be Semitic.”

It is important to note that Tolkien is commenting on their language, Khuzdul, and comparing *that* to Semitic languages. He also wrote that the dwarves are supposed to have certain things in common with the Jewish people, that they both were "at once natives and aliens in their habitations, speaking the languages of the country, but with an accent due to their own private tongue..."³⁵ The dwarves were also special in that they were very difficult to sway with magical influence, though when that influence did take hold it would exacerbate the dwarves' natural greed. So, while the seven rings given to the dwarves did not corrupt them as it did the nine kings of men (who became Ringwraiths), it still affected them in ways that some would say is a quite stereotypical and offensive fashion for a Jewish character. However, this is more like a result of Tolkien's background as a scholar, as dwarves in Norse mythology were often skilled craftsmen and metalworkers and hoarded great amounts of precious metals and stones for just such occasions. This in itself seems to be where the idea that “a dwarf who has been corrupted will become as greedy as a dragon” stems from.

To move on to the elves is to confront another question: with how seemingly perfect they are in every way (especially in the films), are elves inherently good/perfect creatures?

While the elves were created by Ilúvatar as his first creation and they are in many ways “better” than the other races, they are not perfect. This is most present in the tale concerning Fëanor in *The Silmarillion*.

³⁵ Tolkien, J. R. R., Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. George Allen and Unwin, 1981.

The story that gives *The Silmarillion* its name, Fëanor was an elf craftsman who crafted the Silmarils, also known as Silmarilli. They were gems crafted using the essence of the Two Trees of Valinor (the realm of the gods) and were coveted by many. Melkor coveted them as well. He was already spreading lies and rumors amongst Fëanor's people at the time, and though Fëanor did not trust Melkor, many of the things Melkor said fed into Fëanor's pride and paranoia. This eventually led to a schism between the Valar and the Ñoldor – Fëanor's clan. When the Two Trees of Valinor, the source of the Silmarils' beauty, was destroyed by Melkor, the Valar asked Fëanor for the Silmarils, hoping to break them and release their energy and by so doing revive the trees, Fëanor refused. He had become so jealous and possessive of the Silmarils that he would not suffer anyone but himself to possess them. Unfortunately, the Silmarils were stolen from him. Fëanor and his seven sons swore a vow to retrieve the Silmarils at any cost – and it caused them much grief. One son retrieved a Silmaril and it was not only unbearable for him to hold due to the heinous crimes he had committed but he eventually threw himself and the Silmaril into a fiery abyss in despair. This is just one tale of the elves' imperfections.

Unlike the dwarves, who were created imperfect from the start, the elves *were* created to be almost incorruptible. That is the reason that Melkor (later known as Morgoth) attempted to use the elves to create his own race: the orcs. It was a way to bite his thumb at Ilúvatar as he corrupted the incorruptible. But he tried other ways, too: the rings that were meant to bring the leaders from all races under his control.

The three rings given to the elves did not corrupt them as it corrupted the human kings, but then again the seven dwarf lords were not touched in the same way that the humans were either. There are two different explanations for the reasons why the two races were not affected by Sauron's attempts to control them. The dwarves, as was explained above, are naturally resistant to magic and as such did not feel the most harmful aspects of the rings. The elves, on the other hand,

were not touched by Sauron's magic because their rings were made without his interference. An elf smith named Celebrimbor created sixteen of the nineteen rings given to the races with Sauron's help, but Celebrimbor created the three elven rings without Sauron's interference. So it seems plausible that the elves could have been swayed by Sauron's power if the rings they were given had come into contact with his influence.³⁶ So the elves do not seem to be quite as perfect as one would be lead to believe. In fact, their flaws are often that they *believe* themselves to be superior to most other races and their hubris often blinds them to the needs of other races, as shown by Thranduil, the king of Mirkwood.

Thranduil is an antagonist in *The Hobbit* – an elf with no love for dwarves and suspicious of them all. When questioning Thorin Oakenshield as to why the dwarves were trespassing into his kingdom, Thorin answers honestly that they were starving and looking for food. Yet Thranduil dismisses him, saying, "Take him away and keep him safe, until he feels inclined to tell the truth, even if he waits a hundred years."³⁷ His animosity is not one sided. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the dwarf Gimli, the son of one of Thorin's adventuring companions is extremely antagonistic towards Thranduil's son Legolas. This seems only partially a response to Thranduil's treatment of the dwarves and more so a reaction to a general dislike that both dwarves and elves have for one another. But do either of them have an animosity for the humans of Middle-earth?

The first thing to realize about the humans is that they are split up into different "clans" and bloodlines, which in accordance with the Great Chain of Being is both aesthetic and moralistic in its hierarchal ladder. This is only the way the story begins, however.

The highest race of men is called the Númenóreans. They were blessed with unnaturally long life compared to the other human bloodlines, and were gifted greater height and higher

³⁶ Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*. Allen & Unwin, 1977.

³⁷ Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. Allen & Unwin, 1937.

wisdom – this was because of their role in the battle to defeat Morgoth at the end of the First Age (the events of *The Lord of the Rings* take place during the Third Age), and the Valar also gave them an island continent in thanks for their assistance. These men were also known as the Dúnedain, and are the people group that Aragorn is descended from.³⁸ Tolkien even calls them “even in powers of mind, hardly distinguishable from the Elves – but they remained mortal, even though rewarded by a triple, or more than a triple, span of years.”³⁹ However, by the time Aragorn is born, the Dúnedain have been scattered and almost hunted to extinction. How did they fall from being the proudest and holiest men of Middle-earth to a nation in tatters?

The problem comes from a similar situation to the tale of Fëanor and his eventual fall to madness. The king of the Dúnedain, Ar-Pharazôn, began to grow old and feared death. One in his counsel, Sauron, told him that he could cheat mortality by worshipping Morgoth. Ar-Pharazôn fell for Sauron’s deceit, and began to worship Morgoth and sacrificing innocents to the fallen Vala. They also became resentful of the Valar, who forbade the Dúnedain from sailing any further from their island home than within distance where they could still see it. The Valar’s reasoning was to keep men from discovering the Undying Lands, where they were not permitted, but it eventually began to stir into a discontent and rebellion against the Valar, especially from Ar-Pharazôn. He and his people began to sail further and further away, eventually coming to Middle-earth. In the following years, Ar-Pharazôn and his fleet determined to sail to Valinor and take immortality for themselves. A remnant of Dúnedain remained faithful to the Valar and stayed in Middle-earth to found the kingdom of Gondor and Arnor, but most of the Dúnedain were killed when the Valar destroyed their fleet. This is when Valinor was cut off from the mortal plane for good.

³⁸ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Allen & Unwin, 1954.

³⁹ Fimi, Dimitra. “Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium...”

The kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor were the last of the Númenóreans and, as faithful worshippers of the Valar, they prospered. During the battle against Sauron, it was Isildur, the king of Gondor, who managed to defeat the Dark Lord. But Isildur was not perfect. He took the One Ring for himself, and thus began the slow crawl back to power for Sauron. The Númenóreans had once again proven themselves to be weak to the draw of power, and as time passed their bloodline began to dwindle. Their great cities crumbling or overtaken with orcs and other foul creatures.

Fimi says about Gondor that:

“Gondor was not only compared by Tolkien to Byzantium in its period of decline, but also to Rome and the Roman Empire, as well as to ancient Egypt – especially in terms of the Gondorian obsession with death and monuments, and their custom of ‘embalming’ dead kings (Letters, pp. 157, 376, 281). I have also discussed in my book (Fimi, 2008, pp. 165-191) a number of material culture links that associate the Númenóreans (and hence their descendants, the Men of Gondor) to the Vikings, especially their prowess as mariners, and their practice of ship-burials and boar funerals. Despite these cultural references of widely disparate cultures, the main element that [characterizes] the Men of Gondor is the fact that – towards the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth – they are a culture in decline, a culture that has reached its peak and is heading towards decay, despite the promise of hope and renewal with the return of Aragorn as the rightful king and the restoration of the royal lineage.”⁴⁰

The lesson that Tolkien teaches with the Númenóreans is this: a great amount of good can reap great rewards, but it cannot save your children, or your children’s children. They will slip off

⁴⁰ Fimi, Dimitra. “Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium...”

the Great Chain of Being if they do not prove that they are worthy of the elevated place they have been given.

The Rohirrim in contrast to the Númenóreans do not have such a deep history. They are a new civilization, still in its infancy. In many ways they are based off the Anglo-Saxon people, and the culture present in *Beowulf* is extremely prominent in their culture as well. But they are also based off French culture and art – Tolkien at one point commented on the influence of the Bayeux Tapestry on the Rohirrim. The Rohirrim are a pure, wilder nation with the youth and vigor lacking in the people of Gondor. Yet they are not exempt from the folly of men – their own king, Théoden, fell under the spell of treacherous men and the wizard Saruman. The people of Rohan are not spared from the greatest flaw of men in *The Lord of the Rings*: their gullibility and malleability.

The problem with *The Lord of the Rings* is that, unlike the other pieces talked about thus far, the races present in the series are meant to have a clear hierarchal structure. Due to Tolkien's interest in both history and his Christianity, it's no surprise that he would decide to format his text like he did. Yet it does create some uncomfortable questions for a modern audience. Unlike *Star Trek*, which attempted to challenge beliefs on race and sexuality, or *Star Wars*, which blundered its way into the conversation seemingly by chance and due to its popularity, *The Lord of the Rings* is not interested in exploring the real world of diversity of race, gender, and sexuality. Instead it is focused on a deeper philosophical question: how can evil be stopped?

Through the actions of Frodo, Saruman, and the people of the Shire, the answer seems clear: you must always oppose the dark.

The people of the Shire ignored the evil that encroached on them, preferring to keep to themselves and concern themselves with their own business. You will notice that they are not present in Tolkien's Great Chain of Being – this is mostly due to the fact that no one is sure where

hobbits come from. Ilúvatar is never credited with their creation, and by all accounts they simply appeared one day. But the hobbits are shown to be unprepared and easily overwhelmed when Saruman invades their homeland.

Saruman represents perhaps the easiest path: to give in to the evil. It is far easier and perhaps the best decision for one's own safety to join with evil rather than stand up against it.

But Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship represent the hardest, yet noblest path - the one that Tolkien outlined in his letters. Only active opposition to evil can be accepted. Removing yourself from the situation only means your head is next on the chopping block and it would be a betrayal to God if you were to give up and throw your lot in with the devil.

None of these answers have to do with the diversity of character in *The Lord of the Rings*, but maybe that's not the point of the story. But when Faramir stares at the face of a dead Easterling in the film adaption of *The Two Towers*, he comments,

"His sense of duty was no less than yours, I deem. You wonder what his name is, where he came from. And if he was really evil at heart. What lies or threats led him on this long march from home. If he would not rather have stayed there... in peace."

To be a lover of peace and a defender of good is Tolkien's message. I think that's one that everyone can agree with.

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