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Righteous rebellion in fantasy and science fiction for the young

The example of Harry Potter

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Many of the bestselling contemporary young adult (YA) novels are fantasy and science-fiction series.¹ Since these genres reach such a wide audience, their impact on adolescents is profound, which makes it crucial to investigate how novels written in these genres differ from realistic YA literature. In YA literature, adolescents rebel. They rebel against parents, teachers, and restrictions. In contemporary society, adolescent rebellion is viewed as an almost mandatory part of growing up; it is something that everyone does and therefore it is not surprising that it is a common theme in YA literature. However, in many bestselling fantasy and science-fiction series, such as the Harry Potter series, the Hunger Games trilogy, the Artemis Fowl series, and the His Dark Materials trilogy, the rebellions are portrayed as so much more than the ordinary adolescent protest. They function as a motif that challenges the relationship of power between adolescents and adults on a more fundamental level, since they depict adolescents who stand up for democratic values and challenge adults and institutions which are portrayed as corrupt and blinded by power. Thus, their rebellions are not only defiant—they are righteous.

In Disturbing the Universe—Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature (2000), Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that adolescents’ rebellions against parents, authority figures, various institutions, and norms set by identity politics are one of three defining characteristics
of YA literature. She investigates numerous YA novels—most of them realistic—and her conclusion is that YA literature teaches the adolescent reader both to accept the boundaries that adults set up for them and in turn to become adults who regulate adolescents. In this article, I use Trites’ model for rebellions as a point of departure, but since righteous rebellions teach the adolescents that they do have power and can affect the distribution of power in society, the end result of these rebellions is different from the ones Trites describes. Therefore, I modify Trites’ model and use it as a point of comparison in order to clarify the difference between rebellions in realistic YA novels and in their non-realistic counterparts. Trites’ theory of rebellions and the concept of didactic potential, which regards literature’s ability to raise questions about human rights and democracy, is the basis of the analysis.

In this essay, I argue that righteous rebellion is a common motif in bestselling fantasy and science-fiction literature for adolescents and that it incorporates a specific didactic potential. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) Harry Potter’s rebellion against a restriction on the teaching of practical, magical defence is the main example I use. I have chosen this rebellion, since it strikes me as a clear example of the righteous components of a rebellion. A further reason is that the Harry Potter series is the number one bestseller of the last twenty years, which makes its impact unquestionable. The thesis in this essay is twofold: one, that such rebellions question the distribution of power between adolescents and adults; and two, that fantasy and science-fiction have a genre-specific didactic potential, which makes it possible for them to question the status quo more profoundly than realistic YA literature. In short, the non-realistic elements permit the books to criticize the power that adults have over adolescents, both as individuals and institutions, without pointing to specific societies and institutions. Young characters who are destined to save the world from evil are also a common motif both in fantasy and science fiction. In this way the power hierarchy of age is problematized. The Harry Potter example illustrates that adolescents can, and should, rebel against adults and institutions that act in immoral and anti-democratic ways. However, it also depicts how the morally correct adults, who
protect the adolescents, should retain their profound power in so-
ciety as they are well equipped to fight evil. Thus, this adolescent
rebellion might not be as radical as first it seems. It should first and
foremost be viewed as a defence of democratic values, rather than
as a critique of adult normativity as such.\textsuperscript{5}

In this essay, the notion of didactic potential will be used to
investigate how such rebellions become didactic vehicles, which
pose questions about both democracy and the relationship of power
between adolescents and adults. In her article ‘Fairy-Tale Retellings
Between Art and Pedagogy’ (2005), Vanessa Joosen equates didac-
tic potential with didactic intent, or didactic intention, since she
uses them as synonyms. Hence, Joosen argues that when a feminist
version of a fairy tale fails to communicate its ideology by teaching
readers how to read against a text’s ideology, she regards this as an
undermining of the didactic potential, since the author’s inten-
tion is not fulfilled.\textsuperscript{6} Contrary to Joosen, I do not equate didactic
potential with the author’s assumed didactic intention. Instead,
I define the notion of didactic potential as literature’s ability to
problemataze and raise questions about human rights, democracy,
and the distribution of power in society, regardless of the author’s
intentions. A text’s didactic potential is an instance of the text that
raises moral questions and has the ability to generate knowledge.
The didactic potential may appear in several different situations.
The first one is during a person’s solitary reading of a book. The
questions that are raised depend on many factors, including the
reader’s previous reading experiences, his or her life situation, and
his or her interests. The second situation is in a discussion of a book
between two or more readers, which obviously reflects the particip-
ants’ background and relationship to one another. For example, if
a teenage reader and a parent participate, it will probably centre
on different aspects of the book than if two students of literary
studies are included. The third situation is in a classroom where
the teacher becomes an intermediary between the book and the
pupils. For example, he or she might have prepared questions for
the class to discuss or for the individual pupil to reflect on while
reading the book. The teacher steers the pupils’ reading experience
by directing their attention towards themes or problems. However,
when working with a text in the classroom, it is not certain that the didactic potential is activated for all readers. Some students might not enter the discussion, some might dismiss the teacher’s focus on a certain question that the book raises, and some might not have read the book at all.

Hence, the didactic potential is not automatically transferred from the text to the reader. When interpreting a text, there are numerous possible paths to follow, and while we follow some of them while reading alone, we might see other ones when we interact with another reader or read in a classroom context. On a theoretical level it is impossible to imagine one reader, or for that matter one researcher, who follows all the paths at once, since the didactic potential is always a matter of perspective; if we follow some of them, others will fall into the background. This is a highly complex process, which this essay does not investigate as such. Instead, it follows some of the text’s paths that regard the relationship of power between adults and adolescents and the question of democracy, in order to show what didactic potential the righteous rebellion incorporates concerning the issues raised in the example from the Harry Potter series.

The didactic potential of the Umbridge rebellion centres on two different aspects of the rebellion: the adolescents’ challenging of some of the adults and the importance of democratic values and human rights. In order to analyse the didactic potential, I draw on the notions explicit and implicit ideology. Trites distinguishes between explicit ideologies, which are ideologies that authors consciously want to convey to their readers, and implicit ideologies which texts communicate without the authors’ being aware of it. Her example of Judith Blume’s YA novel Forever (1975) depicts the explicit ideology that it is normal for adolescents to want to have sex while the implicit ideology is that adolescents should either abstain from sex, or be ashamed if they engage in sexual activities. The example clarifies that it is not uncommon that the explicit and implicit ideologies contradict each other. I define the notions slightly differently from Trites. An explicit ideology denotes a clear message in the text, while an implicit ideology refers to less obvious ideologies that lie under the text’s surface. As a consequence, the
focus is on what the text communicates, not on what ideologies the author intends to articulate.

The phases and function of rebellion

The concept of the righteous rebellion used in this article differs from Trites’ description of adolescent rebellions in several different ways. Trites claims that the rebellions in her mainly realistic material teach adolescents to accept the restrictions imposed by different institutions, both physical institutions, such as school and the police and identity politics. These rebellions function as a way to create boundaries for the adolescents by imposing norms of adolescent behaviour. According to Trites, rebellions that are set in schools often follow this pattern: (over)regulation—unacceptable rebellion—repression—acceptable rebellion—transcendence-within-accepted-limits. The first three phases consist of a pattern where the teenager is temporarily empowered. Thereafter, he or she is regulated and learns that it is not possible to rebel against adult restrictions. In the following phase he or she only rebels in minor, acceptable ways and achieves transcendence within the limits set up by regulating adults. Trites stresses that this lesson is crucial for teenagers’ maturity and their socialization as adults—that is, for the maintenance of the status quo in terms of the division of power between adults and adolescents.\textsuperscript{8} The adolescents’ rebellions are usually portrayed as unacceptable, whereas the adults’ regulation is depicted as legitimate.

In J. D. Salinger’s classic YA novel \textit{The Catcher in the Rye} (1951), which is one of the examples Trites uses, Holden Caulfield rebels against his boarding school and is punished by expulsion. After wandering around the city of New York, he finally realizes that he has to accept ‘the larger society he once rejected as phony’.\textsuperscript{9} His younger sister becomes a catalyst in this acceptance of the limits of his own power that are set by surrounding institutions. Thus, the outcome of the rebellions that Trites describes is that the adolescents learn that it is not possible to rebel in a profound way. Rebellions are only acceptable as long as they are minor and do not challenge the status quo. In the final pages of \textit{The Catcher in the Rye} we learn
that Holden has been put in an asylum, and consequently he has been re-regulated by an adult institution. He does not seem to be thinking of challenging the status quo again.  

The righteous rebellions in this essay have a different function than Trites’ rebellions, although her book and articulation of the different phases of adolescent rebellions are a useful comparison. In my reading, the first step consists of a situation where adolescents are over-regulated. This is followed, not by an unacceptable rebellion as in Trites’ model, but by an acceptable rebellion. Contrary to Trites’ examples, the teenager’s behaviour is portrayed as the moral way to act, and both the adults’ initial over-regulation and their regulation after the adolescents have rebelled is portrayed as unacceptable, or at least unnecessary. In Trites’ model the first three steps of the rebellion teach the adolescents that they should accept that they have less power than adults, but in many fantasy and science-fiction bestsellers those first three steps lead up to a righteous rebellion. Thus, I agree with Trites that the first three phases consist of a repression of the adolescent’s rebellion, but in order to describe how the righteous rebellion proceeds, I use her model as a means of comparison. In my study, the first three phases lead up to a righteous rebellion, which teaches the adolescent that rebellion is not only worthwhile, but necessary from a moral standpoint.

One example of this scenario is Suzanne Collins’s bestselling Hunger Games trilogy (2008–2010), in which the teenage girl Katniss Everdeen challenges and rebels against not only one, but two, immoral political institutions. In the first novel of the series The Hunger Games (2008), Katniss rebels against the Capitol, whose inhabitants live in luxury while they leave the population to starve, and sacrifice children from the different Districts in a live television show where the children fight to the death. The goal of the Games is to serve as a reminder to the people what happens if someone dares rebel against them. Katniss soon becomes a symbol for a rebellion against the Capitol. The rebels succeed in overthrowing the Capitol, but when Katniss realizes that the rebels’ leader is just as corrupt as the Capitol’s, she kills her. In the epilogue, we find out that this second rebellion was the definitive overthrow and resulted in a new, demo-
Righteous rebellion in fantasy. Since Katniss rebels against an anti-democratic order, her rebellions are portrayed as righteous within the narrative, although she uses anti-democratic means. Thus, the function of these rebellions is to show that it is both necessary and legitimate to rebel against corrupt power. Katniss, the symbol of the revolution, triggers the rebellion against the Capitol, and consequently is empowered beyond what a normal teenager could hope for.

The same is true for the teenage witches in the bestselling Swedish fantasy series the Engelsfors trilogy (2011–2013) by Sara Bergmark Elfgren and Mats Strandberg. Five teenage girls rebel against the Council’s regulation of magic in order to be able to enhance their chances of preventing the Apocalypse. The Council is portrayed as an immoral, power-hungry, and corrupt institution that would rather convict a teenage witch for using magic than focus on preventing demons from taking over the world. If the girls had accepted the Council’s over-regulation, it would have prevented them from fulfilling their destiny to save the world. Just like Katniss they rebel in order to change an anti-democratic, corrupt status quo so that they will be able to defeat evil. The main difference in this fantasy series is that evil is supernatural, rather than human, as in The Hunger Games.

I focus on contemporary examples of rebellions in bestselling fantasy and science-fiction literature, but the theme can be found in earlier bestselling works as well. In Michael Ende’s fantasy novel Momo (1973), for instance, the orphan girl Momo reacts when small grey men steal the adults’ time so that they no longer have time for their children. Momo sets in motion a rebellion against the supernatural evil when she defeats the grey men, and ensures that the adults once again are available to their children. Consequently, Momo rebels against a supernaturally imposed change to the status quo, which makes the adults act in unacceptable ways. Since the goal of her rebellion is to make the adults act in a morally correct manner, her rebellion is portrayed as righteous. There is a crucial difference here from both the Hunger Games and the Engelsfors trilogy, which depict rebellions that overthrow the status quo, for Momo overthrows the new rule and reinstates the old order.
The function of Momo’s rebellion is similar to the rebellion that Harry Potter and some other pupils initiate against the new teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Dolores Umbridge, and the Ministry of Magic in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003). This rebellion shares the same logic as *Momo*. It depicts adolescents who rebel against a change of status quo, and their rebellion achieves a return to how things were before. Their goal is to re-establish the previous, better status quo. Naturally, this affects its subversiveness; to overthrow the status quo seems much more radical than to re-establish it. What all the examples share is the fact that the adolescents rebel against and succeed in overthrowing, a corrupt or anti-democratic state. Both the mechanism and the function of these rebellions is thus very different from the rebellions Trites describes, where the adolescents’ rebellions are portrayed as both unacceptable and without any lasting results.

The phases of the Umbridge rebellion

When Umbridge and the Ministry of Magic in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* decide that the pupils are no longer allowed to practice defensive magic during their classes, this represents the first phase in Trites’ model. The pupils view the new syllabus as over-regulation, since they find it unacceptable that they should be excluded from such essential magical knowledge. Umbridge stresses that the pupils are studying for their examinations, since that ‘is what school is all about’, but Harry who has seen Lord Voldemort return could not disagree more. To him, magical education is necessary in order to improve his chances of surviving in the fight against evil. In Trites’ model the first phase might consist of adults’ regulation or over-regulation. While the pupils of Hogwarts think that they are being over-regulated, Umbridge and the Ministry believe that their regulation is necessary.

The second phase, following Trites’ model, consists of Harry telling Umbridge and the class about the night when he saw Voldemort return and murder a fellow pupil. From Umbridge’s perspective this is an unforgivable rebellion against her and the Ministry. She is afraid that the pupils, lead by their headmaster, will turn against
the Ministry, and tries to silence Harry through different punishments, but is unsuccessful. When Harry does not accept her control over him, this is yet another rebellion. Within the story, however, Harry’s truth-telling is a righteous action. This is a crucial difference from the teenage rebellions of Trites’ model, where the rebellions are described as illegitimate, and thus call for a re-regulation by the morally superior adults, who (supposedly) have learned to accept the boundaries for their power.

In the Umbridge rebellion, the third phase consists of Umbridge’s draconian detention, where Harry is punished by having to carve ‘I must not tell lies’ into his own hand.\(^9\) Since Harry is being punished for telling the truth, the re-regulation does not seem justifiable or proportionate and the corporeal punishment is regarded as a severe over-regulation. In the type of rebellion Trites describes, the initial three steps lead up to a situation where the adolescents have accepted the boundaries of their power and have learned that there is no point in rebelling against institutions in major ways. Only minor rebellions within acceptable boundaries occur after the unacceptable rebellion. Hence, the rebellion reinforces and protects the status quo, and further rebellions are prevented. In the Umbridge rebellion, however, the initial rebellion and re-regulation becomes a starting point for a righteous rebellion that questions the distribution of power between adolescents and adults, and illuminates the importance of upholding democratic values. The pupils create a study group where Harry teaches the other pupils advanced magical defence.\(^{20}\) When Umbridge finds out that they are planning to start the group she issues a decree forbidding all study groups. Participation in unauthorized groups will result in expulsion.\(^{21}\) Once again her regulation, in this case of the freedom of assembly, is depicted as over-regulation, and once again she fails to control the students. They continue their rebellion: their new skills see them through their examinations, and also help some of the members survive a battle against Voldemort’s allies.\(^{22}\)

What makes the rebellion against Umbridge righteous is both that the restrictions that the adolescents rebel against are too strict and the adults and the institution are portrayed as corrupt and unscrup-
pulous. While Umbridge abuses her power severely to gain personal advantages, the Ministry of Magic is busy censoring the largest newspaper of the magical world and issuing educational decrees that suit their own ends. Sarah Fiona Winters argues that Umbridge’s evil consists in how ‘she acts deliberately and ideologically to keep her students weak and unprepared’. In this, says Winters, she ignores a true risk, which differs from how some adults are overprotective of the pupils. Similarly, Gwen Tarbox points out that the concept of childhood innocence can lead to devastating consequences, but while the good adult characters who repress pupils based on this notion do it out of love, Umbridge only seems to be interested in gaining power.

The pupils, on the other hand, stand up for their rights for morally just reasons. They are prepared to risk expulsion and other punishments, because they care more about the on-going battle against evil than about their own comfort and the risk of getting into conflicts with the most powerful institution of the magical world. Thus, the adolescents fight Voldemort, the ultimate evil, while the adults spend their time controlling pupils whom they believe are a threat to the established order. Ironically, it is the Ministry’s over-regulation that give the adolescents a reason to rebel and become the powerful, anti-Ministry organization that the Ministry feared in the first place. There is no doubt that compared to the Ministry of Magic the adolescents are the ones who act more maturely, and care more about the preservation of democracy. In a sense, they act as adults are expected to, while the adults they rebel against act childishly and selfishly. This shows that adults are not always better at dealing with power and, according to Maria Nikolajeva, making young characters superior from an ethical standpoint is a discrete way to empower them.

Thus the adolescents are able to overthrow the current situation of the magical world in a righteous way since the adults whom they rebel against represent a corrupt institution. Robert J. Helfenbein points out that “The protagonists of the text are heroes precisely because of their resistance.” The adolescents are portrayed as morally superior, and their rebellion is a step towards the organized resistance against Voldemort after he has seized power in *Harry Potter and the Deathly*
The rebellion is legitimated and much more subversive than in Trites’ model. However, because the adolescents only challenge illegitimate power, a partial re-regulation occurs that to some extent undermines the subversiveness. The status quo, where the inherently good adults take care of the adolescents, is re-established when the headmaster Albus Dumbledore comes to their rescue during a battle. Harry is certain that they are saved as soon as he sees that Dumbledore has arrived. The adolescents’ magical powers are intact, but their accumulation of them ends, and the balance of power between the adults and the adolescents is restored. Nikolajeva describes Dumbledore as a *deus ex machina*, who rescues the pupils repeatedly. This is what happens in the Umbridge rebellion. The adolescents are empowered by their rebellion, but they are still protected by other adults. This illustrates what Nikolajeva views as a dilemma of children’s literature, namely that it strives to empower children and protect them at the same time, by keeping the children’s innocence intact. Nonetheless, the rebellion still affects the balance of power, since the pupils now have more advanced magical powers than adolescents of their age usually do, and because they have learned that sometimes it can be worthwhile to rebel against adults.

After Dumbledore has returned, he is once again able to protect the pupils from evil and the rebellion is no longer necessary. Dumbledore in fact validates the adolescents’ rebellion when he takes the blame for the study group and saves them from expulsion, causing his own dismissal from Hogwarts. Since Dumbledore is a role model for righteousness, at least until the beginning of the final book in the series, his view is important in relationship to the reader’s. If Dumbledore thinks that the adolescents have acted in a moral way, the reader who knows him is likely to share his opinion. Dumbledore often takes on the role of ideology keeper—the character who communicates the text’s ideologies, and expresses the implicit author’s perspective on different situations.

The Umbridge rebellion is not directed at adults as such, but at corrupt and morally despicable adults. As Helfenbein points out, ‘The adults … allow the adolescents to experience the challenges for themselves and grow in confidence and ability but seem to be watching from the wings in order to protect the young Harry.’
Thus, the rebellion does not challenge adult normativity; the morally just adults still have more power than the adolescents.

The didactic potential of Harry Potter

At first glance, the Umbridge rebellion seems to teach two contradictory lessons in regard to the distribution of power between adolescents and adults. On the one hand, Umbridge and the Ministry’s corrupt regulation of the adolescents is subverted. On the other hand, the adults’ superior power is reasserted when other adults use their magical skills in order to save the adolescents. The novel depicts a righteous rebellion and in this instance the adolescents become moral role models. Power is portrayed as problematic when it becomes repressive and results in abuse, while it is seen as a positive force when it contributes to the adolescents’ empowerment. The similarities to Michel Foucault’s notion of power as both suppression and empowerment are evident. According to Foucault, power always exists in relationships, and people can use power to either repress others or to enhance their power. The narrative underlines that the correct way of using power is for empowerment, not for repression.

The adolescents are depicted as vulnerable when adults, who are supposed to protect them and give them a high-quality education, not only restrict their chances of defending themselves, but also abuse the adolescents both physically and psychologically. Consequently, the explicit ideology of the righteousness of the rebellion against corrupt adults is supported by a description of how the adults neglect their responsibility to care for the adolescents’ safety and wellbeing. This explicit ideology is partially limited by an implicit ideology of how the adolescents’ power should be restricted by the morally just adults. Thus, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix only justifies rebellion against adults who abuse their position of power as teachers and Ministry employees. In conclusion, the Umbridge rebellion does not challenge adults’ power over adolescents as such; instead it partly reinforces it. The democratic values and human rights are more central than the division of power between adolescents and adults.
The importance of democracy and human rights is constantly illuminated throughout the Umbridge rebellion, which is a direct critique of anti-democratic tendencies. Hence, the rebellion supports an explicit ideology about the necessity of defending democracy. If the rules for a society’s members take a step towards restricting their ability to use their power in a democratic way, it might be acceptable, or even necessary, to break the rules and rebel. The rebellion is portrayed as a defence of the idea that democratic societies rely on critical citizens who dare to question the powers that be. The narrative underlines that in order to become critical enough to question anti-democratic tendencies, the adolescents have to become critical readers. Umbridge’s education does not help them to develop those skills; quite the contrary. She reproves Hermione when she questions the course aims, and when Hermione openly disagrees with the author of their textbook, Umbridge tells her that she is not supposed to think independently, but learn everything by heart. While Umbridge lectures the pupils that they are learning for school, the pupils are fully aware that it is outside school they will need their magical education. The adolescents defend the values that the corrupt adults threaten, and as a consequence an explicit ideology of how being an adult does not equal righteousness comes to the fore. Jennifer Flaherty argues that ‘An effort to deny knowledge, as Umbridge does, prompts rebellion.’

This is also what defines the rebellion. In the end, what truly matters is whether the actions of the adults, but also the adolescents, serve to defend a democratic order, or if they are anti-democratic, immoral, and/or corrupt. The Umbridge rebellion, Katniss’s rebellions in the Hunger Games trilogy, the teenage witches’ rebellion against the Council in the Engelsfors trilogy, and Momo’s rebellion against the time thieves, as well as many other examples of the righteous rebellions in bestselling fantasy and science fiction for children and adolescents, all share the same logic. That this type of subversive rebellion is common to some of the most bestselling fantasy and science-fiction series of our time indicates that the didactic potential of these genres differ from realistic YA novels. Instead of teaching adolescents to obey adults and institutions, these fantasy and sci-fi bestselling books highlight the importance of questioning
The distribution of power in society, including the relationship of power between adolescents and adults. Perhaps some of the books’ allure depends on how the rebellions empower adolescent characters.

The defamiliarizing effect of fantasy literature

A literary work’s didactic potential is a result of its explicit and implicit ideologies, but it is also affected by its genre. I would argue that the fantasy genre’s defamiliarizing effect enables it to depict more radical rebellions than realistic YA novels can and that this affects its didactic potential.40

Viktor Shklovsky describes defamiliarization as a process where literature depicts real-life issues and objects from a perspective that the reader is not familiar with. As a result, the reader sees things that they are accustomed to, and normally does not reflect on, from a new, defamiliarizing perspective—seeing them for what they truly are. Shklovsky argues that when Leo Tolstoy describes the world from a horse’s point of view in ‘The Story of a Horse’ from 1885, he achieves an defamiliarizing effect, which questions how humans regard horses, air, or water as their own property.41 This defamiliarizing effect is an inherent quality of the fantasy literature that, according to Farah Mendlesohn’s Rhetorics of Fantasy (2008), can be characterized as intrusion fantasy or portal-quest fantasy. In both cases, the main character comes into contact with a new, magical world. Both the character and the reader learn how this new world functions and compare it to the world they know.42

In the case of Harry Potter, he compares the magical world of Britain to the British Muggle world, and the reader compares it to the real Britain, or to the real world in general. The similarities between the Ministry of Magic and the government are so obvious that the reader is forced to compare the two. As Helfenbein concludes, ‘the Ministry of Magic stands for government or one could say, the state’.43 But, at the same time the Ministry of Magic is so different from real-life governments that the latter are defamiliarized; our own world is viewed through the distorting lens of the magical world, which makes us see it in a new light. The distance from institutions of the real world makes us more neutral in regard to the institution
and all the flaws that would not have been as apparent in a depiction of a realistic institution become illuminated. When the adolescents rebel, this can be read as an allegory of rebellions against governments in reality, which must be viewed as quite radical. However, since the adolescents rebel against a fantasy government, it does not seem as upsetting as when adolescents in realistic YA novels rebel against their government. Fantasy literature is not limited by the mimetic modus, and therefore it can question institutions in a more profound sense without upsetting readers, parents, or teachers. It creates an defamiliarizing effect when it depicts the institutions of a magical world, and this distance to the real world enables it to depict adolescent rebellion without undermining adult institutions’ power in reality. Since the institutions are fantasy-specific, they can be described as acting in immoral and anti-democratic ways, without pointing to real-life institutions. Thus, the Ministry of Magic becomes a metaphor for institutional abuses of power in general that can be applied to different societies, both contemporary and historical. As a consequence, the defence of democratic values can be explored on a more general level.

Fantasy as a genre also makes it possible to give adolescents more power than in real life. As a consequence, adolescent fantasy characters can rebel in ways that change their situation dramatically, whereas their equivalents in realistic YA novels learn that they cannot really affect their own situation. Paired with the ability to defamiliarize real-life institutions, this gives a work of fantasy fiction greater freedom to explore situations where the balance of power is more profoundly challenged than in realistic YA novels. In the end, the Umbridge rebellion is much more than an adolescent rebellion; it is part of a fight between good and evil. Just like many other righteous rebellions in bestselling fantasy and science fiction, it is not simply a matter of adolescents wanting more freedom and power—it is all a matter of defending democratic values and human rights. Harry Potter has been given greater freedom than other young people in order to save the world. It is clear that these rebellions have a different didactic potential than the rebellions Trites describes in realistic YA literature. They are vehicles for questioning the distribution
of power, they are a defence of democratic values. Young people rebel against immoral or anti-democratic adults, institutions, and norms, and they are able to achieve results because they represent the morally just side of a conflict. In some cases evil is human, in others supernatural; but in all instances, the young are truly able to disturb the universe. It is striking just how popular fantasy and science fiction have become among teenagers and young adults in the past two decades. By virtue of being the most widespread type of fiction their influence and impact cannot be underestimated. The images and ideas spread through bestselling fiction might not directly translate into readers’ experience, but they do affect their perceptions of adults, government, and other official institutions.

Notes

1 See Ann Steiner’s essay in this volume.
2 The other two are the depictions of sex and death in YA literature. See Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe—Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa: Iowa Press, 2000), x.
3 Trites only gives two examples from fantasy literature and science-fiction literature in the chapter on rebellions, and she does not discuss whether there are any differences between adolescent rebellions in realistic YA literature and non-realistic genres such as fantasy and science fiction (Trites 2000), 21–53.
4 See Ann Steiner’s essay in this volume.
5 Roberta Seelinger Trites, ‘The Harry Potter Novels as a Test Case for Adolescent Literature’, *Style, 35/3* (2001), 482, concludes that the type of rebellions she describes as central to YA novels are to be found in the series, and that the books are intent on ‘thwarting adolescent power’. When Trites was writing, only four of the seven books had been released, and she does not explore the question of genre. In the present essay, I investigate a different type of rebellion—one that co-exists with the type Trites describes in the Harry Potter series.
7 Trites 2000, 70, 88–9.
8 Trites 2000, 8, 34–5.
9 Trites 2000, 34.
**Righteous Rebellion in Fantasy**


16 Rowling 2003, 272.


18 Rowling 2003, 71.


21 Rowling 2003, 313, 347.

22 Robert J. Helfenbein also concludes that their magical abilities are absolutely essential for the students’ survival in the battle, see Robert J. Helfenbein, ‘Conjuring Curriculum, Conjuring Control: A Reading of Resistance in “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix”’, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 38/4 (2008), 501.


26 Helfenbein 2008, 507.

27 When Umbridge in the same book is in charge of the Voldemort regime’s propaganda, she is associated with evil in an explicit way, which makes it even more apparent that she is a corrupt character, see J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 203–15.

28 Rowling 2003, 710.


30 Maria Nikolajeva, ‘Harry Potter and the Secrets of Children’s Literature’, in *Critical


32 In Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows it becomes clear that Dumbledore was friends with a racist wizard in his youth, which shows that he is not morally impeccable (Rowling 2007, 291–2).

33 Trites 2000, 77.


36 Tracy L. Bealer points out that the students organize their study group according to ‘a democratic power structure’, see Tracy L. Bealer, ‘(Dis)Order and the Phoenix: Love and Political Resistance in Harry Potter’, in Reading Harry Potter Again—New Critical Essays, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009), 181. This further underlines the importance of democratic values in the novel.

37 Rowling 2003, 218, 283–4. Flaherty 2004, 95 stresses that Umbridge’s no-questions approach is completely different from the usual Hogwarts’ teaching style in which staff encourage the pupils’ active participation.

38 Helfenbein 2008, 505–507 defines Umbridge’s education as centred on memorization, discipline, and the teacher as an intermediary for facts written in books, and views Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix as a critique of standardization, high-stakes accountability, and state control of schools; Beth Driscoll, ‘Using Harry Potter to teach literacy: different approaches’, Cambridge Journal of Education, 43/2 (2013), 263, similarly argues that the rebellion against Umbridge becomes a vehicle for questioning standardized education, passive rote learning, and states regulation of schools.


40 Science fiction also has a defamiliarizing effect, since it describes an imaginary future that bears some similarities with the reader’s world, but also differs in important ways; see Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 3–15.


42 Farah Mendlesohn, Rhetorics of Fantasy (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) divides fantasy into four different types: in portal-quest fantasy, the character is transferred into a magical world through a portal; in intrusion fantasy, the fantastic leaks into the ordinary world of the main character. The Harry Potter series is a combination of the two. Nikolajeva 2010, 42 argues that fantasy literature is able to deal with ethical problems ‘in a slightly detached manner’, but that it has real subversive potential because it can investigate reality’s power hierarchies, ‘without necessarily shattering the real order of the world’.

43 Helfenbein 2008, 506.