As Dark as Darkness

Using *Star Maker* and *The Hobbit* to Promote a Constructionist Understanding of Race in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract
Although the popular conception of fantasy has nothing to do with race, in fact, the genre frequently exhibits underlying concerns with racial dynamics. Conversely, science fiction, due to its speculative perspective on the universe and the potential existence of alien species is, by nature, more inherently preoccupied with the concept of race. However, fantasy, science fiction, and race are all discursive formations, shaped by social and cultural forces dependent on time and place. Educators must therefore address the political, economic, and ideological aspects of race that have resulted in societies maintaining essentialist perspectives of race. *The Hobbit* and *Star Maker* both perpetuate essentialist notions of race, but they simultaneously provide distance, which makes the process of addressing the issue of race easier in the classroom. Thus, this essay explores how a critical reading of these novels can help students acquire knowledge of how race is a social construct which is discursively generated and used to legitimize the subjection of people based on perceived racial differences.
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Introduction

Throughout time, the study of literature has been an effective medium for individuals to gain a wider perspective on the world, allowing individuals to look more closely into the depths of human experience and cope with complicated societal concerns. However, realist literature dealing with sensitive topics such as racism and prejudice may pose a significant pedagogical barrier for teachers. One way to overcome this pedagogical challenge is by including science fiction and fantasy in the classroom. By engaging in stories about elves, orcs, or even aliens, these sometimes daunting themes become easier to talk about because of the very fact that they are alien. These genres employ distance to look at real social problems. By temporarily transporting us to worlds different from our own, fantasy and science fiction novels facilitate a contemplative space in which it becomes easier to gaze at difficult and complex issues. This essay will therefore examine two seminal works from the genres of fantasy and science fiction to demonstrate how they may be used as potent instruments for the study and critical evaluation of race in upper secondary school.

Although the popular conception of fantasy has nothing to do with race, in fact, the genre frequently exhibits underlying concerns with racial dynamics. *The Hobbit* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien laid the foundation for the “high fantasy” sub-genre and has influenced subsequent works significantly. Science fiction on the other hand is, by nature, more inherently preoccupied with the concept of race. However, it approaches the topic from a different angle due to its speculative perspective on the universe and the potential existence of alien species. *Star Maker* (1937) by Olaf Stapledon is the quintessence of this vast perspective and provides a philosophical and speculative account of the entire history of the cosmos, spanning billions of years. According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Stapledon’s influence on the development of science fiction “is probably second only to that of H. G. Wells” (“Stapledon, Olaf”).

The discursive construction of race refers to how societal understandings and categorizations of race are shaped, conveyed, and reinforced through language and communication. The concept of race is thus shaped and perpetuated through various discourses that contribute to the construction and maintenance of social meanings associated with perceived racial categories. While the language in these novels contributes to the idea of race being something biologically constituted, they do this in quite distinct ways. This essay will therefore examine and compare the ways in which the concept of race is discursively constructed within them.
Consequently, through a comparative analysis grounded in Stuart Hall’s definition of race as a floating signifier, this essay will demonstrate how these novels can be critically analyzed to promote a constructionist understanding of race for students in upper secondary school. This means that race is a discursive formation which is socially constructed through various ideologies and has been used to legitimize the unequal treatment of marginalized groups of people.

Background

Critical Literacy & Swedish Curriculum

The core values of the Swedish curriculum emphasize that schools should promote an understanding of others and cultivate empathy. The educational environment is expected to promote openness and respect for diversity among individuals. Instances of intolerance and violence, including but not limited to racism and oppression, are to be proactively prevented and addressed (Skolverket). The internationalization of Swedish society, and the growing mobility across national borders places high demands on people's ability to live with and realize the values inherent in cultural diversity. The school therefore serves as a social and cultural meeting place, presenting both opportunity and responsibility to enhance this capacity in all its members (Skolverket). It is therefore imperative that the education students receive is designed to foster individuals who are both democratic and empathetic, as well as capable of critically examining and assessing information.

Catherine Wallace argues that the core idea of critical reading is that language carries "not just a propositional message, but an ideological message" (qtd. in Bland 26). Similarly, Bradford asserts that because texts both reflect and promote cultural values and practices, it is inevitable that they reveal conceptions of and attitudes toward race, ethnicity, and colonialism, thereby responding to the discourses and practices of the societies where they are produced (qtd. in Bland 222). Accordingly, critically reading and engaging with texts is an effective way for students to go beyond the literal meaning of texts and examine the values that shape them. Although both of these novels display essentialist notions of race as biologically constituted, they express this essentialism in quite distinct ways, which are not necessarily obvious to the casual reader. A critical examination of these texts can therefore provide students with the understanding that race is discursively and socially constructed rather than biological.
Understanding the Authors as Products of their Time

A literary work, like any other text, is created within and shaped by its social context. While teachers cannot treat the novels themselves as historical documents, they can certainly regard them as products of the social circumstances under which they were written. Both Tolkien and Stapledon were born in the late 19th century, at the peak of British imperialism.

**John Ronald Reuel Tolkien**

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa which was a British colony at the time. In *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Humphrey Carpenter gives an extensive account of Tolkien’s childhood and influences. During their years in Bloemfontein, Carpenter remarks that Tolkien’s mother “found the Boer attitude towards natives objectionable” and describes how there was tolerance towards the servants in the household (13). This leniency was especially true towards the male servant Isaak, who one day stole little infant Tolkien and “took him to his kraal where he showed off with pride the novelty of a white baby” (Carpenter 13). According to Carpenter, the event upset everyone and caused quite the commotion, “but Isaak was not dismissed, and in gratitude to his employer, he named his own son ‘Isaak Mister Tolkien Victor’, the last being in honor of Queen Victoria” (13). This sequence of events highlights the norms and values of the British Empire at the time, more specifically, in one of its colonial contexts where imperialist cultural hegemony contributed to the cultural assimilation of natives. The naming of the servant’s son after “Mister Tolkien” and “Victor” in honor of the Queen serves as a very telling example of this. Tolkien, however, did not remain long in South Africa and moved back to England in 1885.

Tolkien was passionate about language and studied philology at Oxford University where he later became a professor of the discipline himself. Philology is the study of comparative and historical linguistics, and Helen Young cites Robert J.C. Young, who claims that philology revolutionized race theory by connecting individuals who previously might never have regarded themselves as part of a group (Young 21). Therefore, Young argues that it was not surprising that the link between philology and racial thinking influenced Tolkien's literary works, since race in Middle-earth is characterized by interconnected moral, physical, and linguistic characteristics (Young 21). There are also clear linkages to philological constructions of race that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (22).
Olaf Stapledon

William Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950) was born in Seacombe, Wallasey in England. Like Tolkien, Stapledon spent his first years as a youth abroad. He was raised in Egypt with his parents and thereafter moved back to England. He attended a private boarding school and later went to Balliol College, Oxford where he received a BA degree in Modern History. In 1925, Stapledon was awarded a Ph.D. degree in philosophy from the University of Liverpool. Unlike Tolkien, who fought in the trenches of the Somme, Stapledon was a pacifist and refused military service during World War I. Instead, he served as an ambulance driver in Belgium and France. The experiences he gained during the war solidified his pacifist stance.

After receiving his Ph.D. degree, Stapledon used his doctoral thesis as the basis for his first published prose book, *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, published in 1929. Shortly after, he turned to fiction which resulted in his first novel *Last and First Men*, a speculative fiction depicting a “future history” of 18 successive species of humanity across two billion years, followed by the sequel *Last Men in London*. *Star Maker* remains his most praised work and casts aside the traditional novel structure such as plot twist and character development. The novel is more of a philosophical exploration that displays the structure of an extended essay and sometimes even prose rather than a novel. It has been praised by figures such as Jorge Louis Borges, Virginia Woolf, and Winston Churchill.

Previous Research

Race in Fantasy

In her influential study, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, Helen Young provides a thorough examination of how discourses of race and difference circulate within fantasy-genre culture. Young’s central argument for her work is that “Fantasy formed habits of whiteness early in the life of the genre-culture, and is, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, struggling to break them” (10). Considering that the fantasy genre's foundations were laid in the first half of the twentieth century, Young claims that it is not surprising that the authors who were most influential were white men. Male-dominated White hegemony over Western culture at the time was pervasive and relatively unchallenged (15). The institutional racisms and sexisms, as well as other social inequalities, that defined Western civilization when the foundations for the genre were established surely
aided the ability of white men to write and publish novels (Young 16, 17). Among these men, J. R. R. Tolkien emerged as the founding father of ‘high fantasy’ as we know it today.

Young states that in Tolkien’s fictitious world of Arda, in which his novels are situated, numerous features of race theory are evident. These include the portrayal of characters coded as white and Germanic (particularly Anglo-Saxon) as superior, the use of biological essentialism in race delineation, as well as the incorporation of polygenesis theory (Young 20), which suggests multiple human origins rather than a single origin (Alexander 835). Young provides some examples of how these differentiations are portrayed in *The Return of the King* by noting that the good people of Middle-Earth are explicitly identified as white, while Faramir’s “Men of Darkness”, “Easterlings with axes, Southrons in scarlet, and out of Far Harad black men like half-trolls with white eyes and red tongues” do not receive such a classification (Young 23). Instead, they are depicted as nearly indistinguishable, united under the prominently black banner of evil, servants of Sauron, “collected together within the single Othering category of non-European” (Young 23).

In the essay “Tolkien, Lewis, and the Explosion of the Genre Fantasy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Edward James asserts that most fantasy writers after Tolkien are either imitating him or desperately trying to escape his influence (62). Consequently, the role of Tolkien’s works holds significant weight, especially when considering “the broad brushstrokes which place racial difference” at the core of the fantasy genre, establishing race as the traditional framework around which difference is formed (Young 35). In contrast to fantasy, Young highlights that scholarly engagements with topics such as empire, colonialism, indigenousness, and dispersion are relatively common in science fiction writing because the narrative arcs frequently juxtapose interstellar voyages of discovery with those of Western colonialist endeavors (115). In other words, colonialist enterprises are inevitably more apparent in science fiction since the exploration and settling of new worlds is such a recurring theme within the genre.

**The Literature of Science**

In his essay “Olaf Stapledon and the Idea of Science Fiction”, Robert Crossley states that Stapledon, next to H. G. Wells, stood out as the most innovative practitioner of scientific romance in the first half of the twentieth century (22). However, not much is known of how Stapledon saw himself in the tradition of science fiction writing, and Crossley therefore goes back to the prefaces of two of his novels in trying to understand this. In the Preface to *Last and First Men* (1930), Crossley refers to Stapledon’s central fictional
principle, which states that “[science fiction] is a medium for designing cultural myths” and critiques “the merely fantastic” mode of having only minor power to accomplish this (Crossley 23). Conversely, Stapledon argues that science fiction “exercises ‘controlled imagination’ in the service of a ‘serious attempt to envisage the future of our race’ and ‘mould our hearts to entertain new values’” (Crossley 23). In the Preface to *Star Maker*, with the ongoing Spanish Civil War and a new World War on the horizon, Stapledon emphasizes the political impact of imagination and justifies the exploration of fictional worlds and distant ages amid a terrestrial crisis (Crossley 23). The effort to observe our chaotic world against “a background of stars” may “heighten awareness of human politics” and “strengthen our charity toward one another”, Crossley states (23). As such, Stapledon himself held science fiction in higher regard than he did fantasy, arguing that fiction characterized by “controlled imagination” could contribute much more effectively to humanity reevaluating our existence and practices compared to the fantasy genre.

To summarize, Stapledon clearly distinguished science fiction from what he calls “the literature of escape”, and argued that as science infiltrates literature, fiction’s prophetic powers are enhanced (Crossley 27). Stapledon thus indicates the two extrapolative directions these modes of literature can take: “toward the visionary splendor of utopianism and the celebration of human potentiality, or toward the literature of disaster and revulsion against science” (Crossley 27). In contrast, Tolkien believed that science fiction novels were the most escapist of all literary forms (Tolkien qtd. in Konzack 252). Nevertheless, a critical examination of the concept of race within these authors’ seminal novels will contribute to an understanding that both works may be effectively employed in a teaching context, albeit in different ways.

**Departing from Existential Confrontations**

In her 1981 book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson challenges conventional views of fantasy as mere escapism and sought to recognize it as a distinct type of narrative characterized by unconscious drives. Jackson contends that fantasy novels, like any other text, is created within and influenced by its social context (2). She emphasizes the importance of situating authors within the framework of their historical, social, economic, and political circumstances, along with considering the literary tradition of fantasy (Jackson 2). Jackson thus rejects the notion of interpreting this genre of literature as existing mysteriously “outside” of time altogether (2).
Jackson states that all fantasy novels operate somewhere within the spectrum of three separate modes. She argues that the “world of fairy story, romance, magic, supernatualism is one belonging to the marvellous narrative” (19), and inserts Tolkien as a narrator of this mode. The marvelous is distinguished by minimal functional narrative in which the narrator is omniscient and has complete authority (19). Jackson compares the marvelous with what she calls “the mimetic” and “the fantastic”, where the former imitates our own reality much more clearly, and where the latter is placed somewhere in between the mimetic and the marvelous (19-20). However, she also argues that works such as those of Tolkien “retreat from any profound confrontation with existential disease” (4), possibly implying that Tolkien's works offer a form of withdrawal from reality, thereby departing from any serious confrontations with existential issues, such as racism, for example. However, the claim made in this essay is that this narrative technique, in conjunction with the racial construction, becomes highly problematic as it promotes rather than challenges the uneven treatment of marginalized groups of people.

Jackson recounts that the otherness depicted in fantasy has historically been portrayed as something negative, often characterized as evil, demonic, and barbaric, until its acknowledgment in the contemporary fantastic as culture's “unseen” (Jackson 101). This statement implies a shift in genre formation, which is in line with the more progressive attitude of our society, where contemporary novels have begun to acknowledge and explore the nuances of the "other" rather than simply categorizing it as inherently bad. Nonetheless, Tolkien’s works are to this day read by fans, and their adaptations into various modes of popular culture is a testament to that. To use Jackson’s terms in critically examining texts: “de-mystifying the process of reading [The Hobbit and Star Maker] will point to the possibility of undoing [these] texts which [may or may not] work, unconsciously, upon us” (3), and ultimately lead to actual social transformation (Jackson 4).

**Theoretical Framework**

Stuart Hall’s theorization of race is particularly helpful in understanding how fantasy and science fiction, as imaginative genres, actively engage with and contribute to the discursive construction of race.
Teaching Race as a Discursive Formation in School

In his informal lecture “Teaching Race” given to the London Branch of the Association of Teachers of Social Science, Stuart Hall presents an account of the complexities of teaching race in school. Hall urges educators to uncover for themselves, as well as the students they are teaching, the often deep structural factors that have a tendency to consistently not only generate but also reproduce racial practices and structures, which account for their extraordinarily unchanging character (126). However, Hall also suggests that it would be a mistake not to address these structural issues and connect them to the “surface manifestations” of race (126). In other words, if we are to deconstruct the biological and essentialist notion of race, educators must address "the political, economic, and ideological aspects of race" (Hall 123), which inevitably involves shedding light on the historical processes that have resulted in societies that maintain essentialist views on race. Some may argue that the employment of fantasy and speculative fiction is counter-productive in this context since they are not rooted in these historical processes.

However, it is impossible to interpret any piece of literature as existing somewhere mysteriously outside of time altogether (Jackson 2). Educators must therefore provide students with a historical account of the time in which these novels were written. Moreover, both novels have played a significant role in shaping their respective genres since their publication, and an analysis of racial constructions therefore becomes highly relevant. Although Hall might argue that deep conditions such as these are not going to be changed if “we tinker around with them” (127), fantasy and science fiction nonetheless can make us reconsider our views and beliefs about our environment (Young 2). The separation they provide creates a safer atmosphere for discussing difficult themes such as race within cultural discourse (Young 2).

In his lecture, “Race, the Floating Signifier: What More is There to Say about ‘Race’?” Hall advocates for the dismantling of race as a biological conception. Hall proposes to replace the biological notion of race with a sociohistorical or cultural definition of race as constituted through language. In other words, race must be viewed as a discursive rather than a genetic or biological fact (360). Similarly, Robert Wald Sussman states that there is neither any biological reality to human race nor inherent links between intelligence, law-abidingness, economic practices, and race, just as there is no link between nose size, height, blood group, or skin color and any set of complex human behaviors (2).
Since fantasy, science fiction, and race are all discursive formations, shaped by social and cultural forces dependent on time and place (Young 7), she highlights that although physical appearance no longer constitute race scientifically, they continue to serve as markers of difference in ways that are inseparably linked to their history (9). Accordingly, Hall understands why society finds it difficult to move beyond the biological notion of race. He claims that genetic, biological, and physiological conceptions of race are employed to explain disparities in social and cultural behavior and that despite accusations of racism, this viewpoint is still prominent in society’s commonsense discourse (361).

Therefore, Hall urges us to understand that race operates more like a language, like signifiers. He states that signifiers refer to “the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture, to its practices of meaning making” (Hall 362). These meanings arise from the shifting relations of difference, rather than through what they contain in their essence. The meaning of race is therefore under constant change and resignification, made to be “something different in different cultures, in different historical formations at different moments of time” (Hall 362). In other words, race is not fixed but rather “floats in the sea of relational differences” (Hall 363).

Ultimately, the heart of the problem does not lie in the differences themselves. Rather, the problematic aspect lies in how these differences have been discursively generated and used to classify people into racial categories with specific hierarchical values (Hall 365), wherein marginalized groups have been rendered inferior and uncivilized. Simply acknowledging that race is socially constructed through discourse is therefore not enough. It is also necessary to recognize that the social construction of race has been used to subject and exploit people based on the concept of race.

The Difference between Fantasy and Science Fiction as Genres

In the introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature, James and Mendelsohn state that fantasy and science fiction literature have been incredibly hard to pin down as genres. The distinction between the two has been addressed by the major theorists in the field who all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible while science fiction may be about the unlikely, although grounded in the scientifically possible (1). Similarly, Bould and Vint argues that genres are never, as commonly assumed, fixed objects that already exist in the world, but rather fluid and tenuous constructions formed by the
interactions of different “claims and practices by writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics, and other discursive agents” (48). Thus, the concept of fantasy and science fiction as genres closely aligns with Hall’s theorization of race.

Analysis

Synopsis of The Hobbit

The novel is set in Tolkien’s world of Arda, more specifically in Middle-earth, and follows the hobbit of the title, Bilbo Baggins, who is recruited by the wizard Gandalf and thirteen dwarves that make up Thorin Oakenshield's Company. They set out on a quest to reclaim the dwarves' lost treasure guarded by the dragon Smaug. During the quest, they face immense challenges that they have to overcome. The quest culminates in The Battle of the Five Armies.

Analysis of The Hobbit

Tolkien’s use of the term "orc" creates confusion regarding the differences between goblins, hobgoblins, and orcs from the very beginning. In the author’s note, Tolkien states that “orc is not an English word. It occurs in one or two places but is usually translated goblin (or hobgoblin for the larger kinds)” (1), and that “orc is the hobbits form of the name given at that time to these creatures” (1). It is quite ambiguous since “usually” implies that there is no firm distinction between goblins, hobgoblins, and orcs other than size and that the terms used for naming them rather depend on whom you ask. Therefore, this analysis considers goblins and orcs as synonymous with each other, except for their size. According to Young, there are four major racial tropes associated with orcs, which are directly derived from those of Middle-earth: they either have “green, brown, or black skin color; extreme aggressiveness and irrationality; primitive, disorganized cultures; and homelands outside the borders of civilization” (89). Together, these tropes resonate with anti-black racist stereotypes that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to motivate and legitimize colonization and slavery (Young 93). As such, this example serves as a telling illustration of how race is discursively constructed, providing an excellent entry point for students to critically examine and discuss the concept of race through language.

In the subsequent pages of The Hobbit, the protagonist Bilbo’s setting and home are depicted with telling reminiscence of the English countryside. The novel begins with the
famous line: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit”, followed by: “Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, … it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort” (Tolkien 3). In the following pages, Tolkien's depiction of "hobbit life and the Shire [as] redolent of nineteenth-century England" (Young 22) enhances the significance of the setting. The resemblance is significant not only for its luminous and peaceful portrayal of the English countryside, but also for the stark contrast it presents to the environment of the Othered evil that readers experience throughout their subsequent journey. The human and elf protagonists, including hobbits, are undeniably influenced by historical conceptions of European civilization and way of life (Young 22). Educators looking to situate the novel could, for example, ask students to draw parallels with nineteenth-century England. What cultural values are promoted in the passage? Students could also compare Bilbo’s habitat to that of the goblins and orcs and discuss the implications of these differences.

Let us look at how Tolkien discursively differentiates between goblins, orcs, trolls, and elves. One of the first examples is found when Bilbo and his party reach the Last Homely House in Rivendell, where the old and wise elf Master Elrond lives. Tolkien describes him as “one of those people whose fathers came into the strange stories before the beginning of History, the wars of the evil goblins and the elves and the first men in the North” (66). He was “as noble and as fair in face as an elf-lord … and as kind as summer” (Tolkien 66). Moreover, he is not only fair, “his house [is] perfect” … and “evil things [do] not come into that valley” (Tolkien 66). Summer in this context may at first glance only allude to warmth because of the preceding mention of kindness, but it takes on added significance when considering that brightness is often associated with the summer sun. Thus, the connotation of summer alludes to not only Elrond’s personality but to his physical appearance. Shortly after this sequence, Elrond inspects the swords that Bilbo and the others found in a troll cave and says: “These are not troll-make. They are … very old swords of the High Elves of the West, my kin” (Tolkien 67). As seen here, the good and noble kin of Elrond just so happen to originate from the West, whereas the notion of trolls forging blades with such “beautiful scabbards and jeweled hilts (Tolkien 55) is unthinkable. Consequently, through these perceived racial differences, Tolkien produces the knowledge common in colonialisit discourses which aims, to paraphrase Hall, to “put [goblins and trolls] over there, and [men and elves] over here; them in [caves] and [men and elves] on top of the civilization (Hall 365).

Another such example can be found when Tolkien compares the Wood-elves of Mirkwood to the “Light-elves and the Deep-elves and the Sea-elves, [who] went [on] and
lived for ages, and grew fairer and wiser and more learned, and invented their magic and their cunning craft in the making of beautiful and marvellous things” (Tolkien 214). Yet again, all these elves are rendered with positive qualities and are labeled as beautiful and intelligent people with high degrees of artisanship and culture. Tolkien describes the Wood-elves as “less wise” and “more dangerous” (214) than the “High-elves of the West” (214); however, “[s]till elves they were and remain, and that is Good people (Tolkien 214). As seen here, Tolkien reassures the reader that Wood-elves are good people. This could be due to how Tolkien previously labeled the forest as a “dark, dangerous and difficult” (169) place where “wild things [which] are dark, queer, and savage” (Tolkien 169) reside, thus somehow having to reassure the reader that although elves live in such an evil place, they need to be clearly distinguished from any connotations of darkness or savageness. The Wood-elves “lingered in the twilight of our Sun, and Moon, but loved best the stars” (214), again alluding to entities such as stars or the sun that radiate or reflect light.

In contrast, consider how the life of goblins is portrayed. During the fellowship’s ascent of the Misty Mountain, they find respite in a cave. Bilbo suddenly wakes up as “the goblins, big goblins, great ugly-looking goblins, lots of goblins” (Tolkien 76) jump out of a crack in the back of the cave. As Bilbo and the dwarves are hurried along through the caves of the mountain, in which “[i]t was deep, deep, dark, such as only goblins that have taken to living in the heart of the mountains can see through” (76). While the goblins are described more as having very good sight in the dark rather than being dark themselves, it resembles how Tolkien likened the elves to summer. If one considers that goblins and orcs in Tolkien’s works are a monstrous “Other” constructed through racial discourse as “somatically different to the White ‘Self’” (Young 89), in this case of Bilbo, Gandalf and the dwarves, it becomes quite convincing that this is part of the broader racial discourse of Tolkien’s world, where “goblins are cruel, wicked and bad-hearted” (Tolkien 79) and consistently juxtaposed with darkness. Educators may therefore ask students what kind of knowledge this type of narrative contributes to and whether it challenges or reinforces essentialist or even racist views of race.

However, as Bilbo encounters Gollum, the physical depiction becomes much more explicit. Gollum and his habitat evoke animal imagery: “Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum, a small slimy creature” (Tolkien 91). This feeling intensifies as the narrative voice of Tolkien states that “[he doesn’t] know where he came from, not who or what he was” (91), thereby dehumanizing him altogether, which is emphasized by the very fact that the omniscient and authoritative narrator suddenly is unaware of Gollum’s origin. Nevertheless, “[h]e was Gollum – as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes in
his thin face” (Tolkien 91). Altogether, the combination of these sequences of description becomes highly problematic since dehumanizing animal imagery is often reminiscent of colonialist discourses and aims to construct Whites as more evolved than any other people (Young 95). Further examples of how Tolkien uses animal imagery with connotations of darkness are found in “the dark tunnels of the goblins’ realm” (85) and how they “ran forward, as swift as weasels in the dark” (85), thus likening goblins to weasels with the connotation of being deceitful or treacherous. To the uncritical and “escapist” eye - to use the term which at the time of the novel’s publication, was used to label the genre by many literary critics - these examples may very well pass without further notice.

Additionally, the edition used for this analysis features an illustration of Gollum and Bilbo in the chapter “Riddles in the Dark”, created by Alan Lee in 1997. In this depiction, Gollum is rendered as Tolkien describes him in the novel, predating the first film, The Fellowship of the Ring (2004), where Gollum was portrayed as pale and white. This distinction is noteworthy as the film adaptation diverged from the portrayal of Gollum in the original books. Nonetheless, the notion of racist undertones in categorizing Gollum as a racial other by referring to him “as dark as darkness” highlights the norms and values of the time in which The Hobbit was written, where depictions such as these were readily accepted (Fimi 132).

By now, fans of Tolkien who are aware that Gollum is in fact a hobbit bitterly corrupted by his long possession of Sauron’s ring might disagree with the previously mentioned connections. The fact that Gollum was a hobbit had not been conceived at the time of The Hobbit’s publication, at least not by the audience. However, this fact matters little considering how Frodo responds to news of Gollum’s origin in The Fellowship of the Ring. When he learns from Gandalf that Gollum is “of hobbit-kind” (Tolkien 107), Frodo responds that “[he] can’t believe that Gollum was connected with hobbits, however distantly” (Tolkien 107) subsequently stating “[w]hat an abominable notion” (Tolkien 107). As such, one of the major protagonists expresses contempt and disgust when he learns that the othered Gollum, in fact, is a hobbit.

Examining another clear instance of racial distinction in Tolkien's narrative, we find a connection with Hall's notions of how discursive systems function in “the interplay between the representation of racial difference, writing power, and the production of knowledge” (Hall 364). Sauron is not explicitly named in the novel, but it is evident that Tolkien used the “black sorcerer” (176) and ”Necromancer” (176), who resides in "his dark tower” (176), as the foundation for him in the LOTR-trilogy. Consequently, Tolkien yet again
uses black or dark features to describe evilness in its most vivid form. Rendering Sauron as a “black sorcerer” reproduces negative stereotypes common in racist discourse. Throughout the novel, these features are entirely reserved to induce fear within the reader or to depict instances of evil. As Hall points out, “we are readers of race … we are readers of social difference” (368), and the stark juxtaposition of light and darkness throughout *The Hobbit* ultimately supports rather than challenges essentialist notions of race. However, if used the right way, educators can provide students with examples such as these to promote an understanding that, as emphasized by Young, race is written onto the body both through its phenotypical features and through the social distribution of associations - meanings - to its outward, apparent physical features (10). In other words: that race is a discursive construct that is both written and read.

Another subtle way Tolkien uses the contrast between darkness and light can be found in the protagonists’ journey through the Mirkwood Forest. As the dwarves have been captured by the enormous spiders and brought to “their dark colony” (211), Bilbo searches for them as “he noticed a place of dense black shadow ahead of him, black even for that forest, like a patch of midnight that had never been cleared away” (Tolkien 200). Although these are environmental descriptions, there is nevertheless an extremely clear negative connotation of blackness. Shortly before the dwarves were captured, as they were, although unknowingly so, closing in toward the end of the woods, they “[s]uddenly [saw], on the part ahead appeared some white deer, a hind and fawns as snowy white as the hart had been dark. They glimmered in the shadows (Tolkien 187). Deer are normally brown—light brown at the most—so one could question the reasoning behind rendering these animals as the epitome of whiteness. Yet again, these examples highlight how darkness and blackness are exclusively associated with evilness, while whiteness symbolizes hope and the overcoming of darkness.

In essence, this analysis points to problematic instances in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, where the construction of good and evil is tied to physical features, exclusively associating darkness with malice and light with virtue. These instances therefore raise questions about the persistent employment of these connotations. Jackson argues that understanding the significance of fantasy literature necessitates some reference to psychoanalysis (3). The fact that Tolkien was part of such a racially structured environment in South Africa may very well have influenced his writing. Hence, if we apply Stuart Hall’s suggestion to explore Frantz Fanon’s ideas in *Black Masks, White Faces* for a psychoanalytical understanding of the unconscious processes behind racism and colonialism (340), the portrayal of evil forces as black or dark in Middle-earth might be seen as a
manifestation of these unconscious processes, where “the deceptively obvious fact of blackness” (340) [becomes the rationale for Tolkien’s] “projective fantasy” (Hall 340). In other words, Tolkien's early childhood experiences, as well as him being a member of a colonial empire, most likely affected the racial construction present in his works.

**Synopsis of Star Maker**

The narrative unfolds as an Englishman's disembodied consciousness journeys through space and time in the cosmos. His odyssey stretches over billions of years, and he develops the ability to enter and communicate with the minds of the species he encounters, who subsequently disembody themselves and join him in a communal mind. As the story progresses, they encounter the enigmatic Star Maker, the creator of the universe.

**Analysis of Star Maker**

It is important to note that the novel encompasses such a vast number of social constructions of race that it becomes impossible to include all of them in this analysis. This analysis has, therefore, restricted itself to including the examples that best suit the aim and framework of this essay.

The point of departure in *Star Maker* differs significantly from that of *The Hobbit*. In the opening pages, Stapledon introduces some of his main themes, particularly advocating for "the creation of a worldwide community of awakened and intelligently creative persons, related by mutual insight and respect" (38) and critiquing the "commercial empires of the … Earth" (38). As the narrator ponders on his existence and life with his wife in the 1930s outskirts of London, he describes that they “had grown in and to one another, for mutual support and nourishment, in intricate symbiosis” (Stapledon 1). In this case, his marriage is used as a metaphor for the symbiosis of mankind, which Stapledon addresses many times in the novel. “Yet there was bitterness. … For horror at our futility, at our own unreality,” (Stapledon 1) “[a]nd we two, … were products of a sick world (Stapledon 2). These examples demonstrate not only the existential anxiety of the narrator’s own reality with his wife but also the horrific state of the world. As the narrator’s consciousness is disembodied and leaves for space, he looks down, and just as he catches the last glance of Earth, he remarks: “no visiting angel, or explorer from another planet, could have guessed that this bland orb [was] teemed with vermin, with world-mastering, self-torturing, incipiently angelic beasts” (Stapledon 8).
The first planet his consciousness enters and observes is referred to as “The Other Earth,” followed by a long account of the planet's species physical appearances and culture. The inhabitants of the planets are described “as … erect biped[s], and in general plan definitely human” (Stapledon 23). Stapledon refers to them as the “Other Men” (23), with “great equine nostrils” (23) and with “the feet of an ostrich or a camel” (Stapledon 23). As seen here, Stapledon describes the new species he encounters and uses animalistic traits in doing so, just as Tolkien does when describing goblins and orcs. Stapledon describes their skin as “dark and ruddy, and dusted plentifully with bright green down” (23). As such, they are colored dark red and bright green. “The women, breastless and high-nostrilled like the men, were to be distinguished by their more tubular lips, whose biological function was to project food for the infant (Stapledon 27). “To my unaccustomed vision the effect was inexpressibly vulgar … and they went about their affairs … ignorant that a spectator from another world found them one and all grotesque” (27). Although the narrator expresses disgust at their appearance, it becomes rather hard to interpret the narrator’s impression as something other than the unfamiliarity of observing an entire new species. Nevertheless, the problematic aspect lies in the use of terms like grotesque and vulgar, which reflect the narrator’s own cultural background of 1930s England.

However, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of race is illustrated by Stapledon's subsequent account of racial differences among the Other Men, providing an instructive opportunity for students to examine and evaluate race as a social construct.

“[Their] continents were as variegated as ours, and inhabited by a race as diversified as Homo Sapiens” (28). “There were ‘Eastern’ races and ‘Western’ races” (28). As seen here, the concept of race comes across as quite ambiguous. The differentiation between “Eastern” and “Western” races could be interpreted as an attempt at either biologically distinguishing them from one another or merely referring to cultural differences between people located in different parts of the world. Thus, herein lie the opportunities to address race as a social construct within a teaching context.

Another similar yet more explicit example of how Stapledon discursively constructs racial difference is found in this comparison between the Other Men and the human race:

“Differences of race, which in our world are chiefly conceived in terms of bodily appearance, were for the Other Men almost entirely differences of taste and smell. … [T]he races of the Other Men were much less sharply localized than our own races…” (29).
As seen above, Stapledon refers to our own world and asserts that differences of race are “chiefly conceived” in terms of physical appearance. Thus, in comparison to Tolkien’s construction of race, Stapledon demonstrates essentialist notions of race more outwardly. Additionally, in referring to “our own races” in the plural, Stapledon steps into the territory of polygenesis theory. As stated by Hall, “[race] is a text, which we can read” (368) and if “seeing is believing” (Hall 370), these examples promote essentialist views of race, suggesting that is biologically constituted, as it projects the idea of several human races, rather than a single one. Therefore, if educators wish to promote a constructionist understanding of race, they must not overlook this passage, as it reflects notions of race being the opposite.

However, Stapledon’s subsequent account of this extra-terrestrial species serves as an allegorical critique of not only racial superstitions, but dominant societal structures. Stapledon refers to “the more enlightened countries” (31) and “a movement among the intelligentsia for conditioning infants to tolerate every kind of human flavour” (31) but that unfortunately was “hampered by one of the consequences of industrialism” (31). As such, this example critiques the neglect of progressive science on behalf of societies and intellectuals who strive to unite people rather than divide. The phrase “consequences of industrialism” probably refers to the cheap labor needed. Thus, industrialism hinders the progressive attitudes and ideas of intellectuals who strived to deconstruct the racial division based on smell and taste that started to surface around the concept of race. The fate of the working class transpired as follows: “In the congested and unhealthy industrial centres a new gustatory and olfactory type had appeared … as a biological mutation” (31) which came “to be dominated in all the most disreputable working-class quarters. … In fact it became for [the ruling class] an unconscious symbol, tapping all the secret guilt and fear and hate which the oppressors felt for the oppressed” (31). The oppressed are from then on referred to as the “pariah-race” (32) and are persecuted because of their smell and taste. Stapledon states that “[t]he tragic farce inherent in such a system was already approaching” (31). A society in which “the production of more means” is emphasized “rather than … the fulfillment of the needs of individual life” (31), finally stating: “A familiar story!” (32). Consequently, even though Stapledon presents race as being biologically constituted in the delineation of eastern and western races, he critiques the ideologies and practices that aim to exploit and persecute marginalized and exposed members of society.
In another striking example, Stapledon's critique of racial superstitions highlights clear parallels with the extreme and inhumane ideologies that were endemic in society at the time:

There was a vigorous movement afoot among the wealthy and the official classes to institute slavery for pariahs and half-pariahs, so that these might be openly treated as the cattle which in fact they were. In view of the danger of continued race-pollution, some politicians urged wholesale slaughter of the pariahs, or at the least, universal sterilization (33).

Prior to the above description, Stapledon describes how the “pariah-race” was “allowed only the basest forms of employment and the harshest conditions of work” which in the end led them to be entirely “workless and destitute” (32). Consequently, the extreme language of labelling them “as the cattle which in fact they were”, which might at first glance be perceived as rendering them in a derogatory manner, more specifically highlights societal injustice. It is clearly not intended to depict them in a derogatory manner. Instead, it is a justified and vivid critique of the events occurring in the world at that time, aiming to shed light on the atrocities of ideologies that seek to exclude or even exterminate members of society based on their beliefs or heritage. The above passage bears a striking resemblance to Nazi discourse concerning the Jews during World War II. The critique becomes obvious as the narrator of the story remarks: “Observing these and other farcical events, I was reminded of my own race” (Stapledon 33).

The above examples depicting the “Other Earth” contain many more examples that could be addressed in an educational context. The entire chapter concerning the “Other Earth” employs distance to make us look at real societal issues without departing from any confrontations of existential crisis. Compared to Tolkien, examples such as these are much easier to relate to the history of our own planet. Stapledon “constructs rhetorical distance between one and the other” (Young 2) in the way he transports the reader to an extra-terrestrial planet and species who are persecuted, not because of religious beliefs or skin color, but because of their taste and smell.

In describing another planet with two different alien races called the “Arachnoids” and “Ichthyoids” who early in their age “strove to exterminate one another” (95), Stapledon recounts how the species would, after epochs of time, “[mould] one another to form a well-integrated union” (95). Stapledon remarks “that … the ordinary partnership was at once more intimate than human marriage and far more enlarging to the individual than any
friendship between members of distinct human races” (96). As seen here, Stapledon yet again implies that there are distinct biological human races. Moreover, Stapledon recounts how a “profound disheartenment and lassitude attacked [the Ichthyoids], like that which so often undermines our primitive races when they find themselves struggling in the flood of European civilization” (Stapledon 99). While Stapledon yet again solidifies the notion of race being biologically constituted in this statement, traces of sympathy can be discerned by the preceding mention of despair by natives finding themselves in such a culturally different environment. Alas, how should one feel about entering a civilization that has deprived them of their very essence of life?

As eons pass, the narrator is joined by other individuals whose consciousnesses disemboby and join him in a communal mind. Together, they enter an age of the cosmos where a “community of worlds” begins to take shape. One consequence of this development was that interstellar travel and colonial endeavors became more common. There were worlds that had progressed in terms of technological advancements and deemed brilliant because of these accomplishments. However, these advancements also deprived them of their spiritual and empathetic values. Stapledon recounts that the settlers “would be incapable of conceiving that the native civilization, though less developed than their own, might be more suited to the natives” (146) and remark that their “own culture, might have sunk, … below the simpler culture of the natives in all the essentials of mental life (146). The communal mind subsequently observes and sympathizes with the natives: “however barbaric their culture. … we recognized in them a power which [the settlers] had forfeited, a naïve but balanced wisdom, … a spiritual promise. The invaders, … however brilliant, were indeed perverts” (146). Consequently, although Stapledon refers to the natives having a barbaric culture and even labelling them as stupid, ignorant, and superstitious (146), there is nonetheless recognition of the value of their culture, which departs from standard Western colonial discourse. Conversely, the settlers are deemed as perverts, which serves as an obvious critique of imperialistic and colonial endeavors in the Global South. This becomes more evident in labelling the enterprise as “the mania of religious imperialism” (147). Ultimately, this passage serves as a potent deconstruction of colonial endeavors which effectively could be used as a foundation for critical examination and discussion in the ESL classroom.

The final example, a complete deconstruction of imperialism as a concept, is found in the sub-chapter tellingly called “The Tragedy of the Perverts”, where Stapledon recounts:
a steady increase of “lunacy” in every world of the empire. The whole imperial organization fell to pieces; and since the aristocratic worlds that formed the backbone of empire were as impotent as soldier-ants to maintain themselves without the service and tribute of the subject worlds, the loss of empire doomed them to death (163).

To summarize, while Stapledon describes the concept of race as being biologically constituted in the delineation and comparison between alien species and humans, he simultaneously disarms imperial and colonial practices that historically have conquered and enslaved people. One must remember that the notion of race as a social construct was not as solidified in society at the time these novels were written. Nevertheless, the distance Stapledon employs by referring to racial superstition in terms of smell and taste, instead of skin color or beliefs, makes the entire practice of addressing them in a teaching context easier. Moreover, as the histories of race and racism cannot be disentangled from the histories of colonialism (Young 114), Star Maker recurrently employs themes depicting these endeavors in ways that are very much alike to how they have transpired in our own history.

**Conclusion**

The genres of fantasy and science fiction has since these novels’ publications changed for the better. The genres nowadays often provide readers with a refreshing departure from the Eurocentric traditions of older works. James and Mendelsohn argue that one of the more liberating aspects of teaching the genre is that there are no books that must be included because of the absent consensus around a canon (3), thus allowing for a wide range of works to be used in the classroom. In her essay “Writers of colour”, Nnedi Okorafor highlights that a substantial number of authors identifying as writers of color has emerged and whose bodies of work directly challenge the explicit racism present in much fantasy literature (Okorafor 180). As such, educators who want to promote emphatic and democratic values and contribute to students understanding cultures different from their own should include works that offer diversified stories. This paper therefore urges educators interested in exploring the concept of race through the genres of fantasy and science fiction to include a wide range of works by authors, thus raising and highlighting as many perspectives as possible.

While the focus novels of this essay display essentialist notions of race, the rhetorical distance they provide by transporting the reader to other worlds makes the issue of
addressing these questions easier in a teaching context. As this analysis has shown, these novels mirror the nature of society in which they were produced, just as realist literature of the time did, although in a more detached manner. *The Hobbit* takes place in Middle-earth where evilness in all of its forms is “collected together within the single Othering category of non-European, non-White” (Young 23). In contrast, *Star Maker* demonstrates essentialist notions of race by distinguishing between human races as “Eastern”, “Western” or simply by implying that the human race is of more than one origin. Deeply embedded within this text, however, lies a striking critique of the practices that aim to divide people because of imagined racial differences. In conclusion, both novels, although in different ways, may contribute to uncovering past histories of colonization and imperialism by calling into question the assumptions on which their power structures rely. Taught the right way, these novels can effectively be employed to demonstrate that race is constructed “within the play of the differences that we construct in our own language” (Hall 364).
Works Cited


