

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Literature is not a concept that can be easily understood. Although the word literature is often heard, the fact is that literature has varying definitions. Depending on who you would ask, each person may have a different understanding of the meaning of literature. The fact that there can be many definitions of literature allows us to gain insight into what others think when they hear the word 'literature'; after all, one's definition of literature does not define others' views. Many experts have their own definitions of literature, and all of them are worth understanding. However, for the sake of this thesis, I will attempt to define the meaning of the word 'literature' through several experts' opinions.

According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in their book *Theory of Literature*. Literature is a product of human's imagination. However, they also stated that although literature is a product of the human minds, it does not mean that literature does not have a base in reality. Wellek and Warren emphasized that literature is based in real life, that literature is based on facts. Literature is able to expand because humans experienced different things that influenced them in their lives, this allows writers to tap in their experience and imagination and create a work that may incorporate reality, imagination, or both (Wellek and Warren, 9). From this definition, I will define literature as a product of human experience that reflects the writer's experience, which may contain elements from reality or elements from imagination.

The definition above means that literature reflects how humans live. Literature allows humans to get a glimpse through time, a glimpse of life in times that may come before them, a life where humans have not yet evolved to the point that we are in. Literature also reflects how humans think, behave, and feel. Humans, like most living creatures, are wired to survive.

Our survival instincts ensure that in dangerous situations, we can survive against any threats. These survival instincts allow us to evolve and preserve our species. When other species may not survive the natural selection, humans are able to survive because our instincts help preserve us.

This is a concept that is explored by Charles Darwin in his book *On The Origin of Species*. In this book, Darwin explained that humans are wired by our 'survival instincts' to survive. Survival instincts are formed by habits, eventually those habits get passed down from generations to generations, until it becomes a default instinctual act in our mind. These instincts can be defined as a set of behaviors that lay dormant in our brain, which are programmed to go active or to be done when a threat is perceived to us.

Darwin also spearheaded the concept of 'natural selection'. Natural selection is the concept in which humans go through several stages in our evolution. In these stages, several subspecies of humans live in the same time period. However, some subspecies of humans may be equipped with instincts that serves them well in the long run, and allows them to survive against the harsh elements of nature. Meanwhile, the other subspecies that do not have that behavior hardwired in their brain may fail to adapt to nature, and eventually their sub-species went extinct. According to Darwin, the humans that we are today result from natural selection, and we are equipped with the most complete set of survival instincts so far (*On The Origin of Species*, 63).

These survival instincts are sometimes confused with human nature; in some ways, these two concepts can be used interchangeably. Survival instincts can be seen in the smallest example of human habits. For example, a baby's habit of crying to get the attention of a caretaker is because humans are wired to respond to distressed children. Another example is humans and reproduction, humans are most likely to choose a partner that they find has the most potential to create the best progeny. As such, when a person is looking to settle down,

they may choose a potential partner that embodies traits that can produce healthy, attractive, and intelligent children.

This survival instinct carries over to our daily lives. Even in an era of technology and convenience, humans will still be able to act out self-preservation when pushed to the extreme. As a result, we humans have created works embodying these traits. Literature is one of the mediums where we can see the influence of our survival instincts. Authors may, knowingly or unknowingly employ elements in their works that correspond with Darwin's idea of survival instincts and human nature.

This concept is known as literary Darwinism. Literary Darwinism is a branch of literary criticism that focuses on how a work manages to employ Darwinian elements in their works (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*, vii). Scholars of literary Darwinism believed that Darwin's ideas regarding humans and our evolutions have influenced literary works. These scholars believe that due to our survival instinct, our literary works also contain scenarios in which the characters are faced with a situation where they are challenged to survive.

The work that will be the focus of this thesis is a series of children's middle grade novels. The title of the series *Ever After High: The Storybook of Legends* is a series of novels written by children literature writer, Shannon Hale. This series is inspired by its source material, the *Ever After High* doll line produced by Mattel. This franchise centers around children of famous fairytale characters who are attending the eponymous Ever After High, an education institution similar to high school. The main conflict of the franchise is the revolution incited by the Rebels, a group of students who refuses to follow their parents' destiny, and the Royals, the opposing group who wishes to follow their parents' destiny. The conflict happened due to the fact that in the franchise's lore, the children of fairytale

characters must relive the story of their parents, with the threat of disappearing from the world if they do not follow their parents' story.

The novel series by Shannon Hale expands on the lore established by the doll line, and details the characters' motivation and the franchise's setting. The first book in the series *The Storybook of Legends* sets the stage for the following books, beginning with the very beginning of the Rebels versus Royals debate. The second book, *The Unfairest of Them All*, deals with the aftermath of the first book, expanding the lore of the character's parents and the lore of the franchise's setting. The third book, *A Wonderlandiful World*, focuses on Wonderland as its main settings, and introduces more characters that influence the plot. For the sake of the thesis, I will focus on these three novels as my research subject.

The status quo presented within the series is the longstanding tradition of children of famous fairytale characters to take the place of their parents' and continue the family lineage. This means that the teen characters of the novel series have been groomed and conditioned since birth to prepare for their roles, with the threat of 'vanishing from existence' should they refuse to follow their respective stories. Children of characters like Cinderella and Snow White is taught how to rule a kingdom and how a 'damsel-in-distress' behave, while children of evil characters such as the daughter of the Evil Queen from "Snow White" and the daughter of the Witch from "Hansel and Gretel" is also prepped with lessons on how to be 'evil'. The conflict starts when Raven Queen, daughter of the Evil Queen of "Snow White" fame refuses to follow in her mother's footsteps and become evil. This puts her in opposition with Apple White, Snow White's daughter.

Raven eventually incites a rebellion at Ever After High when she refuses to sign the Storybook of Legends, a book where each student must pledge their promise to continue their parents' stories. This results in two different factions forming at the school. The Royals, consisting of students who wish to follow their destinies and preserve the continuity of their

fairy tales. On the other side are the Rebels, students who believe that everyone should be free to choose their own destiny and not follow their parents' footsteps before them. The book deals with the two factions dealing with the repercussions of Raven's actions of not signing the Storybook of Legends.

These novels contain elements of Darwinian ideas, mainly in the discourse of the Royals versus the Rebels. Two opposing sides, both having the intention to survive and live. On one hand, the Royals fear for their lives if their parents' story is not relieved by them, and seek to change the Rebels' minds. Meanwhile, the Rebels strive to be free from the shackles of their parents' supposed legacy and make their own paths. This is the basis which serves as the background of my research titled *Self Preservation and Self Governance of Youth: A Literary Darwinian Perspective of Ever After High: The Storybook of Legends Series by Shannon Hale*.

## 1.2. Review of Previous Study

In doing my research on this topic, I have read several articles and a thesis that gives an insight on how to research the topic of literary Darwinism. One of the thesis I found dealing with the subject of literary darwinism is titled *Evolution and Empathy: A Darwinian Approach To The Cultural' Other'* by Erin N. Jines, published in 2011. In this thesis, the writer attempts to use adaptationist approach and Darwinism to discuss the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. In the first chapter, the writer explains adaptationist criticism and the prominent adaptationism. The second chapter analyzes the novel *Things Fall Apart* in a Darwinian perspective. The third chapter discusses the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* within a Darwinian perspective (Jines, 7).

Jines provides a detailed explanation of how the background of the works and the author influenced the texts. However, the writer tends to quickly move from one topic to

another. This is noticeable in the third chapter, where the writer moves from the topic of Darwinian feminism, which has not been discussed in the introductory chapter, to an adaptationist approach. The thesis would have been far better if the writer had already included explanations regarding Darwinian feminism in the introductory chapter, so that the flow of the paper can be more coherent from the beginning.

Peter Grauholt Hansen also tackled the issue in his thesis titled *Gripped by Humbert Humbert: A Literary Darwinist Reading of Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (1955)*. This thesis focuses on Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Here, the writer focuses on how the novel and the character Humber Humbert presents some ideas that have to do with the biological evolutionary needs of humans. The writer explores the novel's reception and how it made people react because it contains ideas that are not accepted by society. Afterwards, the writer focuses on Humbert Humbert and uses the Welfare Tradeoff Ratio to analyze why the character and his actions garnered negative reactions from readers. In the end, it is concluded that the novel has many potential to be analyzed using literary Darwinism (Hansen, 47).

Hansen presented very interesting points in his thesis, especially when focusing on what makes *Lolita* so interesting, yet repugnant to read by people. While the thesis does try to be objective, it is clear which stance the writer takes. Although, this does not ruin the quality of the thesis itself.

Another thesis dealing with how literary Darwinism can be analyzed is *From Darwin to Dracula: A Study of Literary Evolution*, written by Erin Alice Lamborn and published in 2005. This thesis discusses how Darwin's *The Origin of Species* influenced two famous novels, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. The writer made note that both novels treat religion differently. *Dracula* treats religion as a force that actively fights against "evil", while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* treats religion as a passive concept devoid of any meaning in the story. Both works derive inspiration from Darwin and

his theory of evolution. Both works depict the story of two men, Dracula and Dorian Gray, who are driven by need and desire and have a distinct uniqueness of being "Other" than the rest of society. In conclusion, both characters are driven by natural selection and sexual selection in their actions (Lamborn, 66).

Lamborn offers a very insightful analysis on how both works have elements of Darwinism. She also did a great job at distinguishing how each work has a different way of conveying the elements of Darwinism, particularly faith and human's dependency on faith and religion. In the end, the thesis is a refreshing take on Darwinism, as it focuses on degeneracy, faith, and morality.

The last studies reviewed in this thesis is titled *Instinct or Insight in Dystopia: Reading Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler through a Darwinian Lens*, written by Solbjørg Skjønhaug Sviland and published in 2011. This thesis focuses on the novel *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler. The writer focuses on the nature of the dystopian society discussed in the book through the lens of literary Darwinism. Both novels have elements that can be analyzed through literary Darwinism, particularly relating to evolution and how human instincts have carried us to survive far longer than other creatures. Characters in the novel have made it that far because they have several characteristics that have been vital in helping human beings to evolve, which is the ability of teamwork, forming communities, and having instincts based on feelings (Sviland, 81). It is concluded by the writer that both novels have many elements that can be analyzed using literary Darwinism.

This thesis attempts to deconstruct the dystopia genre using a Darwinian perspective. The writer succeeded in pointing out elements of worldbuilding within dystopian fiction that contains ideas from Darwin. However, the writer focuses too much on the fantasy aspect of

world building and as a result, the writer did not provide many examples relating the fantasy aspect to real world ideas that may inspire the dystopian world.

An article of note that I came upon while doing my research on the novel series is a review written by Kate Quealy-Gainer in the journal *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*. In her review, Quealy-Gainer mentioned how Apple and Raven shares an interesting dynamic as foils for each other. She points out how Raven's independence and her self-assuredness fits nicely with Apple's genuine and perfectionist nature, creating a balance within the two female leads of the series (Quealy-Gainer, 215).

It should be noted that aside from the review of the series above, I could not find any academic research that discusses this novel series prior to my own.

### **1.3. Identification of Problem**

This novel series provides an example of elements of Darwinian ideas in literary works. The concept of humans and the lengths humans will go through in order to survive can be seen in this series. The students of Ever After High are trapped to a future they did not choose, where they must follow the destiny and stories that their parents before them followed. Their fates have been decided for them as fairytales have a fixed ending. Some of the characters may have an unfortunate fate, in which case it is not strange to want to avoid unpleasant endings. In this thesis, I would like to explore the elements of Darwinian ideas that can be seen in the Rebels versus Royals conflict in the *Ever After High: The Storybook of Legends* series by Shannon Hale, specifically dealing with human motives of self-preservation (evolutionary psychology) by Joseph Carroll to analyze the motives of the characters in relation to their self-preservation methods. As well as learned mechanism theory by David M. Buss to analyze how the characters deal with the learned mechanism that they received.



#### 1.4. Scope of the Research

This research will focus only on the three main books in the *Ever After High: The Storybook of Legends series* by Shannon Hale. This thesis aims to explain how Darwinian elements of adaptationist, evolutionary psychology, and learned mechanism play a role in the lore of the series, the characters' motive, and the relationship between the characters.

#### 1.5. Research Questions

I will attempt to answer two questions regarding the topic of the thesis;

1. What is the relation between the characters' self-preservation behaviors and their reactions to the status quo presented in the novel series?
2. How does the characters of both factions display self-governance despite the status quo presented in the novel series?

#### 1.6. Objective of the Research

This thesis aims to explain the Darwinian ideas that can be found in the novel series *Ever After High: The Storybook of Legends*, as well as relating the literary Darwinian theory of adaptationist literary theory and evolutionary psychology theory that can be found within the lore of the series, the character motives, as well as the relationship between the two factions that can be seen in the novels between the Rebels and the Royals