FAKULTA
PŘÍRODOVĚDNĚ-HUMANITNÍ
A PEDAGOGICKÁ TUL

Diplomová práce

Young Adult Fantasy trends on BookTok and their impact on young readers

Studijní program: N0114A300106 Učitelství pro střední školy a 2. stupeň základních škol
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Zadání diplomové práce

Young Adult Fantasy trends on BookTok and their impact on young readers

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Zásady pro vypracování:

The diploma thesis will focus on the literary genre of young adult (YA) fantasy. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in 2020, a community mainly for teenagers and young adults called BookTok was created on the social network TikTok. Therefore, many authors and their works discussed on the platform have become popular worldwide. The main goal of this thesis is to analyse some of the works known, thanks to BookTok, within the YA fantasy genre and to find out the possible impact on the given age group. Reading as a hobby is generally viewed positively by society. However, do YA fantasy books have a positive effect on adolescents? This genre contains stories with themes that the age group may need help understanding. This literature can influence their perception of their lives and relationships.
This thesis will consist of two parts. The theoretical part of the thesis will deal with the known hypothesis of the importance of reading literacy during the psychological development of adolescents, and the typical features of YA and fantasy genres will be mentioned. It will also explain the concept of BookTok: its origin, range, and significance. The practical part will apply comparative and close reading analyses of selected works. The works are selected based on their worldwide popularity. It will analyse the genre, themes (coming of age, love, sexuality, family and friendship relationships, a quest for power, good and evil), motifs, main characters, symbols, and possible inspirations from other stories. An essential part of the analysis will be the positive and negative stereotypes of the genre and their possible influences on the reader. In the last part, the results of the discussions will be elaborated on with a sample of high school students, potential book readers. The results will be based on the students' opinions and understanding of excerpts from the analysed works. The excerpts will be selected explicitly based on the mentioned topics and contain possible inspirations for life.
Key words: the value of young adult literature, fantasy, trends of social media, adolescence, reading
Objective: to analyze works of YA fantasy made famous by BookTok and discuss their impact on the age group
Requirements: studying literature, analyzing literary works, evaluating the result of the discussions and comparing it with the analysis of the literary works, drawing conclusions

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Declaration

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Anotace

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá popularitou fantasy podžánru zvaném romantasy na platformě BookTok a zkoumá, jak dospívající čtenáři mohou interpretovat vybrané romantasy romány populární v rámci této komunity. Výzkum se zaměřuje na čtyři romány: *A Court of Thorns and Roses* Sarah J. Maasové (2015), *The Cruel Prince* Holly Blackové (2018), *Red Queen* Victorie Aveyardové (2015) a *Fourth Wing* Rebeccy Yarrosové (2023). Práce analyzuje zobrazení témat, postav, vztahů, sexuality a dalších žánrových charakteristik. Zároveň se věnuje tomu, jak tyto prvky vnímají dospívající čtenáři. Nejprve se práce věnuje adolescenci, čtenářským návykům, literatuře pro mládež, žánru romantasy a vlivu platformy BookTok. Další část práce obsahuje komparativní literární analýzu vybraných románů, popisuje materiály a metody použité ve výzkumu a prezentuje výsledky získané prostřednictvím dotazníku a řízených diskusí s dospívajícími čtenáři.

Klíčová slova

Adolescence, literatura pro mládež, BookTok, fantasy, romance, romantasy, literární analýza, čtenářská interpretace

Abstract

This diploma thesis aims to investigate the popularity of the fantasy subgenre romantasy on BookTok and to explore how adolescent readers may interpret selected BookTok-popular romantasy novels. The research focuses on four novels: *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas (2015), *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black (2018), *Red Queen* by Victoria Aveyard (2015), and *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros (2023). It examines the portrayal of themes, characters, relationships, sexuality, and other genre characteristics, as well as possible adolescents' perceptions of these elements. Initially, the thesis provides insight into adolescence, reading habits, Young Adult literature, the romantasy subgenre, and the influence of BookTok. The following part of the thesis presents a comparative literary analysis of the selected novels, outlines the materials and methods used in the research, and discusses the findings obtained through a questionnaire and guided discussions with adolescent readers.

Key words

Adolescence, Young Adult literature, BookTok, Fantasy, Romance, Romantasy, Literary analysis, Reader interpretation

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Introduction

In modern society shaped by digital technologies, adolescents spend a great part of their free time online. Social media platforms are popular spaces where users consume, create, comment on, and share content in the form of short videos and images. Many parents and other adults, such as teachers, often criticise these activities. They view them as unproductive or as a distraction from more valued activities, such as sports, or art.

Reading, perceived as one of the more valued activities, is generally encouraged by families and schools. However, this has had no significant effect on making adolescents read more or on showing them that reading can be enjoyable. Several studies have shown that only a small percentage of them read. For example, in 2016, only 16% of high school students in the United States reported reading daily, and only one in three of them read for pleasure (Knickerbocker and Rycik 2020, 3). At the same time, research shows that reading is essential for the psychological development of children and adolescents. From a teacher's perspective, reading supports the development of many competencies, which are central aims of the Czech Framework Educational Programme for secondary and grammar schools.

Not all efforts to convince youth to read have ended in vain. While social media may appear to be a rival to books, there is surprisingly an online space where reading is successfully promoted among young people. This space is known as BookTok. It has over 240 billion views (Bronwen K. Bradshaw 2024, n. p.). Many books have been discovered and have become popular because of this trend. However, increased sales do not automatically indicate deeper comprehension, critical reflection, or age-appropriate engagement with literary content. There is still limited research that examines the content of BookTok-popular books and how readers interpret them. Also, it is not sufficiently explored how BookTok online content shapes readers' expectations before reading.

BookTok promotes titles that mostly belong to Young Adult literature (YAL). In popular YA books, themes resonate with adolescent readers as the protagonists usually undergo similar developmental processes, therefore it may be more enjoyable than classic, canonical literature, which is mostly read for school assignments. The issue is whether the portrayal of the processes and certain adult themes is appropriate for adolescent readers. YA literature may influence readers during their crucial stage in the development of personality, opinion, expectation, and behaviour. This highlights the need for further research in this area. Furthermore, there are readers who are much younger than the main characters, and it is uncertain whether they can fully understand the characters' behaviours and actions. Additionally, it is relatively unknown how these books are promoted on BookTok.

This thesis argues that BookTok tends to present the romantasy subgenre mainly in an emotional and promotional way, which may lead adolescent readers to focus more on feelings and characters rather than on deeper critical interpretation. The thesis aims to analyse selected works that have gained popularity through the BookTok trend (Merga 2021, 8) and to examine how these texts may shape adolescent readers' interpretations and expectations. The chosen BookTok-popular romantasy novels are *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Maas 2015), *The Cruel Prince* (Black 2018), *Red Queen* (Aveyard 2015), and a recent phenomenon, *Fourth Wing* (Yarros 2023). This aim is accompanied by the following research questions: What themes are represented in the selected works? How are these books framed and promoted within BookTok videos? How may adolescent readers interpret key themes, relationships, and moral conflicts? And to what extent do BookTok videos frame books through emotional, interpretative, or promotional content?

The thesis is structured into several parts. The first part focuses on adolescent development during puberty, as its aspects are important for literary analysis. Moreover, it explores the benefits that reading may have during adolescents' psychological development.

Furthermore, this section explores the literary category YA, its features, themes, and, most importantly, its current trends and its criticism. Afterwards, this part examines the beginning, development and content of the BookTok trend on social media. It highlights its impact on adolescent readers, the book market and the new romantasy subgenre.

The following section uses the acquired knowledge and information. It includes the comparative analysis of the four mentioned works using close reading. The most essential part of the analysis is the main characters, symbols, tropes, representations of relationships, coming-of-age themes, and themes related to morality and power. This section also includes short, selected excerpts from the analysed works. The final part of the thesis involves class-based research with adolescents who are the potential readers. Through a guided discussion, small attitude survey and observations, the study explores how a particular group of adolescents interpret these texts. The findings of these discussions are then compared with the analysis of the works. The evaluation and conclusion summarise the research findings, educational relevance, and interpretation challenges.

1 Adolescence

Protagonists in YAL are usually at an age when maturation has begun or are on the point of entering adulthood. In the romantasy genre, they do not face the same obstacles and challenges as adolescents in the real world, since they exist in fictional ones. However, these challenges can reflect and symbolise real ones, which is why readers may find the novels relatable. To analyse the YA novels, it is crucial to understand adolescents and their development.

Various sources divide adolescence into early adolescence (ages 10-13), middle adolescence (ages 14-17), late adolescence (ages 18-21), and emerging adulthood (ages 21-30) (Steinberg 2023, 4). The stages of adolescence are unique for each individual and can vary depending on social factors. In YA novels, especially in romantasy, these stages are not that differentiated. Discussion of the forced transformations that follows in the close reading of the primary texts will show that the real-life stages of adolescence largely depend on the circumstances, the environment in which the adolescent is situated, and the biological predispositions (Meeus 2019, 1).

Adolescents' developmental changes can be divided into three main categories: biological, cognitive, and social (Steinberg 2023, 3). Some aspects of these changes are relevant to analysing the discussed YA novels and to how adolescent readers can interpret literary texts and BookTok content in general.

1.1 Biological development

During physical development, also known as puberty, adolescents' bodies undergo a significant transformation (Lamb and Gilbert 2018, 142). Girls begin puberty earlier than boys, starting around ages 9-12 (Kloep et al. 2016, 78). Typically, this process finishes between the

ages of 16 and 18 for both males and females (Steinberg 2023, 30). Every adolescent accepts their new appearance individually. Unfortunately, it is not always a positive experience (Rathus 2021, 460).

> "It should be pointed out also that more recent findings have shown that early-maturing girls, relative to girls of their age who mature on time, are at greater risk for psychiatric disturbances" (Slater and Bremner 2017, 589).

Therefore, girls are at a higher risk of developing eating disorders due to negative body perception and cultural factors. Protagonists' biological changes in romantasy are usually affected by external influences as well. They may suffer from malnutrition or stress, for example, Feyre in *ACOTAR* (Maas 2015), and Violet in *Fourth Wing* (Yarros 2023). The protagonists generally do not bother with typical puberty changes, but adolescent readers can see that even the heroes of the stories have body issues that can cause dissatisfaction, too. Another aspect readers may notice is a change in the protagonists' social behaviour and personality.

1.2 Cognitive development

Cognitive development refers to the process of change in thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning (Moshman 2011, 5). During this development, adolescents learn to understand themselves, their emotions and behaviours, and form their opinions and attitudes (Wright and Kutcher 2016, 40). According to psychologist Jean Piaget, adolescents transition from concrete operational thinking to formal operational thinking. Formal operations include hypothetical, complex and abstract thinking (Newman & Newman 2020, 184). Therefore, in YAL, there is a shift towards abstract thinking because the readers start to think about and question abstract concepts such as morality, possibilities, alternatives, thinking itself, and context, rather than focusing solely on the problems. According to Slater (2017, 52), adolescents can think of

hypothetical situations and compare them. They also expand their understanding of relationships, behaviours, and their ability to interpret others' feelings. Then, while reading, they may empathise with, or even favour, morally complex characters and understand their trauma.

After the start of cognitive development, fourteen-year-old individuals begin to think about morality and identity as they start to consider the future. They also become more prone to succumbing to social pressure and accepting the values of others. Jayne and Purswell (2024, 86) recommend discussing adolescents' interests and influences, including people in their lives and even virtual ones. Then, fifteen-year-olds are able to imagine situations they have not experienced yet. While their understanding of friendly relationships is still in progress, their romantic ones are just beginning to develop. YA novels present romantic relationships, which may help adolescents explore and understand this unknown area. Later at sixteen, adolescents focus more on the interests of their social group and external influences, which affect their own development (Jayne and Purswell 2024, 104). The social context plays a significant role in the development of cognitive thinking (Savina and Moran 2022, 17).

Seventeen-year-olds have a better understanding of concepts such as justice and political issues. However, their perception is often idealistic, and their tolerance for different opinions is limited. Exploring these abstract concepts is visible not only in the dystopian genre but also in romantasy, such as in *Red Queen* (Aveyard 2015). Abstract concepts accompany the formation of adolescent identities, and individuals shape their life goals (Jayne & Purswell 2024, 119). Cognitive development continues into the mid-20s, which means abilities are developing, too (Steinberg 2023, 57). Adolescents are less likely to consider long-term consequences and focus more on the short-term than adults. So, adolescents are prone to misbehave or risk harm. This risky and impulsive behaviour of the main protagonists is used in YAL to enhance narrative

tension. Moreover, the way adolescents think is also influenced by their emotions, so adolescents learn to manage them during development (Wright and Kutcher 2016, 44).

Abstract thinking

According to studies (Steinberg 2023, 253), the development of abstract thinking leads individuals to become more empathetic, sympathetic, helpful to those around them, and more independent. Their ability to think about different ideologies and philosophical questions, such as interpersonal relationships, politics, philosophy, religion, and morality, increases which results in curiosity about related topics. It is often reflected in YA protagonists, who begin to question and reconsider accepted truths. It may also explain adolescents' interest in fantasy and science fiction during these years (Slater and Bremner 2017, 561). When individuals become more mature, they question and establish ideas about their priorities and values related to social issues (Steinberg 2023, 257). Moreover, adolescents can excessively question and criticise everything around them (Berger 2020, n. p.).

Morality is another abstract concept that adolescents develop. The determination of rightness or wrongness in actions is relative and depends on the cultural environment in which the individual is situated. Although norms are not influenced. According to Kohlberg (Newman & Newman 2020, 198), adolescents learn to recognise the perspectives of others, then critically evaluate society's values and its benefits. The final stage, which not all individuals reach, is realising universal moral and ethical values (Moshman 2011, 71). Moral reasoning and critical evaluation of society's values are essential in many romantasy novels. The protagonists' awareness of injustice and repression usually drives the plot. Then, adolescent readers who understand perspectives may justify characters' morally complex decisions, such as joining a rebellion.

Identity

Adolescents usually begin to ask, " Who am I?" or " What am I like?" (Berger 2020, n, p.) as well as YA protagonists. According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is characterised by finding and creating identity. Identity development is a complex and challenging process involving how individuals see themselves and how the environment and society see them. They often focus on self-understanding and self-concept. In romantasy, fantastical settings make struggles with identity even more visible. Feelings of alienation and seeking their own position can resonate with adolescents as they search for their own identities, too.

According to Meeus (2019, 9), before the completion of identity development, there is a phase of searching and identity confusion, which is considered a healthy part of development. Adolescents may seem rebellious or try out different identities (Maldonado-Durán et al. 2023, 50). This process is also associated with adolescent egocentrism, and their emotions may not reflect reality. Their perception of how others see them may not always be accurate, which can lead to self-esteem issues and loneliness. It is not until around the age of 15 that adolescents become aware of what their surroundings honestly think (Berger 2020, n. p.). Also, the environment is becoming more important in shaping identity development, including social media (Jayne & Purswell 2024, 10).

1.3 Social development

Identity development is closely linked to group identification and a sense of belonging. Adolescents become more aware and sophisticated in their understanding of interpersonal relationships and human behaviour (Steinberg 2023, 60). In YAL, the social awareness is reflected in protagonists' increasing understanding of complex social environments. Situations, such as Violet entering the Riders Quadrant, may reflect real adolescents' experiences: entering new schools or struggling with classmates. Furthermore, adolescents begin to develop serious

and intimate relationships. These close relationships, characterised by honesty and trust can help prevent psychological disorders (Steinberg 2023, 263).

Family and Peers

Adolescents seek to have a greater voice in decision-making, and to become more independent, while parents often do not give their opinions much consideration (Slater and Bremner 2017, 592). Parents often believe that peers and the environment negatively influence adolescents or that adolescents' opinions are too loose, while adolescents view their parents as overprotective (Berger 2020 n. p.). For these reasons, adolescents often look for other role models to admire, such as celebrities (Slater and Bremner 2017, 587). Relationships with brothers and sisters are also dynamic, and they are characterised by conflicts that typically arise due to the invasion of personal space or a personal perception of inequality. During late adolescence, sibling relationships improve (Steinberg, 2023, 100). On the other hand, in romantasy novels, relationships with family members are usually more complex, and their families are not very supportive. These situations cause trauma and create obstacles for the protagonists from the beginning.

Friendships play a central role in YA novels as well. These relationships go beyond companionship, and they are crucial to trust, loyalty and the protagonists' development that resonate with adolescents. Adolescents define friendship in terms of similar values and attitudes, loyalty, shared interests and confidentiality. According to Wright and Kutcher (2016, 51), they place a high value on qualities such as honesty, humour, and kindness. They associate spending time with peers with enjoyment and fun, in contrast to spending time with family, where they often think of chores or more organised activities. Moreover, compared to boys, girls have closer and more intimate friendships, communicate more openly about personal topics and value emotional support (Savina & Moran 2022, 105). However, these gender

patterns are mostly absent in romantasy as both male and female characters are open to forming emotional bonds and discussing their feelings.

Romantic interests

According to Steinberg (2023, 293), it is not until later adolescence that adolescents become interested in romantic relationships. This natural interest in dating and romance is a key theme in romantasy. Romance is part of the plot and character development. The fictional relationships may even resemble those of adults. For example, Feyre and Rhysand form long-lasting relationships that end in marriage. This may allow adolescent readers to explore yet unknown emotions and commitment. However, adolescents usually do not have stable relationships during this phase, and they typically do not seek life partners. According to a 2019 study (Steinberg 2023, 280), the average 25-year-old adolescent, regardless of gender, has approximately 10 romantic experiences. And more than 50% of fifteen-year-old adolescents claim to have some experience with dating (Savina & Moran 2022, 106).

During early and mid-adolescence, the choice of potential partners often relies on peer opinion, popularity or a desire for social visibility (Slater and Bremner 2017, 599). Girls often find themselves attracted to individuals with high peer status, such as "bad boys" (Steinberg 2023, 283). This pattern is visible in romantasy as the romantic interest may seem like a dangerous and morally ambiguous person. During middle to late adolescence, individuals select potential partners based on personal preference, but they continue to think about how their peers perceive their relationships (Slater and Bremner 2017, 600). In comparison, romantasy does not always support peer influence and perception on relationships.

According to Berger (2020, n. p.), adolescents begin thinking about longer-term commitments at the end of high school. These relationships appear to be genuine, couples prefer to spend time together, and value commitment and caring just as much as passion and pleasure.

Girls at this age are more likely to have steady partners. Moreover, as adolescents spend a lot of time with their partners, it affects their interests, opinions, education, and lifestyle (Berger 2020, n. p.).

Depicting these relationships in YAL is challenging, as there is a risk of an unrealistic portrayal, or the readers can romanticise them. At the same time, it can support readers' awareness of toxic and unhealthy relationships, as adolescents are in the process of understanding romantic relationships. According to Savina and Morran (2022, 107), negative behaviours, including excessive control, violence, physical, verbal and sexual abuse, in adolescent relationships are quite common and often carry over into adulthood. The primary causes are gender inequality and male dominance in relationships (Kloep et al. 2016, 128).

Sexuality

Romantic relationships are related to sexuality. Adolescents express interest in sexuality through activities such as flirting, holding hands, staring and touching. This interest is a natural part of healthy development (Lamb and Gilbert 2018, 145). It is inappropriate to ridicule these healthy adolescent impulses and make them feel shame or even fear, as it negatively affects them into adulthood (Berger 2020, n. p.). According to Steinberg (2023), the first signs of sexuality tend to be subtle and limited to the fantasies and attraction to celebrities or someone unattainable. It is only during middle adolescence that individuals are attracted to younger people, their peers, with whom they already have actual interactions. Sexual behaviour at this stage is often motivated by a desire for higher social status, popularity among peers, and the media rather than just hormones. Girls are more influenced by society in terms of their first sexual intercourse than boys. However, as romantasy offers more long-lasting relationships, it also presents sexual intercourse as a result of a deep emotional connection. This depicts the difference between the usual adolescent experience and its fictional representation.

When adolescents have healthy relationships and practice safe sexual activities, it positively impacts their identity development, self-concept, and intimacy with partners (Lamb and Gilbert 2018, 151). In many YA novels, descriptions of romantic and sexual interaction highlight genuine desires, but they do not necessarily make the descriptions realistic. This shows the need for critical engagement with how romance and sexuality are portrayed in media and books that adolescents consume in their free time.

1.4 Leisure Time and Social Media

Adolescents spend half of their day on leisure activities (Dimitrova and Wiium 2021, 531). Technology and social media play a prominent role. According to Savina (2022, 23), many adolescents use social media daily. Around 45% of teenagers say that they are "almost constantly" online, with more girls (50%) than boys (39%). However, it is challenging to assess the influence of media because everyone is exposed to media differently.

There are several advantages to using technology and social media. Firstly, it is crucial for adolescents to be online to connect with peers. Researchers believe that online interaction can even improve communication skills (Kloep et al. 2016, 46). When individuals find their place on social media, they can feel a sense of belonging that they lack in the real world. Being online can positively impact feelings of loneliness, boost self-esteem, and create a sense of closeness (Slater and Bremner 2017, 599). Besides, online communication can help adolescents overcome shyness when interacting with peers toward whom they have romantic feelings (Berger 2020, n p.). According to these findings, participation in an online community can function as a leisure activity. It contributes not only to adolescents' entertainment but also to social connection and emotional well-being. Furthermore, according to Dimitrova (2021, 536) media is also a place for self-expression, which promotes identity development. It is important to emphasise that the positive effect of media on adolescents depends on its content, its

adaptation to adolescents' age, cognitive abilities, language, and the context (Tetzchner 2023, 184).

The disadvantages of using technology and social media are well-known. For example, adolescents can easily use social media to cyberbully (Slater and Bremner 2017, 599) or encounter unknown individuals. Fortunately, according to research (Tetzchner 2023, 192), most adolescents interact with and follow real-life friends on social media. Moreover, it is difficult to protect adolescents from content that may not be appropriate for them. But there is an assumption that adolescents actively select to consume the media that aligns with their traits and preferences (Steinberg 2023, 195). Therefore, adolescents who are not interested in certain content are less likely to seek it out.

Another discussed issue is that adolescents are frequently exposed to sexualized content (Steinberg 2023, 197). Research (Berger 2020, n. p.) indicates that this content has not been shown to directly cause inappropriate behaviour in adolescents, but it may contribute to it. Girls tend to be more sensitive when it comes to body image (Lamb and Gilbert 2018, 198) and may also develop a higher tolerance for sexual abuse and gender stereotypes. According to Lamb and Gilbert (2018, 396), trends and images can shape adolescents' perceptions of an ideal partner due to the popularity and promotion of celebrity appearances. Some adolescents even develop sexual feelings for celebrities before they seek real-life partners (Hust et al. 2025, 7). In a similar way, romantasy love interests are promoted online as ideal boyfriends. This idolization can have a negative impact on adolescents. As Lemish states (2022, 330), it may cause anxiety because idols seem out of reach and cause unrealistic standards. Lastly, the significant disadvantage is the time that adolescents could otherwise spend on more productive activities, such as reading (Dimitrova and Wiium 2021, 534).

2 Literacy and Reading Fiction

Adolescents today require a higher level of literacy than previous generations (Vacca et al. 2021, 15). In developed countries, literacy no longer means just the ability to read and write, but it is a complex and constantly evolving concept. The concept of literacy includes the ability to use the technologies necessary for communication, problem-solving, sorting information, and creativity (Carver 2023, 2). In this context, reading should be understood as an active process. According to reader-response theory, meaning is not inherent in the text alone but is co-created by the reader during interaction with the text (Rosenblatt 1982, 268). A reader's experiences, culture, and emotions all shape this process. Furthermore, reading is a rather social activity (Pace 2006, 586). Sociocultural approaches to literacy suggest that the interpretation of a text can be shaped when a reader interacts with others and discusses the text. Therefore, readers' responses can change significantly (Pace 2006, 587). They encounter many perspectives and negotiate meaning.

Such an understanding of reading is closely connected to the development of reading comprehension. To increase comprehension, it is important to possess a rich vocabulary, background knowledge, and well-developed critical thinking. Individuals broaden their horizons and knowledge through education and teacher-student questioning. It supports the need to share their thoughts orally or in writing (Carver 2023, 6). When the self-expression occurs, individuals develop self-awareness, which contributes to the formation of their personal identity (Wagner et al. 2024, 4). Before achieving such a level of development and literacy, adolescents' skills must develop, so readers may not apply critical evaluation when engaging with texts.

2.1 Reading Development

Reading development usually starts at family home in childhood (Wagner et al. 2024, 8). Their reading fluency develops along with their comprehension of the text (Carver 2023, 24). When readers begin to transition into puberty, they are capable of reading longer texts, expressing their opinions about their reading preferences, and reading silently. They also learn to distinguish between the author's perspective and the characters' (Carver 2023, 81). With further development, they gather more information to gain a better understanding of the text. Individuals during the early to middle stage of adolescence learn to analyse, evaluate, and organise information. However, their opinions on a text are influenced by their emotions and desire to read what is useful to them specifically. Therefore, they may struggle to comprehend and evaluate the text or the author's intention (Carver 2023, 104). At the same time, it would be inaccurate to assume that adolescents are unable to critically evaluate texts. Research (Sulzer 2016) emphasises that adolescents should be viewed as complex individuals with diverse experiences and interpretive abilities, not as a homogeneous group of passive readers.

Their developing abilities may limit them because novels often involve morally ambiguous characters and complex relationships. Then, adolescents may rely on external interpretations, such as on BookTok, which can function as an interpretive community (Pace 2006, 590). According to Wagner (2024, 121), older adolescents continue to develop a critical perspective and expand their background knowledge. However, the popularity of reading declines at this age, and students tend to read only what is required for their high school studies (Carver 2023, 129). This declining interest in reading raises the question of whether the promotion of reading on social media communities can have a positive impact.

2.2 Reading Habits of Adolescents

Children and adolescents' reading engagement is influenced by multiple factors. These factors include extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, free time, preferred format, peers, and even the reading environment. Numerous recent surveys on adolescent reading habits are available. They reveal some patterns in adolescent reading habits and the growing dominance of digital media.

Several studies in the USA and UK show that differences between girls' and boys' reading habits are diminishing. However, adolescents read only an average of 34 minutes per day across various media, in comparison to spending 90 minutes daily on social media (Cremin & McGeown 2025, 80). Many adolescents remain disengaged from reading because they have not found a book that motivates them to read another (Cremin & McGeown 2025, 20). Other common and familiar reasons include a lack of free time, losing interest in reading, taking up new hobbies, a preference to watch movies, the perception that reading is not considered "cool," and the inability to find engaging reading material (Wilkinson et al. 2020, 2). This suggests that reading choices should be more personalised to match adolescents' interests. Additionally, the study (Cremin & McGeown 2025, 189) showed that adolescents are more likely to read when those around them share the joy of reading with them through discussion. These findings support both the social nature of reading and the potential to promote reading on social media.

Data from the Czech context provides a more detailed insight into these patterns. A 2022 survey conducted in Czechia by the National Library (Friedlaenderová et al. 2022) included 2,040 participants aged 6 to 19 years. According to this survey, among respondents aged 15 to 19, 55% of them said they enjoyed reading books, compared with 42% of those aged 9-14. Despite this, the COVID-19 pandemic had little impact on reading engagement as only 17-19% of respondents aged 9-19 reported reading more often. 52% of children aged 9 to 14 and 73%

of adolescents aged 15 to 19 used mobile phones for reading. Their book selection was primarily based on genre, with older adolescents choosing by genre 11% more frequently than in previous years. Fantasy and science fiction were the most popular among older adolescents, followed by romance and adventure. Comics, nature books, and youth books were the most popular among younger adolescents.

Similar trends can be observed in a 2023-2024 survey by the Czech School Inspectorate (Novosák et al. 2024) that involved pupils in the 5th and 9th grades and students in the 2nd year of high school. The findings showed that girls in all age groups demonstrated a 1-4% higher level of reading literacy than boys. Grammar school pupils and students achieved higher literacy results than their peers across all age groups. Attitudes towards reading, whether respondents found reading difficult or engaging, varied. In the 9th grade of lower secondary schools, 29% responded, with girls responding 24% more than boys. In high schools of the same age, 48% responded, with girls 30% more than boys. These results suggest that educational level significantly influences adolescent reading habits, and a noticeable gender difference exists. In all grades, more than 80% of adolescents rated the texts they read at school as almost never interesting. Meanwhile, on average, more than 50% of all age groups read online every day, especially on social media. Fiction remains the most popular type of reading material, followed by manga and comics.

Across these studies, several patterns emerge. In general, adolescents' interest in reading is declining, not only because of other interests, lack of free time, and social situations, but also because many of them do not read what would really interest and entertain them. This indicates that promoting texts relevant to their interests may be more successful than promoting reading as an activity.

2.3 Benefits of Reading Fiction

According to surveys (Vacca et al. 2021, 155), the selected works that adolescents are required to read for their studies are usually uninteresting, not only for non-readers but also for students who regularly read in their free time. Interest and curiosity are key to enhancing intrinsic motivation, which in turn increases the chances of better understanding the text and mastering more complex reading tasks. Moreover, motivation also grows when adolescents consider texts relevant to their personal experiences. The texts adolescents read include magazines, webpages, comics, and non-fiction, but none is as relevant as fiction.

> "Fiction books often reflect the social world we live in and can give children and young people the opportunity to experience (albeit imaginatively) the experiences they would not have in their own lives, which has been cited as important by young people themselves" (Cremin & McGeown 2025, 70).

Reading fiction contributes to many areas of adolescent development. A popular benefit is the enhancement of imagination, which is essential for effective comprehension (Vacca et al. 2021, 166). Another proven benefit is the development of empathy and the enhancement of personal and interpersonal understanding. Additionally, readers acquire vocabulary associated with a wide range of positive and negative emotions and feelings that they have not yet experienced personally (Currie et al. 2025, 655). Through the characters, they experience not only the feelings themselves but also the ways of dealing with those feelings, which influence the reader's affective experiences (Cremin & McGeown 2025, 66). Empathising with fictional characters is also appropriate for adolescents because they can identify with aspects of their own lives in the story and develop a sense of belonging or self-understanding (Currie et al. 2025, 657). Furthermore, fiction helps readers improve their memory, concentration, and analytical skills, expand their knowledge, and recognise analogies in narratives that mirror

social, environmental, economic and political issues (Currie et al. 2025, 670). When reading, adolescents consciously or subconsciously shape their values, attitudes, and opinions on social norms, traditions, beliefs, and their role in society. Thanks to fictional stories, broader contexts, and characters' interactions, readers can gain a deeper understanding of issues related to race, gender, class, and inequality (Beach et al. 2020, 11). On the other hand, strong emotional engagement can make it harder for some readers, especially younger ones, to keep a critical distance. Readers may identify with characters without fully considering the consequences of their actions or relationships. According to Carver (2023, 133), high school students are generally better equipped to recognise, analyse, and compare these concepts, primarily due to their advanced cognitive development with age. Then, when adolescents encounter a book with a story that truly engages them, they experience the most effective way to learn and reap all the benefits mentioned (Currie et al. 2025, 656).

Reading for pleasure and with genuine interest also has an impact on adolescents' well-being. According to research in the United Kingdom (Cremin & McGeown 2025, 63), fiction offers children and adolescents a space for relaxation, entertainment, and escape from the real world. Another example of the positive impact of reading on well-being could have been seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when reading provided adolescents aged 9 to 18 with a sense of safety, an opportunity to dream about the future, and reduced stress (Currie et al. 2025, 655). The research by Cremin and McGeown (2025, 73) suggests that teachers and professors should recognise the positive benefits of reading fiction for adolescents, and further research would be valuable. This is relevant in digital environments such as BookTok. The impact of fiction may be shaped not only by the text itself but also by the way it is framed and discussed online.

In general, fiction may encourage adolescent development, but these benefits do not automatically appear. The reader-response theory suggests that the impact of fiction on adolescent readers depends on how readers engage with and interpret it, as well as on their

individual backgrounds (Rosenblatt 1982, 269). The interpretation is further affected by social context, such as when readers encounter different perspectives (Pace 2006, 591). Therefore, if reading is predominantly emotional or affected by external interpretations, deeper critical reflection may not fully develop.

3 Young Adult literature

Young adult literature (YAL) typically refers to works intended for young adults. It is shaped by its readers, narratives, and audience responses. YAL definition remains complex and fluid as the boundaries of it are not fixed. It also often depends on the perspective of the individual, whether it is a teacher, parent, publisher, or reader (Knickerbocker and Rycik 2019, 2). The typical age range for YAL is 12 to 18 years, though readers may be as young as 10 or as old as 30. Research by The Atlantic in 2017 found that 55% of YAL readers are adults (Knickerbocker and Rycik 2019, 3). Most YAL authors, as well as those involved in publishing and promotion, are also adults (Wilkins 2019, 5). Despite this, YAL is frequently perceived as literature exclusively for teenagers. It encompasses a wide range of genres marketed under a single publishing category (Kane 2023, 4). These works address diverse topics and themes that interest younger people (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 10). Reader engagement in YAL depends on the ability to connect with stories, characters, and their challenges. According to Williams (2023, 3), it increases readership and inspires future writers, who may later develop an interest in the 'great and true' adult literature. Understanding YAL dynamic helps explain its popularity and development.

3.1 Features of Young Adult Literature

A key YAL feature is connections to contemporary culture and trends popular among adolescents. These cultural elements may include slang, fashion, and topics that resonate with a specific adolescent generation (Hintz & Tribunella 2025, 77). These features, or rather trends, can be identified across various works. These developments are relevant to this thesis because they show that YAL trends are influenced by reader popularity, just as romantasy.

When the term 'juvenile' literature appeared after the First World War (Cart 2022, 9), it reflected social recognition of adolescence as a distinct stage of life, which would later support

YAL themes, such as identity and moral development. During the mid-20th century, coming-of-age novels did not explore sexuality. Some novels were even censored in schools due to controversy and were criticised for their use of vulgar language (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 28). The issue of censorship reoccurred later, at the beginning of the new millennium. The best-selling fantasy *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997-2007) increased sales of books for children and adolescents by 50% (Pullen 2024, 20). But the depiction of witchcraft was too controversial among some conservative groups, and as a result, the series was banned in some U.S. states (Pullen 2024, 20). This shows that debates surrounding the suitability of YAL content are not a recent phenomenon.

In the 1990s, the primary focus of adolescent attention turned from YA books to magazines and television channels (Knickerbocker and Rycik 2019, 7). These media trends initiated a wave of films and series centred on adolescent experiences. Since 2000, YAL has more openly explored topics such as intimacy, stereotypes, identity, sexuality, and adolescent relationships. The romance genre also experienced a revival, most notably with the *Twilight series* (Meyer 2005-2008), and also as a theme in dystopian genre, for example *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008). The popularity of YA titles was further elevated by television and film adaptations, which also promoted book sales. This suggests that the success of YAL is connected to the media environments in which adolescents engage.

However, the media is not the only factor in YAL's popularity and commercial success. For adolescent readers, YAL is often more accessible due to its style and language. Authors ought to carefully consider word choice in dialogues. It should be authentic and reflect the language used by teenagers, thereby making characters of a similar age relatable to readers (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 142). Also, according to Cart (2022, 142), books can immerse the readers in stories in ways that television or other media cannot. YAL offers fast-paced plots that engage readers from the start, diverse representations of various groups,

genders, and disabilities, and complex characters who question common stereotypes. Additionally, according to Bean (2013, 34), YAL is innovative, not only in the content of novels but in expanding the definition of literature to include formats.

Understanding common features of YAL, such as narrative structure, central themes, language, genres, tropes, and stereotypes, is important for later analysis of popular novels. Therefore, the focus will be on selected aspects of the YAL features that are prominent in romantasy.

Narrative Structure

Narrative structure involves the development of the story and its perspectives. The setting contains culture and context, which vary depending on the genre. In genres such as romantasy, maps are often included at the beginning of the novels to help readers envision the worlds. It also proves the detailed world-building of the stories (Hintz & Tribunella 2025, 140). Most commonly, plots are linear and usually include flashbacks (Kokkola and Bossche 2026, 51). In series, cliffhangers are often used as they end the novel abruptly with a hint of another conflict. Readers experience a range of emotions and a desire for the sequel, which may also benefit the market. Central conflicts in YAL plots typically revolve around the adolescent protagonists. The conflicts can be interpersonal and internal struggles, and are often intertwined (Knickerbocker and Rycik 2019, 71). Thus, character maturation is a key part of a resolution (Pullen 2024, 65).

Characters

Character types and their patterns in YAL are similar to those in other adult genres. However, the ways these characters address and solve conflicts differ, as they are often not fully mature and may make mistakes. The protagonist may face significant evil, go on a quest, experience family tragedy, encounter misunderstandings within their peer group, be an outsider, or participate in a rebellion. A defining characteristic of the main character, a hero, is personal

growth and improvement despite their weaknesses. The protagonist generally wins against all odds and undergoes a significant transformation (Coats 2017, 193). Moreover, YA novels often feature many supporting and opposing characters. Unlike in children's literature, these roles are not always immediately obvious. Characters in YAL tend to be more unpredictable, complex, and capable of changing loyalties. The presence of morally ambiguous characters and complex protagonists is common, as it may challenge adolescents' ability to distinguish between healthy and problematic behaviour.

Female heroes

In the past, literary heroes were predominantly male figures. In recent decades, influenced by feminist movements, female protagonists have become famous. These heroines are especially visible in genres such as romantasy. All the protagonists in the analysed works are female. The heroines are typically written by women and predominantly read by female audiences (Jagielnicka 2024, n. p.). The heroines may function as role models for adolescent girls. They symbolise women's courage and independence. The heroines undergo a transformation from unassuming girls to exceptional women capable of saving lives without relying on men. This represents an empowerment compared to earlier depictions of female characters. Also, the heroines show how YAL reflects changing societal expectations and offers adolescents more diverse role models. However, Coats (2017, 263) observes that heroines are generally presented with fewer choices than typical male heroes when responding to the call for the journey, and the question of their virtue is mentioned more often.

Narrator

The actual author may intentionally manipulate the reliability of the narrators, which questions the interpretation of the story. They can manipulate readers' emotions through the characters, but this manipulation is not naturally negative. According to Kokkola (2026, 58), readers often enjoy the narrator's description of positive as well as negative emotions, such as

grief. This feature supports readers' empathy and allows them to imagine realities different from their own, such as a different gender or beliefs. However, readers do not automatically adopt the values and attitudes of characters unless they choose to do so (Kokkola and Bossche 2026, 59).

Central Themes

In YAL, themes are generally easier to recognise, which allows younger readers to think about and identify underlying messages and literary patterns. Themes may be intensified in romantasy as they are usually presented in heightened and idealised ways. The central theme is the exploration of identity and the coming-of-age journey. The characters experience a transformation that symbolises the transition from childhood to adulthood (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 102). The next theme is associated with relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. These relationships highlight the development of emotional intelligence and attachment in adolescence. Relationships are closely linked to issues of sexuality, gender, and intimacy. Sexuality influences romantic relationships and introduces critical topics that young people encounter, such as diverse sexual orientations and the concept of consent. Gillies (2015, 5) states these themes offer opportunities for exploration in a safe place. Moreover, themes in YAL frequently focus on characters' psychological issues, which highlight mental health, healing, and acceptance. YAL increasingly features representations of diseases and disabilities. This representation emphasises societal barriers and the obstacles associated with these conditions (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 33). Lastly, YAL, especially dystopia and fantasy genres, contain themes of injustice, oppression, political power, and social inequality. Conflicts are often resolved through rebellion or war, which are depicted as necessary to overcome unfair forces and free society. Such themes criticise real society (Fitzsimmons & Wilson 2020, n. p.).

3.2 Genres

For readers, genre classification or labelling can simplify the selection of works and set expectations prior to reading. Knickerbocker (2019, 65) argues that genres benefit publishers and bookstores. It allows them to respond to market trends and increase the publication and sale of works within popular genres. YAL encompasses a wide range of genres, however, not all of them are relevant for this thesis. Hence, the focus will be on those which are relevant to the analysed works.

Fairy tales and Retellings

Classical narratives, such as legends, myths, fairy tales and folktales, may seem predictable to readers, but writers continue to be inspired by the ideas and plots. These new works are called retellings. Such retellings have become increasingly popular, particularly in YAL (Fitzsimmons & Wilson 2020, n. p.). Authors commonly modify the plot, characters and resolution (Knickerbocker and Rycik 2019, 159). With all the new features and the incorporation of contemporary themes, such as the application of feminist ideologies, the stories are more engaging to readers (Fitzsimmons & Wilson 2020, n. p.).

Fantasy

The fantasy genre is built on the magical, supernatural, unreal, or impossible, usually inspired by myths, folklore, and fairy tales (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 124). Magic, fantastic creatures, epic journeys, and moral struggles feel real to readers because of the creation of secondary worlds. The fantasy worlds can be fully separate from the real world, called high fantasy (Spencer and Craig 2024, 23), or intersect with it, called low fantasy (Coats 2017, 346). There is no difference in quality and value between high and low fantasy. Many subgenres of fantasy exist, and it often combines with other genres. The fantasy romance subgenre centres on relationships and emotional bonds that are crucial to the plot, but the

romance does not require a happy ending (Pullen 2024, 26). In recent years, fantasy romance has been called romantasy, and it is discussed further in the next chapter. Fantasy functions as a form of escapism for readers, but more importantly, it fosters imagination and alternative possibilities. Additionally, difficult themes featured in fantasy are also easier to encounter, especially for adolescents, because they seem distant from everyday life (Levy & Mendlesohn 2016, 225).

Romance

The romance genre centres on the development of romantic relationships between main adolescent protagonists in YAL (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 19). YA romance often concludes optimistically, celebrates relationships and emotionally satisfies readers (Gillis and Simpson 2015, n. p.). The genre should also depict complexities of dating, awkward behaviour and realistic situations (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper 2013, 100). Furthermore, romance novels sometimes contain explicit sexual descriptions. Initially, it may seem inappropriate for adolescents. However, novels that feature physical and emotional descriptive scenes provide valuable vocabulary to understand and express adolescents' own feelings (Gillis and Simpson 2015, 6-16). According to research (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 22), readers prefer healthy relationships in romance. Despite many stereotypes about romance readers, the romance genre is the highest-earning and most popular fiction genre worldwide, which makes it a vital part of the book market (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 15).

New Adult

New Adult literature (NAL) is not a specific genre, but rather a relatively new category intended for readers aged 17 to 26. Protagonists are in the age of the target audience. NAL encompasses a variety of genres. It focuses on the next life stage, including university education, first career experiences, leaving home, civic responsibilities, and more mature relationships than those of teenagers. It is often described as a second coming-of-age phase, or

a bridge between adolescence and full adulthood (Kane 2023, 2). An example of NAL is the contemporary romance bestseller *It Ends with Us* (Hoover 2016). Many works are often marketed as YAL, but their features overlap with NAL. The boundary between NAL and YAL is often blurred, which challenges clear categorisation. The differences are mainly visible in the protagonists' ages and the presence of explicit adult scenes.

3.3 Tropes and Stereotypes

Various stories contain similar or nearly identical recurring narratives and features. Readers may enjoy the ability to identify the variations in the patterns or find them comforting (Pullen 2024, 71). Recurring narrative devices are referred to as tropes, and sometimes clichés (Coats 2017, 259). Another term readers use is stereotype. In YAL, there are many popular tropes about protagonists, romance, characters, plot, themes, and settings. Protagonists' tropes (see Table 1) can serve as narrative shortcuts that help readers quickly understand a character's motives. The most common romance tropes in romantasy are also named in Table 1.

Table 1: Protagonist and romance tropes

Protagonist or romance trope	Description
The Chosen One	A story where the hero(ine) is selected as a protagonist by some external force such as destiny or prophecy and burdened with responsibility
The Reluctant Hero(ine)	The protagonist resists the role of being the lead, doubts themselves, but later accepts it.
The Gifted One	The protagonist discovers their inner talents and extraordinary abilities.
Love Triangle	One of the most recurring tropes, in which the female protagonist can choose between two romantic interests.
Enemies-to-Lovers	The trope is evident. The main protagonists hate each other at first, but as the story progresses, they fall in love.
Fated Mates	Romantic partners who are predestined to be together with some magic bond.

A Morally Grey Love Interest	The trope often represents a male protagonist with questionable actions and a tragic background, who is rather complex, broody, neither good nor evil, but an exceptionally affectionate and protective lover to the female protagonist.
Forced Proximity	The trope forces the main protagonists to be together, such as when they share space or work on a project, and in the process, they develop feelings.
Forbidden Love	It presents significant obstacles for the two characters who must hide their relationship, as in Romeo and Juliet. This trope can also include feelings for a character who seems off-limits because of a different social class.
Friends-to-Lovers	The trope includes two friends who realise their feelings, and their relationship gradually shifts.
Slow-Burn	Romance takes a long time to progress between the two characters.

3.4 Critical Perspectives on Young Adult Literature

The recognition of tropes and stereotypes in YAL supports readers' responses that are both positive and negative. The public and even scholars debate not only the clichés but the whole YAL. Examining the criticisms gives a deeper understanding of the challenges YAL faces.

Poor Writing Accusations

The public often considers YAL lacking literary value. For example, the *Twilight series* faced significant criticism despite many nominations and multiple awards (Levy & Mendlesohn 2016, 200). There is a common assumption that popularity equals low quality, especially within YAL. The cause may be factors such as linguistic simplicity, reliance on tropes, and predictable or unoriginal narratives.

Censorship

YAL is subjected to censorship by conservative groups due to its description of violence, language, mature themes, non-traditional perspectives, and taboos. These conservative groups, often represented by religious parents and educational institutions, want to restrict specific titles (Williams 2023). However, YAL contains many ideas and information that reflect adolescents' developmental stages. They provide access to information that might otherwise remain unavailable. The censorship of YAL may be interpreted as adults imposing their moral values and authority on younger generations.

Explicit Scenes

YA novels which contain explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse are a common target of censorship. The primary cause is mostly age appropriateness. Such content is often viewed as a significant threat to adolescent morality and is associated with pornography (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 38). However, this perspective ignores the potential for positive romantic development, no shaming of women's bodies and the possibility that detailed depictions of emotions and experiences may be helpful to adolescents. Contemporary portrayals often include themes of consent, female desire, freedom from objectification, and empowerment through personal choice

Unrealistic Expectations

Romantic relationships and the concept of 'better halves,' or soulmates, are often criticised. They are supposed to promote unrealistic standards, ideas, and beliefs about romance. Additionally, adolescents are supposed to struggle to distinguish reality from fiction (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 40). However, some social media users post short videos about unhealthy or harmful behaviour in relationships that seem attractive in stories but would not be healthy or attractive in real life relationships. It suggests a degree of awareness regarding the distinction between fiction and reality, but it remains unclear if this awareness applies to all readers.

Examples of short videos and social media posts with their explanations are discussed in the following chapter.

Unrealistic Portrayal of Issues

YAL addresses mature and complex themes such as alcoholism, addiction, and mental health issues. Criticism arises from depictions that lack authenticity and accuracy. However, including such issues can help reduce feelings of isolation among readers who identify with these experiences. And for those who cannot identify with these experiences, even the not completely authentic depictions are enough to warn about the problems, thus encouraging empathy (Wilkins 2019, 3). Moreover, realistic depictions could lead to greater censorship and raise questions about age appropriateness.

The mentioned criticism of YAL demonstrates that this genre is not only popular but also raises many questions and attracts attention. For the purpose of this thesis, several concepts will be used to analyse the selected novels, including age appropriateness, explicitness, representation of relationships, and the use of tropes. Nowadays, debates and opinions are discussed not only in academic institutions but also in online communities, where readers can share their views. A BookTok community on social media TikTok includes such discussions and debates.

4 BookTok trend

Trends on social media go viral and are widely shared by users worldwide. The trends depend on people's engagement, which can last for a week, while others, such as BookTok, can last for years. Many trends remain in the online space. Yet BookTok has influenced not only social media users but also publishing market, deciding which stories are worth publishing, and readers of all ages choosing books in libraries and bookstores. The books that go viral on BookTok increase sales by 600% (ManuscriptReport 2026, n. p.). This raises the question if BookTok and its phenomena influence readers, particularly adolescents, in their opinions on narratives, reading enjoyment, and real-life preferences and decisions.

4.1 #BookTok

BookTok refers to a trend on the social media app TikTok (Reddan 2022, n. p.). Users consume content, short videos, that is mostly recommended by the algorithm[1] (Yang, Zhao, and Ma 2019, 340). The majority of TikTok users are adolescents and young adults.[2] Their likings group them and gradually form communities of users that share and consume the same content, such as BookTok. BookTok began to emerge in early 2020 but gained greater reach in March of that year, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many teenagers were required to stay home. The trend involves reading books and functions as an international online book club (TikTok 2022, n. p.). It was created organically by the users themselves (Dera 2024, n. p.). It remains popular, with more than 52 million videos posted under the hashtag and over 370 billion views in April 2025 (TikTok 2025, n. p.). The global community of users and fans of

[1] "TikTok's algorithm works by analysing thousands of signals from a user to determine what kind of content they most want to see. These user interactions — things like likes, comments, follows, and how long they spend on a particular video — determine what videos appear on their 'For You' page and in what order (Kirsti 2026, n. p.)." Therefore, if a user engages with a #booktok video by liking it, the algorithm recommends more videos that feature that hashtag to the user.

[2] Statistics show that 35% are 25-34, 31% are 18-24, and 25% are 13-19 (Dunn 2026, n. p.). Creators are younger, over 52% are 18-24, and 27,5% are under 18 (Singh 2026, n. p.).

this trend is large, primarily consisting of women and girls aged 13-27. In recent years, it has also expanded to include users aged 25-34 (Dera 2024, n. p.). On other social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, readers may find similar content to BookTok, but they are named BookTube and Bookstagram (Desai 2025, n. p.). This indicates that readers have been seeking an online space to share their passion for books with others, but BookTok has achieved a particularly high level of visibility and influence. The popularity may be partly explained by the original content readers create.

4.2 BookTok content

The content of videos within the BookTok trend is diverse, vibrant, chaotic, and energetic (Martens, Balling, and Higgason 2022, 707). Users engage with BookTok as viewers and content creators. Fans express their passion for books, and everything related to them. Those who gather significant followings and create content are called bookfluences and serve as trusted sources for their followers (Balling and Martens 2024, n. p.). Creators openly share their genuine feelings, emotions, and personal experiences about books, which fosters a sense of trust within the community. There has been a considerable shift in the importance of book ratings. The ratings now prioritise readers' enjoyment and post-reading feelings, rather than critical evaluation of literary value, style, or overall quality. Emotionally driven, personally focused ratings are preferred over analytical reviews, as they seem more personal and convincing to the general public.

BookTok contains numerous popular video formats that can be analysed and discussed. For the purpose of this thesis, these typical trending formats are not only described but also organised into several categories. The examples of specific BookTok content in the appendices were selected based on their visibility and engagement, such as a high number of views and likes.

Book recommendations

The first type of videos creators make involves creators recommending books they have read, often accompanied by personal ratings. They make up to 40,5% of BookTok videos (Merga 2021, 5). These recommendations are original, with captions such as "Book TikTok made me buy," "Book that I would sell my soul to read for the first time," "Books that made me believe in love," or "Convincing you to read a book based on its aesthetic" (Appendices 1-4). Typically, readers display a stack of books and reveal each cover, along with a 1–5-star rating. The rating covers the intensity of their emotions and their desire to relive those feelings as when they first read it. The concept of 'aesthetic' is widely mentioned on social media, and it refers to the atmosphere, visuals, and unique features of the books. Appendix 6 illustrates how emotional engagement influences ratings. User @kenz's reviewed *Throne of Glass* (Maas 2012) as: "Nothing like THIS. The attachment I felt to every single character. All 8 books are worth it. I miss it every single day." Another popular format for recommendations is the "If you liked this, read this" video (Appendix 5), in which creators suggest lesser-known books with similar themes, tropes, or aesthetics. Additionally, many readers seek out books containing 'spice.' The term denotes erotic scenes, and readers use 1–5 chilli pepper emojis to indicate their amount (Appendix 11). This shows that readers of romance value sexual content.

Moreover, creators often produce videos featuring monologues and explanations for their recommendations. These videos can last up to ten minutes and delve into characters, plotlines, tropes, whether a book is underrated, and the emotional impact. For instance, user @mariannasreads said, "The emotions that you feel, the anxiety and trauma rep, the romance, you feel it in your soul" (Appendix 8). They sometimes describe reading as an obsession and, paradoxically, a curse (Appendix 7). Besides, creators also use scenes from audiobooks as sound effects with a commentary. As shown in Appendix 9, the user emphasises the political themes of romantasy books and refers to a particular scene in *Heir of Fire* (Maas 2014).

Emotional reactions

Emotional reactions are standard on BookTok. Creators record themselves while reading and show their honest reactions, such as happiness (Appendix 15) or sadness (Appendices 12 and 14). They even ask their followers to share book quotes that stirred these reactions, such as "Tell me a line that broke you" (Appendix 13). These reactions may contribute to BookTok being a safe place to be vulnerable and to normalise openly showing emotions.

Visually appealing bookshelves

Readers are proud of their bookshelves, and BookTok has inspired many to make them visually appealing by displaying books, adding lights and merchandise, and sorting them by genre, popularity, or colour. In their homes, they often set up a book corner with a comfortable armchair and call it "My happy place" (Appendices 17-18). Followers frequently comment on and praise the arrangement of bookshelves. This implies that the visual and material aspects of books play an important role. It is common to buy multiple versions of the same book solely for the designs and extra illustrations. Rarely, they buy copies in a language they do not speak (Appendix 20). Publishers have responded to this trend by producing books with enhanced visual appeal. Sprayed edges and illustrations on endpapers have become apparent in bookstores.

Immersion in fictional stories

Attachment to fictional stories, characters and settings is widespread. Readers express a sense of belonging or 'home' when reading their favourite books. In the video by @lanilovesreading, a Taylor Swift lyric, "I can go anywhere I want, just not home" (Appendix 23), suggests the reader's home is unavailable because it is fictional. These types of videos are accompanied by photos of maps or illustrations of the fictional places (Appendix 22). Fans of the *ACOTAR* series even visit places that resemble the fictional city of Velaris, which is

supposed to be Zermatt, Switzerland (Appendix 21). This form of video emphasises the desire to escape reality.

Moreover, music enhances the impact of videos. Artists such as Alex Warren (Appendix 17) and his song *Ordinary* gained popularity during the release of *Onyx Storm* (Yarros 2025). Also, an instrumental track, *Luminary* by Joel Sunny, has become associated with the *ACOTAR series* as its unofficial hymn (Appendix 16). This shows that readers value auditory experiences while reading, which increases immersion in fictional worlds. Furthermore, users create videos with music and collages of illustrations and images that evoke the atmosphere of specific genres (Appendices 24 and 26). Artists show their work, and some, such as a digital artist @frostbitestudios, are recognised and commissioned to create official book art (Appendices 32-34). Therefore, BookTok has emerged as a platform for promoting visual art and creative hobbies.

BookTok users further engage with and speculate about the stories, develop theories about plot continuation (Appendix 27), use AI to visualise scenes, create humorous memes and videos (Appendices 30-31). They also discuss and compare characters and narratives, such as debating who is more powerful (Appendix 29). Sometimes creators dress as characters and record themselves pretending to be the characters (Appendix 25). These activities represent the playful, sometimes amusing side of the BookTok community. Their deeper understanding of the narratives leads them to create new content and ideas.

Book Boyfriends

A significant portion of BookTok content centres on male characters, often referred to as book boyfriends (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 253). This term reflects readers' tendencies to romanticise and idolise these characters. There is a discussion of readers' immersion in these romantic narratives and their ability to distinguish between fiction and reality. The most famous

book boyfriends come from popular romantasy series, for instance Xaden Riorson, Rhysand, Jacks, Aaron Warner, Rowan Whitethorn, Ruhn Danaan, Cardan Greenbriar, and Cassian with Azriel. Creators and artists make videos featuring fan art and AI-generated images of these characters. The art and AI-generated images and videos may be viewed as inappropriate by the public because of the sexualisation of characters. Then followers frequently comment on the pictures' accuracy. Nicknames are also created, such as the Bat Boys for Rhysand, Cassian, and Azriel due to their wings. User @motion.chapters described them as "The holy trinity of trauma, wings and smirks" (Appendix 37), which shows the intensity of fan thoughts and the qualities readers value. Fans associate specific sounds and voices with these characters (Appendix 36). Also, with the expected series adaptation of the *Fourth Wing* series, readers participate in casting discussions and monitor the online presence of potential actors and models (Appendices 38-39).

This fan engagement can be characterised as intense and may surpass typical fandom behaviour. Adolescents, who are still undergoing cognitive development and may not critically evaluate, can adopt these behaviours and perceive them as normal because their peers and online communities do. This category is especially relevant for this thesis, as it shows how romantic relationships are interpreted and idealised by readers on BookTok.

Real versus Fictional

Another concern of BookTok and the book boyfriends is the blurred distinction between reality and fiction. Readers seem to be aware of their intense attachment to fictional men. For example, a video by @caitlin_frostxx (Appendix 40) states that she does not have a boyfriend but an obsession, and other users comment on with words "same," "rhysand is my boyfriend just so you know," or "me dying with my rhysand." Readers identify as 'Rhysand girlies' and compare fictional characters to real-life (Appendices 41-42). They admire qualities such as yearning (Appendix 43), protectiveness, unconditional loyalty and high emotional intelligence,

besides their stereotypical looks that are dark or silver hair, blue or dark eyes and a tall, muscular build. Although readers acknowledge that the characters are fictional, they may still desire boyfriends similar to book boyfriends. The video by @rebeccarosemont (Appendix 44) shows a dancing pair, then the man disappears, which symbolises the experience of loving a fictional character. Using words as love indicates a deep emotional connection. When it is used by adolescents who have never experienced a real relationship, it may carry significant meaning. They start to recognise these emotions and develop them toward fictional characters, which can contribute to feelings of sadness and loneliness because of an unavailable partner and no reciprocated feelings.

The comparison between real and fictional men is part of a trend called ‘red flag and green flag’, where red signifies toxic or unhealthy behaviour. Green denotes desirable, attractive, and healthy relationship traits. Fans quote famous male characters' lines and confessions and compare them with common expressions such as "I love you," which seem inadequate (Appendix 45). Some users express dislike against real-life men, such as “What’s something that is a red flag in real life but you love in a romance book? Men” (Appendix 47). They even justify certain behaviours that are unacceptable, such as killing, despite clear red flags (Appendix 46). This trend may foster negative attitudes toward real men, which affects the opinions of the broader BookTok community as this attitude spreads.

However, not all comparisons are negative. Many creators convince their partners to read their favourite books, which may enhance enjoyment for the partners. There are also trends in which readers try to persuade their boyfriends to pose as they find it attractive in the books, such as leaning against the doorframe. Readers try to support attractive, ‘green flag’ behaviour in men in relationships, as written by women. It indicates that women and girls increasingly communicate their desires without shame, which can be a positive cultural influence.

Authors' activity

BookTok content is produced not only by readers and fans but also by authors. Many participate in online communities and share updates on their writing progress. Readers often analyse and speculate about the content authors share and try to predict future storylines and plot developments (Appendix 49). For example, Victoria Aveyard regularly posts videos on social media to promote her work (Appendix 51). Publishers and bookshops also manage accounts and create content for newly published titles. Interviews with authors are often recorded for TikTok videos or at events such as conferences and book festivals (Appendix 50).

Social events

BookTok content also includes reader podcasts by bookfluencers. They analyse narratives in depth and share their theories and opinions, as seen in @fantasygirlspodcast (Appendix 54). Other creators participate in activities such as cosplay and attend thematic festivals and balls that are open particularly to readers (Appendices 52-53). In Czechia, there is a HumbookFest festival in Prague focused on YAL, organised by Humbook (HumbookTeam 2026, n. p.) and fantasy balls by @emscreations.cz. These activities unite the BookTok community and promote friendships.

4.3 BookTok community

BookTok is predominantly made up of young women, according to available data (Flood 2021, n. p.). This composition reflects features such as the majority of female protagonists, book content marketed toward women, and an emotionally expressive environment. They generally consider BookTok a safe and friendly space where participants feel comfortable (Touma 2021, n. p.). Readers often immerse themselves in reading. For some, reading becomes a core aspect of identity and satisfies their need for belonging. Users use hashtags such as #bookworm, #booknerd, #bookish, #booklover, and #bookbuyingproblems on their profiles to

publicly declare their identity (Martens, Balling, and Higgason 2022, 713). Also, readers distinguish themselves by preferred genres (Wall 2023, n. p.). At the same time, they integrate the hobby into their lifestyles. Besides reading, readers follow online trends, listen to reading podcasts, watch adaptations and vlogs, and decorate their visually appealing bookshelves and displays. They feel proud to be part of the BookTok community, seeing it 'cool' again (Knight 2024, n. p.).

The BookTok community greatly influences book evaluation and promotion. Before the emergence of BookTok, readers were more often positioned as consumers. Currently, they actively contribute to the virality of book recommendations, interact with authors and the publishing industry, and participate in social events. Community members now shape trends and personalise them. Moreover, as they comment and share opinions, it may lead to online friendships (Lansom 2022, n. p.). Each country has its own BookTok community in the local language, although BookTok is mostly in English. These dynamic supports cross-cultural interactions and global participation, which became especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reading books and some content on BookTok can improve comprehension. Although the comprehension quality depends on the reader. Adolescents may understand the content, characters, and basic themes, but their critical thinking skills are still developing. Many BookTok users focus on surface-level analysis, such as recognising common tropes or simplifying complex themes. This may be because TikTok is designed for quick entertainment. Therefore, it may not always support analytical thinking.

4.4 Influence of BookTok on Publishing

BookTok can be considered both a marketing trend and a sales driver. It is sometimes called the Best-Seller Machine (Harris 2022, n. p.). Bestsellers increasingly emerge through

virality. Furthermore, bestsellers appear to be less dependent on critical acclaim and more on commercial success and readers' recommendations. This shift implies the importance of visibility over literary prestige. Publishers observe and compare great differences in book sales before and after the rise of BookTok (Chaddah 2022, n. p.). In 2021, book sales in the USA increased by 9% compared to 2020 (Gillian Flynn 2023, n. p.). In 2023, 767 million copies were sold, and even though it was down from 2022, it was still higher than in pre-BookTok years (Szklarzewska 2024, n. p.). In 2025, 8% of all USA book sales were accounted for by BookTok (Pusser 2025, n. p.). The sales remain higher, which indicates BookTok's long-term influence.

BookTok is also recognised in Czechia, but its specific data on book sales is limited. However, Czech bookshops like Luxor are aware of the trend. They promote bestsellers that are popular on BookTok. The bookshop has its own social media accounts @knihkupectvi_luxor. Their promotional videos sometimes resemble BookTok video formats (Appendix 55). This illustrates how bookshops and publisher have had to change their marketing strategies, and their presence on social media seems crucial. Another trend publishers adapted to is a focus on the physical appearance of books. Readers value aesthetic book design, such as sprayed edges, called ‘spredges’ (Armitstead 2022, n. p.). In 2024 in the UK, 13% of sales were influenced by cover (Battersby 2024, n. p.). Therefore, they sometimes produce more detailed design covers with illustrations, and in bookshops they promote them on shelves under signs “BookTok faves” (Carlick 2022, n. p.).

Moreover, BookTok has enhanced authors' visibility. They are sometimes treated as celebrities by readers. It has also revived release events and tours, such as the midnight releases of *Fourth Wing* sequels *Iron Flame* (2023) and *Onyx Storm* (2025) at bookshops Barnes & Noble in the USA and Canada (Johnson 2023, n. p.). These releases resembled the popularity of *Harry Potter series* releases in previous decades. This phenomenon shows that readers and

fans of BookTok bestsellers are a large and active community that raises the popularity of the romantasy genre (Duncan 2022, n. p.).

4.5 Romantasy as a BookTok trend

When fantasy and romance genres combine, they are referred to as romantasy. The term first appeared in Urban Dictionary in 2008 ("Urban Dictionary: Romantasy" 2008, n. p.), but its prominence has increased since the start of the BookTok trend. The most prominent authors, whose works are considered as romantasy, include Sarah J. Maas, Rebecca Yarros, Carissa Broadbent, Jennifer L. Armentrout, Stephanie Garber, Callie Hart, Holly Black, Lauren Roberts, Rebecca Ross, and Ali Hazelwood (Goodreads 2026, n. p.). All these mentioned authors are women, which highlights the dominance of women in this genre.

Romantasy is not fantasy with a romance subplot, nor romance with magical elements. Instead, romance and the fantasy world are essential to the plot, conflict, and character development (Bertino 2025, n. p.). The narratives usually happen in a fully developed fantasy world full of supernatural beings such as fairies, dragons, and other mythical creatures, along with magical powers, added political intrigue, battles, and epic quests (Creamer 2024, n. p.). Narratives are character-driven with dynamic relationships. Protagonists are generally adolescent girls who evolve into strong heroines. However, some novels include chapters from the main male protagonist's POV, who becomes the heroine's romantic partner. Fans usually treasure these few chapters as they explore the male's thoughts on the relationship in greater detail. Moreover, romantic partners are usually presented as equal or help each other to reach the same level of power (Smith & Taylor Kollman 2025, 280). Besides the main story and the relationships, the stories sometimes embrace explicit sexual content, called 'spice' or 'smut' by the fans (Creamer 2024, n. p.). These sections are not always crucial to the plot and cover a few chapters of the content (Scudeler 2025, n. p.), which allows readers to skip these parts.

Romantasy readers who are often BookTok fans, therefore mostly girls and young women, discuss theories about the continuation of relationships and plotlines online. The reason is that most romantasy books are part of duologies, trilogies or even pentalogies, and their endings frequently end with cliffhangers. Fans sometimes even create their own alternative storylines, known as fanfictions, and share them online.

In summary, romantasy genre represents many of the BookTok trends and values, and combines emotions, relationships and immersive fantasy world-building. Its rapid growth reflects its close connection to the commercial success, which leads to more and more YA romantasy titles in the book market. This BookTok effect may raise concerns, for example, about literary quality.

4.6 Criticism of BookTok

BookTok is associated with many positive outcomes that were mentioned. Despite its many positive impacts, BookTok has also raised many questions:

Educational concerns

Trends on BookTok emerge rapidly and without regulation, which leads many titles to go viral in a short period of time. People who do not actively participate in or regularly follow the content may struggle to stay informed about it. For instance, teachers who want to know their students' interests may find it chaotic and time-consuming. Furthermore, BookTok may lack guidance as its creators are enthusiastic readers rather than educators who specialise in literature and critical literacy tools. A potential solution to this problem involves teachers as content creators (Dera 2024, n. p.), who would present the content from an academic perspective.

Virality versus Quality

As mentioned, the more viral a book becomes, the more popular it is and the higher the chances of becoming a bestseller. This may encourage publishers to prioritise novels with

familiar tropes and narratives, their fast production, and authors to adapt their writing (Yang 2024, n. p.). It may impact originality and literary merit. Even if this assumption is true, it can be argued that many BookTok titles are created for readers' entertainment, therefore the value of the novels may lie in their ability to connect with contemporary audiences.

Focus on viral titles

On BookTok, every author can create their own content and promote their work. However, the spotlight and popularity are disproportionate, as they repeat the same recommendations. That creates a potential issue of less exposure for debuts outside of trends, while it strengthens the repetition of already popular titles (Barnett 2023, n. p.). Also, if a book becomes visible, it does not guarantee long-term visibility, because it can be quickly replaced.

Commercialisation of Reading

Besides reading, the BookTok community enjoys the aesthetic of the interest. They often decorate their increasingly large shelves or collect many editions of the same titles. This side of BookTok may contribute to overconsumption, where the quantity of books is more important than actually reading them (Dera 2024, n. p.). Additionally, this issue may accidentally cause inequality (Merga 2021, 6). Some readers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be unable to afford these aesthetically appealing bookshelves, which may make them feel excluded.

Mature content

Another issue that may hurt readers, according to the public, is the presence of mature content. It has been discussed that explicit content in YAL may appear and inform readers. However, many popular BookTok titles do not appear to contain mature content, and readers can be surprised while reading. Especially, NA and YA contemporary romance covers in pastel colours with cartoon illustrations and small labels ‘18+’ can be misleading (Knight 2024, n. p.).

Apart from that, BookTok contains trends that may idealise unhealthy and toxic romantic behaviour (Neely 2024, n. p.), such as the novel *It Ends with Us* (Hoover 2016), which has been widely criticised for romanticising domestic abuse (Barnaby 2023, n. p.). These concerns highlight the need for critical reading and media literacy when engaging with BookTok trends.

In conclusion, BookTok has evolved from a social media trend into a literary phenomenon that contributes to YAL development. It has transformed relationships among readers, authors and the publishing industry over the past few years, along with many positive impacts and some challenges. Its dynamic is evident in the rise of the romantasy, a genre that reflects many of BookTok's dominant patterns. Some aspects discussed in this chapter, such as reader responses, the use of tropes, and representations of romantic relationships, are also applied in the following analysis.

5 Literary Analysis and Readers' Responses to BookTok-Popular Romantasy Novels

This chapter focuses on four BookTok-popular novels: *A Court of Thorns and Roses (ACOTAR)* (Maas 2015), *The Cruel Prince* (Black 2018), *Red Queen* (Aveyard 2015), and *Fourth Wing* (Yarros 2023). These novels serve as examples of romantasy. The first part of the chapter presents a comparative literary analysis of these novels. The second part examines how adolescent readers may interpret selected novels. Attention is given to readers' preferences and their perceptions of themes, characters, relationships, and moral conflicts. Moreover, the research compares responses of younger and older adolescents. Additionally, the findings are later compared with the literary analysis presented in the first part of the chapter.

However, the research is not intended to be a large-scale empirical study. It represents a small classroom-based exploration, and it offers insight into how a specific group of adolescent readers perceives romantasy literature and BookTok content. These findings cannot be generalised to all adolescent readers.

5.1 Literary Analysis of Romantasy Novels

This part presents a comparative literary analysis of four selected novels. These works were selected for their worldwide popularity and strong presence in BookTok communities. The *ACOTAR series* has sold more than 70 million copies worldwide and has accumulated several billion views on TikTok. *The Cruel Prince* remains one of the most frequently recommended YA romantasy series on BookTok, with more than one hundred thousand videos under the hashtag #cruelprince. *Red Queen* became one of the early fantasy trends during the rise of BookTok and continues to attract readers. *Fourth Wing* is among the most successful recent romantasy novels, generating more than a billion views on TikTok and remaining on *The New York Times* bestseller list for eighteen weeks.

All four novels draw inspiration from different influences. *ACOTAR* was originally a darker retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* and was also inspired by the Scottish ballad *Tam Lin* (Good Reading Magazine 2022, n. p.). *The Cruel Prince* draws heavily on folklore, such as a reversed changeling story (Mullen 2019, n. p.), and Holly Black's long-standing interest in faerie mythology. *Red Queen* combines fantasy and dystopian fiction, which Aveyard herself described as "*Game of Thrones* meets *X-Men* meets *The Hunger Games*" (Aveyard 2019, n. p.). Finally, *Fourth Wing* reflects Rebecca Yarros's personal experience with military life and chronic illness (Rosenfeld 2026, n. p.). It also draws on themes concerning the manipulation of history and information (Kwong 2024, n. p.).

The analysis uses close reading and focuses on recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across the selected novels. It examines genre positioning, narrative method, world-building, protagonists, relationship dynamics, tropes, themes, symbols, sexuality, and audience appeal. More in-depth analyses of the individual novels are included in the appendices 56-59, providing the basis for the comparative analysis in this chapter.

5.1.1 Genre Positioning

All four analysed novels belong to fantasy literature and combine fantasy elements with romance. However, they differ in the extent to which romance influences the main plot and in the additional genre elements they incorporate. The novels demonstrate that contemporary romantasy literature is not limited to one genre.

ACOTAR and *Fourth Wing* emphasise more romance, which is connected to the main narrative. Both novels can also be viewed as crossovers between YA and NA. Although *ACOTAR* is usually marketed as YA, the protagonist is 19 years old, and the series gradually includes more explicit sexual content. Similarly, *Fourth Wing* is categorised as NA because of its explicit scenes, violence, and darker themes. In contrast, *The Cruel Prince* and *Red Queen*

focus more on political conflicts. *The Cruel Prince* combines fantasy with court intrigue, while romance remains less important, especially in the first novel. The age of the main protagonists, Jude and Mare, and the absence of explicit sexual content support YA classification for both novels. Besides, *Red Queen* incorporates dystopian features such as an oppressive regime, surveillance, propaganda, and rebellion. Also, the romance is present through romantic tension and attractive royal characters, but it does not dominate the narrative.

5.1.2 Narrative Style

All four novels are written in the first person from the main female protagonist's perspective. The narration is limited and subjective, and readers only have access to the information available to the protagonist. This narrative style enables readers to discover secrets, misunderstandings, and hidden motivations alongside the protagonists. It may also contribute to the romanticisation of morally complex characters and to misjudgements that are later revealed as the story develops. For example, Feyre initially views faeries as monsters, Mare misjudges Maven with hidden intentions, and Violet remains unaware of political truths and propaganda. The novels mostly focus on emotions and personal experiences. The narration prioritises the protagonists' thoughts, feelings, fears, and relationships. This approach may encourage readers to form an emotional connection with the protagonists and their romantic interests. Consequently, relationship dynamics often receive more attention than political or social issues, particularly in *ACOTAR* and *Fourth Wing*. A further indication of this tendency can be observed in the way these novels are presented on BookTok, as explained in Chapter 4. Despite these similarities, the novels differ in tone and atmosphere. *ACOTAR* shifts from a harsh, cold, realistic atmosphere to a magical, romanticised world. In the final section, it becomes darker and more oppressive again. *The Cruel Prince* maintains a predominantly dark tone characterised by cruelty of faeries, manipulation, irony, and political intrigue. *Red Queen*

combines social inequality and rebellion with a dramatic atmosphere. *Fourth Wing* emphasises danger, competition, and survival.

The pacing of all four novels differs, but they are all accessible to adolescent readers. None of the novels employs complex sentence structures or demanding language. Instead, the texts focus on dialogue, emotional reactions, atmosphere, and character development. *The Cruel Prince*, *Red Queen*, and *Fourth Wing* use short chapters, cliffhangers, and unexpected revelations to create suspense. Unlike *ACOTAR*, which devotes more space to world-building and romantic development. Nevertheless, all four novels combine action, tension, and suspense in ways that may encourage reading.

5.1.3 World-Building and Social Structures

The selected novels are set in different fantasy worlds, but all four are characterised by social hierarchies, power inequalities, and systems that privilege particular groups over others. *ACOTAR* and *The Cruel Prince* are set in faerie realms, but the relationship between the human and magical worlds differs. In *ACOTAR*, the human world resembles a medieval society and is separated from magical Prythian by the Wall. Prythian is divided into several courts ruled by powerful High Lords. The first novel focuses mainly on the Spring Court and Under the Mountain, where political authority is concentrated. In contrast, the faerie realm of Elfhame in *The Cruel Prince* exists alongside the modern human world, and ordinary humans are largely unaware of it. Elfhame is centred around royal court politics, noble families, and competition for influence. Power is determined by magical abilities, birth, status, strategic thinking, and manipulation. These two novels also emphasise the contrast between beauty and danger. The Spring Court appears as a place of luxury, comfort, and safety, compared to the poverty of the human world, see excerpt below.

> "I'd never seen anything like it; even our former manor couldn't compare… Of course it would be magic, because it was spring here. What wretched power did they possess to make their lands so different from ours, to control the seasons and weather as if they owned them?" (*ACOTAR*, 47).

Elfhame is presented as beautiful and magical, almost whimsical, full of celebrations, enchanting food, music, and supernatural creatures. Behind this lie violence, humiliation, and betrayal. Feyre and Jude gradually realise that appearances conceal darker realities. This contrast may contribute to the romanticisation of the danger among readers. The excerpt below shows how Jude describes brutality of the main male protagonist in *The Cruel Prince*. It proves how cruelty is normalised in Elfhame.

> "As the boy falls, Cardan grabs one of his wings. It tears like paper. The boy's scream is thin and reedy. He curls up into himself on the ground, agony plain on his face. I wonder if faerie wings grow back; I know that butterflies that lose a wing never fly again. The courtiers around us gape and titter, but only for a moment. Then they go back to their dancing and their songs, and the revel spirals on" (*The Cruel Prince*, 22).

The worlds of *Red Queen* and *Fourth Wing* differ from the faerie settings. They are built around systems of privilege and control. In *Red Queen*, social status is determined by blood. The Silver blood elite possess supernatural abilities and dominate the Red population politically, economically, and militarily. The Red and Silver blood function as a social marker which supports the belief of Silvers' superiority. The system is controlled by the royalty and government propaganda. Mare's unexpected powers challenge this ideology. The novel presents inequality as something normalised within society. The excerpt below describes how Mare is expected to be thankful as the Queen elevated her status to a Silver noble. It shows how the elite, the Queen, do not consider feelings of the Red.

> "My throat tightens, like I can feel the chains the king and queen are wrapping around me. "What about my life—?" "What life?" Elara crows. "Girl, you have fallen head over heels into a miracle." Cal squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, as if the sound of the

queen's laughter pains him. "She means her family. Mare—the girl—has a family" (*Red Queen*, 88).

Fourth Wing illustrates a military society which values strength. Dragon riders hold a high social status, second only to royalty. The military leadership controls information, and the dragons possess supernatural power. Violet gradually discovers that many truths about the kingdom are censored. Like *Red Queen*, the narrative raises questions about authority, and the control of information. The following passage captures how Violet tries to convince herself that there was no censored message. It highlights her progressive realization of government censorship.

> "None of them knows what we do, that an entire village of Navarrians was ransacked last night along the border and supplies looted. And yet, we're discussing a battle that happened before the convenience of indoor plumbing was invented. "Now, pay close attention," Markham lectures…"Was that scroll marked classified?" Liam asks under his breath. "No," I respond just as quietly. "But maybe I missed it?" The battle map doesn't even show activity near that mountain range. "Yeah." He nods, scratching his quill against the parchment as he begins to take notes. "That has to be it. You missed it."… That's the only possible explanation" (*Fourth Wing*, 261).

Moreover, magic works differently in each novel. In *ACOTAR* and *The Cruel Prince*, magic remains rather mysterious and may be bent by the characters. Magical abilities include glamour, enchantments, bargains, shapeshifting, mind-reading, and geases. *Red Queen* and *Fourth Wing* use more structured systems. Silvers' supernatural abilities in *Red Queen* are hereditary, and in *Fourth Wing,* riders' supernatural abilities originate from dragon bonds.

Another important similarity is the protagonists' position as outsiders. This allows the readers to explore and question the fictional worlds alongside them. Feyre enters Prythian as a human who is unfamiliar with faerie customs. Jude struggles to be accepted by the Fae and is always reminded of her mortality. Mare must hide her true identity because she challenges the

power system. And Violet begins in the novel as a fragile and weak outsider within the violent Rider's Quadrant.

5.1.4 Main protagonists

The female protagonists, Feyre (19 years old), Jude (17 years old), Mare (17 years old) and Violet (20 years old), undergo major transformations. Their personalities and motivations differ, but they become more confident and powerful characters despite starting out as mortal humans. Their development mirrors a coming-of-age transformation, which is a common feature in YA literature. Initially, the protagonists are motivated by survival. Feyre is responsible for supporting her family, so she becomes a hunter. Mare contends with poverty and social inequality as a thief. Violet, who is described as physically weak, endures the quests of Rider's Quadrant. Although Jude is motivated less by survival and more by a desire for acceptance and recognition, as seen in the following excerpt.

> "No matter how careful I am, eventually I'll make another misstep. I am weak. I am fragile. I am mortal. I hate that most of all. Even if, by some miracle, I could be better than them, I will never be one of them" (*The Cruel Prince*, 46).

The protagonists differ in how they transform. Feyre's growth is associated with courage and sacrifice for her lover. Mare gains influence through her magic and participation in a rebellion. Violet relies on her intelligence, wit and determination. Jude gains power through learning how to spy, manipulate, lie, and strategize. It makes her the most morally ambiguous of the protagonists. A characteristic they share is discontent with their roles in society. Feyre refuses to remain powerless and chooses to fight. Mare rejects the passive role of a prince's fiancée and secretly fights the oppressive system. Violet deliberately trains to become physically stronger and refuses to listen to the mockery and judgment. Jude never accepts the subordinate human status and humiliation. They all want control over their own lives.

However, the protagonists are not portrayed as perfect heroines. Their complexity may make them more sympathetic and realistic to the readers. Feyre sometimes becomes naive and dependent on those she trusts. Jude increasingly resorts to many kinds of deception and even violence. Mare often acts impulsively and misjudges others. And Violet struggles with low confidence and the consequences of her lethal lightning power. The next passage focuses on Violet and Xaden's discussion. He attempts to reframe her perspective. This part demonstrates Violet's struggle of accepting responsibility that comes with it.

> "I start to shake my head, but his eyes narrow on mine. "You might not like it, might even loathe it, but it's power like yours that saves lives." "By killing people?" I cry. If Sgaeyl is right, and signets reflect who we are at our core, then I'm exactly as Xaden nicknamed me…Violence. "By defeating invading armies before they get the chance to hurt civilians. You want to keep Rhiannon's nephew alive in that little border village? This is how. You want to keep Mira alive when she's behind enemy lines? This. Is. How. You are not just *a* weapon, Sorrengail. You are *the* weapon. You train this ability, own it, and you'll have the power to defend an entire *kingdom*" (*Fourth Wing*, 366).

5.1.5 Relationship Dynamics

A recurring pattern in the selected novels is the portrayal of powerful male love interests. Tamlin and Rhysand (*ACOTAR*) are High Lords, Cardan (*The Cruel Prince*) is one of the King's children, Cal and Maven (*Red Queen*) belong to the ruling royal family as well, and Xaden (*Fourth Wing*) is a respected military leader, although he is also viewed as a dangerous son of a traitor. In contrast, Feyre, Jude, Mare, and Violet begin their stories in weaker social positions. Romantic relationships, therefore, often develop alongside the protagonists' rise in status and influence.

Male protection is usually presented as love. Tamlin constantly attempts to hide Feyre from danger and later sends her away from Prythian to save her life. Xaden secretly protects Violet during military training, trains her to survive challenges, and supports her as a rider. In

these cases, protective behaviour is illustrated as caring and desirable. However, this may raise questions about personal choices made on behalf of the female protagonists. Moreover, the boundaries between protection and control may become unclear, and readers may see overprotective behaviour as romantic. The following excerpt illustrates a situation in which Tamlin makes decisions on Feyre's behalf, even though his motivation is to protect her.

> "A glamour—that's what Tamlin had said he wore. His faerie sight had stripped away the glamours I'd been seeing. But why bother to glamour everything? Because I'd been a cowering human, that's why. Because Tamlin knew I would have locked myself in this room and never come out if I'd seen them all for their true selves. Things only got worse when I made my way downstairs to find the High Lord. The hallways were bustling with masked faeries I'd never seen before" (*ACOTAR*, 214).

The Cruel Prince and *Red Queen* relationships are different from the previous ones. Jude and Cardan's relationship begins with humiliation and rivalry, as Cardan initially intimidates Jude. Then it evolves into attraction while they try to control one another. Their tension and political alliance may appear stronger than their romantic relationship in the first novel. Moreover, Mare's relationships with Cal and Maven are connected to political intrigue and propaganda. At first, Mare is forced into an engagement with Maven and is always exposed to the princes' conflicting messages of affection. Mare learns to navigate her romantic feelings while she questions true loyalty and identity. The excerpt below provides an example of this dynamic.

> "I'll miss you, Mare." As much as I want to stand still, to stop time and let this moment last forever, I know it's not possible. Whatever I might feel or think, Cal is not the prince I'm promised to. More important, he's on the wrong side. He's my enemy. Cal is forbidden…. His lips are on mine, hard and warm and pressing. The touch is electrifying, but not like I'm used to. This isn't a spark of destruction but a spark of life. As much as I want to pull away, I just can't do it" (*Red Queen*, 228).

Another common feature is the attraction to morally ambiguous characters. Rhysand, Cardan, and Xaden are introduced as dangerous, mysterious, or even threatening. Their behaviour includes deception, secrecy, and manipulation. All the male characters are willing to use violence. However, the stories gradually reveal their vulnerabilities and motivations. Rhysand's reputation as Amarantha's ally, Cardan's cruelty, and Xaden's secrecy are all partially explained and, from the narrator's perspective, nearly justified. On the contrary, Maven initially appears sensitive, kind, and supportive. Mare trusts him and views him as safer and more understanding than Cal. Mare does not question his intentions. Then his later betrayal causes shock and reveals how appearances can be misleading. As a result, readers may be encouraged to sympathise with characters whose behaviour might otherwise be viewed negatively, or to misjudge some characters. Furthermore, the novels highlight the attractiveness not only of morally complex characters but also of emotionally unavailable ones. Tamlin struggles with his emotions and communication, Cardan hides his trauma behind cruelty, Maven is full of jealousy and schemes, and Xaden escapes from any truth. Their emotional wounds often become part of their redemption and re-evaluation of their character. These characters, also called 'bad boys,' can encourage the romanticisation of dysfunctional relationships, and readers' expectations may be influenced by them. The following excerpt shows Violet's fascination with, or rather attraction to, Xaden's dangerous and mysterious nature.

> "Xaden lifts a hand a few inches above the table, and shadows pour from underneath our seats, filling the room and turning it dark as midnight in a blink. My heart jumps as my sight goes black. *"Relax. It's just me."* A ghost of a touch skims my cheek. *Just him* is slightly…terrifying… What had Sgaeyl said about signets? *It reflects who you are at the core of your being.* It makes sense. Mira is protective. Dain has to know everything. And Xaden…has secrets" (*Fourth Wing*, 339).

Despite the importance of romance, the female protagonists are portrayed as active participants in these relationships. All the protagonists' motivations are gradually shaped by

their romantic relationships, but these relationships do not completely define their identities or alter their ambitions. Moreover, the protagonists are not overshadowed by the powerful males. Protagonists gradually become their equals or even more powerful heroines, and their male partners fully support or respect them. This shows a non-traditional approach to gender roles. *The Cruel Prince*, *Red Queen*, and *Fourth Wing* portray women participating more directly in politics and the military. Jude becomes a kingmaker, Mare a symbol of rebellion, and Violet the most powerful dragon rider. In contrast, *ACOTAR* features the most traditional gender structure, with political power concentrated among male High Lords. However, even in these more progressive settings, male characters are associated with strength, leadership, confidence, and the ability to provide protection. At the same time, female protagonists are valued for intelligence, determination and independence. Overall, the selected novels combine modern female representations with more conventional romantic ideals.

5.1.6 Tropes

Several BookTok-popular tropes that shape the protagonists, their relationships and the central conflicts, are present in the selected novels. For example, none of the female protagonists initially seek heroic status but rather a sense of belonging. They are reluctant heroines who are gradually forced or influenced by circumstances to accept responsibility and power. While Feyre and Violet face trials and quests, Jude and Mare are involved in politics and manipulation.

Another popular trope is enemies-to-lovers. In *ACOTAR*, the enemies develop feelings for each other, specifically Feyre and Rhysand, but do not fall in love in the first novel. In *Red Queen*, Mare falls in love with Cal despite his privileged Silver class status. In *Fourth Wing* and *The Cruel Prince*, this trope is evident as the main couples begin with hatred and open

antagonism and slowly develop mutual attraction. The following excerpt depicts the initial hostility and tension that characterise the enemies-to-lovers trope.

> "Smoothing it out, I see Cardan's furious, arrogant handwriting scrawled over the page, taking up all available space. In some places he pressed the nib so angrily that the paper tore. *Jude*, it reads, each hateful rendering of my name like a punch to the gut" (*The Cruel Prince*, 140).

The love triangle is a next relationship trope. There is Feyre with Tamlin and Rhysand, and this love triangle creates romantic tension. Jude, Locke, and Cardan's love triangle is entangled in betrayal and politics. Mare with Maven and Cal's relationship combines romance with political conflict as well. In contrast, *Fourth Wing* contains a less important triangle between Violet, Dain and Xaden. It mainly highlights Violet's growing attraction to Xaden. Another recurring trope is miscommunication. In *ACOTAR* and *Fourth Wing*, it causes tension, secrets and arguments between the main romantic partners.

Furthermore, morally grey characters appear in all novels. Characters such as Rhysand, Jude, Cardan, Mare, and Xaden cannot be clearly categorised as evil, but their actions are morally questionable. Their problematic behaviour is usually motivated by survival, duty or a greater good, which may invite readers to sympathise with such characters.

5.1.7 Themes and Coming-of-Age Elements

The selected novels explore several recurring themes. The most apparent are identity, a sense of belonging, survival, power, and transformation. The works contain many coming-of-age elements typical of YA literature. The protagonists experience increasing responsibility, maturity, romantic relationships, and difficult moral choices. They question authority and learn to define their own values. Their journeys are not simple nor idealised as they must overcome many obstacles, such as betrayal, trauma, sacrifice, and disappointment. These elements match the coming-of-age journeys.

The search for identity and belonging is portrayed as all four protagonists occupy low positions in their societies at the beginning of the novels. For example, Feyre feels hopeless in human life and then struggles to find her place in the faerie world. Jude does not belong to the human world nor to Elfhame, where she grew up as a bastard human child. Mare pretends to be a Silver noble after discovering her powers, which means she hides her true identity behind the persona of Mareena Titanos. And Violet is on the verge of choosing between the identity of a scribe and that of a rider. Throughout the novels, the protagonists stop seeking acceptance from society and create their own place, which highlights their independence. It shows a common YA identity development. The following excerpt, which is highly popular in BookTok content, illustrates Jude's rejection of the role assigned to her by society. She decides to create her own path.

> "I won't be afraid of him or of Prince Dain's censure. If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse" (*The Cruel Prince*, 210).

The theme of identity development is connected to transformation. They undergo emotional, social, and physical changes. Feyre is reborn as a High Fae, Jude becomes a political strategist, Mare becomes a symbol of rebellion, and Violet is a fearful rider. Their journeys indicate that identity is shaped by experience and determination. It may also appeal to adolescent readers who are undergoing many changes. In addition, the theme of transformation is represented by many symbols. Feyre's paintings reflect her emotional state, Mare's lightning symbolises her uniqueness, Violet's bond with her dragon Tairn represents the acceptance of her new identity and power, and Jude's poisoning herself symbolises adaptation and overcoming vulnerability. These symbols are different, but they all illustrate the protagonists' journeys.

Family and friendship relationships also influence the protagonists' development. Families are often portrayed as imperfect or almost dysfunctional, but they are sources of motivation, responsibility, loyalty, and conflict. Feyre supports her family despite receiving

little appreciation. Jude's relationship with her sisters and her father figure, Madoc, is marked by affection and betrayal. Mare's decisions are often influenced by concern for her family. Violet's development is shaped by her mother's expectations. Whereas friendships usually serve as healthy found-family relationships and provide emotional support, especially in *Fourth Wing*. These relationships indicate that identity is also formed through connections with others.

Another theme is survival, evident at the beginning of each selected novel. Survival functions as the protagonists' main motivation. Feyre and Mare face poverty, while Jude and Violet face the cruelty and dangers of society. However, survival gives way to bigger goals. They do not just want to survive but also freedom, influence, justice, and love. Power is another central aspect in the works. Protagonists usually fight the great villains who hold the power. It may resemble fairy tales, but with a much darker context, such as spying and murders *in The Cruel Prince,* betrayal in *Red Queen*, and deadly trials in *ACOTAR* and *Fourth Wing*. All four narratives also question who deserves power, how it is obtained, and how it can be used. The protagonists discover that power often requires sacrifice and questionable moral decisions, as illustrated by Mare in the following passage.

> "I push back from the murdered woman, but my hands slide through a mixture of silverblood and wine. A scream escapes me in a terrifying combination of frustration and grief. The blood clings to my hands, like it knows what I've done. It's sticky and cold and everywhere, trying to drown me" (*Red Queen*, 243).

The novels also contain many symbols of truth and illusion. Characters live within systems built on deception or hidden information. In *ACOTAR*, the masks worn by the Spring Court faeries symbolise Amarantha's curse, which is revealed to Feyre later in the novel. In *The Cruel Prince*, the faeries' inability to lie creates an environment full of deception. *Red Queen* presents a society that functions on propaganda and false beliefs. *Fourth Wing* shows censored history and how easily the truth can be erased by the government. These symbols and themes suggest that knowledge is a form of power and is necessary for discovering the truth. Another

symbol is boundaries and divisions that repeatedly appear in different forms. The Wall in *ACOTAR* symbolises separation and prejudice between humans and faeries. The division between Reds and Silvers in *Red Queen* represents social inequality. In *Fourth Wing*, Basgiath War College has two functions: a place of belonging and a system that forces cadets to prove themselves. And the world of Elfhame represents Jude's desire as well as her exclusion.

5.1.8 Explicit Content and Its Narrative Function

The selected novels vary in the depiction of sexuality. The difference in the amount of explicit sexual scenes corresponds with genre classification. *ACOTAR* and *Fourth Wing* contain explicit sexual scenes and therefore correspond more closely with the NA category, whereas *The Cruel Prince* and *Red Queen* contain little or no explicit sexual content, which is typical for YA. Furthermore, these explicit scenes and attractive romantic interests are often highlighted in BookTok content and may contribute to the popularity of these novels.

In *ACOTAR* and *Fourth Wing*, sexuality plays an important role in the characters' development. The scenes often highlight turning points in the relationships. They also depict the characters' intimacy, desire, trust, physical attraction, and consent. The following excerpt illustrates Feyre's perception of Tamlin. She initially viewed faeries as dangerous monsters, but she now feels attracted to Tamlin and the power he represents. At the same time, the passage emphasises her own desire and consent.

> "A ravenous, unyielding sort of hunger passed over his face. I bent a leg and slid it to the side, a silent invitation. He let out a low growl—and slowly, with predatory intent, raised his gaze to mine again. The full force of that wild, unrelenting High Lord's power focused solely on me—and I felt the storm contained beneath his skin, so capable of sweeping away everything I was, even in its lessened state" (*ACOTAR*, 247).

The Cruel Prince and *Red Queen* rely more on tension, attraction, jealousy, and relationship conflicts. Romance in these two novels is expressed through interactions between

characters, such as flirting, kissing and dialogue, and not through explicit scenes. The following excerpt highlights the connection between attraction and power in Jude and Cardan's relationship. Jude is primarily aware of her control over Cardan rather than focusing on romance.

> "I lean toward him, close enough for a kiss. His eyes widen. The look in his face is some commingling of panic and desire. It is a heady feeling, having power over someone. Over *Cardan*, who I never thought had any feelings at all. "You really do want me," I say, close enough to feel the warmth of his breath as it hitches. "And you *hate* it." I change the angle of the knife, turning it so it's against his neck" (*The Cruel Prince*, 307).

5.1.9 Audience Appeal

The popularity of the novels may be driven mainly by their alignment with BookTok culture. As mentioned in the previous chapter, BookTok trends include attractive male characters, enemies-to-lovers romances, morally grey love interests, emotional tension, and plot twists that create strong emotional reactions and encourage online discussions. All the named elements are present in these novels. Another appealing aspect is their aesthetics. Like *ACOTAR*'s magical courts and fairy-tale elements, *The Cruel Prince's* beautiful, whimsical yet dangerous faeries, *Red Queen's* royal luxury and rebellion, and *Fourth Wing*'s dragons and a military academy. These settings are easily transformed into BookTok content. Moreover, Rhysand, Cardan, and Xaden have become popular as "BookTok boyfriends." Besides, the novels contain memorable scenes that remain in readers' minds and are recalled on BookTok. One of the BookTok-popular scenes from *ACOTAR* portrays Rhysand and Feyre's first meeting. This scene is shaped by Feyre's perception of Rhysand, who appears as her saviour and an exceptionally attractive stranger.

> "There you are. I've been looking for you," said a deep, sensual male voice I'd never heard…"Thank you for finding her for me," my savior said to them, smooth and polished. "Enjoy the Rite." There was enough of a bite beneath his last words that the faeries

stiffened. Without further comment, they scuttled back to the bonfires. I stepped out of the shelter of my savior's arm and turned to thank him. Standing before me was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen" (*ACOTAR*, 188).

Another BookTok-popular scene is from *The Cruel Prince*. The passage depicts Cardan's unexpected confession of his feelings and focuses on romantic tension rather than on any broader political themes or a profound message of the novel.

"Just tell me why you hate me. Once and for all."… "Well?" I say, lifting the crossbow again, glad to have a reason to reassert my position as the person in charge. "Tell me!" He leans in and closes his eyes. "Most of all, I hate you because I think of you. Often. It's disgusting, and I can't stop." (*The Cruel Prince*, 306-307).

The examples above support the claim that BookTok content focuses on emotions, romance, and attractive characters, which may influence attention of the readers. Together with powerful female characters, all these elements contribute to the popularity of the selected novels.

5.2 Adolescent Readers' Responses

This part of the chapter explores how adolescent readers interpret selected romantasy novels and BookTok content. The research is intended to offer an insight into the perception of a specific group of adolescent readers. It presents the results of a questionnaire and guided discussions. The attention is given to readers' preferences related to their perceptions of themes, world-building, characters and relationships.

5.2.1 Research Sample, Environment, and Method

The research was conducted with 22 female participants since BookTok content primarily targets female readers. Participants were students at Grammar school Písnická in Prague. Ten participants attended the fourth year (kvarta) of grammar school, equivalent to Grade 9 (aged 14-15), and twelve participants attended the seventh year (septima, 3.A), corresponding to the

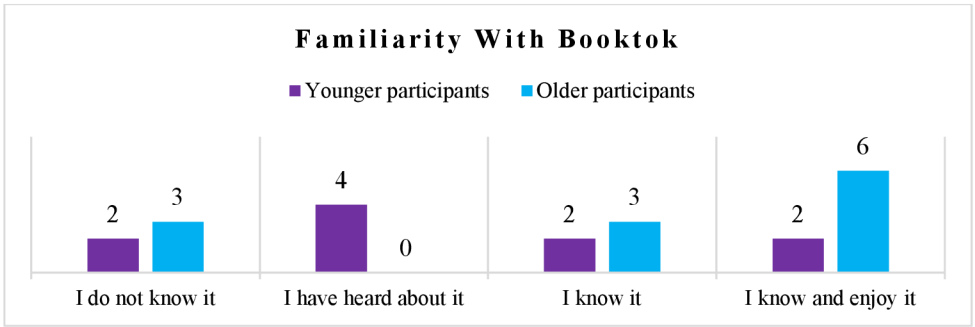
third year of upper-secondary education (aged 17-19). They were selected through convenience sampling as the researcher had access to these classes through teaching practice. Participation was voluntary and, surprisingly, the students showed a positive interest in participating. It may be explained by the fact that they were readers, and many of them were familiar with BookTok.

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed in advance and is included in appendix 60. Participants were allowed to complete it at home, which provided them enough time to reflect on their answers. The open-ended and closed questions focused on their reading habits, preferences in fantasy and romantasy literature, attitudes towards fictional characters and relationships, and awareness of BookTok trends. Then, the discussions were held in a calm, friendly and familiar school environment, so the participants could express their opinions and reading experiences openly with their peers and the researcher. They were presented with excerpts from the analysed novels with additional context and questions related to the texts.

5.2.2 Questionnaire: Reading Habits and Preferences

The responses showed that all participants were active readers, and almost all younger participants read daily, but some of the older participants reported they read less frequently due to their academic responsibilities. Both groups favoured romance, fantasy and romantasy genres, but the older group reported a wider variety, such as historical fiction, sci-fi, thrillers, detective, and contemporary novels. This suggests their broader reading experience.

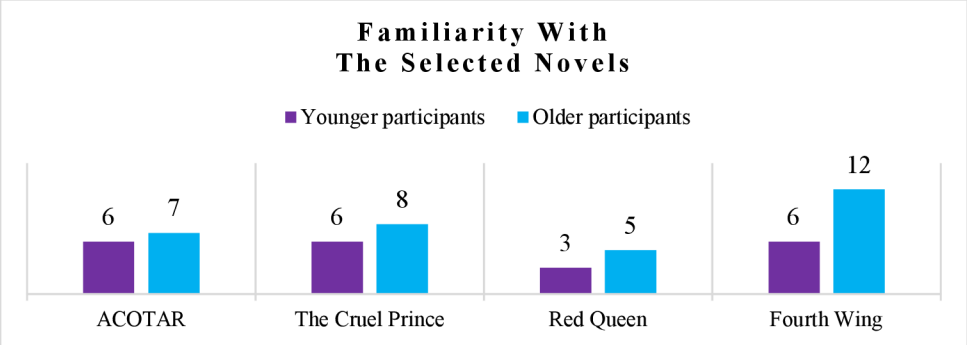
Figure 1: Familiarity with BookTok



As shown in Figure 1, many participants were familiar with BookTok. Younger participants were more likely to be aware of its existence. This suggests that older adolescent readers participate more actively in BookTok communities, as older participants reported higher levels of engagement. Moreover, some older participants mentioned they found a feeling of understanding online. They also mentioned that they enjoyed ranking male characters, edits, fan art, cosplays, discussions, conspiracy theories, reading comments, chatting online, and watching videos that highlight "small details they missed while reading." Younger participants viewed BookTok primarily as a source of recommendations. They preferred people's reactions, opinions and edits, including scenes from the novels. Some younger participants specifically mentioned that the recommendations could convince them to buy a book. These findings suggest that BookTok functions differently for each age group. Younger readers use it to discover books, and older readers actively engage with the content.

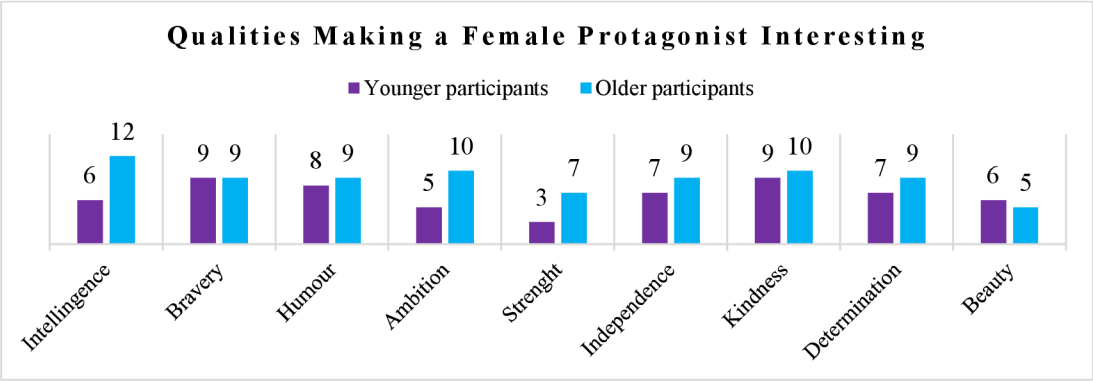
The priorities of choosing and continuing to read a book varied between the age groups. Younger participants mostly mentioned romance, plot twists, explicit scenes and action, while older participants considered ratings, authors, plot descriptions, visual appeal, and themes. They also mentioned writing style, suspense, well-written characters, and world-building. This indicates that younger participants focus more on romance and emotions, as discussed in subsequent findings.

Figure 2: Familiarity with the Selected Novels



As shown in Figure 2, older participants were more familiar with selected novels, which may be related to the target audience of the novels and participants' greater engagement. Familiarity includes both participants who had read the novels and those who reported knowing them. Regarding actual reading experience, 10 of 12 older participants had read *Fourth Wing*, 7 had read *ACOTAR*, 5 had read *The Cruel Prince*, and 2 had read *Red Queen*. In comparison, only 3 younger participants had read *Fourth Wing*, 2 had read *ACOTAR*, 4 had read *The Cruel Prince,* and none had read *Red Queen*. In addition, 8 older participants chose a book because it had become popular on BookTok, whereas only 3 younger participants did.

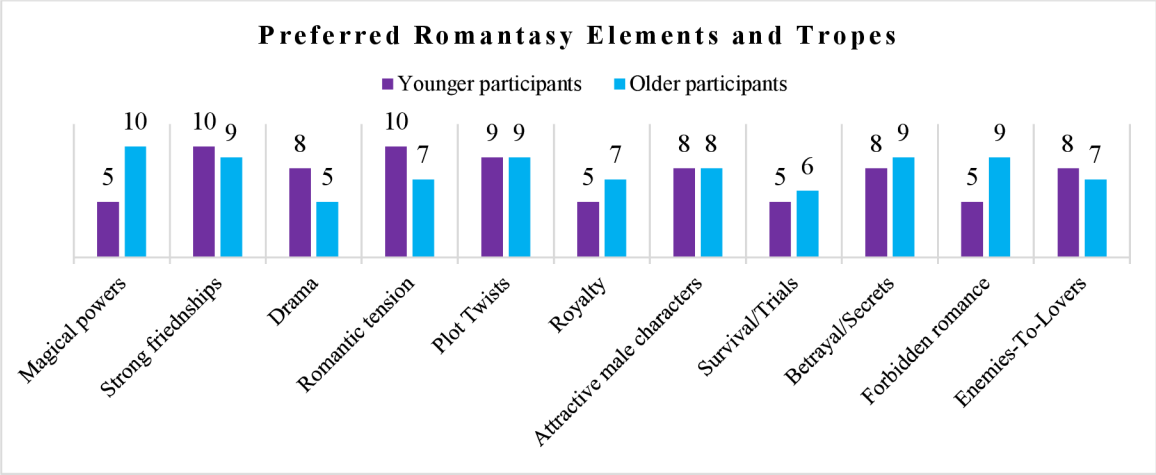
Figure 3: Qualities Making a Female Protagonist Interesting



Questions related to the characteristics of an interesting female protagonist revealed similarities between younger and older participants. However, as shown in Figure 3, older participants emphasised intelligence, ambition, and strength more. Several older participants also commented that they preferred protagonists whom they could admire or aspire to be like.

Regarding fantasy settings, participants favoured magical, emotional, adventurous, and exciting worlds. However, younger participants preferred romantic and dramatic settings, and older participants selected beautiful, mysterious, suspenseful, and unpredictable worlds more often. One older participant described an ideal fantasy setting resembling "a fairytale on the outside but ruthless when you read more."

Figure 4: Preferred Romantasy Elements and Tropes



When asked about preferred romantasy elements and tropes, participants from both age groups expressed similar preferences, as seen in Figure 4. The most notable differences concerned drama and romantic tension, which were more popular among younger participants. Magical powers and forbidden romance were selected more often by older participants. These outcomes support the literary analysis and suggest that many of the BookTok-popular romantasy elements correspond with readers' preferences. Furthermore, open-ended responses reflected this pattern. Younger participants focused on romance and emotions. Older readers placed greater emphasis on fantasy elements, character development, and suspense, such as:

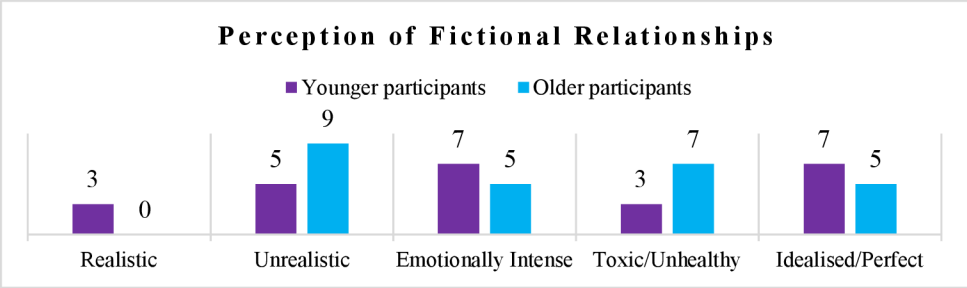
> "Plot twists because I like when the author shocks me," "powerful female protagonists because they are inspiring to watch when they become stronger," "betrayal when it's well-written."

The findings also suggest a preference for morally complex characters. Most participants enjoyed characters who break rules, hide secrets, and make risky decisions. These traits were associated with excitement. Although older participants emphasised the well-written condition, younger participants focused on the attractiveness and tension. Moreover, respondents admitted that they had understood a character's actions even when they knew those actions were wrong. Participants described such characters as "extremely attractive," "hot," and "rebellious," and

several respondents admitted that readers may overlook flaws because they "like the character too much so they do not care about the bad things they do." Others compared this tendency to "wearing pink glasses" in real life and suggested that appearance or even online edits may influence readers' perceptions of fictional characters. The responses suggest that emotional attachment to fictional characters may influence readers' moral evaluation of their actions.

Another question related to reading priorities revealed that both groups focus on emotions and relationships the most. Participants described relationships as the most engaging aspect of a story and emphasised emotional involvement with the characters. Deeper messages were commented on by younger participants as "too much thinking." Several older respondents explained that fantasy provides an escape from reality. Others reported looking for deeper messages expressed through characters and the plot, which suggests that older readers approach romantasy literature from a broader perspective. These preferences were also reflected in participants' favourite relationship tropes. Both groups strongly favoured enemies-to-lovers relationships. They explained that its appeal lies in the transition from hatred to attraction accompanied by tension. However, older participants additionally expressed a preference for forbidden romance, slow-burn relationships, and healthy relationships.

Figure 5: Perception of Fictional Relationships



As shown in Figure 5, younger and older participants differed in their perceptions of fictional relationships. They could select more than one option. Younger readers most frequently described them as emotionally intense and idealised. Older participants more often

characterised them as unrealistic, unhealthy or toxic. Notably, none of the older participants considered fictional relationships realistic, but 3 younger respondents selected this option. Some younger participants argued that such relationships "could happen to someone," or that the gradual dating development resembles real-life experiences. In contrast, older participants emphasised the fictional nature of these narratives, describing them as intentionally dramatic, idealised, and designed to entertain readers, as one noted "it's called fiction for a reason." These findings imply that maturity influence the interpretation of fictional relationships and expectations of real-life romance as well.

A comparison of ideal fictional male characters and ideal partners showed interesting results. Most of the younger participants were drawn to physical attractiveness, protectiveness, romantic behaviour, and confidence in fictional characters. Older participants appreciated confidence, humour, intelligence, and protectiveness as well, but placed greater emphasis on emotional support and communication, and less physical attractiveness. On the other hand, when describing their ideal future partner, both age groups repeatedly mentioned kindness, loyalty, honesty, respect, reliability, emotional support, and good communication. Some younger participants additionally referred to traits associated with romantasy male characters, such as protectiveness, jealousy "in a healthy way," and physical attractiveness. On the contrary, several older respondents explicitly noted that the qualities they enjoy while reading differ from those they like in real-life relationships. These findings indicate that older readers may distinguish more clearly between fictional relationships and real-life expectations.

Finally, participants noted that these books may promote emotional understanding, confidence, resilience, imagination, and the ability to navigate relationships. Several respondents also highlighted vocabulary development and reading motivation. One respondent observed that reading can help adolescents develop an awareness that not everything, in terms

of morality or politics, should be considered true or correct. This suggests that some adolescents can engage critically with the texts they read.

5.2.3 Discussion of the Selected Excerpts

The discussions were conducted during two lessons with each age group. Participants read selected excerpts from the analysed novels, accompanied by brief contextual information, and subsequently discussed their interpretations, emotional reactions, and opinions. The responses were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. The researcher occasionally adopted language and terminology used by adolescent readers and BookTok communities. Participants responded positively to this approach and appeared comfortable during discussions. The complete set of excerpts is included in appendix 61. The excerpts were selected to represent key scenes related to female protagonists' development, romantic relationships, world-building and political conflicts. Preference was given to scenes that were expected to stimulate discussion.

Participants from both age groups demonstrated the ability to recognise protagonists' development and interpret their characters, and not only their romantic relationships. Across all four novels, they identified a common coming-of-age theme of moving from vulnerability or disadvantage to greater strength, confidence, and independence. Younger readers focused on emotional strength, bravery, determination, and the ability to face problems. Older participants added comments on ambition, intelligence, political awareness, leadership, and moral complexity. For example, they noted that Feyre "found her voice and [became] more confident, able to speak her mind," while Violet "shows that strength is not only physical but also mental." Discussions of Jude and Mare revealed an even greater awareness of power, politics, and social inequalities. Participants described Jude as ambitious and morally complex and Mare as a "symbol of rebellion." Some older respondents compared Feyre's story to *Beauty and the Beast*

and *The Hunger Games*. The responses suggest that participants were able to identify both personal and social aspects of the protagonists' development, although older readers tended to offer more complex and detailed interpretations.

Discussions of the romantic relationships revealed that participants were able to recognise their appeal as well as their problematic aspects. Readers mostly referred to attraction, tension, trust, secrecy, emotional intensity, and personal development. In the case of Feyre and Tamlin, participants suggested that Feyre fell in love with him because he provided something she lacked at the beginning of the story, such as safety and attention. At the same time, many recognised that his protectiveness gradually became controlling. One participant said that the relationship "on the outside seems healthy but not true," while another noted that Feyre initially valued the security he offered but later realised that she also desired freedom. A similar pattern appeared in discussions about Violet and Xaden. Participants acknowledged the role of secrets, mistrust, and poor communication. Older readers described the relationship as toxic or unhealthy, although some also argued that Xaden supports Violet's growth. Younger participants were more sympathetic and occasionally justified his behaviour. As one participant commented, "Xaden has many secrets, and it doesn't help in a relationship," but his actions became more understandable once the reasons behind them were revealed. Another participant wanted Violet to "give him a second chance as they love each other." These responses suggest that some participants were willing to overlook problematic behaviours when they perceived them as love or protection. This tendency was also visible in discussions of Jude and Cardan. Participants interpreted their relationship as a complex enemies-to-lovers trope full of jealousy, conflict, and attraction. Cardan was described as misunderstood, emotionally damaged, and neglected. One younger participant argued that his behaviour arose from "fear and anger," while another observed that "they all think he has a great life." Even when respondents acknowledged the relationship's manipulation and toxicity, many still considered it captivating and

highlighted “the tension” as one of its most appealing aspects. Compared with the previous relationships, Mare, Cal, and Maven’s relationship focused on the conflict arising from the love triangle. Mare and Cal were often connected with attraction, support, and romance, whereas Mare and Maven were linked to vulnerability, understanding, and betrayal. One respondent argued that Mare and Maven “understand each other more,” while another described their relationship as “painful and complex.” Additionally, many participants criticised Mare’s actions, such as kissing both brothers.

Participants also described the different atmospheres in the novels. *ACOTAR was* referred to as having magical, mysterious, romantic, and fairy-tale-like elements. Some older participants highlighted the shift towards a darker, tenser atmosphere. *Fourth Wing* was rather associated with danger, suspense, survival, and emotional intensity. Participants repeatedly referred to tension and high stakes, with some also recognising the military and competitive nature. *The Cruel Prince* was perceived as darker and more political. Readers referred to court intrigue, conflict, jealousy, and distrust. Several participants contrasted the novel with *ACOTAR*, arguing that its faerie world is crueller and less fairy-tale-like. *Red Queen* often focused on politics, inequality, and unstable relationships. Although participants recognised the political aspects of the story, many connected the atmosphere to the relationship conflict. The responses suggest that participants were able to connect the atmosphere to the story's central themes and conflicts.

Additional observations emerged during the discussions. For example, participants initially focused on romance, emotion, and immersion in fantasy worlds when asked any question by the researcher. One respondent explained that they enjoy romantasy because they can “be immersed in the world” and experience the romance themselves, especially when they do not have a partner. Other observations showed particular opinions about BookTok and social media. Some participants claimed that BookTok recommendations are trustworthy. On the

contrary, another participant expressed annoyance and admitted avoiding *Fourth Wing* because it seemed "too hyped." Older participants also noted that they enjoyed romantasy as a form of relaxation but perceived many tropes as cliché more as they got older. Furthermore, several respondents suggested that reading can encourage critical thinking by showing that everything presented in books, such as claims about morality or politics, should not be accepted as true.

5.3 Comparison of Literary Analysis and Reader Responses

The literary analysis and adolescent readers' responses revealed similarities. One noticeable aspect concerns the enemies-to-lovers trope. The literary analysis identified this trope as a dominant feature of all four novels, and participants selected this relationship trope as their favourite. The appeal of this trope owes to tension, attraction, and conflict, as many respondents described the relationship in *The Cruel Prince* mainly through "the tension" between the characters. This suggests that this prominent trope, which may portray unhealthy relationships, in contemporary romantasy novels corresponds with readers' preferences.

Another concern deals with morally grey characters and problematic behaviour. The literary analysis showed that many central characters cannot be clearly classified as either good or evil. The questionnaire and discussion findings indicated that participants attempted to explain, or even justify, the actions of these characters. For example, some respondents tried to justify Xaden's secrets or Cardan's cruelty. Moreover, participants also admitted that readers may forgive fictional characters because they favour them. These findings support the thesis claim that adolescent readers may engage sympathetically with morally complex characters, as participants were more concerned with understanding the characters' motivations and personal struggles. The literary analysis also indicated that romantasy novels blur the line between protection and control, creating unhealthy relationships, which may affect the readers expectations. Reader responses partly confirmed this observation. They recognised

manipulation, controlling behaviour, poor communication, or unhealthy relationship dynamics. However, most of the participants described these relationships as exciting and engaging. Therefore, participants generally recognised problematic behaviour and did not reject it.

Furthermore, a similarity can be observed in relation to the female protagonists. The literary analysis showed that all four novels feature protagonists who develop from vulnerable individuals into strong, independent characters. Participants identified typical traits as important aspects of the protagonists' development. Older participants specifically emphasised leadership, political awareness, and moral complexity. Additionally, participants in the questionnaire expressed a preference for strong, intelligent, and ambitious female protagonists. Consequently, they commented that such characters are inspiring and admirable. This suggests that readers recognise the protagonists' development and may identify with or be inspired by these characters.

The literary analysis also examined the importance of broader themes, such as power, inequality, rebellion, manipulation, and social hierarchies. Participants were able to recognise many of these themes, especially in discussions of *The Cruel Prince* and *Red Queen*. However, the questionnaire and discussion findings suggest that these themes were not the crucial source of readers' engagement with the novels. They valued emotional and romantic elements more. This tendency corresponds with the thesis claim and analysis of BookTok content, which showed that books are promoted through romance, attractive male characters, and emotional scenes. Participants often remembered relationships before the plot, discussed male characters extensively, and some chose books based on BookTok recommendations.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that age and adolescent development may influence readers' engagement with romantasy. Although participants from both groups recognised deeper themes, older readers were more likely to discuss broader thematic aspects alongside the

romantic storyline and provided more perceptive interpretations distinguished fiction from reality. In contrast, younger participants focused more strongly on romance, emotions and attraction. These findings do not indicate that romantasy literature is unsuitable for younger readers, but they raise concerns about how idealised relationships, morally grey characters, and BookTok-promoted content may be interpreted at different stages of adolescence and further influence the readers.

Overall, the findings suggest that BookTok may play a role in shaping readers' expectations and initial engagement with romantasy. As mentioned, participants selected books based on content seen on BookTok and were drawn to the emphasised romance. However, the discussions demonstrated that readers did not simply adopt these perspectives. Therefore, according to the findings, BookTok appears to influence what attracts adolescent readers to a book and what they expect from it, while personal reading experience, age, and individual interpretation continue to shape how the texts are ultimately understood.

Conclusion

This diploma thesis examined the relationship between social media phenomena BookTok, romantasy literature and adolescent readers. The aim was to analyse four BookTok-popular romantasy novels, how BookTok promotes novels, and explore how adolescent readers, who are the target BookTok audience, interpret them. The thesis also tried to investigate whether BookTok content and its promotional framing may influence readers' expectations and interpretations.

The first part of the thesis explored adolescence and demonstrated why this literature may be appealing to adolescents, as YA themes correspond with adolescent development. It emphasised the educational and psychological benefits of reading fiction as well as the importance of critical interpretation. Regarding YA literature, it examined its defining characteristics and introduced common issues, such as age appropriateness or explicit content, and this information was applied later in the practical part. Moreover, while exploring and intensely characterising the BookTok content, its influence on readers and the publishing industry, it showed that books on BookTok are usually promoted through emotional reactions, romance, attractive characters, and immersive experiences for readers. Interpretative or critical discussions exist, but compared to emotional engagement content, they are much less visible and significant.

The last chapter presented a literary analysis of the romantasy novels that shared several features, including strong female protagonists, coming-of-age development, romantic relationships as central elements, explicit scenes, morally complex characters, and broader themes of power or social inequality. The analysis showed that the texts combine empowering messages with relationships that blur romance and questionable behaviour, positively advertised on BookTok. The discussions and the questionnaire with adolescent readers provided

findings related to their preferences and reading interpretations. Participants were able to recognise many of the themes and the protagonists' development identified in the literary analysis. They were also able to discuss these aspects, however, the most appealing features of the novels were relationships, romance, character dynamics and emotions related to the reader's enjoyment. They favoured common BookTok-popular elements present in the novels. Despite participants' recognition of unhealthy and questionable behaviour and character traits, they found it engaging and exciting. The findings showed that older participants generally offered more critical interpretations than younger participants. Most importantly, many participants demonstrated some critical awareness, as they could distinguish fiction from reality and did not automatically accept all fictional behaviour as desirable in real life.

This thesis class-based research showed that the influence of BookTok appears stronger in shaping reading choices and expectations than in final adolescent reading interpretations. In addition, these romantasy novels appeared to encourage adolescents' motivation to read voluntarily. They provide opportunities to discuss many topics that adolescents may find easier to imagine. Therefore, if teachers recognise BookTok and the popular romantasy genre, they can use them as starting points for literary discussions.

The present study also opens several possibilities for future research. The sample consisted exclusively of female grammar school students and examined their opinions and reading perceptions over a short period of time. Further research with a wider sample of participants could focus on the long-term effects of BookTok on reading habits, literary preferences and examine additional romantasy novels or other popular genres on the platform. Finally, future studies could explore the educational potential of BookTok and investigate whether adolescents' exposure to its content influences their expectations for real-life experiences. These questions extend beyond literary interpretation, and collaboration with researchers in psychology could provide valuable insight.

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Appendices

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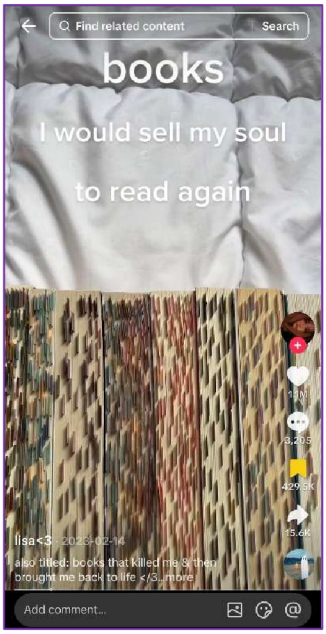

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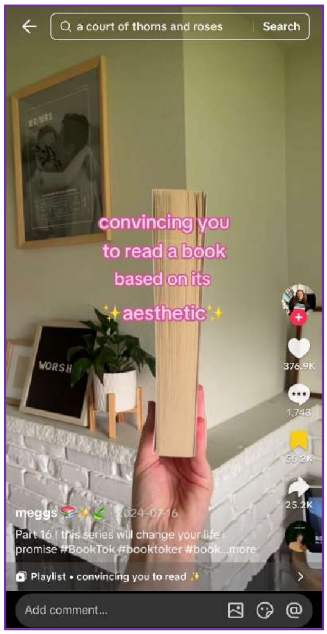
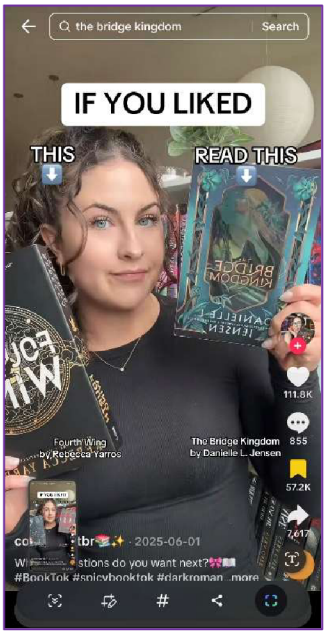


Appendix 4: Based on its aesthetic



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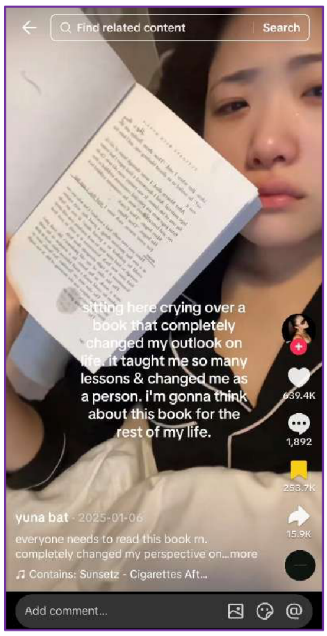
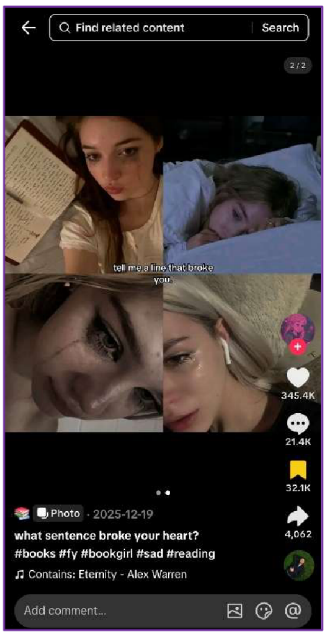


Appendix 12: This book changed me



Appendix 13: Line that broke you

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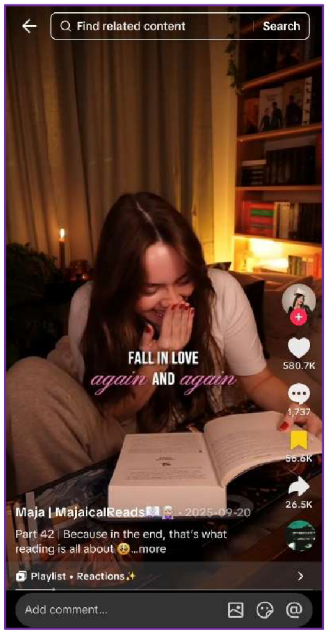
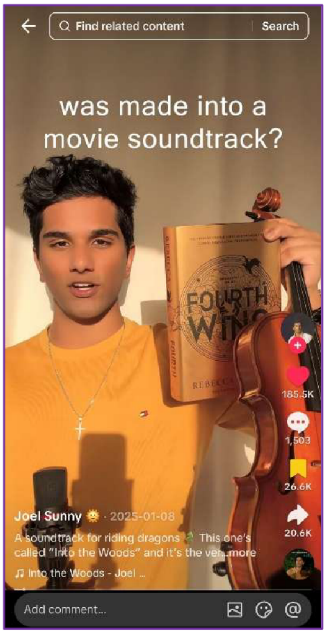


Appendix 15: Fall in love again



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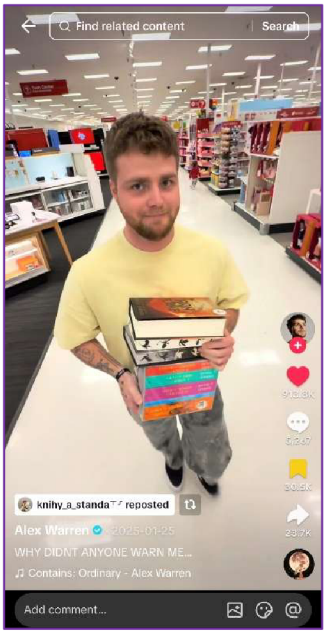

Appendix 17: Alex Warren buying books

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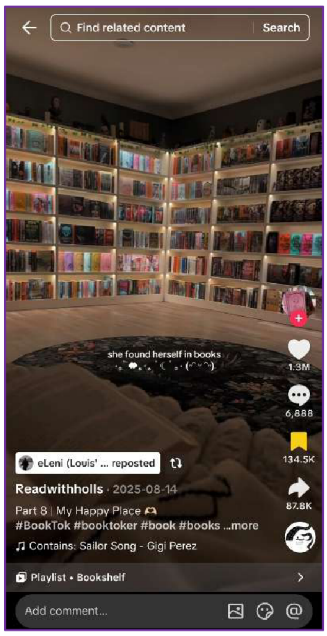

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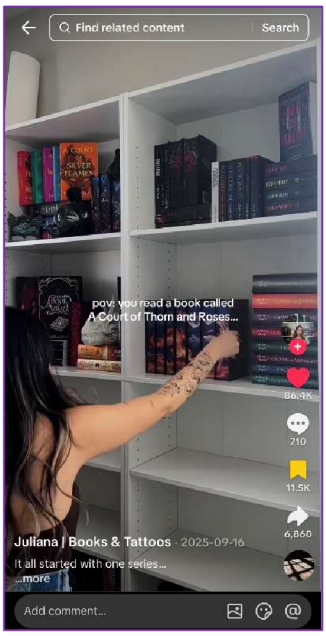
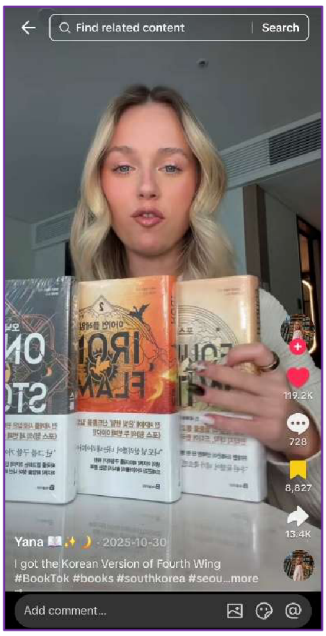


Appendix 19: It all started with…



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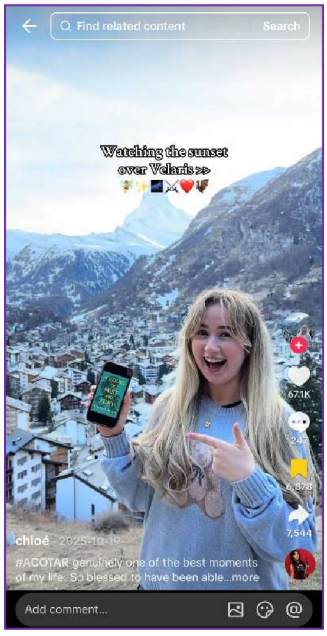

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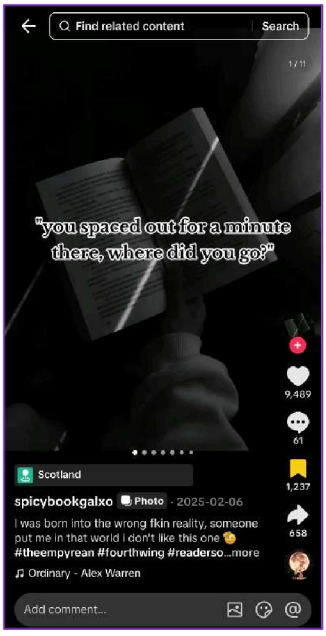

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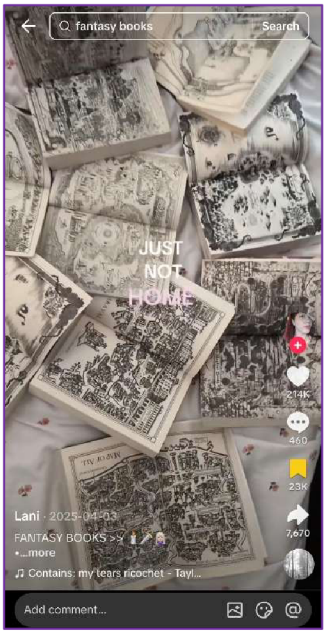
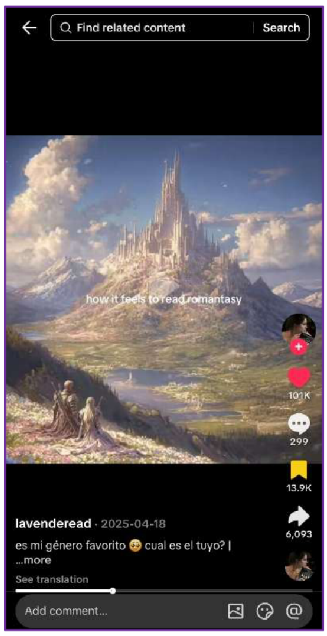


Appendix 23: Just not home



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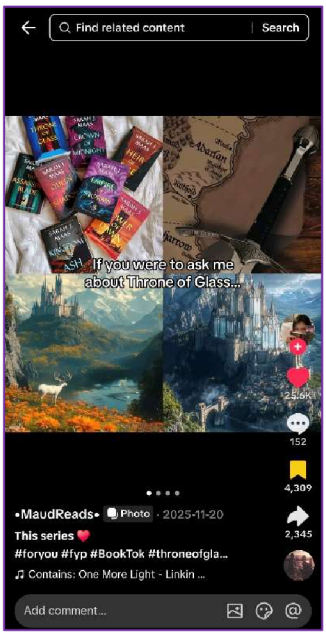

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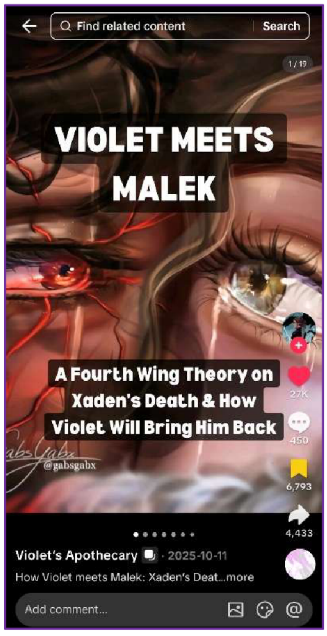

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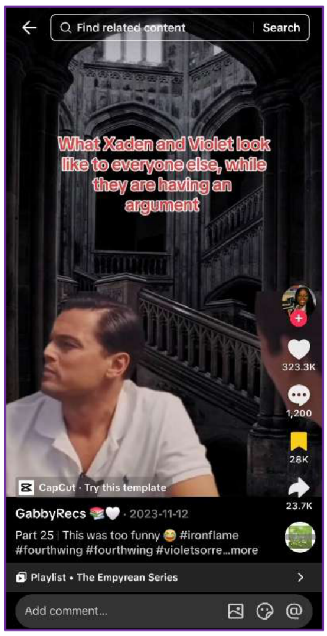
Appendix 29: Aelin vs Basgiath



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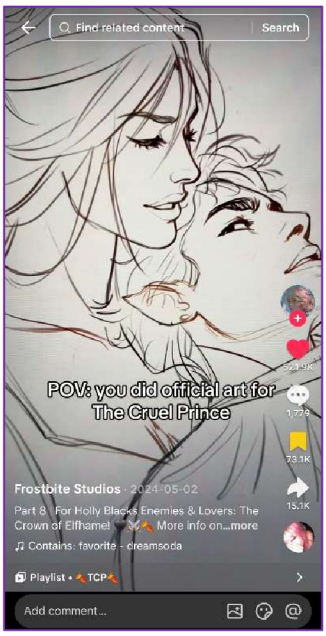

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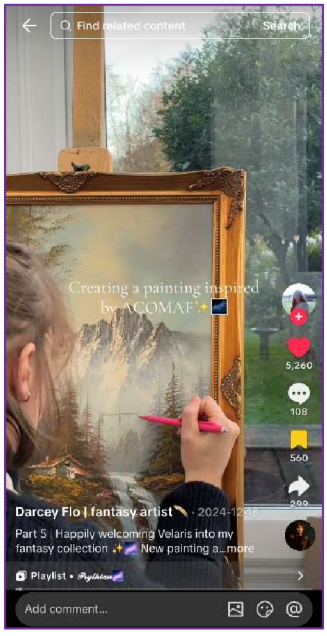

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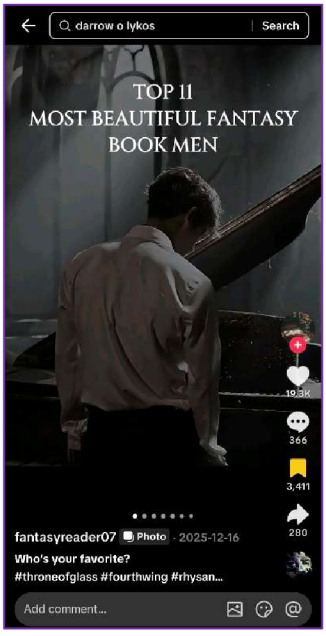
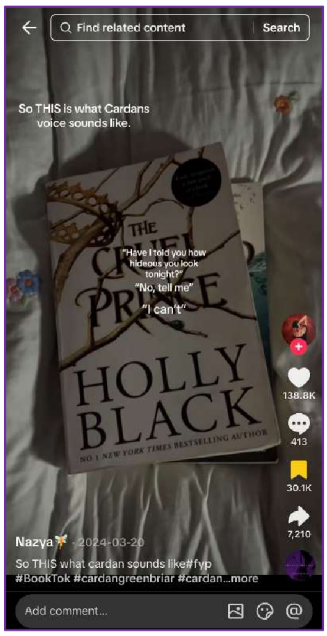


Appendix 35: Top beautiful book men



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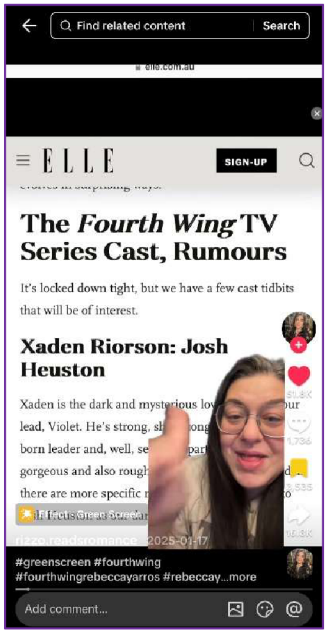
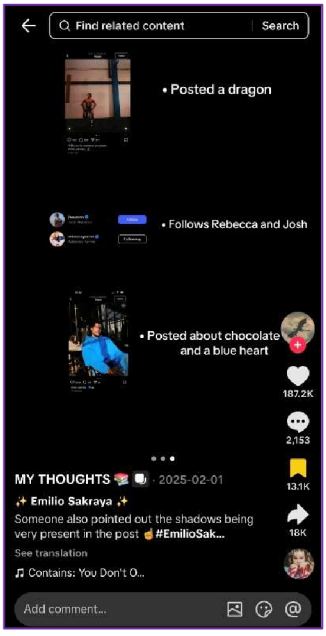
Appendix 37:ACOTAR Meet the bat boys



Appendix 38: Casting rumours



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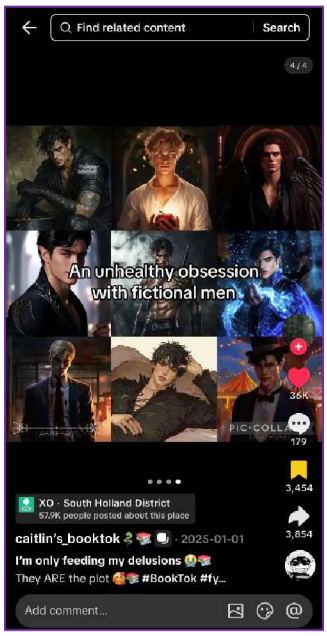
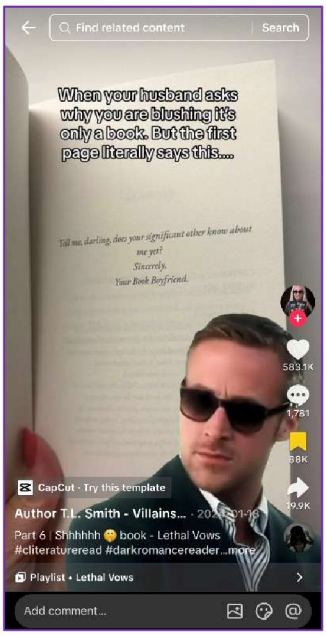


Appendix 40: Unhealthy obsession

Appendix 41: A Rhysand girlie



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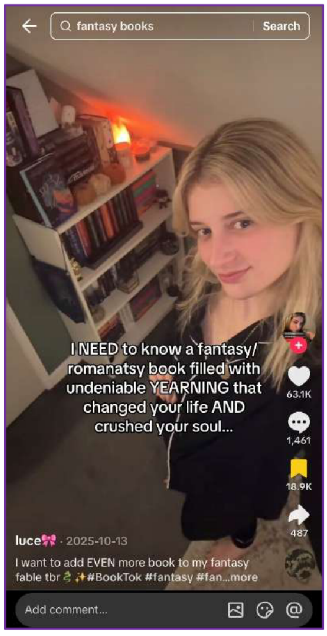

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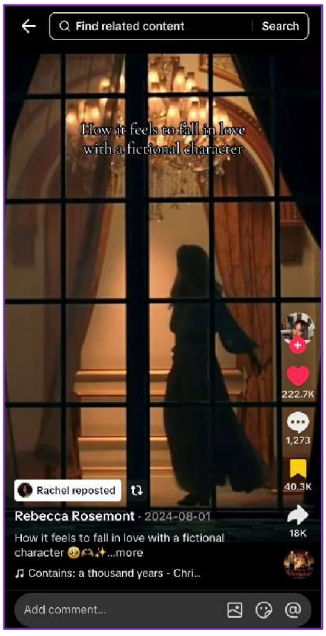
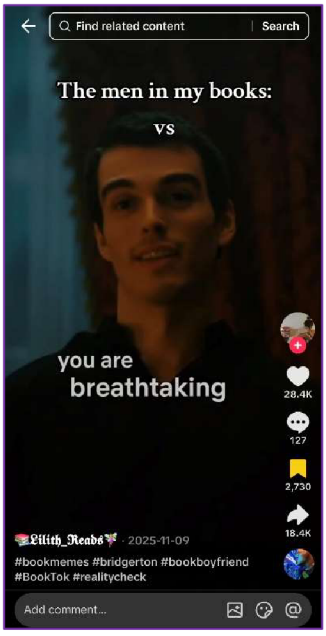
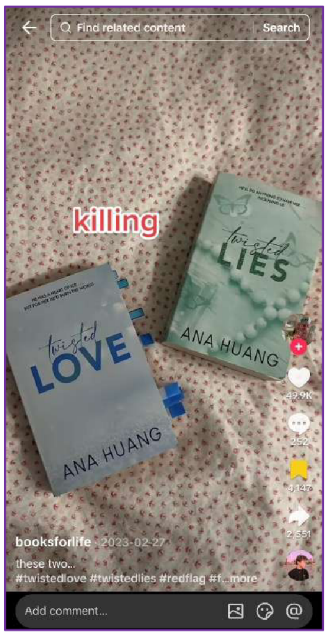


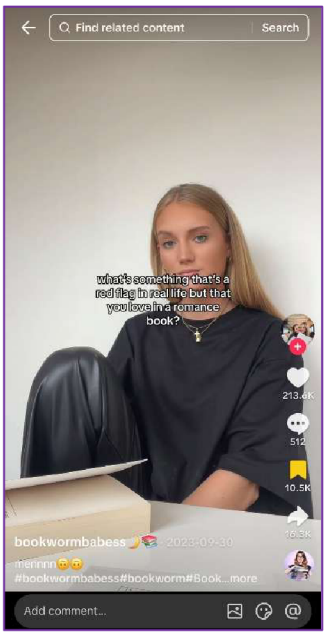
Appendix 44: In love with fictional men



Appendix 45: The men in my books

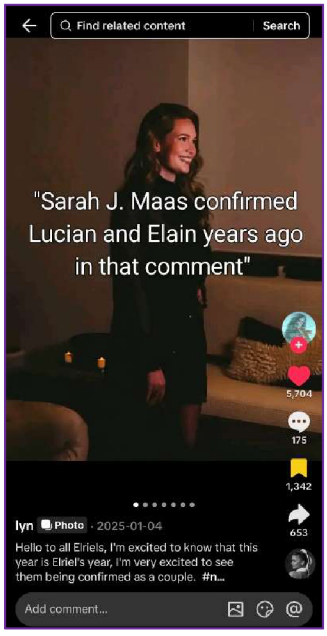


Appendix 46: Red flag - killing



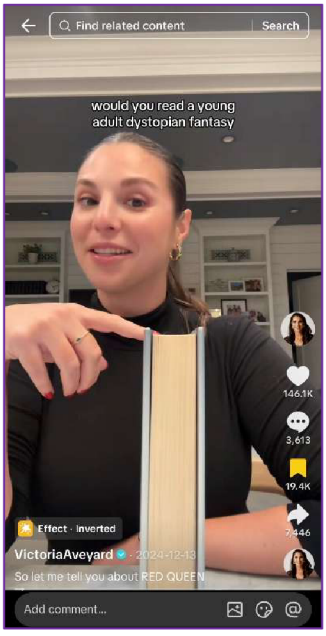
Appendix 47: Red flag – men

Appendix 48: Boys in real life could never

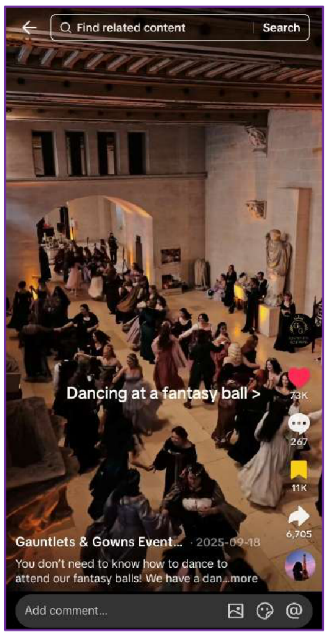


Appendix 49: Sarah J. Maas comment

Appendix 50: With Rebecca Yarros

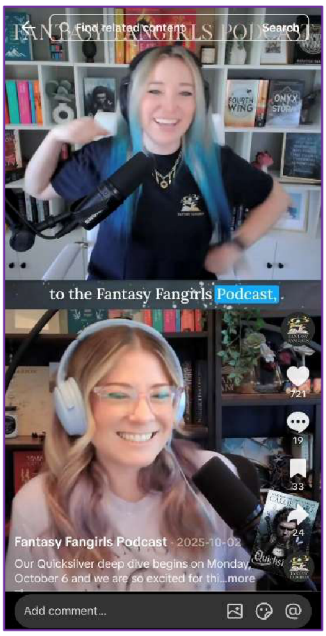


Appendix 51: Victoria Aveyard's video



Appendix 52: Fantasy ball

Appendix 53: Cosplay



Appendix 54: Fantasy Fangirls Podcast

Appendix 55: @knihkupectvi_luxor, TikTok

Appendix 56: Detailed Analysis of *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

According to the author's official website (Maas 2023), "Sarah J. Maas is a #1 New York Times and international bestselling author and internationally bestselling author of the *Throne of Glass*, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Crescent City* series, which have sold more than 70 million copies in English worldwide and are published in thirty-eight languages." All her series are part of the BookTok phenomenon, and the hashtag for her *ACOTAR series* has several billion views.

Maas is an American fantasy author. In her childhood, she read folktales and fairy tales with her adoptive parents (Rosenfeld, n. p.). She began writing at age 16. From 2002 to 2008, she posted some of her early writing online before publication of the first novel, *Throne of Glass* (2012). During that period, she also graduated from Hamilton College with a degree in creative writing (Rosenfeld, n. p.). While Maas prefers to keep her personal life private, she recently spoke with presenter Alexandra Cooper about how her experiences and feelings inspire aspects of her work. Fairy tales also influence her novels. For example, the inspiration for *Throne of Glass* came from the music in Disney's *Cinderella* (Good Reading Magazine 2022, n. p.).

Maas began writing the *ACOTAR series* as a personal passion project (Good Reading Magazine 2022, n. p.). She explained it was originally intended as a retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Tam Lin*, a Scottish fairy ballad. Although the first novel draws on these inspirations, the storyline takes new directions as the series progresses (Martin 2024, n. p.). To date, five novels have been published, with two more scheduled for publication in October 2026 and January 2027 (Maas 2023).

Genre Positioning and Narrative Style

Although *ACOTAR* is usually marketed as a YA novel, it has many NA features, making it more of a YA and NA crossover, as the protagonist is 19 years old and the story includes increasing explicit sexual content. The genre is high fantasy, as it does not take place in a

realistic, modern setting. It intertwines with romance, making it a representative example of the romantasy genre. It is also combined with fairy tale elements such as the *Beauty and the Beast* retelling, captive heroine, magical setting, and 'a life for a life,' which may make the novel emotionally accessible for readers.

The story is written in first-person limited narration, exclusively through the protagonist's perspective. The reader has access only to Feyre's feelings and knowledge, which means the narrator is subjective. It may encourage readers to adopt Feyre's perspective, for example, initially seeing faeries as monsters, misjudging other characters' personalities and having a limited understanding of faeries' politics and society. Additionally, it may encourage sympathising with morally ambiguous characters, such as Tamlin, the protagonist's romantic interest.

The first few chapters' tone is connected to the harsh reality of the human world.[3] This atmosphere is supported by the winter season, which represents the cold and the need for survival. After Feyre is brought to the faerie world, Spring Court, the tone gradually shifts,[4] as the protagonist shifts her attitude toward faeries, to magical and sensual. It is also increasingly romanticised. For example, the romantic interest is initially described as a monster, a beast, hungry and feral, then Feyre slowly begins to feel safe and at home. Then, in the final act, Under the Mountain, where the protagonist fights the greatest enemy for her love, the tone changes to a darker, violent and oppressive atmosphere.

Most of the chapters are structured around the protagonist's exploration of the world, conversations, and emotional development. The middle section of Spring Court focuses heavily on world and romance building, prioritising it over action. Under the Mountain increases the

[3] "I had risked much in coming so far into the forest, but we'd finished our last loaf of bread yesterday, and the remainder of our dried meat the day before. Still, I would have rather spent another night with a hungry belly than found myself satisfying the appetite of a wolf. Or a faerie" (2)

[4] "I'd never seen anything like it; even our former manor couldn't compare… Of course it would be magic, because it was spring here. What wretched power did they possess to make their lands so different from ours, to control the seasons and weather as if they owned them?" (47).

pacing as the protagonist faces danger, and the struggle for survival.[5] The characters' emotions are prioritised over the political complexity of the world. Therefore, many scenes with relationship moments may be more memorable for readers and are emphasised on BookTok, such as Rhysand's appearance during a Fire Night, Calanmai event.[6]

The novel contains descriptive passages of Feyre's surroundings and nature. There are many contrasts between the grey, cold, poor human world and the magical, colourful, luxurious fairy world, Prythian. It reflects Feyre's emotional transformation.

The text uses a rather simple sentence structure. It employs emotionally expressive vocabulary, intense emotional reactions, and dialogues. All these features make it readable for adolescent audiences despite its length.

World-Building and Social Structures

The world is divided by the Wall after the ancient war between humans and faeries. Although both realms exist on the same landmass, they remain politically and socially separated. The setting reflects a medieval fantasy world without modern technology. Prythian, the faerie territory, is divided into courts: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, Day, Night, and Dawn. Each court possesses its own atmosphere, symbolism, and political identity. However, the first novel focuses on the Spring Court and Under the Mountain, located in the centre of Prythian. The novel also includes a map at the beginning, which helps readers navigate the fictional world.

The magic system and its rules are not fully explained to Feyre or to the reader. Instead of functioning through strict logic, magic appears mysterious and emotional. High Lords, who

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[5] "It ached—ached worse than anything I'd ever endured. I bit down on a cry as my fingers grazed my nose, flakes of blood crumbling from my nostrils. It was broken. Broken. I would have clenched my teeth had my jaw not been a throbbing mess of agony, too. I couldn't panic. No, I had to keep my tears in check, had to keep my wits together. I had to survey the damage as best I could, then figure out what to do" (304).

[6] "There you are. I've been looking for you," said a deep, sensual male voice I'd never heard…"Thank you for finding her for me," my savior said to them, smooth and polished. "Enjoy the Rite." There was enough of a bite beneath his last words that the faeries stiffened. Without further comment, they scuttled back to the bonfires. I stepped out of the shelter of my savior's arm and turned to thank him. Standing before me was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen" (188).

rule the courts, possess enormous magical power compared to ordinary faeries, indicating a strong hierarchy even within the faerie realm itself, not only between faeries and powerless humans.[7] Examples of magic in the novel include glamour, blights, shapeshifting, controlling seasons and nature, mind reading, and magical bargains and promises.[8]

Social hierarchy is strongly present throughout the novel. Humans are portrayed as physically weaker, mortal, and socially inferior to faeries.[9] At the same time, it supports their fear and hate because of orally transmitted stories, prejudice, and the memory of slavery. As a result, most humans refuse to cross the Wall. One exception is the Children of the Blessed, a group that worships faeries and believes life in Prythian is superior to the human world. This conflict demonstrates how collective trauma and historical memory shape attitudes toward the unknown.

Political power in Prythian is concentrated in the hands of male High Lords of the courts. Above them stands a female fae, Amarantha, who controls Prythian from Under the Mountain. Her rule is based on fear, violence, and oppression. Feyre slowly explores information about the political situation, but the narrative avoids overly detailed political explanations. Instead, the world is introduced mainly through emotional experiences and observations, which makes it more accessible to adolescent readers.

The Spring Court, where most of the story takes place, symbolises beauty and the illusion of safety. In contrast to the cold, starving, and poor human world, the Spring Court offers magical landscapes, luxury, food, and comfort. Feyre begins to associate the court with safety

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[7] "Where is he going?" I asked, staring toward the door. "To hunt the Bogge." "You said it couldn't be killed—that you can't face it." "Tam can." My breath caught a bit. The gruff High Fae halfheartedly flattering me was capable of killing a thing like the Bogge" (93-94).

[8] "Rhysand's moon-white skin began to darken into nothing but shadow. "Wait." The darkness consuming him paused. For Tamlin … for Tamlin, I would sell my soul; I would give up everything I had for him to be free. "Wait," I repeated. The darkness vanished, leaving Rhysand in his solid form as he grinned. "Yes?" I raised my chin as high as I could manage. "Just two weeks?" "Just two weeks," he purred, and knelt before me. "Two teensy, tiny weeks with me every month is all I ask" (334).

[9] "Even from across the room, I could see his remaining russet eye widen. He sniffed once, his lips curling a bit to reveal straight white teeth, and then he turned to the other faerie. "You're joking," he said quietly. "That scrawny thing brought down *Andras* with a single ash arrow?" (52).

and escape from responsibility toward her family. As a result, it becomes romanticised, as she calls it her home, despite its hidden violence and oppression.[10]

Characterisation and Relationship Dynamics

Feyre

Feyre is the main protagonist of the series. She is a nineteen-year-old illiterate human girl who undergoes a transformation throughout the novel. At the beginning of the story, Feyre is emotionally restrained, responsible, and pragmatic rather than idealistic, as she carries the burden of providing for her family despite being the youngest of the three sisters. Feyre appears emotionally distant from her sisters, who struggle with the loss of their former wealth and social status. Her family environment is far from functional, and she is forced to develop survival skills, such as hunting, to secure food and money. She has no personal desires, and her emotional escape is an intimate relationship with a village boy, Isaac Hale. Another form of escapism is painting as the family's cottage was decorated with her artwork. Throughout the novel, she notices colours, beauty, and visual details in her surroundings. Painting reflects her emotional state.[11] She is usually able to create art when she feels safe and free from constant survival pressure.

After arriving in the Spring Court, Feyre initially experiences fear, distrust, and alienation based on prejudices. She continues to feel responsible for her family. However, she gradually becomes curious about faeries and their world, especially after Tamlin reassures her that her family is safe. She spends time exploring Prythian and accompanying Lucien on patrols and

[10] "I was leaving. Just when this place had become more than a sanctuary, when the command of the Suriel had become a blessing and Tamlin far, far more than a savior or friend, I was leaving. It could be years until I saw this house again, years until I smelled his rose garden, until I saw those gold-flecked eyes. Home—this was home" (248).

[11] "I didn't go outside the following day, and when I sat down to paint, what emerged on my canvas was a tall, skeletally thin gray creature with bat ears and giant, membranous wings. Its snout was open in a roar, revealing row after row of fangs as it leaped into flight. As I painted it, I could have sworn that I could smell breath that reeked of carrion, that the air beneath its wings whispered promises of death" (182).

hunts, yet she is unable to kill animals unnecessarily.[12] These event show that Feyre slowly loses her prejudice against faeries and begins romanticising Prythian as an escape from her former life. She begins to link safety with love, protection and attention with romance, and emotional dependence with belonging, as she no longer has a place in the human world. She also starts painting again, which symbolises that she is no longer emotionally restricted within the faerie world.

Feyre's transformation is connected to her changing perception of faeries and her relationship with Tamlin. Her character evolves from a weak mortal girl into a strong heroine. She is prepared to sacrifice herself for him, the Spring Court, and all faeries in Prythian she formerly detested.[13] Under the Mountain, she shows courage, determination, and hope for a better world while completing Amarantha's trials. Despite her lack of education, she shows her intelligence and wit.[14] Her transformation is symbolically completed through her death and resurrection by the High Lords, after which she becomes High Fae herself.

Tamlin

Tamlin is the main protagonist's love interest in the first novel of the series. He is an immortal High Fae, around five hundred years old, with great magical power and shapeshifting abilities. His portrayal throughout the novel gradually changes with Feyre's perspective and emotional development. At the beginning, Tamlin is introduced as a dangerous, beast-like faerie

[12] "An arrow. I never fired a single one during those three days we rode along the border. That very morning I'd spied a red doe in a glen and aimed out of instinct, my arrow poised to fly right into her eye as Lucien sneered that *she* was not a faerie, at least. But I'd stared at her—fat and healthy and content—and then slackened the bow, replaced the arrow in my quiver, and let the doe wander on" (100).

[13] "Take me to her," I insisted. If Amarantha ripped out my throat, at least I would die doing something for him—at least I would die trying to fix the destruction I hadn't prevented, trying to save the people I'd doomed. At least Tamlin would know it was for him, and that I loved him" (289).

[14] "What's it doing?" the green-faced faerie whined again. A deep, elegant voice replied this time. "She's building a trap." Rhysand. "But the Middengard—" "Relies on its scent to see," Rhysand answered, and I gave a special glower for him as I glanced at the rim of the trench and found him smiling at me. "And Feyre just became invisible" (324).

who takes Feyre into the faerie realm against her will.[15] However, over time, he comes to be associated with safety, comfort, home, and love. Because the story is told entirely from Feyre's perspective, younger readers may adopt her emotional perspective on Tamlin and romanticise his behaviour. In the recent podcast, Maas herself said that Feyre and Tamlin's relationship was intentionally written to reflect how women can fall in love with unhealthy behaviour, and some readers later recognised themselves in Feyre's experiences (Cooper 2026, n. p.).

Tamlin primarily serves as a protector throughout the novel. At the same time, however, he often withholds important information from her and struggles with communication. Although he is the High Lord of the Spring Court, Tamlin says he was raised as a warrior. His masculinity is therefore associated with silence, control, and emotional repression, which he presents as forms of protection. Tamlin also replaces Feyre in the role of provider by securing wealth and safety for her family Nevertheless, some of his behaviour may also be interpreted as controlling. For example, Tamlin makes decisions for Feyre, sends her away without allowing her to choose, and repeatedly commands her.

Feyre's presence in the Spring Court is connected to the curse placed upon Tamlin and Prythian. This raises suspicion around Tamlin's intentions and behaviour. His actions, such as using glamour to hide the servant faeries from her, create the tension in their relationship.[16] Another Tamlin's behaviour may appear manipulative because he needs Feyre's love to break the curse, the narrative gradually suggests that his feelings become genuine.

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[15] "Had I been alone in the woods, I might have let myself be swallowed by fear, might have fallen to my knees and wept for a clean, quick death. But I didn't have room for terror, wouldn't give it an inch of space, despite my heart's wild pounding in my ears. Somehow, I wound up in front of my sisters, even as the creature reared onto its hind legs and bellowed through a maw full of fangs: "*MURDERERS!*" (33).

[16] "A glamour—that's what Tamlin had said he wore. His faerie sight had stripped away the glamours I'd been seeing. But why bother to glamour everything? Because I'd been a cowering human, that's why. Because Tamlin knew I would have locked myself in this room and never come out if I'd seen them all for their true selves. Things only got worse when I made my way downstairs to find the High Lord. The hallways were bustling with masked faeries I'd never seen before" (214).

Lucien

Lucien is a High Fae, originally from Autumn Court. He is a loyal friend of Tamlin and his political emissary. In the story, he balances Tamlin's seriousness and functions as a guide to Prythian. He often provides information that Tamlin avoids giving. Lucien is sarcastic and emotionally sharper. Feyre and Lucien's relationship develops from hatred, mockery, and mutual toleration to friendship. Their friendship is proven during the trials as they save each other.[17]

Rhysand

Rhysand is a very powerful High Lord of the Night Court with the ability to read minds. Within the Spring court, he is perceived as cruel, corrupted and Amarantha's puppet. Therefore, Feyre's perception of him aligns with Tamlin's. However, Rhysand is the one who truly helps her survive the trials Under the Mountain, though his help does not seem as straightforward or genuine. Moreover, before knowing his identity, Feyre describes him as the most beautiful male she has ever seen, which suggests her attraction to him. He contrasts with Tamlin, who seems light and safe, while Rhysand is dark, seductive, and initially dangerous. His limited appearance in the first novel creates intrigue. This illustrates the romanticisation of a character with limited knowledge of him. In the first novel, he is a morally ambiguous character. But later in the series, he becomes Feyre's true soulmate and love interest.

Nesta

Nesta is the eldest Archeron sister and a complex character in the series. However, in the first novel, she represents pride and a trauma response. She struggles to cope with the family loss of social status. She seems emotionally distant and cruel, but she secretly cares deeply for

[17] "I bowed my head to the Lady of the Autumn Court, and she inclined her chin slightly. I supposed that was honor enough. "For giving her your name in place of my son's life," she said, her voice as sweet as sunwarmed apples" (339).

her sisters. When Feyre returns from Spring Court, Nesta serves as her only confidant and supporter.

Elain

Elain is the middle Archeron sister who represents femininity, domesticity, and softness. She is a contrast to both sisters, Nesta and Feyre, through her positive and idealistic nature. Her character remains static in the first novel.

Father

Feyre's father is depicted as a passive character with no development in the first novel, either. He is physically and emotionally incapacitated, unable to support his family after his business bankruptcy. He let Feyre shoulder the role of provider and protector. There is a visible reversal of family roles and failure of patriarchal protection.

Amarantha

Amarantha serves as the main villain in the first novel. She is a cruel and manipulative ruler of Prythian who detests humans and enjoys the torture of all creatures. However, the narration includes her backstory and an explanation of her hatred towards humans, which stems from betrayal and unrequited love. Her character is a combination of seduction, femininity, and monstrosity.

Alis

Alis, a faerie servant in the Spring Court, is a static but important figure. She functions as a caretaker to Feyre and challenges her prejudices about faeries as she does ordinary domestic chores. Additionally, she is the one who reveals to Feyre the truth about the curse, serving as Feyre's motivation and broadening her knowledge.

Andras

Andras is a minor but symbolic character. His sacrifice in a wolf form is an early representation of misunderstanding between humans and faeries. This scene carries additional

symbolism, as a wolf is slain by a weaker being, a human, like a lamb. Andras serves as a catalyst and initiates the plot. Later, Feyre experiences guilt over his death as her prejudice and hatred toward faeries diminish.[18]

Gender Roles

Gender expectations in Prythian and the human world are similar. There is a traditional patriarchal structure: only male High Lords rule the Courts, with consorts, and there are no High Ladies. The absence of High Ladies normalises the patriarchal structure. The only female Fae with greater political power is Amarantha, but she occupies the role of the enemy and antagonist. Human girls and women are often linked with domesticity and are expected to marry, such as Elain and Nesta depend on marriage prospects to secure themselves. However, they are also aware of abusive behaviour, for example, when Feyre warns Nesta not to marry Thomas because women in his family are beaten. Moreover, feminine beauty is admired in both the faerie and human realms. Feyre is described as beautiful, and she slowly transforms, she begins to notice and admire her own appearance more positively.

Despite these societal norms, Feyre actively challenges traditional feminine roles and rejects passive femininity. She is a hunter, protector, and provider for her family instead of their father. Unlike her sisters, Feyre does not think about marriage while living in the human world. Moreover, she later becomes the heroine and saviour of Prythian and gains magical powers, though only by sacrificing herself for love of a male character. Nevertheless, the novel reinforces strong female ideals and portrays Feyre as a strong character who faces evil despite her weaknesses.

Power and gender dynamics in romantic relationships are visible in Feyre's relationship with Tamlin. Feyre becomes emotionally dependent on Tamlin and relies on his protection and

[18] "But I could still see that High Fae male facedown in the snow, my arrow through his eye, red and bloody all over from where I'd cut and peeled off his skin. Bile stung my throat. Not real. Just a dream. Even if what I'd done to Andras, even as a wolf, was …" (102).

care. A power imbalance is created because Tamlin's control is often disguised as care. Additionally, their positions are unequal, as Tamlin and other male Fae characters are immortal, physically stronger, more powerful, and more experienced than Feyre.

Tropes and Archetypes

The novel includes several YA and romantasy tropes. Many of these tropes shape the romance and character archetypes, support the protagonists' transformation, and might make it appealing to readers. The following table summarises them, their narrative function, and possible 'readers' interpretations.

Beauty and the Beast retelling	This captive heroine trope includes a common girl who is brought to a magical place against her will by a beast, a faerie lord, who is cursed. Her imprisonment gradually starts to be identified as a place called home. Tamlin's estate may be seen only as protection and romanticised.
The Reluctant Heroine	Feyre initially needs to survive, not to be a heroine. She fears Prythian and only later accepts responsibility and sacrifice.
Trials and Quests	Under the Mountain, Feyre must successfully complete 3 trials, overcome suffering, and prove herself worthy of the role of a typical heroine.
Enemies to lovers	Feyre hates and fears faeries, but her feelings shift into attraction and emotional attachment. Emotional tension may be prioritised over logic.
Love triangle	Tamlin is the first person introduced as a love interest, however, after Rhysand's appearance, there is a visible tension between him and Feyre.
Miscommunication	Tamlin constantly withholds information, creating tension and secrets. Readers may attribute his lack of communication to the curse.

Themes and Coming-of-Age Elements

Opening chapters strongly focus on hunger, winter, exhaustion, and survival. Therefore, the first important theme is survival and poverty. Feyre lives in constant survival mode and suppresses her emotions. The survival theme eventually shifts towards emotional fulfilment and

belonging. This narrative may make readers to sympathise with Feyre's isolation and responsibility.

After entering Spring Court, the theme of love and sacrifice becomes the novel's central force. Feyre repeatedly sacrifices herself for her family, Tamlin, and Prythian. Her love is connected to pain and self-sacrifice. This suffering may be romanticised as proof of love and perceived by readers as necessary for romance.

Typical YA themes, such as transformation and identity, are also included. Feyre transforms emotionally, morally, and physically. Her prejudice against faeries disappears, and she learns to see beauty in Prythian. Her resurrection symbolises her rebirth.[19] Readers may identify with Feyre's search for identity and belonging. Thus, her transformation may especially appeal to adolescent readers who themselves undergo personal changes.

Besides these themes, the novel features coming-of-age elements. Feyre's age positions her between adolescence and adulthood. She learns emotional intimacy, responsibility, and sexuality. She develops independence and gains confidence. Also, her rebirth completes her maturation.

Key motifs include the trials of courage, intelligence, and endurance that strengthen the protagonist. Another important motif is Feyre's repeated questioning of her belonging and her search for a true home, which she gradually finds in Tamlin and the Spring Court.

The first novel contains many symbolic elements. First, the Wall dividing the human and faerie realms symbolises war, separation, fear, and historical trauma. It functions as both a physical and psychological barrier, accompanied by myths and prejudice. Second, the Archeron sisters' chest of drawers represents their identities and destinies. Feyre painted flowers for Elain, flames for Nesta, and a night sky with stars for herself. Additionally, this symbol foreshadows

[19] "I groaned as I braced my hands against the floor, readying myself to stand, but—the sight of my skin stopped me cold. It gleamed with a strange light, and my fingers seemed *longer* where I'd laid them flat on the marble. I pushed to my feet. I felt—felt *strong*, and fast and sleek. And— And I'd become High Fae" (407).

Feyre's later connection to the Night Court and Rhysand.[20] Third, the white horse Feyre rides on as she travels to Prythian symbolises her transition from the human world into an unknown magical realm. There may also be a symbolic parallel to Alice entering Wonderland.

Another important symbol is the beast, represented through Tamlin's animalistic form, which directly connects to the fairy-tale inspiration. His beast form contrasts danger with attraction and tenderness. Another symbolic element is the masks worn by the Spring Court faeries. The masks symbolise hidden truth and lack of freedom as they cannot be removed because of Amarantha's curse. Readers may interpret the masks as part of the novel's mystery and tension.

Another recurring symbol is blood, which represents violence, guilt, sacrifice, trauma, and transformation. Feyre feels traumatised and guilty after killing Andras. Many faeries and humans are wounded or killed because of Amarantha's brutal rule. On the other hand, blood is also connected with care and intimacy between Tamlin and Feyre, especially in scenes where Feyre tends his wounds. Finally, Feyre's painting of winter woods, which she gives to Tamlin, serves as her emotional language and symbolises the growing intimacy between them. Readers may perceive the painting as a sincere expression of love and emotional vulnerability.

Explicit Content and Its Narrative Function

This series contains romantic, intimate, and sexual content. However, the first novel includes fewer explicit scenes. Feyre's first sexual partner is Isaac Hale, and their relationship is based on mutual understanding. She describes this romance briefly and without emotional depth, in comparison to her intimate scenes with Tamlin. There are also mentions of contraceptive brew taken by male characters.

[20] "It wasn't simply that it was the most beautiful place I'd ever been to, or that it filled me with both longing and mirth, but it just seemed … *right*. As if the colors and lights and patterns of the world had come together to form one perfect place—one true bit of beauty. After last night, it was exactly where I needed to be" (156).

The sexual tension between Feyre and Tamlin is built gradually through emotional intimacy, mutual attraction, touch, and physical closeness. The sensual atmosphere is emphasised more than explicit sexual scenes. These scenes include gazes, kissing, physical desire, partial nudity, references to sexual attraction and arousal, and implied sexual behaviour. Sexuality is presented through Feyre's perspective rather than through graphic details. The descriptions focus more on her feelings, bodily reactions, emotional tension, and desire.[21] She repeatedly notices Tamlin's physical appearance, body, strength, and scent.

However, some scenes blur the line between desire, fear and danger. Tamlin's behaviour combines gentleness, possessiveness, and physical dominance. For instance, during Fire Night, Tamlin struggles to fully control himself because of magic and leaves bruises on Feyre while kissing her.[22] Moreover, one scene includes a possible attempt to assault Feyre by three unknown faeries before Rhysand intervenes.

The sexual scenes are mostly consensual, occur briefly, and always include Feyre's thoughts and reactions.[23] Also, her sexuality is a part of her maturation. Therefore, the intimate scenes contribute not only to romance but also to character development and story progression. As the narration is subjective, readers may be influenced by Feyre's interpretation of events. They may focus more on emotional intensity than on the problematic power imbalance between Tamlin and Feyre.

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[21] "A ravenous, unyielding sort of hunger passed over his face. I bent a leg and slid it to the side, a silent invitation. He let out a low growl—and slowly, with predatory intent, raised his gaze to mine again. The full force of that wild, unrelenting High Lord's power focused solely on me—and I felt the storm contained beneath his skin, so capable of sweeping away everything I was, even in its lessened state. But I could trust him, trust myself to weather that mighty power. I could throw all that I was at him and he wouldn't balk. "Give me everything," I breathed" (247).

[22] "He reeked of magic. When I looked into his eyes, remnants of power flickered there. No kindness, none of the wry humor and gentle reprimands. The Tamlin I knew was gone. "Let go," I said as evenly as I could, but his claws punched out, imbedding in the wood above my hands. Still riding the magic, he was half-wild" (196).

[23] "I fell asleep in his arms, and when I awoke a few hours later, we made love again, lazily and intently, a slow-burning smolder to the wildfire of earlier. Once we were both spent, panting and sweat-slicked, we lay in silence for a time, and I breathed in the smell of him, earthy and crisp. I would never be able to capture that—never be able to paint the *feel* and taste of him, no matter how many times I tried, no matter how many colors I used" (248).

Audience Appeal

The novel focuses primarily on emotions and romance rather than on complex political fantasy. Its first-person narration may increase emotional immersion, as readers experience the story through Feyre's feelings and perspective. The fantasy world may offer escapism from ordinary reality, similarly to how Feyre escapes from the human world into magical courts, immortality, adventure and beauty. The contrast between the poor human world and Prythian further strengthens this escapist fantasy, which readers may find appealing. Elements such as the protagonist's age, themes of identity, intense first love, and maturation may especially resonate with adolescent readers. Emotional narration may also make the story easier to understand and to experience emotionally.

The *ACOTAR* series is easily adaptable for edits, trope discussions, reaction videos, and fan art, as BookTok often emphasises romance, emotional suffering, attractive male characters, and aesthetic atmosphere. Within the BookTok community, Tamlin is sometimes portrayed as either a victim or a villain in the sequel, while Rhysand is glorified and idealised. Moreover, the story contains elements that are popular on BookTok, such as morally grey men, enemies-to-lovers dynamics, memorable quotes, and dramatic romantic scenes.

Appendix 57: Detailed Analysis of *The Cruel Prince*

Holly Black is an American fantasy writer known for works such as *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. This bestselling author from New Jersey loved reading from an early age (Black 2026, n. p.). Her works often focus on magical stories, faeries and folklore. At HumbookFest Prague in 2024, where she was one of the main guests, she admitted that faeries and folklore are among her interests. Therefore, the inspiration for The Folk of the Air series started with the idea of a reverse changeling story (Mullen 2019, n. p.), and with her visit to the woods of Cornwall and Devon, which she described as magical (Enchanted Living Magazine 2019, n. p.).

The Folk of the Air trilogy, beginning with *The Cruel Prince* (2018), was followed by the duology *The Stolen Heir* (2023). The series has gained mass popularity on BookTok and is frequently recommended as a YA romantasy. On TikTok, there are currently over one hundred thousand videos with the hashtag #cruelprince.

Genre Positioning and Narrative Style

The Cruel Prince can be classified as high fantasy, as its narrative takes place in the fictional faerie realm. Yet it also incorporates low fantasy elements, such as the coexistence with the modern human world.[24] The novel emphasises political fantasy, power struggles, and court intrigue, which makes romance less central to the plot. Romance becomes more important in the sequels, aligning the series with the romantasy genre. The novel is advertised as YA, and it may fit this classification better than NA. The protagonist is seventeen years old, and the narrative contains almost no explicit sexual content. Nevertheless, older readers can appreciate the violence, manipulation, and morally grey characters, so the novel still has crossover appeal.

[24] "The doors are open, and I see a sprawl of things stolen from the human world, matchbooks, newspapers, empty bottles, novels, and Polaroids. The sprites had turned the matchbooks into beds and tables, shredded all the paper, and ripped out the centers of the books to nest inside. It was a full-on sprite infestation. But I am more baffled by the quantity of things Vivi has and how many of them don't seem to have any value. It's just junk. Mortal junk" (35).

The story is narrated in the first person from the limited, subjective point of view of the protagonist, Jude. Readers may know only her thoughts and interpretations of events, so they discover secrets with her. Besides, the narrator occasionally addresses the reader directly[25] which may disrupt readers' immersion.

The tone of the novel is mostly dark, as the narrator frequently emphasises the cruelty of the faeries. This creates an atmosphere that blends beauty with danger and violence. Irony and sarcasm are present in both narration and dialogue. The plot maintains a fast pace, though the second part of the novel, Book Two, becomes more political and suspenseful. Short chapters may contribute to readability and tension. Moreover, the writing is accessible to YA readers, with no complicated sentence structures and rather concise and sharp during tense scenes. Descriptive passages emphasise atmosphere, court aesthetics, and the protagonist's internal emotions. The magical atmosphere is supported through folklore vocabulary and imagery. Such portrayal may encourage readers to perceive this dangerous faerie atmosphere exciting and aesthetically appealing.

World-Building and Social Structures

The faerie realm of Elfhame is a fictional magical world hidden from ordinary humans across a sea, as in the map at the beginning of the novel. Faeries and humans may cross between worlds, but only with a spell, so Jude or any human needs a faerie to cross. Elfhame is ruled by the old High King Eldred from a royal court under the hill. Different courts and territories, such as the Court of Termites, exist and create political tension or alliances. Inside faerie society, there is a hierarchy: royalty, such as the King's children, and nobility possess the highest status, lesser faeries exist below them. Even among faeries, there are divisions and prejudices. Then, the position of humans present in the realm is strictly individual. They may serve, entertain, or

[25] "I've told this story all wrong,…So here are the things I should have told you about myself before, but didn't" (44).

be part of the court because of their rare skills, such as artistic or combat. As immortal faeries dominate society, mortal humans are often considered weak, fragile and outsiders.[26]

Cruelty is normal in faerie society. Bullying, humiliation, and violence are treated as entertainment or accepted behaviour.[27] The court values wit, beauty, and, above all, power. Power is tied to birth, status, strategy, or magic. The magic system, only partly explained in the first novel, features glamour, enchantment, magical bargains, compulsion, geases, and supernatural abilities. Moreover, faeries cannot lie directly. However, they manipulate through omission and sharp tongue, so humans are respected only for the ability to lie.[28] Humans must be aware of enchantment in food, drink, music, dance or faerie geases which force obedience. Jude finds it difficult to navigate the magic as she has experienced all types, but she and her twin learn to adapt. The sisters grew used to faerie beauty, their luxury, magical creatures, court feasts, and the fact that beauty often hides violence or manipulation.

Jude's feelings of being an outsider may resonate with adolescents who struggle with a sense of belonging. Furthermore, her desire for power may appear understandable because of constant humiliation. Additionally, readers may romanticise the dangerous faerie culture due to its aesthetic beauty.

Characterisation and Relationship Dynamics

Jude

Jude, the protagonist, is a seventeen-year-old mortal human girl raised in the faerie realm for ten years. She constantly feels inferior, vulnerable, and like an outsider. Yet, she does not belong to the human world either. Her narration often reveals insecurity. She is repeatedly

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[26] "No matter how careful I am, eventually I'll make another misstep. I am weak. I am fragile. I am mortal. I hate that most of all. Even if, by some miracle, I could be better than them, I will never be one of them" (46).
[27] "As the boy falls, Cardan grabs one of his wings. It tears like paper. The boy's scream is thin and reedy. He curls up into himself on the ground, agony plain on his face. I wonder if faerie wings grow back; I know that butterflies that lose a wing never fly again. The courtiers around us gape and titter, but only for a moment. Then they go back to their dancing and their songs, and the revel spirals on" (22).
[28] "It's shocking," he says, as though he's giving me some great compliment. "I know humans can lie, but to watch you do it is incredible. Do it again." I feel my face heat. "I wasn't… I…" "Do it again," he repeats gently. "Don't be afraid" (83).

described as weak, fragile, and mortal as this quality is considered an insult. She is emotionally divided between attraction to and hatred of the faerie world. Moreover, she is fascinated by its cruelty and beauty.

Constant bullying and humiliation from powerful and cruel faeries, such as Cardan and his companions,[29] gradually motivate her not only to become equal to them but superior.[30] This demonstrates her ambition, courage, and desire to prove herself. As she trains to become a better soldier and spy, she slowly transforms from a victim into a manipulator and later a kingmaker.

She develops morally darker behaviour throughout the novel. Underestimated by others, she proves herself capable of killing.[31] However, she still maintains compassion for the helpless and innocent. She becomes extremely strategic and increasingly hungry for power, which not only ensures her survival within the faerie realm but also her control over it. She represents the rejection of the passive role of a human girl. The pinnacle of her transformation happens when she manipulates her former enemy, Cardan, into becoming the King of Elfhame,[32] and when the Court of Shadows gives her the symbolic nickname the Queen.

Her relationship with Cardan combines attraction and hatred. Their emotional tension is much stronger than the romance itself. Throughout the narrative, they both attempt to control each other. Jude discovers Cardan's obsession with her[33] and uses it against him. In the first

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[29] "This is just a game," Nicasia says. "But sometimes we play too hard with our toys. And then they break." "It's not like we drowned you ourselves," Valerian calls" (49).

[30] "I won't be afraid of him or of Prince Dain's censure. If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse" (210).

[31] "*You're no killer.* I balk and pull the knife free, running out of the room. I shove the bloody blade into my pocket. My boots clatter on the stone as I head for the stairs. Looking back, I see him on his knees, pressing a hand to his side to stanch the blood. He lets out a hiss of pain that makes me recall my knife is cold iron. Cold iron hurts faeries a lot. I could not be gladder of carrying it" (157).

[32] "Cardan looks at me with helpless rage. Then, the full minute of my command up, he rises slowly to his feet. The fury in his eyes is familiar, the glitter of them like banked fire, like coals burning hotter than flames ever could. This time I deserve it. I promised he was going to be able to walk away from the Court and all its manipulations. I promised he would be free from all this. I lied" (363-364).

[33] "Smoothing it out, I see Cardan's furious, arrogant handwriting scrawled over the page, taking up all available space. In some places he pressed the nib so angrily that the paper tore. *Jude*, it reads, each hateful rendering of my name like a punch to the gut" (140).

novel, Jude is not fully aware of her feelings for Cardan, and their connection is characterised by desire linked with danger.

Jude's portrayal may be admired for her ambition and resilience. Readers may also identify with her feelings of alienation and experiences of bullying. Nevertheless, her morally questionable actions may be justified by the readers because the narration is subjective.

Cardan

Cardan, the youngest prince of Elfhame, is associated with alcohol, partying, and excessive behaviour. He is described as beautiful, fashionable, emotionally unstable, arrogant, and cruel. His cruelty functions as a defence mechanism. He uses humiliation and fear to maintain power and to hide his shame and unwanted position within the royal family, which has neglected him since birth. His tail symbolises hidden shame and fear.[34]

Moreover, he represents a dangerous attraction. His reputation and appearance suggest he could kill, but he repeatedly claims he is not a killer, and his actions often support this. This contrasts with Jude, who is capable of killing. Cardan gradually demonstrates to be intelligent, politically observant, and vulnerable. One of his weaknesses is his fascination with and disgust toward Jude. Jude's combat skills threaten him, and he is jealous of her position within her family. Throughout the series, he develops deep romantic feelings for her.[35] Their dynamic shifts after Jude becomes aware of Taryn's betrayal and gains control over him. Their romance emerges mainly from psychological conflict.

The narrative may encourage readers to romanticise Cardan and his behaviour because he is described as very attractive and emotionally damaged. They may also favour the enemies-

[34] "As I watch, the tail forms one wavering curve after another, snaking back and forth, betraying his cool face, telling its own story of uncertainty and fear. I can see why he hides that thing away" (264).
[35] "I put both of my hands on the desk. "Just tell me why you hate me. Once and for all."… For a moment, I think he's ignoring me, but then I realize he's not answering because he can't lie and he doesn't want to tell me the truth. "Well?" I say, lifting the crossbow again, glad to have a reason to reassert my position as the person in charge. "Tell me!" He leans in and closes his eyes. "Most of all, I hate you because I think of you. Often. It's disgusting, and I can't stop." I am shocked into silence" (306-307).

to-lovers tension between him and Jude.[36] Therefore, Jude and Cardan's relationship may contribute to the romanticisation of toxic behaviour and attraction.

Taryn

Taryn is Jude's identical twin sister. She represents adaptation and conformity. Her character mirrors Jude's as she wants safety, avoids conflict, and is more passive and socially accepted. Taryn prefers survival through fitting in. Therefore, she is determined to marry a faerie despite betraying her sister. She may frustrate readers with her indifference, but her behaviour may appear to be a realistic survival strategy.

Locke

Locke is a charming, manipulative faerie and one of Cardan's closest companions. He represents drama and emotional games. He enjoys creating chaos. Readers may initially romanticise him, as he seems to be kind and affectionate towards Jude. He uses Jude, which later creates an emotional shock for her and stirs conflict between the twins.[37] His character is important for changing the relationship dynamics between Jude and Cardan[38] and between Jude and her sister.

Vivienne

Vivienne, or Vivi, is the twins' older half-fae sister. She hates and disrespects her true father, Madoc. She represents resistance to adaptation and maintains a strong connection to the human world. She contrasts with Jude as she rejects power games, favours humans and modernity. In addition, she is a queer representation in the novel, as she dates a human girl.

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[36] "And Cardan is even more beautiful than the rest, with black hair as iridescent as a raven's wing and cheekbones sharp enough to cut out a girl's heart. I hate him more than all the others. I hate him so much that sometimes when I look at him, I can hardly breathe" (30).

[37] "I'm a mirror," she shouts. "I'm the mirror you don't want to look at." I swing toward Taryn again, putting my whole weight into the strike. I am so angry, angry at so many things. I hate that I was stupid. I hate that I was tricked. Fury roars in my head, loud enough to drown out my every other thought. I swing my sword toward her side in a shining arc" (277).

[38] "It was about this, wasn't it? He knew. They all knew." I think of Nicasia sitting at Locke's dining table, seeming for a moment to take me into her confidence. *He ruins things. That's what he likes. To ruin things.* I thought she'd been talking about Cardan" (275).

Madoc

Madoc is a powerful and politically manipulative general of Elfhame. He functions as a father figure to the sisters as well as the monster after he murdered their parents and brought them to Elfhame. He provides them with a home, some protection and social status among faerie nobility. As he values ambition, war and bloodshed, he shapes Jude's identity. She seeks his approval despite her trauma and their complex father-daughter relationship.

Oriana

Oriana is Madoc's second wife. She represents the social expectation of faerie motherhood. She emotionally distances herself from Jude and Taryn to protect her son. As the narration progresses, she is shown to be more politically aware than expected.

Oak

Oak is supposed to be a young child of Madoc and Orianna, and Jude's brother. However, he is a true son of Prince Dain. Therefore, he symbolises the future and political legitimacy. He is crucial for a succession conflict.

Dain

Dain is a prince of Elfhame and is supposed to be the next King. He appears honourable but is morally ambiguous. His character shows corruption hidden beneath the elegance of a court. He is politically intelligent and makes Jude his spy in exchange for resistance to other faeries' geases. Jude explores his true nature over time.

Balekin

Balekin is the King of Elfhame's oldest child, thus a prince, too. He is known for his cruelty, violence, desire for power and a court with human slaves. His character represents corrupted aristocratic power and functions as the enemy. Jude fears him even more after she discovers he abuses his brother Cardan.

Gender Roles

The Faerie realm is largely politically patriarchal, as the princes of Elfhame are treated as the main competitors for the throne. However, powerful female faeries are present, such as Queen Orlagh, the ruler of the Undersea. Female royals and nobility participate socially and politically. They hold influence mostly indirectly and through court manipulation, alliances, beauty and seduction. Men are associated with military authority and strategy.

As Jude is skilled in combat, strategy, and manipulation, she challenges the traditional female role. She is trained and supported by Madoc, but his approval is conditional. Other relatives constantly discourage her from doing so. For instance, Oriana and Taryn, who represent conventional femininity, view Jude's ambition as dangerous.[39]

Many family and romantic relationships in the novel are closely tied to social status, protection and power. Oriana, for example, married Madoc for Oak's protection, as Madoc holds political and military authority. Likewise, Taryn wants to secure safety for herself, so she accepts Locke's proposal because he can provide social approval and stability. Meanwhile, Jude interprets only Locke's attentions as acceptance within faerie society. This relationship exposes Jude's vulnerability and desire to belong.

However, Jude and Cardan's relationship combines attraction, obsession, fear and power struggle. Initially, Cardan possesses greater social and physical power over Jude because he is a prince and a High Fae. When Jude gains political control over him, the power dynamic reverses.[40] Therefore, their relationship may be interpreted as more equal in power and mutually

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[39] "Don't fight him tomorrow," she continues. "I'm not withdrawing from the tournament," I tell her. "Even if it wins you nothing but more woe?" she asks. "Even then," I say. "Do something else," she insists. "Find a way. Fix it before it's too late" (69).

[40] Cardan crosses the room toward me, and I have no idea what he's going to do. If he kisses me, I am afraid I will be consumed by the hungry and humiliating urgency that I felt the first time. But when he kneels down in front of me, I am too surprised to formulate any thoughts at all. He takes my hand in his, long fingers cool as they curl around mine. "Very well," he says impatiently, not sounding in the least like a vassal about to swear to his lady. "Jude Duarte, daughter of clay, I swear myself into your service. I will act as your hand. I will act as your shield. I will act in accordance with your will. Let it be so for one year and one day…*and not for one minute more*" (319-320).

dependent. Readers may interpret their relationship as intense and even romantic as Jude and Cardan follow the enemies-to-lovers trope. As readers gain more information about the characters, they may overlook their manipulative, toxic or even cruel behaviour toward one another, such as threats, hateful comments and humiliation.

Tropes and Archetypes

The Folk of the Air series contains common YA romantasy tropes which shape the protagonist, her relationships, and the political conflicts. The tropes are portrayed in a dark and manipulative way. The following table summarises the main tropes and their functions in the text.

The Reluctant Heroine	Jude does not want to save the faerie realm at first and rather fights for her place at the court. However, when she unfolds the court intrigue and fears Balekin or Madoc ruling over Elfhame, she wants to save the realm from them. Therefore, she accepts her role and gains political power and respect through questionable means, but basically for the good of Elfhame.[41]
Morally Grey Characters	The story contains many morally grey characters, but the most obvious are Jude and Cardan. They are both morally ambiguous, manipulative, abusive, and vulnerable. They share the same goal to find a place where they belong.
Love Triangles	In the first novel, there are several love triangles. The main one is between Locke, Taryn and Jude. Each character wants different things. No one is motivated to date the other one for love or attraction: Locke wants entertainment, Taryn wants marriage and stability, and Jude wants acceptance in society and to be the chosen one. The result is the sister's betrayal. Another mentioned love triangle that happened in the past was between Cardan, Nicasia and Locke. Cardan loved Nicasia, but Locke stole her from him for entertainment, again. And the last love triangle gradually unfolds in the story between Cardan, Locke and Jude, as Cardan and Jude become attracted to each other. Then,

[41] "What might Madoc do with so much power unchecked? What might I do with a brother on the throne? And I could put him there. I have the winning card to play, because while Balekin would resist crowning Oak, I bet Cardan wouldn't. I could make my brother the High King and myself a princess. All that power is right there for the taking. All I have to do is reach out my hand. The odd thing about ambition is this: You can acquire it like a fever, but it is not so easy to shed. Once, I was content to hope for knighthood and the power to force Cardan and his friends to leave me alone. All I wanted was to find some place to fit in here in Faerie. Now I wonder what it would be like to choose the next king" (296-297).

	Cardan is secretly jealous of Locke and tries to subtly warn Jude about Locke's manipulation.[42]
Enemies-to-Lovers	As previously mentioned, Jude and Cardan's relationship starts as enemies. Jude openly despises him and opposes Cardan's demands. In addition, they are jealous of each other in different aspects. During the series, they accept their mutual attraction and slowly become romantic partners. The relationship is complex and interwoven with the rule over Elfhame. Their love may not be considered healthy, but it is intense.

Themes and Coming-of-Age Elements

The most important theme in the novel is power and ambition. The central plot and conflict revolve around the rule in Elfhame, and all characters are affected by it. At first, Jude's motivation to primarily survive shifts into a desire for influence. She seeks political power because she not only acquires a place in society but a superior and respectful position, surpassing the faeries. This theme is connected to schemes and manipulation within the court that dominate the narrative.

Jude, learning to navigate the court and resist the powerful faerie magic, shows her transformation and identity development, which is a characteristic theme of YA. Jude transforms from a frightened outsider to an ambitious spy and, finally, a kingmaker. She becomes emotionally harder, politically intelligent and morally ambiguous. She proves she can win without any magical abilities, even in a mortal human body. Readers may sympathise with her desire to stop being powerless and admire her determination. Alongside her transformation, she creates a sense of belonging for herself. Originally, she trains in the hope of gaining recognition from others who might secure her a place in the faerie realm. In the end, she invents her place on her own. The narrative suggests that every individual should decide their own

[42] "My skin prickles. I don't like this. But at least I know what to say. "If you hurt me, I wouldn't cry. I would hurt you back." His step falters as we sweep over the floor. "I'm sure you'd—" And then he breaks off speaking, looking behind him. I can barely think. My face is hot. I dread what he will say next. "Time to change partners," a voice says, and I look to see that it's the worst person possible: Cardan. "Oh," he says to Locke. "Did I steal your line?" His tone is unfriendly, and as I turn his words over in my mind, they do little to comfort me" (231).

place in society. This situation may be inspirational for readers who struggle with a sense of belonging.

Another theme, which is much less idealised and complicated, is sisterhood. The sisters' relationship is protective, but competitive, emotionally painful and tied to survival. They all survived childhood trauma; their responses differ, and that separates them. However, they feel strong family bonds with each other, and therefore, their conflicts affect them deeply. Readers may identify with the sibling conflict and depiction of imperfect family relationships.

The last prominent theme in the first novel is romance. Romantic relationships are not central to the plot, as true feelings of love have not yet emerged. Although relationships based on mutual advantages, manipulation, attraction and entertainment strongly affect the main conflict. At the end of the series, Jude and Cardan's love will contribute to the resolution, and love increasingly becomes central to the plot.

Faeries as twilight creatures represent a key motif in the series. Furthermore, they can see in the dark, which reflects secrecy, hidden truths, and their darker nature.[43] Another recurring motif is performance. Since faeries cannot lie directly, they constantly perform social roles and conceal their true intentions through manipulation, omission, and court behaviour.

Many objects in the series also possess symbolic meaning. For instance, in order to rule, the heir must wear the magical crown of Elfhame, which confirms legitimacy and authority.[44] During periods of political change, blood can be spilt, symbolising violence and betrayal. However, some characters prefer quieter methods of killing, such as poison. After nearly being

[43] "I know when we come to a door because I walk straight into it, much to the Roach's amusement. "You really can't see," he says. I rub my forehead. "I told you I couldn't!" "Yes, but you're the liar," he reminds me. "I'm not supposed to believe anything you say." "Why would I lie about something like that?" I demand, still annoyed" (127).

[44] "Dulcamara's smile gentles. "Once there are fewer than two descendants—one to wear the crown and the other to place it on the ruler's head—the High Crown and its power crumble. All of Elfhame will be free from their oaths to it" (174).

poisoned herself, Jude intentionally poisons herself daily to develop immunity. So, poison can symbolise adaptation, survival, self-transformation, and death.

Another dangerous symbolic object is faerie fruit, especially apples. One bite causes temptation, addiction, euphoria, and loss of self-control in humans.[45] In contrast, iron can physically harm faeries and therefore symbolises human resistance and the hidden vulnerability of faeries. Another object symbolising vulnerability and also shame is Cardan's tail, which he carefully hides beneath his clothing. Cardan also possesses another symbolic object: a copy of the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which he must have acquired from the human world. The book symbolises crossing into a strange and dangerous magical realm, similarly to Jude's experience in Elfhame.[46]

Explicit Content and Its Narrative Function

The Cruel Prince contains very little explicit sexual content, making it more suitable for adolescents. Sexuality is implied rather than graphically described.[47] Only kissing and physical attraction are present. Jude's intimate interaction with Locke, which is described, includes kissing, flirting and physical closeness.[48] Then, Jude repeatedly notices Cardan's physical appearance without implication of sexual intentions. The most dramatic and romantically emotional scene in the first novel is Jude and Cardan's first kiss, which is connected rather with

[45] "Just then, as I am looking at the stars, Valerian shoves something soft against my mouth. An apple, sweet and rotten at the same time, honeyed juice running over my tongue, tasting of sunlight and pure heady, stupid joy. Faerie fruit, which muddles the mind, which makes humans crave it enough to starve themselves for another taste, which makes us pliant and suggestible and ridiculous. Dain's geas protected me from enchantment, from anyone's control, but faerie fruit puts you out of even your own control. Oh no. Oh no no no no no" (p. 95).

[46] "I reach over to my bedside table to retrieve the book I stole from Hollow Hall. "Remember this?" I ask, lifting up the collected *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* book. When I do, a folded piece of paper slips out and flutters to the floor. "We used to read that when we were little," she says, grabbing for the book. "Where did you get it?" "I found it," I say" (139).

[47] "I am afraid that my mortal body stinks of sweat, of decay, of fear. I am not sure where to put my hands, how hard to grab, how deep to sink my nails into his shoulders. And while I know what comes after kissing, while I know what it means to have his hands slide up over my bruised calf to my thigh, I have no idea how to hide my inexperience" (165).

[48] "Locke continues his flirtation. He sits with Taryn and me when we take our lunch, spread out on a blanket, watching the sun set. Occasionally he walks me home through the woods, stopping to kiss me near a copse of fir trees just before Madoc's estate. I only hope he doesn't taste the bitterness of poison on my lips" (153).

adrenaline, unknown feelings and power reversal.[49] Moreover, Jude is not aware of her desire but acknowledges Cardan's. Readers may interpret Jude and Locke's kiss as the idea of romance, but she never focuses much on him. The scene contains little genuine emotion from Jude's perspective. Then, Cardan and Jude's kissing may be romanticised by readers, even though it followed an emotional confrontation. The function of these scenes for the narrative is essential. The relationship with Locke and their intimate scenes helps to demonstrate that romance in Elfhame is often performative and false. However, the scene where Jude kisses Cardan is a turning point in their relationship and in her development. It affirms Jude's control over him, exposes his weakness, and lastly, it complicates Jude's perception of Cardan.

Audience Appeal

The Cruel Prince's popularity may be based on intriguing political fantasy, dangerous romance and complex characters. Moreover, the fantasy world Elfhame described as beautiful and cruel may attract readers who prefer a darker aesthetic and intense conflict to lighter, romantic fantasy. Thus, readers may admire the daring and determined main protagonist who sometimes makes morally questionable decisions. For adolescent readers, there are many elements that may be relatable, such as searching for identity, a sense of belonging, imperfect family relationships, feelings of alienation, and complicated romantic relationships. The novel may resonate with individuals who feel underestimated or powerless. BookTok readers may favour this novel because it portrays believable enemies who do not suddenly become inseparable lovers despite their unhealthy behaviour. Dramatic scenes, including violence, betrayal, and unexpected events, can cause emotional reactions. Besides, the dark aesthetic of the narrative offers the opportunity to create original content and fan edits featuring popular quotes.

[49] "I lean toward him, close enough for a kiss. His eyes widen. The look in his face is some commingling of panic and desire. It is a heady feeling, having power over someone. Over *Cardan*, who I never thought had any feelings at all. "You really do want me," I say, close enough to feel the warmth of his breath as it hitches. "And you *hate* it." I change the angle of the knife, turning it so it's against his neck" (307).

Appendix 58: Detailed Analysis of *Red Queen*

Victoria Aveyard is an American *New York Times* bestselling author and screenwriter. Aveyard studied screenwriting at university in California (Aveyard 2019). Since high school, she has known that she wanted to become a writer. She prefers writing YA fiction because it allows her to combine different genres without clear limitations. Moreover, she states that YA novels are often much more fast-paced, which suits her writing style due to her screenwriting background (Books A Million 2021, n. p.).

Her inspiration for *Red Queen* (2015) came from a visual image of an adolescent girl about to be executed who suddenly electrocutes the executioner with her abilities (The Guardian 2015, n. p.). She had this vision three years before the novel's publication. Aveyard explains that her ideas often come from combining and reshaping various concepts, which is a tactic she developed during her university studies. To describe the novel to potential readers, she characterised *Red Queen* as "*Game of Thrones* meets *X-Men* meets *The Hunger Games*" (Aveyard 2019, n. p.).

Aveyard is active on Instagram and TikTok, where she often posts promotional content about her novels and writing. *Red Queen* reached bestseller status soon after its publication in 2015. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the series gained additional popularity on BookTok (Merga 2021, 8), becoming one of the early BookTok fantasy trends. Although the series is currently less dominant on the platform, it still maintains popularity among readers. Recently, discussions on BookTok concerning similarities between *Red Queen* and *Powerless* (2023) have renewed interest in Aveyard's series.

Genre Positioning and Narrative Style

Red Queen is primarily a fantasy novel with political and romantic elements. The novel can be categorised as YA because it focuses on a teenage protagonist and typical coming-of-age themes. The absence of NA features supports this categorisation. The story features several

dystopian elements, including an oppressive political regime, surveillance, propaganda, and a rebellion narrative. These aspects resemble the phenomenon of *Hunger Games* or *Divergent*. Therefore, *Red Queen* is not only a YA fantasy but also a dystopian novel. Moreover, the novel includes romance such as romantic tension, court aesthetic and attractive princes, making it an early romantasy crossover.

The narrative is written in the first-person from Mare, the main protagonist's perspective. Readers only know the information she knows. Therefore, the narrator's perspective is limited and emotionally subjective, leading to early misjudgements, prejudices, and the romanticisation of some characters with hidden intentions.[50]

The novel's tone is dark and dramatic. It begins with a portrayal of Mare's hometown, a place full of poor, oppressed people.[51] It highlights inequality between social classes and contrasts with the royal court environment that fascinates Mare with wealth, beauty and power. From a hopeless, desperate atmosphere, the narration shifts to feelings of alienation and pretence as the protagonist enters the palace. This marks the beginning of questioning her identity.

The pacing is fast and episodic because of relatively short chapters, cliffhangers, and sudden revelations that build suspense. Aveyard's screenwriter's background shows in the abrupt transitions between emotional, political and action scenes. Many of the scenes feature violence with a military-strategy focus.

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[50] This time I really do snap. "You don't know a thing about him." Maven's my friend. Maven's risking more than me. "Judging him by his parents is like judging me for my blood. Just because you hate the king and queen doesn't mean you can hate him too" (223).

[51] "Gray Town," Maven murmurs. Factories stretch out as far as I can see, dirty and massive and humming with electricity. It hits me like a fist, almost knocking me off my feet. My heart tries to keep up with the unearthly pulse and I have to sit down, feeling my blood race. I thought my world was wrong, that my life was unfair. But I could never even dream of a place like Gray Town" (285-286).

The novel's style is simple and direct, which makes it accessible to adolescent readers. The descriptions emphasise characters' emotions and the setting's aesthetic, not detailed politics. This style likely supports readability and the novel's popularity.

World-Building and Social Structures

The world of Norta is advanced in technology, such as electricity, cameras, screens, transport systems, and weapons. Yet, society operates as a monarchy. The kingdom is ruled by King Tiberias and his second wife, Queen Elara. The system resembles a dictatorship as the government relies on propaganda, the military and censorship. For example, screens broadcast royal speeches to influence public opinion. In addition, the atmosphere is affected by constant surveillance. Mare feels a sense of control and paranoia, awareness that cameras are everywhere.[52]

However, society is not divided only by wealth but also by blood. The superiors, called the Silvers, have silver blood. The poor and working class have red blood. This shows strict class inequality. The setting contrasts poor Red villages, such as the Stilts, where Mare grew up, with extravagant Silver palaces and cities.[53] The world combines futuristic and historical elements at the same time.

Moreover, magic is a prominent part of the world. The Silvers have magical abilities, for instance, the ability to command fire and water, run fast, be physically strong, and read minds. Their powers differ and are usually hereditary. The Reds have no powers and are treated like servants, as it is their purpose to serve the extraordinary Silver class. However, Mare's

[52] "Motion-activated lights, I think. Like back in the hallway, my senses sharpen and everything electrical becomes a burning feeling in my mind. Immediately I know there are no less than four cameras in my room and that makes me squirm" (112).

[53] "As we get closer to the gates, I squint through the glare to see to the other side. Though Summerton only exists for the season, abandoned before the first frostfall, it's the biggest city I've ever seen. There are bustling streets, shops, cantina bars, houses, and courtyards, all of them pointed toward a shimmering monstrosity of diamondglass and marble. And now I know where it got its name. The Hall of the Sun shines like a star, reaching a hundred feet into the air in a twisting mass of spires and bridges" (29).

surprising lightning abilities, as she is a biological Red, challenge this structure. Her power seems even stronger, which threatens the Silver's position and ideology.[54]

The society operates under this ideology of hierarchy and oppression, with the Silvers holding political, military, and economic power. Most of the Reds accept their inferior role with no hope. The superiority of Silvers is reminded in arenas where only they can fight and demonstrate their abilities.[55] These spectacles are meant to frighten the Reds into obedience.

The narrative also highlights the consequences of war. The Kingdom is in long-term war, and that affects all the Red families. They must be employed, or they will be conscripted at the age of 18, boys and girls, for several years. These aspects are also normalised within society.

Besides this rigid class system, a rebellious group called the Scarlet Guard opposes it. The Guard is not fully explored in the first novel, but Mare gradually learns more and even becomes a rebel herself.[56]

This portrayal of social inequality, propaganda and inherited privilege may be interpreted by the readers as a warning. They may also admire the main protagonist for her determination to survive and for fighting for the right cause.

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[54] "Julian sighs, exasperated. He runs a hand through his thinning chestnut hair. "For hundreds of years the Silvers have walked the earth as living gods and the Reds have been slaves at their feet, until you. If that isn't change, I don't know what is" (131).

[55] "For me, watching two champions rip into each other is not enjoyable, but Kilorn loves it. Let them ruin each other, he says. They're not our people. He doesn't understand what the Feats are about. This isn't mindless entertainment, meant to give us some respite from grueling work. This is calculated, cold, a message. Only Silvers can fight in the arenas because only a Silver can survive the arena. They fight to show us their strength and power. You are no match for us. We are your betters. We are gods. It's written in every superhuman blow the champions land" (6).

[56] "Are you with us, Mare Barrow?" he says, his hand closing over mine. More war, more death, Cal said. But there's a chance he's wrong. There's a chance we can change it. My fingers tighten, holding on to Will. I can feel the weight of my action, the importance behind it. "I'm with you." "We will rise," he breathes, in unison with Tristan. I remember the words and speak with them. "Red as the dawn." In the flickering candlelight, our shadows look like monsters on the walls. When I join back up with Cal at the edge of town, I feel lighter somehow, emboldened by my decision and the prospect of what's to come" (164).

Characterisation and Relational Dynamics

Mare

Mare is the narrator and main protagonist. She is a seventeen-year-old girl who comes from a poor family. She tends to be pessimistic and impulsive. She has no talent, unlike her sister, so she feels worthless.[57] At least, she is determined to contribute financially through stealing. Her character focuses on survival and insecurity. She fears conscription and feels trapped by poverty and social inequality.

Mare begins to transform after her powers unexpectedly manifest in the palace. On the royal orders, she is disguised as a lost noble daughter. She is forced to adapt, hide her identity, and mask her veins in public. Therefore, Mare struggles with identity and a sense of belonging.[58] This creates psychological conflict throughout the novel. In the palace environment, Mare's character still focuses on survival but now is accompanied by rebellious tendencies. With her supernatural ability, she gained true power and a voice as she is presented as a future princess. On the contrary, she feels alone and searches for allies and finds one in her future husband, the second prince, who supports her rebellious ideas. Another ally is her tutor, Jurian, who helps her gain confidence and provides knowledge about the court.

At the end of the novel, she is deeply betrayed by the second prince, which highlights her naivety and wrong judgment. Mare is morally imperfect, able to manipulate and questions her motivation.[59] These features may make her relatable and realistic for adolescent readers.

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[57] "That's beautiful, Gee." I let my hand trace one of the flowers, marveling at the silky feel of it. She glances up and smiles softly, showing even teeth. As much as we fight, she knows she's my little star. And everyone knows I'm the jealous one, Gisa. I can't do anything but steal from people who can actually do things" (14).

[58] "Sitting at a table made of crystal, drinking bubbly gold liquid until my head spins, I feel like a traitor. *What are my parents eating for dinner tonight? Do they even know where I am? Or is Mom sitting on the porch, waiting for me to come home?* Instead, I'm stuck in a room full of people who would kill me if they knew the truth. And the royals of course, who would kill me if they could, who probably will kill me one day. They've pulled me inside out, swapping Mare for Mareena, a thief for a crown, rags for silk, Red for Silver. This morning I was a servant, tonight I'm a princess. *How much more will change? What else will I lose"* (105).

[59] "I push back from the murdered woman, but my hands slide through a mixture of silverblood and wine. A scream escapes me in a terrifying combination of frustration and grief. The blood clings to my hands, like it knows what I've done. It's sticky and cold and everywhere, trying to drown me" (243).

Cal

Cal, his true name Tiberias, represents duty, honour, and responsibility. He is the crown prince, so he must be loyal to the kingdom and the military system, even though he recognises its flaws. He genuinely cares about Mare, despite the fact that she is biologically a Red.[60] Cal demonstrates sincere worry about the Reds' position. For instance, he wants social reform through the Shadow Legion, but he still benefits from Silver privilege. Cal's fire abilities symbolise destruction, military strength, leadership, and inherited royal power.

Cal represents the conflict between morality and loyalty. He struggles between love, political expectations, family duty, and justice. Mare initially sees him as a true Silver and often describes him as dangerous or surprisingly kind. Moreover, she compares him to a wolf disguised as a sheep.

Maven

Maven is the son of the King and his second wife. He initially appears sensitive, intelligent, and emotionally vulnerable. After he and Mare become formally engaged, she believes he understands loneliness better than Cal does.[61] He appears genuine and even joins Mare's rebellious cause. Readers may romanticise Maven at first, as Mare initially does. However, his later betrayal and seizing the throne completely changes his characterisation.

Maven symbolises manipulation, hidden identity, jealousy, and corruption. His mother shaped his personality and emotions, making him villainous. His jealousy toward Cal is a motivation for many of his actions. He repeatedly describes himself as the shadow of a flame, which suggests how he sees himself in relation to his brother.

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[60] "My throat tightens, like I can feel the chains the king and queen are wrapping around me. "What about my life—?" "What life?" Elara crows. "Girl, you have fallen head over heels into a miracle." Cal squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, as if the sound of the queen's laughter pains him. "She means her family. Mare—the girl—has a family" (88).

[61] "I know that look very well. I used to wear it myself, when my parents would hint at me to be more like Gisa, even though that was impossible. I went to sleep hating myself, wishing I could change, wishing I could be quiet and talented and pretty like her. There's nothing that hurts more than that feeling. But the king doesn't notice Maven's pain, just like my parents never noticed mine" (231).

Queen Elara

Queen Elara represents manipulation, propaganda, cruelty, and psychological control. Her mind-reading ability is a powerful weapon, as she can enter and manipulate minds. This makes her one of the most terrifying characters in the novel. Elara symbolises absolute power.[62] She controls others through fear, deception, and superior position. Her manipulation of Maven demonstrates how power destroys identity and relationships.

Julian

Julian is a noble and a relative of the royal family. He functions as Mare's mentor figure. He introduces Mare to information about history, abilities, and political truth. Despite being Silver, he questions class ideology and values knowledge over power. He knows about Queen Elara's cruelty and warns Mare. Moreover, he informs Mare about her superior abilities and the fact that there are more Reds with abilities like her. He symbolises memory, truth, education, and resistance against propaganda.

Kilorn

Kilorn is a childhood friend of Mare and is soon to be conscripted, as his mentor died. He represents friendship, loyalty, survival, and suffering of the Reds. He initially fears war and conscription, which motivates Mare to contact the Scarlet Guard to save him. His relationship with Mare is emotionally intimate, though they stay friends. Later, Mare learns that Kilorn has joined the Guard, approving her decision to join it, too.

Gisa

Gisa is the youngest of Mare's siblings and her only sister. She symbolises innocence, hope, and domestic stability. Her talent in embroidery contrasts with Mare's violence and survival instincts. Gisa is the family's hope, as she can work and support them financially.

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[62] "But somehow I get to my feet, my legs moving on their own, marching me toward the bars. On the other side, the queen watches me. Her blinks match my steps. She's a whisper, and she's playing with me. When I'm close enough, she grabs my face in her hands. I cry out as the pain in my head multiplies. What I would give now for the simple doom of conscription" (79-80).

However, her broken sewing fingers symbolise Silver's cruelty and the destruction of Red's hope. Later, Mare feels responsible for this unfortunate event and blames herself.

Farley

Farley is a woman who appears throughout the novel as a rebel of the Scarlet Guard. Mare sees her on the screens and even meets her in person while saving. Farley represents rebellion, leadership, and revolutionary ideology.[63] She is pragmatic and understands that survival requires sacrifice. Unlike Mare, she is completely committed to overthrowing the system.

Shane

Shane is one of Mare's brothers. He is absent from the first novel, but his character is significant. His letters from the front lines provide emotional comfort to the family,[64] and he can remind readers of the brutality of the war. Mate realises he has actually joined the Scarlet Guard, which motivates her to join. Through the Guard, she feels connected to him. Later, it is revealed that Shane also possesses extraordinary abilities, which helps Mare to cope with her identity. His teleportation symbolises breaking boundaries between Silvers and Reds.

Gender Roles

In *Red Queen*, gender roles are relatively progressive. Women can hold political, military and supernatural power. For instance, Queen Elara is one of the kingdom's most powerful political figures. Another example is the leader of the rebellion, Farley, who is also a woman. Moreover, physical strength is not restricted by gender. Women participate in combat and are

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[63] "A woman stands in front of a shaky camera, a scarlet bandanna tied around her face so only her golden hair and keen blue eyes shine out. She holds a gun in one hand, a tattered red flag in another. And on her chest, there's a bronze badge in the shape of a torn-apart sun. "We are the Scarlet Guard and we stand for the freedom and equality of all people—," the woman says. I recognize her voice. Farley. "—starting with the Reds." I don't need to be a genius to know that a bar full of angry, violent Silvers is the last place a Red girl wants to be. But I can't move. I can't tear my eyes away from Farley's face" (36).

[64] "I pull out Shade's letter from the little box where I keep all his correspondences. If nothing else, this will calm me down. His jokes, his words, his voice trapped in the page always soothe me. But as I scan the letter again, a sense of dread pools in my stomach. "Red as the dawn . . ." the letter reads. There it is, plain as the nose on my face" (50).

respected for their abilities, such as Evangeline, Cal's fiancée. As the novel progresses, Mare becomes one of the story's most powerful characters, revealing her transformation.

However, traditional expectations of women remain in the novel. Women are pressured to marry and judged for their appearance. These stereotypes are evident in the Silver class, where women present themselves as feminine and elegant, with court manners and behaviour.[65] Mare, pretending to be Mareena Titanos, demonstrates how female appearance becomes political performance. Relationships are also performative for the public, such as Cal and Evangeline's. Moreover, inequality between Mare and Cal or Maven is visible in power dynamics regarding political influence, physical power and class position. The Royal treatment of Mare may be viewed as a political tool. The novel critiques how the patriarchal elite attempts to control women's identity. Even though readers may still consider the novel progressive, as female characters are active and powerful.

Tropes and Archetypes

The novel relies on familiar and popular YA dystopian and fantasy tropes, which support readability. The tropes cause tension, suspense and plot twists, contributing to the novel's popularity later on BookTok.

The chosen one	Mare does not initially seek power or revolution. Instead, she is forced to serve as a symbol of the monarchy and later of the Scarlet Guard. Her unique powers make her politically dangerous to the elite and powerful for the Guard.
Love triangle	The love triangle between Mare, Cal, and Maven creates conflict. Mare is torn between Cal's attraction and Maven's trust. However, the triangle is not only romantic, as they are all tied to politics.
Hidden identity	Mare's hidden identity is a strong trope in the novel. Her whole life, she was unaware of her supernatural abilities, then she must pretend to be a lost noble, and, in the end, she is portrayed as a Red rebel.

[65] "But Lucas shakes his head. "Lady Titanos, they gave her to you because your posture is terrible and you eat like a dog. Bess Blonos is going to teach you how to be a lady and if you light her up a couple of times, no one will blame you." How to be a lady . . . this will be awful" (118).

Morally Grey characters	The novel contains many morally grey characters. Mare, Cal and Maven's actions cannot be viewed as entirely good or evil. Mare is morally ambiguous as she lies, steals, manipulates others, and participates in violence and rebellion. Cal supports the current oppressive system because he values duty. Maven is cruel and manipulative, hidden behind a kind persona. Furthermore, even the Scarlet Guard uses violence to achieve political goals.

Themes and Coming-of-Age Elements

One of the central themes of *Red Queen* is social inequality and oppression based on blood colour. The colours, silver and red, symbolise class division and identity. Reds represent the working class, forced into labour, poverty and military service. Silvers symbolise the elite with political power and supernatural abilities. Mare repeatedly reflects on the injustice of this hierarchy, especially during the arena fights and her stay in the palace. The division is visible everywhere, including housing, education, transport, opportunities, clothing and even physical posture. Reds are described as bent from work, while Silvers stand tall.[66] Additionally, even within the Silver society, there are hierarchies. Noble houses compete for influence, royal favour and marriage alliances. Therefore, power structures exist even among the privileged class.

The Stilts, a town where Mare grew up, symbolise poverty, instability and survival. The house shows how the Reds live in poor and dangerous conditions. In contrast, the Silver palaces and cities symbolise luxury and control.

The rebellion theme develops gradually. At first, Mare's hatred toward the system is personal and connected to survival. After her involvement with the Scarlet Guard, the rebellion becomes political. The Scarlet Guard symbolises hope, resistance and the desire for equality.

[66] "As is customary, the officers are Silvers, and Silvers have nothing to fear from us Reds. Everyone knows that. We are not their equals, though you wouldn't know it from looking at us. The only thing that serves to distinguish us, outwardly at least, is that Silvers stand tall. Our backs are bent by work and unanswered hope and the inevitable disappointment with our lot in life" (5).

Their slogan, "Rise, Red as the dawn," becomes a symbolic call to revolution. Mare becomes an accidental revolutionary symbol because of her impossible abilities. However, rebellion is not completely romanticised. It is portrayed as dangerous and violent. For instance, their bomb attacks kill innocent people. Therefore, the novel raises a question of whether violence can truly create justice.

Screens and cameras constantly promote propaganda and manipulated narratives constructed by the monarchy. The Silvers are presented as superior, almost godlike. In contrast, the Scarlet Guard is described as terrorists. Meanwhile, the monarchy hides its own cruelty and violence. After Maven's betrayal, Mare becomes propaganda herself, publicly presented as a traitor.[67]

An old map in Julian's study symbolises hidden truth and forgotten history. It reveals that the world existed differently before wars and destruction.

The war in *Red Queen* is endless, normalised and connected to class oppression. Reds are used as disposable soldiers. Meanwhile, Silver officers remain powerful and protected. Mare's fear of conscription shapes her motivations from the beginning of the novel. The stars on family flags symbolise children sent to war. Black stripes represent dead soldiers. These flags demonstrate how war controls family lives.[68] Another symbol is earrings worn by Mare and Gisa. They wear them to remember their brothers sent to war. The earrings symbolise family memory, connection and loss.

Another theme is survival, as it is one of Mare's motivations. Before entering the palace, poverty forces her to become morally flexible. She repeatedly describes herself as good only at

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[67] "I can't see any Reds at all, but I don't expect to. This is what the Silvers call entertainment, another play for them to laugh at, and they won't share it. Video screens dot the arena, reflecting my own face back at me. Of course they must record this, to broadcast it across the nation. To show the world another Red brought so low. The sight gives me pause; I look like myself again" (360-361).

[68] "We're too far from the bank to see anyone properly, but I know my house in an instant. The old flag still flutters on the porch, still embroidered with three red stars. One has a black stripe through it, in honor of Shade. Shade was executed. You're supposed to rip a star off after that. But they didn't. They held on to him in their own little rebellion" (282).

causing trouble or surviving unnoticed. Survival in the novel often requires lying, suppression of emotions and violence. The symbol of survival is the arena, which publicly demonstrates that only the strong survive.

Transformation is a central theme of *Red Queen*. At the beginning, Mare is a poor thief from the Stilts. Later, she is transformed into Mareena Titanos, a Silver noblewoman. This forced identity change creates a conflict between who she truly is and who she must pretend to be. Makeup to hide her red veins symbolises the loss of identity.[69] Mare continuously fears exposure, which suggests how identity becomes performative under oppressive systems. As the story progresses, she becomes more strategic and politically conscious. By the end of the novel, she loses her innocence completely after the betrayal and public humiliation.

Her powers also symbolise the transformation. Mare, unlike Silvers, creates electricity rather than controlling the existing one. Therefore, her lightning symbolises her uniqueness. This isolation reflects typical YA coming-of-age themes that involve self-exploration and belonging.

Explicit Content and Its Narrative Function

Red Queen contains very limited explicit sexual content, therefore, it supports its YA classification. Romance is present, but physical intimacy stays mild. The focus is placed more on tension, attraction, jealousy, betrayal, and emotional intimacy rather than explicit sexuality. Romantic scenes, featuring Mare and Cal kissing[70] or dancing, function to develop the conflict in the love triangle.

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[69] "In the mirror, it looks like the warmth is leeched from me, as if the powder has covered the heat in my skin. With a gasp, I realize it's supposed to hide my natural flush, the red bloom in my skin, the red blood. I'm pretending to be Silver, and when they finish painting my face, I actually look the part. With my newly pale skin and darkened eyes and lips, I look cold, cruel, a living razor. I look Silver. I look beautiful. And I hate it" (89).

[70] "Unable to meet his gaze, I focus on what's right in front of me. Unfortunately, that happens to be his chest and a much-too-thin shirt. Above me, he takes a ragged breath. Then his fingers are under my chin, tipping my head up to meet his gaze. Gold flame flickers in his eyes, reflecting the heat beneath. "I'll miss you, Mare." As much as I want to stand still, to stop time and let this moment last forever, I know it's not possible. Whatever I might feel or think, Cal is not the prince I'm promised to. More important, he's on the wrong side. He's my enemy. Cal is forbidden…. His lips are on mine, hard and warm and pressing. The touch is electrifying, but not like I'm used to. This isn't a spark of destruction but a spark of life. As much as I want to pull away, I just can't do it" (227-228).

Readers may focus on emotional tension and betrayal rather than sexuality. On the contrary, some BookTok readers favour novels with sexual content and tension between the characters, making *Red Queen* less popular.

Audience Appeal

The novel offers readers a sense of escapism through royal courts, magic, rebellion, romance, and political conflict. The combination of dystopian oppression and fantasy magic creates an original and intense reading experience. Many adolescent readers may relate to the protagonist's feelings of powerlessness, struggles with identity, desire for belonging, and pressure about the future. Moreover, Mare's transformation from an underestimated thief into a powerful revolutionary figure may strongly appeal to YA audiences.

The aesthetic of *Red Queen* also contributes to its popularity, such as blood symbolism, royal palaces, futuristic screens and arenas. BookTok audiences rather enjoy the love triangle, complex characters, quotes about power, and the narration twist. Maven's betrayal may become one of the novel's most memorable moments.

Appendix 59: Detailed Analysis of *Fourth Wing*

Rebecca Yarros is an American bestselling author, best known for the ongoing *Empyrean series,* beginning with *Fourth Wing* (2023). However, she has written many standalone romance novels since 2014. Many aspects of her personal life have impacted her writing. For instance, she grew up in a military family, and her husband was both a soldier and a pilot (Rosenfeld 2026, n. p.). After she got married, she was studying history and English at Troy University in Alabama. Furthermore, she has been living with a connective tissue disorder that results in frequent joint dislocation, pain and migraines (Rosenfeld 2026, n. p.).

Yarros's experiences are clearly reflected in the *Empyrean series*. The series heavily focuses on military service, historical narrative, and the main protagonist's chronic pain and physical limitations. In an interview at the Library of Congress National Book Festival (Kwong 2024), she expressed her dissatisfaction with American academic texts and the omission of certain topics, such as slavery, which she thinks may influence historical understanding and education. Therefore, the topic of erasing history served as inspiration for *Fourth Wing*.

Fourth Wing is considered one of the most popular romantasy books on BookTok, with more than 900 thousand #fourthwing videos and over a billion views on TikTok (TikTok 2026, n. p.). This novel was at the top of The New York Times bestseller list for 18 weeks (Spencer-Regan 2025). Moreover, the publication of *Iron Flame* (2024) and *Onyx Storm* (2025) recalls the popularity of *the Harry Potter series*, as bookstores worldwide hosted events, including midnight release parties. Even though the publishers, Red Tower Books and Piatkus, recommend the work for older audiences, it strongly appeals to adolescent readers (Spencer-Regan 2025, n. p.).

Genre Positioning and Narrative Style

Fourth Wing is a combination of military, academy, political fantasy, and romance. It is categorised as NA for its explicit sexual content, violence and darker themes, but, at the same

time, it shares similarities with YA such as coming-of-age theme, identity formation, academy setting and relationship dynamics. For these reasons, it is a NA and YA crossover novel and an ideal example of the romantasy genre because the main plot intertwines with romance.

The narrative is written in the first-person point of view with the main protagonist, Violet, having a limited perspective. Readers are aware of the information only she knows. Thus, the narrator is subjective and emotionally biased, creating mystery about government propaganda and hidden truths that are gradually explored alongside Violet.[71] Additionally, this narration may justify Violet's opinions and romanticise other characters.

The atmosphere is dramatic, emotional and highly competitive with a constant sense of danger and survival.[72] The novel's tone changes as the story progresses. It starts with the protagonist's fear, anxiety and alienation, then it shifts to growing confidence and attraction, resulting in betrayal and emotional revelation. The tension is reduced with frequent humour, including sarcasm.

The novel has an episodic structure, with clear milestones such as crossing the parapet, passing the gauntlet, surviving the threshing, challenges and war games. All these life-threatening milestones maintain a fast-paced narrative and suspense. Additionally, romance develops alongside action rather than replacing it. Chapters often end with cliffhangers, which may support readability.[73] The novel also ends with a shocking revelation that encourages a sequel.

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[71] "None of them knows what we do, that an entire village of Navarrians was ransacked last night along the border and supplies looted. And yet, we're discussing a battle that happened before the convenience of indoor plumbing was invented. "Now, pay close attention," Markham lectures…"Was that scroll marked classified?" Liam asks under his breath. "No," I respond just as quietly. "But maybe I missed it?" The battle map doesn't even show activity near that mountain range."Yeah." He nods, scratching his quill against the parchment as he begins to take notes. "That has to be it. You missed it."… That's the only possible explanation" (261).

[72] "In through my nose, out through my mouth, I force my breathing to calm, my heart rate to slow from its gallop. If I panic, I'll die. If I slip, I'll die. If I… *Oh, fuck it.* There's nothing more I can do to prepare for this" (22).

[73] "Sorry, Violet," Professor Emetterio says, scratching his short black beard. "You were supposed to challenge Rayma, but she's been taken to the healers because she can't seem to walk in a straight line."… I wince. *You served it to her too early.* "Should I just…" I start, already backing up to get off the mat. "I'm happy to step in." That voice. That tone. That prickle of ice along my scalp…Oh no. Hell no. No. No. *No*. "You sure?" Professor Emetterio asks, glancing over his shoulder. "Absolutely." My stomach hits the floor. And Xaden walks onto the mat" (102-103).

The writing style is relatively simple and accessible to adolescent readers, with modern language and contemporary dialogue, and is strongly focused on the students of the military academy. Detailed descriptions mostly involve the protagonist's emotional states, physical attraction to Xaden, the protagonist's lover, danger, and the aesthetics of the fantasy world.[74]

World-Building and Social Structures

The story takes place in the fictional militaristic fantasy kingdom of Navarre, at the Basgiath War College. The college functions as an academy, a military institution, and a symbolic survival arena. The monarchy is not explored in detail in the first novel, but some features of the monarchy and military dictatorship are evident. The kingdom is supposedly constantly threatened by attacks from Poromiel, the neighbouring kingdom, and its gryphon riders.

Navarre has a magical system linked to dragons. Only riders channel magic through the dragon bonds, and their signets reflect their personalities, for example, object summoning, farsight, mending, shadow wielding, lightning wielding, and mind-reading, which is mostly illegal. The antagonist characters, called venin corrupted by magic, are later revealed as real threats and not just imaginative evil characters from a childhood fairy tale.[75]

Religion and gods are also present within Navarre's culture, but they are not present or magical. They are often mentioned in situations involving danger or death. The most repeated god is Malek, the god of death, who symbolises frequent and normalised death. These references reinforce the dark, violent and competitive atmosphere of the Rider's Quadrant.

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[74] "The atmosphere is tense with anticipation as Mira leads me along the worn cobblestone path toward the southern turret. The main college is built into the side of Basgiath Mountain, as if it was cleaved from a ridgeline of the peak itself. The sprawling, formidable structure towers over the crowd of anxious, waiting candidates and their tearful families, with its stories-tall stone battlements—built to protect the high rise of the keep within—an defensive turrets at each of its corners, one of which houses the bells" (11).

[75] "Which means I would have to believe that we have no clue that Poromiel is being relentlessly, viciously attacked by dark wielders just beyond our borders." My brow furrows. He glances away and takes a deep breath before looking me in the eye. "Or you have to believe that we know and choose to do nothing about it" (444).

The society has a clear hierarchy. Besides royalty and nobility, riders occupy the highest social status. However, dragons are independent of human laws and rules, thus possessing ultimate power. Then scribes hold knowledge but are less prestigious, infantry is viewed as expendable, and healers are a great asset to riders. The plot does not explore the lives of common people outside the college. This social hierarchy shows clear boundaries between the classes and the division of rule and power, which is often highlighted. The society highly values physical strength and military usefulness. While dead riders are treated only as names on paper.[76] The military government heavily relies on censorship and propaganda, hiding the existence of venin. In addition, scribes, with their in-depth knowledge and education, symbolise the manipulation and control of censorship. Any threats to the system are destroyed, eradicated or silenced. For example, Xaden's father, a duke, was sentenced to death as a leader of a rebellion. This happened before the events of the first novel, and it shows how the elite can remove people for exposing the truth.

Violet gradually explores the secrets and propaganda that she had completely idealised. This portrayal raises the question of how easily people can be manipulated. The revelation of propaganda may encourage distrust toward authorities. Also, readers may view Basgiath as brutal, oppressive, and violent, yet exciting and empowering, as the main protagonist slowly develops her feelings for the place.

Characterisation and Relational Dynamics

Violet

Violet is the main protagonist and narrator. She is highly intelligent and educated, but physically frail. From the beginning, there are constant underestimating remarks about her

[76] "He sits two rows behind me in Battle Brief. *He sat*. There's nothing special about this morning. Our first trial on the Gauntlet has made the roll longer, but it's just another list on just another day…except it's not. The exceptional cruelty of this ritual has never hit me this hard before. It's not like the first day anymore. I know more than half of the names as they're called. My vision blurs. "Newland Jahvon," he continues. *Second Squad, Flame Section, Fourth Wing*. He had breakfast duty with me. We have to be in the twenties by now. How can this be all there is? We say their names once and then go on as if they never existed?" (125).

small figure, strange silver hair ends, and unsuitability as a rider.[77] These parts may resonate with adolescents as they deal with bodily changes during puberty.

Moreover, Violet suffers from unnamed disability affecting her joints and ligaments, making training difficult, and it complicates her chances of survival. However, this indicates her determination and motivation to adapt, survive and prove herself. Her character relies on intelligence rather than physical strength. Violet develops physically but, even more, morally, even amid the violence of the college environment. A visible transformation is portrayed from an unpopular, fragile general's daughter, who was raised to be a scribe, to a fearful, strategic, and powerful rider of two dragons, which makes her exceptional. Initially, she did not believe herself to be suitable for the Rider's quadrant, but she gradually realised her true identity and sense of belonging. She represents resilience and adaptation.

However, she still has weaknesses. She struggles to accept her extraordinary lightning power, which results solely in killing.[78] There come her friends from a squad, who basically become a found family, and Xaden, the initial enemy and lover, who supports her. Her dragons, Tairn and Andarna, play a great role in her development as well. Tairn, one of the biggest dragons alive, represents authority, strength, intelligence, and power, and serves as a mentor figure to Violet, encouraging her confidence. He often sarcastically comments on her actions, as dragons have access to their rider's mind. On the other hand, Andarna, a small, young, golden dragon, is connected to innocence and uniqueness. Violet's transformation parallels Andarna's. In the first novel, Andarna and her powers are underestimated, mysterious and secret to the public. As the story progresses, she becomes exceptional, too.

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[77] "Slings say *weak*. They say *breakable*. They say *liability to the wing*. If I break this easily on the mat, what's going to happen if I get on the back of a dragon?" (74).

[78] "I start to shake my head, but his eyes narrow on mine. "You might not like it, might even loathe it, but it's power like yours that saves lives." "By killing people?" I cry. If Sgaeyl is right, and signets reflect who we are at our core, then I'm exactly as Xaden nicknamed me…Violence. "By defeating invading armies before they get the chance to hurt civilians. You want to keep Rhiannon's nephew alive in that little border village? This is how. You want to keep Mira alive when she's behind enemy lines? This. Is. How. You are not just *a* weapon, Sorrengail. You are *the* weapon. You train this ability, own it, and you'll have the power to defend an entire *kingdom*" (366).

Therefore, Violet's dragons are essential to her development, as they repeatedly remind her that they have chosen her for qualities, such as intelligence and courage. This creates a contrast between human and dragon values, since these dragons do not consider strength the most important human asset. Additionally, their choice has affected Violet's social position and earned her respect among other cadets and military officers.

Xaden

Xaden's character represents a morally grey love interest. He is associated with shadows, secrecy, rebellion, power and danger.[79] Xaden is the son of the Duke Riorson, who led a rebellion several years ago, as he knew the secret about venin. Therefore, Xaden initially appears as the enemy who wants the general's daughter, Violet, dead. However, she slowly uncovers his burdens, motivations and real ambitions. He is responsible for all the children of executed rebels and secretly helps them survive the college. His high-ranking position as a wingleader of the *Fourth Wing* allows him to lead, command and occasionally bend the rules of the college. These actions help portray him as emotionally reserved, protective, and responsible despite his toxic behaviour, such as secrecy and miscommunication.

Xaden plays an even more important role once his life becomes dependent on Violet's survival through dragon bonds. They are forced to tolerate each other's presence, which develops into romance. Xaden's training and support become crucial to Violet's transformation, as his guidance genuinely helps her become stronger physically and mentally.

Their romantic relationship begins with attraction, sexual intimacy, followed by emotional vulnerability and trust. Nevertheless, they constantly struggle to define their relationship, which creates narrative tension. This emotional tension, Xaden's possessiveness,

[79] "Xaden lifts a hand a few inches above the table, and shadows pour from underneath our seats, filling the room and turning it dark as midnight in a blink. My heart jumps as my sight goes black. *"Relax. It's just me."* A ghost of a touch skims my cheek. *Just him* is slightly…terrifying… What had Sgaeyl said about signets? *It reflects who you are at the core of your being.* It makes sense. Mira is protective. Dain has to know everything. And Xaden…has secrets" (339).

his notable physical attractiveness,[80] and broody personality align with popular archetypes on BookTok, so readers may romanticise and idealise him.

Dain

Dain is Violet's childhood close friend who entered college one year before her. He represents blind obedience to rules, childhood memories and past romantic feelings. His excessive protectiveness toward Violet[81] and his projection of his own beliefs break Violet's trust and damage their friendship. He becomes too emotionally restrictive and is unable to accept Violet's personal growth. He contrasts with Xaden. Dain initially represents safety, but their roles reverse, and he commits a major betrayal, while she trusts Xaden more.

Rhiannon

Rhiannon represents loyalty, friendship and chosen family within the new environment of the Riders' Quadrant. She encourages Violet's confidence and independence. She behaves as a true friend from their first encounter before crossing the parapet. Rhiannon also contributes to LGBTQ+ representation.

Liam

Liam is a talented first-year cadet assigned by Xaden to serve as Violet's bodyguard. He symbolises selflessness, loyalty and emotional safety. He is portrayed as one of the few morally good characters. His sudden and emotional death represents the brutality of war, and this event darkens the tone of the narrative.[82]

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[80] "I hate how beautiful he is, how lethal his abilities make him as he strides toward me, shadows curling around his footsteps. He's like one of those poisonous flowers I've read about from the Cygnis forests to the east. His allure is a warning not to get too close, and I am *definitely* too close" (86).

[81] "I asked him if he'd allow you into the Scribe Quadrant for your own safety, and he said yes. They'd put you with the first-years. It's not like you'd have to wait until next Conscription Day or anything." "You what?" I twist, breaking my hold, and back away from my best friend. "I saw a way to get you out of danger, and I took it." He stands. "You went behind my back because you think I'm not cutting it" (113).

[82] "It's not all right." I want to scream with the injustice of it, but that won't help. My hand trembles as I slide his riding goggles up to his forehead, then brush his blond hair back off his forehead. "None of this is all right. Please stay," I beg, tears I can't fight rolling unchecked down my cheeks. "Fight to stay. Please, Liam. Fight to stay" (471-472).

Jack

Jack is a first-year cadet, too. However, he embodies cruelty, aggression, amorality and threat to Violet as he repeatedly attempts to murder her. His death leaves Violet anxious as she responsible for it.

Mira

Mira is Violet's only surviving sibling until Violet discovers their older brother Brennan, is still alive. Mira represents the successful rider ideal that is valued by their mother, General Sorrengail. Mira openly disagrees with their mother's decision on Violet's entering the Riders, as she recognises all of Violet's weaknesses. The sister combines emotional care and pragmatism. She is Violet's closest family member, symbolising home and familiar support.[83]

Gender Roles

Men and women participate equally in combat and leadership despite the military system. For instance, General Sorrengail is at the top of military society. Physical competence is valued regardless of gender. Thus, traditional femininity is rejected within the Riders' Quadrant. Violet rather challenges expectations through intelligence than strength. Furthermore, relationships seem equal. Female characters openly express their desires and boundaries. Violet and Xaden's relationship never questions Violet's womanhood but only her power, specifically her rider skills and abilities, which grow increasingly stronger. However, Xaden still holds more power, including physical, social, and informational power.[84]

This representation of gender roles may be interpreted as progressive because women hold military power, female sexuality is normalised, and their disabilities, like Violet's, do not prevent them from becoming heroines.

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[83] "Mira." I bury my face against her shoulder, and my eyes burn as she rests her hand on top of the very braid she taught me how to do…. We might be hundreds of miles from Basgiath, but I've never felt more at home" (326-327).

[84] How is Xaden supposed to be effective if he has to fly back here all the time?" My face scrunches. "He's the most powerful rider of our generation. He's going to be needed on the front, not here." "For now." Rhiannon stares at me with intention, lifting her brows. "He's the most powerful rider in our generation *for now*" (282).

Tropes and Archetypes

Fourth wing contains most of the popular tropes and archetypes which are typical for YA romantasy. These tropes are highly advertised on BookTok, which may increase their popularity. Readers may also enjoy the familiarity and comfort that the tropes provide.

The Reluctant Hero	Violet never intended to become a rider. After she survives the deadly trials and challenges, she slowly accepts her role as extraordinary, but she never seeks heroism.
Enemies to lovers	Initially, Violet hates and fears Xaden as she expects him to murder her. However, the attraction to him develops alongside distrust. Meanwhile, he becomes aware of his feelings and is gradually more possessive and protective of her.
Love Triangle	The story creates rivalry between Dain and Xaden as they both have romantic feelings for Violet and are jealous of each other. But Violet soon expresses dissatisfaction with Dain after their first kiss and does not acknowledge Dain romantically anymore.
Forced Proximity	Violet and Xaden are forced to cooperate because of their dragon bonds and mated dragons. Their time spent together and telepathic communication strengthen their relationship
Morally Grey Character	The series features more morally grey characters, and Violet becomes morally ambiguous too as she joins the rebellion in the sequels. The most obvious character is Xaden, whose actions are illegal but for a good cause.
Miscommunication	Violet and Xaden's relationship struggles with open and honest communication. They do not lie to each other, but Xaden hides information and facts in order to protect the new secret rebellion forming in his hometown. Violet is unaware of it but suspects him of keeping secrets from her. She repeatedly demands honesty. This relationship dynamic causes constant conflicts.

Themes and Coming-of-Age Elements

The main theme of *Fourth Wing*, connected to Yarros's inspiration, is hidden truth and propaganda. Throughout the story, the government suppresses historical truth. This represents the idea of how knowledge can become a dangerous tool of manipulation and secure the power of the elite. Another important theme is the power of writing. Scribes control historical memory,

which can be modified or even erased.[85] Books, such as Violet's *Fables of the Barren,* containing stories about venin, therefore symbolise truth, hidden knowledge, and resistance against propaganda. Violet's upbringing and education as a scribe saved her life many times, suggesting that knowledge can be even more powerful than physical strength.

Another major theme is violence and survival. These are normalised socially and institutionally. Riders are constantly reminded that they may die every day, as the college eliminates the weak. Black is the colour riders must wear because it easily conceals blood and symbolises death and intimidation as forms of military power. Basgiath College simultaneously symbolises the place where the characters' worst personality traits emerge and where Violet finds a sense of belonging. Thus, survival requires moral compromise, as cadets learn to kill to graduate and become soldiers.[86]

Therefore, the characters transform and develop their identities during their studies, which is a typical YA theme. At first, Violet struggles between the identities of a scribe and a rider, as she belongs fully to neither. She never entered the Scribes Quadrant, yet she is underestimated in the Riders Quadrant. As a result, she searches for a sense of belonging. However, she chooses to stay and successfully fight for her place.[87] Her daggers symbolise intelligence, precision, and fighting skills. In the end, she can no longer imagine herself among the scribes, which represents her transformation and the creation of her own identity. She shifts from survival mode to become one of the most powerful riders while still accepting her physical limitations. Her silver hair symbolises her uniqueness. As she undergoes this transformation, her daggers are replaced by lightning, which symbolises her acquired power. She gains

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[85] "Gravity shifts as I recognize my father's handwriting, and it's dated just a few months before his death. *My Violet, By the time you find this, you'll most likely be in the Scribe Quadrant. Remember that folklore is passed from one generation to the next to teach us about our past. If we lose it, we lose the links to our past. It only takes one desperate generation to change history—even erase I"* (391).

[86] "This place can warp almost everything about a person, Vi. It cuts away the bullshit and the niceties, revealing whoever you are at your core. They want it that way…" (52).

[87] *"You are sad?"* Andarna asks, her voice soft. *"Just visiting the Archives. No need to worry,"* I tell her. *"It's hard to love a second home as much as the first."* I swallow. *"It's easy when the second home is the right one."* And that is what the Riders Quadrant has become to me—the right home" (210).

lightning through the permanent bond with her dragon Tairn, who symbolises Violet's magical identity, strength, and survival.

The final important theme is forbidden love. From the beginning, Violet is reminded of the presence of the dangerous son of a traitor and is advised to stay away from him. Violet and Xaden's families are essentially enemies, which encourages prejudice and distrust between them.[88] For Violet, a relationship with Xaden is politically and existentially dangerous, especially after she becomes involved in his rebellion. His shadows symbolise secrecy and the need to hide the truth. Violet initially falls in love with him without knowing about the rebellion. Even after the shocking revelation and broken trust, she still joins his cause. They share a similar sense of justice, but as the story progresses, they begin prioritising each other above everything else. This may further romanticise their relationship.

Explicit Content and Its Narrative Function

In the novel, there are several explicit sexual scenes and openly sexual dialogues, which indicate its NA classification. Sexual intercourse is directly depicted, unlike in YA romantasy novels. The scenes focus on desire, emotional connection, and physical attraction between the characters. As the narrator, Violet describes her feelings, bodily reactions, and the effects of Xaden's actions on her.[89] However, the scenes are not presented as purely erotic. They are emotional, always include genuine consent, and even mention contraceptives.

The explicit content deepens intimacy and marks turning points in Violet and Xaden's relationship. Violet is becoming more confident, which mirrors her transformation as well. Nevertheless, their initial attraction may raise questions because it may resemble forbidden

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[88] "Stay the hell away from Xaden Riorson." The air rushes from my lungs. That name… "*That* Xaden Riorson," she confirms, fear lacing her gaze. "He's a third year, and he *will* kill you the second he finds out who you are." "His father was the Great Betrayer. He *led* the rebellion," I say quietly (13).

[89] "Good." I tilt my head up to his and draw his bottom lip between mine, sucking before gently nipping him with my teeth. "Because I only want you, Xaden." The words breach something within him, and he gives. *Finally.* Our mouths collide, and the kiss is hot and hard and completely out of our control. Need streaks down my spine as he takes my ass in his hands and hauls me against his hips, my back raking the ridges of the door behind me as I use it as leverage to push closer to his strength" (374).

temptation. Readers may sympathise with Violet's perception of Xaden and romanticise the romance initially based on physical attraction. Also, the explicit scenes likely contribute to BookTok popularity.

Audience Appeal

The novel offers escapism through academy fantasy, romance, dragons, and magical powers. It contains intense emotional highs and lows, suspense, and danger. Readers may relate to feelings of being underestimated, living with chronic illness and insecurity, pressure to meet expectations, a desire for belonging, and the school setting with friendships. Therefore, these aspects may make Violet a highly relatable protagonist for adolescent readers, which may partly explain *Fourth Wing*'s popularity.

Readers also favour the aesthetic of *Fourth Wing*, including black leather, relics, shadows, dragons, and castles. They create BookTok content featuring many viral scenes, such as crossing the parapet, the threshing, dialogues between Violet and her dragons, and explicit romantic scenes. Xaden is especially popular as the "BookTok boyfriend," which may encourage the romanticisation of his actions and behaviour.

Moreover, the central theme of hidden truth and propaganda may encourage readers' critical thinking, evaluation of authority and historical information, and questioning of censorship. The novel presents an important contrast between physical strength and knowledge, questioning their value and power. Additionally, the story features LGBTQ+ characters, characters with chronic illness, emotionally vulnerable male characters, and the idea of becoming powerful despite personal weaknesses.

Appendix 60: Questionnaire

BookTok-popular Romantasy Novels

Thank you very much for your time and participation in this questionnaire!

The questionnaire is part of a master's thesis focused on the popularity of romantasy literature on BookTok and the interpretation of these novels by adolescent readers.

- The questionnaire is anonymous.
- Your answers will be used only for academic purposes.
- There are no correct or incorrect answers.
- You do not need to answer every question if you feel uncomfortable.
- Please answer honestly and in as much detail as you wish.

The questionnaire is divided into 3 parts:

- Part 1 focuses on your reading habits, social media use, and experience with BookTok.
- Part 2 explores your opinions about romantasy novels, characters, themes, relationships, fantasy worlds, and BookTok content.
- Part 3 consists of an oral discussion based on selected excerpts from romantasy novels (to be completed during a lesson) and focuses on interpretation, emotions, and personal opinions.

Part 1: Participant Information

Age: Gender:

1. Do you read books in your free time? How often?

2. If so, what genres do you read?

3. Do you know BookTok or Bookstagram on TikTok/Instagram? If yes, do you enjoy it?

4. If yes, what do you find entertaining about it?

5. What BookTok trends and content do you enjoy the most?

6. Which of these books do you know or have read?
   - A Court of Thorns and Roses (Sarah J. Maas 2015)
   - Fourth Wing (Rebecca Yarros 2023)
   - Red Queen (Victoria Aveyard 2015)
   - The Cruel Prince (Holly Black 2018)
7. What usually motivates you to read/choose a book?

8. What makes you continue reading a book? (ex: romance, world-building, action scenes…)

9. Have you ever chosen a book because:
   a. It became popular on BookTok Yes No
   b. You liked the fictional couple Yes No
   c. You saw an emotional video/edit on social media Yes No
   d. People recommended the book online Yes No
   e. You heard about the plot twist Yes No

Part 2: Fantasy and Romantasy Preferences

1. Which qualities make a female protagonist interesting to you? Why? (tick ✓ yes)

intelligence		independence	
bravery		morally grey (complex) behaviour	
sarcasm/humour		kindness	
ambition		determination	
physical strength		beauty	

Anything else?

2. What do you enjoy seeing the protagonist become during the story?
(ex. stronger, more confident, powerful, feared, special, a leader, …)

3. Do you prefer fantasy worlds that feel:

comforting		dark	
dangerous		emotional	
romantic		exciting	
mysterious		magical	
realistic		suspenseful	
beautiful		relatable	
violent		adventurous	
dramatic		intense	
unpredictable		complex	
immersive		action-packed	

Anything else?

4. Which elements of fantasy/romantasy worlds attract you the most?

magical powers		powerful female protagonists	
dragons		faeries	
strong friendships		royal families/kingdoms	
drama		hidden identity	
dangerous male characters		attractive male characters	
romantic tension		love triangles	
enemies-to-lovers relationships		survival/deadly challenges	
rebellions		political conflicts	
sarcastic dialogue/humour		Betrayal/hidden secrets	
plot twists		found family/friendships	
powerful villains		forbidden romance	

5. What are your 3 favourite elements in fantasy/romantasy and why?

6. Do you enjoy characters who:
   Why?

- follow rules
- break rules
- hide secrets
- make risky decisions
- slowly become darker/more dangerous
- do bad things for a good reason

7. Have you ever understood a character's actions even when you knew they were wrong?
   Yes – No – Maybe
   If yes, which character and why?

8. Do you think readers sometimes forgive bad behaviour because they like the character?
   Yes – No – I am not sure
   Why?

9. Have you ever liked a character more after seeing edits/videos about them online?
   Yes – No – I am not sure
   Why?

10. While reading books, what do you focus on the most? Why?

- emotions and relationships
- action and plot twists
- characters
- fantasy world
- deeper messages/ideas
- aesthetics/atmosphere

Anything else?

11. Have fantasy/romantasy books ever: (tick ✓ yes)

- helped you escape from stress ☐
- made you emotional (happy, sad,…) ☐
- helped you feel understood ☐
- increased your interest in reading ☐

12. Which problems in fantasy/romantasy books feel the most realistic to you? (tick ✓ yes)

pressure from parents	☐	friendship problems	☐
insecurity	☐	feeling different	☐
loneliness	☐	wanting to fit in	☐
relationships	☐	trust issues	☐
stress/anxiety	☐	pressure to succeed	☐
fear of the future	☐		

13. Which type of fictional relationship do you usually enjoy the most? Why?
- Enemies-to-lovers
- best friends-to-lovers
- forbidden romance
- slow-burn romance
- love triangles
- healthy/supportive relationships
- complicated relationships

14. Do you think fictional relationships are usually:
- realistic
- unrealistic
- emotionally intense
- toxic/unhealthy sometimes
- idealised/perfect

Why?

15. Do you think difficult or unhealthy relationships can still be interesting in books?
Yes – No – Maybe
Why?

16. Have you ever liked a fictional couple even when their relationship was unhealthy?
Yes – No – Maybe
Why?

17. Which qualities make a fictional male character (the romantic interest) attractive or interesting? (tick ✓ yes)

confidence	☐	willingness to sacrifice for others	☐
intelligence	☐	passion	☐
humour	☐	power	☐
kindness	☐	good communication	☐
mystery/secrets	☐	emotional support	☐
protectiveness	☐	jealousy/possessiveness	☐
physical attractiveness	☐	romantic behaviour	☐
rebellious personality	☐		

18. If you know BookTok and its popular content, which romantasy tropes or moments do you enjoy the most? Why?
    - "She fell first, he fell harder" trope
    - "Good girl × bad boy" dynamic
    - "Only soft for her" characters
    - one bed trope
    - "Who did this to you?" scenes
    - "Touch her and die" scenes

Anything else?

19. Which qualities (traits, behaviour) would you like a future partner to have? Do any fictional characters represent these qualities for you? If yes, which characters?

20. What do you think teenage readers can learn from fantasy/romantasy books?

Appendix 61: Excerpts Used in the Discussions

Excerpt 1: *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

- I had risked much in coming so far into the forest, but we'd finished our last loaf of bread yesterday, and the remainder of our dried meat the day before. Still, I would have rather spent another night with a hungry belly than found myself satisfying the appetite of a wolf. Or a faerie. Not that there was much of me to feast on. I'd turned gangly by this time of the year and could count a good number of my ribs. Moving as nimbly and quietly as I could between the trees, I pushed a hand against my hollow and aching stomach. I knew the expression that would be on my two elder sisters' faces when I returned to our cottage empty-handed yet again (2).

- "My father. My father had come to take me—to save me…. "Weren't you warned to keep your wits about you?" Tamlin snapped. "That your human senses would betray you?" He stepped beyond me and let out a snarl so vicious that whatever the thing was by the gates shimmered with light and darted out as fast as lightning streaking through the dark. "Fool," he said to me, turning. "If you're ever going to run away, at least do it in the daytime." He stared me down, and the fangs slowly retracted. The claws remained. "There are worse things than the Bogge" (95).

- When I continued gaping at the pool, he laughed, drawing away my attention—only for me to find him unbuttoning his tunic. "Jump in," he said, the invitation dancing in his eyes. A swim unclothed, alone. With a High Lord. I shook my head, falling back a step. His fingers paused at the second button from his collar. "Don't you want to know what it's like?" I didn't know what he meant: swimming in starlight, or swimming with him. "I—no." "All right." He left his tunic unbuttoned. There was only bare, muscled, golden skin beneath. "Why this place?" I asked, tearing my eyes away from his chest. "This was my favourite haunt as a boy." "Which was when?" I couldn't stop the question from coming out. He cut a glance in my direction. "A very long time ago." He said it so quietly that it made me shift on my feet. A very long time ago indeed……. .Slowly, so slowly, his eyes roved down, then up. As if he were studying every inch, every curve of me. And even though I wore my ivory underthings, that gaze alone stripped me bare. His eyes met mine and he gave me a lazy smile before removing his clothes. Button by button. I could have sworn the gleam in his eyes turned hungry and feral—enough so that I had to look anywhere but at his face (159).

- I'd never yearned for anything more than to remove his mask and see the face beneath, to find out whether it matched how I'd dreamed he looked. "Tell me there's some way to help you," I breathed. "With the masks, with whatever threat has taken so much of your power. Tell me—just tell me what I can do to help you." "A human wishes to help a faerie?" "Don't tease me," I said. "Please—just … tell me." "There's nothing I want you to do, nothing you can do—or anyone. It's my burden to bear." "You don't have to—" "I do. What I have to face, what I endure, Feyre … you would not survive."…….... He picked up the small painting of the frozen forest and examined it again. "I've had many lovers," he admitted. "Females of noble birth, warriors, princesses …" Rage hit me, low and deep in the gut at the thought of them—rage at their titles, their undoubtedly good looks, at their closeness to him. "But they never understood. What it was like, what it is like, for me to care for my people, my lands. What scars are still there, what the bad days feel like." That wrathful jealousy faded away like morning dew as he smiled at my painting. "This reminds me of it." "Of what?" I breathed. He lowered the painting, looking right at me, right into me. "That I'm not alone." I didn't lock my bedroom door that night (206).

- "You were too blind to see Tamlin's curse," Alis continued. "How do you expect to face Amarantha? You'll make things worse." Amarantha had taken everything I wanted, everything I finally dared desire. "Show me the way," I said, my voice trembling, but not with tears. "No." Alis slung her satchel over a shoulder. "Go home. I'll take you as far as the wall. There's naught to be done now. Tamlin will remain her slave forever, and Prythian will stay under her rule. That's what Fate dealt, that was what the Eddies of the Cauldron decided." "I don't believe in Fate. Nor do I believe in some ridiculous *Cauldron*." She shook her head again, her wild brown hair like glistening mud in the dim light. "Take me to her," I insisted. If Amarantha ripped out my throat, at least I would die doing something for him—at least I would die trying to fix the destruction I hadn't prevented, trying to save the people I'd doomed. At least Tamlin would know it was for him, and that I loved him (288-289).

Excerpt 2: *The Cruel Prince*

- …How fortunate I am, a bastard daughter of a faithless wife, a human without a drop of faerie blood, to be treated like a trueborn child of Faerie. They tell Taryn much the same thing. I know it's an honor to be raised alongside the Gentry's own children. A terrifying honor, of which I will never be worthy. It would be hard to forget it, with all the reminders I am given (10).

- What they don't realize is this: Yes, they frighten me, but I have always been scared, since the day I got here. I was raised by the man who murdered my parents, reared in a land of monsters. I live with that fear, let it settle into my bones, and ignore it. If I didn't pretend not to be scared, I would hide under my owl-down coverlets in Madoc's estate forever. I would lie there and scream until there was nothing left of me. I refuse to do that. I will not do that. Nicasia's wrong about me. I don't desire to do as well in the tournament as one of the fey. I want to win. I do not yearn to be their equal. In my heart, I yearn to best them (31).

- They highlight that I am vulnerable. No matter how careful I am, eventually I'll make another misstep. I am weak. I am fragile. I am mortal. I hate that most of all. Even if, by some miracle, I could be better than them, I will never be one of them (46).

- Cardan watches me. Although he doesn't lift a finger, I know this is all his doing. In his eyes, I see all the vast alienness of Faerie. "Is this fun?" I call to the shore. I am so furious that there's no room for being scared. "Are you enjoying yourselves?" "Enormously," says Cardan. Then his gaze slides from me to where shadows rest under the water. Are those nixies? I cannot tell. I just keep moving toward Taryn. "This is just a game," Nicasia says. "But sometimes we play too hard with our toys. And then they break" (49).
- Locke brings me a thimbleful of liquor, and I take a tiny scalding sip for the sake of politeness. I start coughing immediately. At that moment, Cardan's gaze goes to me. His eyes are barely open, but I can see the shine of them, wet as tar. He watches me as the girl kisses his mouth, watches me as she slides her hand beneath the hem of his silly, ruffly shirt. My cheeks heat. I look away and then am angry with myself for giving him the satisfaction of seeming uncomfortable. He's the one who's making a spectacle of himself (169-170).

- I remember choking on nectar and pulp as the horrible bliss of the everapple stole over me, robbing me of caring even that I was dying. He'd wanted to watch me die, wanted to watch me fight for breath the way I am fighting for it now. I look into his eyes and find the same expression there. *You are nothing. You barely exist at all. Your only purpose is to create more of your kind before you die.* He's wrong about me. I am going to make my mayfly life count for something. I won't be afraid of him or of Prince Dain's censure. If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse…. "I curse you," Valerian whispers. "I curse you. Three times, I curse you. As you've murdered me, may your hands always be stained with blood" (210-211).

- The odd thing about ambition is this: You can acquire it like a fever, but it is not so easy to shed. Once, I was content to hope for knighthood and the power to force Cardan and his friends to leave me alone. All I wanted was to find some place to fit in here in Faerie. Now I wonder what it would be like to choose the next king (297).

- I put both of my hands on the desk. "Just tell me why you hate me. Once and for all." His long fingers smooth over the wood of Dain's desk. "You really want honesty?" "I am the one with the crossbow, not shooting you because you promised me answers. What do you think?" "Very well." He fixes me with a spiteful look. "I hate you because your father loves you even though you're a human brat born to his unfaithful wife, while mine never cared for me, though I am a prince of Faerie. I hate you because you don't have a brother who beats you. And I hate you because Locke used you and your sister to make Nicasia cry after he stole her from me. Besides which, after the tournament, Balekin never failed to throw you in my face as the mortal who could best me." I didn't think Balekin even knew who I was. We stare at each other across the desk. Lounging in the chair, Cardan looks every bit the wicked prince. I wonder if he expects to be shot. "Is that all?" I demand…... He leans in and closes his eyes. "Most of all, I hate you because I think of you. Often. It's disgusting, and I can't stop." I am shocked into silence. "Maybe you should shoot me after all," he says……. "You really do want me," I say, close enough to feel the warmth of his breath as it hitches. "And you hate it." I change the angle of the knife, turning it so it's against his neck. He doesn't look nearly as alarmed by that as I might expect. Not nearly as alarmed as when I bring my mouth to his (305-307).

Excerpt 3: *Red Queen*

- I'm pretending to be Silver, and when they finish painting my face, I actually look the part. With my newly pale skin and darkened eyes and lips, I look cold, cruel, a living razor. I look Silver. I look beautiful. And I hate it. *How long will this last? Betrothed to a prince*. Even in my head, it sounds crazy. *Because it is. No Silver in their right mind would marry you, let alone a prince of Norta. Not to calm rebellion, not to hide your identity, not for anything* (89).

- "You and your brother have everything, Prince Maven," I whisper in a voice so fervent it might be a prayer. "You live in a palace, you have strength, you have power. You wouldn't know hardship if it kicked you in the teeth, and believe me, it does that a lot. So excuse me if I don't feel sorry for either of you." There I go, letting my mouth run away with my brain.

As I recover, drinking down the rest of the water in an attempt to cool my temper, Maven just stares at me, his eyes cold. But the wall of ice recedes, melting as his gaze softens. "You're right, Mare. No one should feel sorry for me." I can hear the bitterness in his voice. With a shiver, I watch him throw a glance at Cal. His older brother beams like the sun, laughing with their father. When Maven turns back around, he forces another smile, but there's a surprising sadness in his eyes. As much as I try, I can't ignore the sudden jolt of pity I feel for the forgotten prince. But it passes when I remember who he is and who I am. I'm a Red girl in a sea of Silvers, and I can't afford to feel sorry for anyone, least of all the son of a snake (106).

- *We can barely feed ourselves, let alone pave streets*. My jaw tightens until I think my teeth might shatter. I try to smile but instead end up grimacing as the other women voice their agreement. "And the Reds, well, I suppose it's the best they can do with what they have," the Welle continues, wrinkling her nose at the thought. "They're suited to such lives." "It's not our fault they were born to serve," a brown-robed Rhambos says airily, as if she's talking about the weather or the food. "It's simply nature." Anger curls through me, but one glance from the queen tells me I cannot act on it. Instead, I must do my duty. I must lie (132-133).

- I notice a tattoo around his wrist: a red band. Like the ones they make us wear. Except now he's wearing his forever. It's part of him, like the blood in our veins. "Are you with us, Mare Barrow?" he says, his hand closing over mine. *More war, more death*, Cal said. *But there's a chance he's wrong. There's a chance we can change it*. My fingers tighten, holding on to Will. I can feel the weight of my action, the importance behind it. "I'm with you." "We will rise," he breathes, in unison with Tristan. I remember the words and speak with them. "Red as the dawn." When I join back up with Cal at the edge of town, I feel lighter somehow, emboldened by my decision and the prospect of what's to come. Cal walks alongside me, glancing over occasionally, but says nothing. Where I would poke and prod and forcibly pull an answer out of someone, Cal is the complete opposite. Maybe it's a military tactic he picked up in one of his books: *let the enemy come to you. Because that's what I am now. His enemy*. He perplexes me, just like his brother. Both of them are kind, even though they know I'm Red, even though they shouldn't even see me at all. But Cal took me home, and Maven was good to me, wanting to help. *They are strange boys* (164).

- His [Maven] eyes shift, moving to mine, and he swallows hard. "When I was twelve, my father sent me to the war front, to toughen me up, to make me more like my brother. Cal is

perfect, you see, so why couldn't I be the same?" I can't help but flinch at his words, recognizing the pain in them. I lived in Gisa's shadow, and he lived in Cal's. I know what that life is like (186).

- Unable to meet his [Cal] gaze, I focus on what's right in front of me. Unfortunately, that happens to be his chest and a much-too-thin shirt. Above me, he takes a ragged breath. Then his fingers are under my chin, tipping my head up to meet his gaze. Gold flame flickers in his eyes, reflecting the heat beneath. "I'll miss you, Mare." As much as I want to stand still, to stop time and let this moment last forever, I know it's not possible. Whatever I might feel or think, Cal is not the prince I'm promised to. More important, he's on the wrong side. He's my enemy. Cal is forbidden…. His lips are on mine, hard and warm and pressing. The touch is electrifying, but not like I'm used to. This isn't a spark of destruction but a spark of life. As much as I want to pull away, I just can't do it (227).

- "It's too bad we didn't stay longer," I murmur, looking out at the river. "I would have liked to die close to home." Another breeze sends a curtain of my hair across my face, but Maven brushes it away and pulls me close with startling ferocity. Oh. His kiss is not at all like his brother's. Maven is more desperate, surprising himself as much as me. He knows I'm sinking fast, a stone dropping through the river. And he wants to drown with me. "I will fix this," he murmurs against my lips. I have never seen his eyes so bright and sharp (280).

- "Cal will never turn his back on his crown, on your father." "I know my brother. If it comes down to it, to saving your life or saving his crown, we both know what he will choose," Maven fires back. "He would never choose me." My skin burns under Maven's gaze, with the memory of one stolen kiss. It was him who saved me from Evangeline. Cal who saved me from escaping and bringing more pain upon myself. Cal who saved me from conscription. I've been too busy trying to save others to notice how much Cal saves me. How much he loves me. Suddenly it's very hard to breathe. Maven shakes his head. "He will always choose you." Farley scoffs. "You want me to pin my entire operation, the entire revolution, on some teenaged love story? I can't believe this" (316-317).

- They painted me every day; they knew I had something to hide. And they died for it. No one paints me now or even bothers to brush away the dirt from a *night spent in a cell. More pageantry. Once, I wore silk and jewels and* pretty smiles, but that doesn't fit Maven's lie. A Red girl in rags is easier for them to understand, and to kill (356).

- “Good-bye, little lightning girl.” The storm overhead explodes with a deafening clap of thunder, so strong it shakes the air. It shatters through the shield, sending purple shards down on us like falling snow. It sizzles against my skin in a delightful sensation, an invigorating pulse of power to bring me back to life (375).

Excerpt 4: *Fourth Wing*

- “Damn it, Mom, she can’t even handle her rucksack,” Mira snaps, rushing to my side. “I’m fine!” My cheeks heat with mortification, and I force myself upright. She’s been back for five minutes and is already trying to save me. Because you need saving, you fool. I don’t want this. I don’t want any part of this Riders Quadrant shit. It’s not like I have a death wish. I would have been better off failing the admission test to Basgiath and going straight to the army with the majority of conscripts. But I can handle my rucksack, and I will handle myself (2).

- Even the diagonal scar that bisects his left eyebrow and marks the top corner of his cheek only makes him hotter. Flaming hot. Scorching hot. Gets-you-into-trouble-and-you-like-it level of hot. Suddenly, I can’t remember exactly why Mira told me not to fuck around outside my year group. “See you two on the other side!” Dylan says over his shoulder with an excited grin before stepping onto the parapet, his arms spread wide. “Ready for the next one, Riorson?” the rider with the ripped sleeves says. Xaden Riorson?.....“You’re General Sorrengail’s youngest.” His voice is deep and accusatory. “You’re Fen Riorson’s son,” I counter, the certainty of this revelation settling in my bones. I lift my chin and do my best to lock every muscle in my body so I don’t start trembling. He will kill you the second he finds out who you are. Mira’s words bounce around my skull, and fear knots in my throat (19).

- Then he leans closer. “Taking out your enemy before the battle is really smart; I’ll give that to you,” he whispers, his warm breath brushing the shell of my ear. Oh gods. He knows what I’ve been doing. The pain in my arm is nothing compared to the nausea churning in my stomach at the thought of what he might do with that knowledge. “Problem is, if you aren’t testing yourself in here”—he scrapes the dagger down my neck, but there’s no warm trickle of blood, so I know he hasn’t cut me—“then you’re not going to get any better.” “You’d rather I die, no doubt,” I fire back, the side of my face pressed into the mat. This isn’t just painful, it’s humiliating. “And be denied the pleasure of your company?” he mocks. “I fucking hate you.” The words are past my lips before I can shut my mouth. “That

doesn't make you special." The pressure releases from my chest and arm as he gets on his feet, kicking both daggers toward Dain. Two more. I only have two more, and now my indignation and anger far outweigh my fear. Ignoring Xaden's outstretched hand, I gain my feet and his lips curve into an approving smile. "She can be taught." "She's a quick learner," I retort (108).

- It's going to die just because it's smaller, weaker than the other dragons… just like me. My throat closes. The dragon backs up, its growl growing louder as it bares its teeth. Stomach pitching, I have that Parapet feeling again—whatever I do next has overwhelming odds of ending my life. And yet, I'm still going to do it because this is *wrong*. "You can't do this!" I take the first step into the shin-high grass and Jack's attention swings my way. My ankle has a heartbeat of its own, and agony streaks up my spine, chattering my teeth as I force my weight onto my ruined joint so they won't see me limping. They can't know I'm hurt, or they'll just attack faster. One at a time, I stand a chance of holding them off long enough for the dragon to escape, but together… *Don't think about it.* "Oh, look!" Jack grins, pointing his sword my way. "We can take out both the weakest links at the same time!" He looks at his friends and laughs, pausing their advance. "You can't kill a dragon," I try reasoning, shaking my head at the trio, fear lacing my veins with adrenaline. "Sure we can." Jack shrugs, but Oren looks a little uncertain. "I would strongly recommend you rethink your actions," a voice—*his* voice—demands from across the field to my right. My scalp prickles as each of our heads swivel in his direction. Xaden is leaning against the tree. X*aden.* For the first time, the sight of him fills my chest with hope. He won't let this happen. He might hate me, but he's a wingleader. He can't just watch them kill a dragon (161).

- This can't be happening. There's no way I can flee to safety and leave my sister here, with absolutely zero way of knowing if she's alive or dead…… "I can't do this," I say to Xaden, turning in his arms to face him. "The others are gone. Call it the favor you owe me, I don't care. We can stay. I can't just leave her here. It's wrong, and it's something she'd never do to me. I have to stay for her. I just have to." There's so much compassion, so much understanding in his eyes, that when he lets go of my waist, I think he might just let me stay. Then his hands are on my cheeks, sliding back to cup the base of my neck as he brings his mouth to mine. The kiss is reckless and consuming, and I give it my all, knowing it might be the last one….. He only breaks the kiss when we're both panting, then rests his forehead against mine. "Leave for me, Violet" (344).

- “You love me, and—” “Loved,” I correct him, sidestepping so I can get some fucking space and then taking it. “Love!” he shouts, stopping me in my tracks and earning us a glance from every rider within hearing distance. “You love me.” One of those little embers in my chest tries to come back to life, and I squash it before it has the chance to burn. Slowly, I turn to face him. “Everything I feel—” I swallow, fighting to hold on to the anger so I don’t fall apart. “Felt for you was based on secrets and deception.” Shame burns in my cheeks that I was naive enough to fall for him in the first place. “Everything between us is real, Violence.” The intensity with which he says it hurts my heart even more. “The rest, I can explain with enough time” (446-447).

- If this is it, if my power is backlashing, then I’ll be damned if I don’t take that asshole with me. Tairn is fireproof—but not Jack. “Faster!” I shout, my voice desperate with worry we won’t make it in time. Tairn charges the tower, his wings beating faster and faster, and I instinctually throw my hands forward, as though I can project all this power lashing within me toward the enemy who just tried to kill my friend, who has done his best to kill me at every opportunity. That sizzle of magic grows to a lethal, swirling vortex of energy, and though my feet are still firmly grounded, the power rises to a breaking point and the roof of my Archives disintegrates. Power crackles above me, swirls around me, wraps along my feet below me. I am the sky and the power of every storm that has ever been. I am infinite. A scream rips from my throat just as lightning splits the sky with a terrifying crack of thunder….. Tairn roars with the unmistakable sound of pride. *“Lightning wielder”* (362).

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