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The Heroic Fallacy: Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and the Young Adult Reader

This paper was an opportunity to connect my education as a student of literature with my past experience as a reader. I was always more comfortable reading young adult, science fiction or fantasy novels, perhaps because this is what I read growing up. Interestingly, a trend of the past decade in British literary criticism has been to study crossover literature. This includes books that have been widely read by both adults and children. The case for studying adolescent fiction intersects with studies of crossover fiction. Individuals for whom reading was a formative part of their upbringing, by taking a closer look at adolescent fiction can peer into the past and try to understand the events and experiences that shaped the yet unmolded identity.

Without question, *Ender's Game* was one of the most compelling novels I read growing up. Unlike most novels, I re-read it several times. *Ender's Game* distinguished itself from other science fiction because of the well-developed characters. For example, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series spanned too lengthy of a time period to develop any character, focusing instead on the plot. Interestingly, the primary characters of *Ender's Game* were children with heightened intellects who behaved like adults. One of these adult-like children, Ender, was also fascinating because of the moral dilemmas through which he was forced to maneuver. While most fantasy novels were attractive because of their setting and plot, with easily relatable, stock characters, I liked *Ender's Game* because Ender's characterization was so strong. Where previously plot replaced characterization, in *Ender's Game* characterization overshadows all else.

This study began with the hope that I could revisit *Ender's Game* in order to identify why the novel was so compelling for me as a child and why it was one of the few novels I have reread over the years. After a few years as an English major, this study was also an opportunity to research my favorite childhood genre to see whether it would measure up to critically-

heightened expectations. Were there critical conversations about my favorite genre? I was also concerned that I had spent my childhood reading narratives without merit. As I began to research *Ender's Game*, I hoped to redeem a childhood favorite from the stack of cheap fiction I used to enjoy. *Ender's Game* seemed worth studying for several reasons. The first was its popularity. A novel's popularity oftentimes discredits it in the eyes of critics, but I was curious to ascertain whether the novel was a conscious attempt on the part of the author to speak to culture. It seemed important that children's literature should be rigorously evaluated based on its content and message and that critics would want to understand how contemporary literature was influencing future generations.

Studies in crossover literature suggest how adults and children read literature. After considering Card's aesthetics of reading and writing it will become evident the purpose of Card's writing and how he understands the reader's role in receiving fiction. Card's notion of the reader's role in literature will be compared with notions of how children read literature. Do Card's ideas agree or clash with adolescent tendencies? Specifically, how does Ender's role influence the adolescent psyche? No author can be held responsible for how his work is received by every audience. However, this argument accounts for authorial intent and critically assesses the protagonist's relationship on an adolescent audience. Critics have voiced a variety of opinions about the novel's meaning and how Ender functions within the novel. This argument combines critical discussions of *Ender's Game* with discussions of the heroic ideal to evaluate Ender's role as the protagonist. *Ender's Game* portrays a protagonist in the role of a suffering hero. In contrast to Card's intention in illustrating the agony Ender undergoes as he faces moral quandaries, critical frameworks for young adult perspectives suggest that young adult readers experience Card's novel differently than he intends. Ender's role in the novel was to illustrate the

internal turmoil and external consequences that accompany the choices individual's make. However, this message is dissolved in Card's characterization of Ender. For the young adult reader, Ender's grief and guilt become badges of honor, symbols of heroism. Grief and guilt, rather than indicators of a conscience blackened by evil are translated in Ender to become vestments of tragic heroism, qualities to be desired. Glorified guilt makes consequences rewards, deconstructing morality to little more than good intentions.

Though not large, there exists a unique body of criticism dedicated to Card's fiction and its role in the science fiction genre. One of these critics, John Kessel, notes how *Ender's Game* continues to be one of the most popular science fiction novels published in the last twenty years (2). Kessel's essay explores aspects of Card's writing that makes it so appealing. His primary point is that Card "argues that the morality of an act is based solely on the intentions of the person acting" (2). Kessel discusses the three primary incidents for which Ender is labeled an "innocent killer" and how Card uses a particular narrative sequence to manipulate the reader's sympathy for Ender, even while he aggressively attacks his enemies. Kessel argues that Card's morality is based on who people are rather than what they do (9). Ender garners sympathy because he is a child and because he is pitted against adversity without the support of adults, authority figures, or peers. He faces extreme circumstances alone and gains that much more support from the reader because of it. Drawing on interviews with Card and other critical responses, Kessel's article dissects the novel and Ender's character to uncover why he is responsible for a "guiltless genocide" (2).

Kessel states that "the extreme situation Card has constructed to isolate and abuse Ender guarantees our sympathy" (4). Isolation and abuse characterize Ender throughout the novel but climax in three key incidences. Ender's self-defense in school on Earth and in Battle School

resulted in the deaths of two students though he did not realize he had killed the students till much later. The final incidence was Ender's "test" at the end of battle school. His tactics resulted in the annihilation of the alien species though Ender was once again unaware of the consequences of his actions thinking that the battle was a simulation. Kessel shows how in each of these situations Ender is put through a particular sequence. First he is either abused or his life is threatened (4). In each case Ender cannot "ask for intervention by authority figures" and in some cases authority figures are already aware of the coming abuse (4). He is eventually forced to "respond with intense violence, dispatching his tormenter quickly and usually fatally... onlookers are awed by his prowess and seeming ruthlessness" (5). After the violent act, Ender is unaware of his adversary's death but "feels great remorse for his violence" (5). Perhaps because of his remorse and self-questioning Kessel concludes that readers "are reassured that Ender is good" (5). This cycle is responsible for "producing sympathy" for Ender in the reader as well as absolving him of any guilt connected with his violence (5). Because Ender is always forced to face his tormentors alone he "generalizes from this situation that the only rational policy to insure safety in the world is to be ready always to cause excessive pain" (6). Kessel also defines Card's definition of a "killer" as someone who "intends to kill" or is "motivated by rage or by selfish motives" (7). Because Ender unintentionally kills the two boys and later the alien race he evades marring his character with the label "killer." Kessel argues Ender is not only innocent, but also a victim. Particularly in the case of the alien xenocide, Ender is shown to have been manipulated by those who knew the reality of the situation and the reader is meant to consider the genocide in light of Ender's guilt rather than the death of the aliens (8).

Because the narrative absolves Ender of his violence he becomes a "person who sacrifices himself for the community," namely that of Earth (14). Kessel argues in this section

that Ender is shown to be “Hitler as Christ the redeemer” and “savior as righteous killer” (14). This is rooted in Card’s depiction of morality as dependent on motivation rather than action. Because Ender has good intentions his actions cannot be condemned as immoral since Ender is not immoral. Kessel argues that *Ender’s Game* continues to be so popular because of the “methods of evasion” which allow Ender to maintain his innocence while speaking to a “psychology of adolescence” to which most readers can relate.

Readers can also relate to the notion of a protagonist the author establishes as a hero. Michael Collings argues that Ender represents a “traditional hero” and follows the eight stages of the “Hero Monomyth” located “in the literature of virtually every human culture.” Collings describes each of the eight stages which define the “Hero Monomyth” and contends that Ender fulfills each of these eight stages. According to Collings it is not normal for a character to fulfill all eight of these requirements and that Christ is the main figure who conforms to each of these descriptions. The first is a “miraculous conception and birth.” As was already noted, Ender’s birth is unusual because of his status as a “Third.” Collings cites the failure of Ender’s parents to adhere to their faith. Ender’s birth, according to Collings, is a “physical manifestation of their own deeply hidden spiritual need to multiply and replenish the earth.” Ender’s birth is not only unusual because it breaks from society’s rules but also because he symbolizes the spiritual deficiencies of his family and simultaneously represents a return to them. The second stage is “initiation of the hero-child” manifested in Christ’s life when he instructed the Temple-teachers at a young age. From a young age Ender was implanted with a “monitor” in order for doctors to track his development. This is removed at the beginning of the novel just prior to his first encounter with a bully. His success handling the bully marks his initiation. For Collings, this satisfies the hero requirement and also foreshadows a cycle of being “introduced to higher levels

of awareness” as Ender is repeatedly faces trials without “external support.” Thirdly, a hero must withdraw from “family or community for meditation and preparation.” Collings identifies the Giant’s Game, a computer simulation, as Ender’s mode of escape for “preparation.” In the novel, the game functions as a method by which the administrators of Battle School can track the psychological development of the cadets. Ender often plays the game during transitional sections of the novel when Ender “learns to rely on his internal responses for strength and understanding.” Stages four, five, and six describe the hero’s trial and quest, death, and descent into the underworld, respectively. These culminate in one climactic episode towards the end of the novel. The final “test” is in reality the final battle between the humans and aliens and represents Ender’s success as savior of the human race. His exhaustion from the “test” causes him to collapse into a deep sleep, a sleep Collings labels as his “figurative” death. Collings identifies Ender’s dreams as his figurative “descent into the underworld.” Collings claims that Ender “subconsciously...works through his guilt” and thereby transform from “sci-fi’ hero to archetypal Hero.” Ender’s resurrection and rebirth can be found in his physical awakening as well as his more developed “awareness of his new relationship with, and responsibilities for, both humanity *and* the Buggers.” Collings describes the final stage as one in which the hero is “taken out of the cycle and placed in a permanent state in relation to the cosmos and to the creator-father god.” This is represented in part by Ender’s physical separation from Earth and his transformation to “Speaker for the Dead.” According to Collings, the name “suggests something beyond the human.” Ender also becomes responsible for the “salvation” of the alien race which he re-introduces to society later in the series.

Collings also points out that Card assumes the “importance of religion” and uses his fantasy writing to allow his readers “apprehension of truth through few other modes” (29).

Collings argues that the religious underpinnings in Card's fiction allow for the stability in which "heroic" and "meaningful action" is possible (29). Card's heroes, according to Collings, "alter their cultures and their worlds" resulting in "a better state for individuals; and...for the humanity his protagonists vicariously represent" (29). Additionally, Collings evaluates Ender's character and how he works in Card's novel. He describes Ender as an "epic protagonist" (36). He cites one critic's observation that Ender is different from humanity, a "genius among geniuses" but Collings explains that Ender's uniqueness is necessary to convey to readers "the depth of [Ender's] commitment and sacrifice" (37). Here Collings also discusses an interesting aspect of the production of *Ender's Game*. Originally published as a novella in a 1977 edition of *Analog*, the novella ended with a similar irony to the book. Ender is left at the conclusion of the story a child hero unable to move forward and simultaneously unable to enter adulthood. It was not until Card realized his idea for *Speaker for the Dead*, the sequel to *Ender's Game*, that he realized the Ender in *Speaker* needed a background against which to embark on his journey. Collings explains that the "adulthood and maturity implied in the final chapter of the first novel" prefigure Ender's "true quest" in *Speaker for the Dead*. Collings cites other childhood heroes in Card's fiction and the "threatened humanity" of the protagonists who have been given superhuman powers (39). According to Collings, these protagonists face the danger of isolating themselves from their community. *Speaker for the Dead* functions as a quest for Ender to rediscover "that commitment to community that Card affirms as essential" (40). At the conclusion of *Ender's Game*, Ender is the isolated destroyer of communities. This is reconciled, as Collings notes, in future installments, but the consequences of the unresolved hero should not be ignored.

Robertson is another critic who provides insight into the role of the hero in literature. Robertson writes with the understanding that heroes in literature reflect the culture in which they

are born. Heroes “reflect both what we are and what we desire to be” and exist in a cycle of mirroring the needs of a society and then positing new characters in which that society can believe (33). Robertson cites critics of fiction such as Lewis and L’Engle to define “myth” as a narrative that juxtaposes humans and deities to suggest how humanity should “understand” and “relate to—their universe” (33). Robertson presents anthropological theories of mythology to argue that mythic heroes were created as a response to the “harsh realities of life for many ancient peoples” (34). Ancient myths were created to enable readers to look beyond their circumstances and gain a “sense of larger, greater worlds” (34). Societies, according to Robertson, continue to evolve and mythmakers respond by constructing new myths and corresponding heroes to satisfy the need for more imaginative and grander experiences.

Robertson’s essay deals mainly with the development of the comic-book superhero and his movement from text to screen. Rather than dismissing the comic-book Robertson studies its relationship to the pulp magazines that already existed to find that the comic-book and its superhero were both much more popular than the pulp magazines (40). Robertson cites one critic’s comment that pulp heroes were too “one-note” whereas the comic-book hero “quickly became more” (40). Robertson also describes the adult response to comic-books as a result of their popularity among young readers. He claims that parents were ignorant of the “impact of the Depression...WWII...and the Bomb...on the minds of the young” (40). Robertson quotes Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* in which comic-books transfigured “insecurities and delusions...wishes and doubts...public educations and sexual perversions, into something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status of art” (41). Comic heroes are “adaptable” while staying true to their “mythic roots” and have therefore surpassed pulp heroes in popularity (42). According to Robertson, comic-book heroes

are the “new household gods” because of they are “highly visible, recognizable, and, ultimately, relatable,” capable of establishing a 21st-century polytheism (43). Comics are important, according to Robertson’s research, because they continue the necessary practice of teaching children important myths through which they will encounter deeper layers of meaning as they progress through adulthood. He supports L’Engle’s proposition that fantasy is intentional about touching something of “personal concern” and therefore favors the visible hero with whom readers can identify (46).

Norman Spinrad’s dialogue relates directly to *Ender’s Game*. His discussion of sci-fi shows how the hero functions within a narrative. Spinrad offers a more complete definition of science fiction and how Card’s novel functions within the genre. Spinrad’s conclusion about *Ender’s Game* is difficult to unravel because he alternates between two assessments of the novel, both of which deal with the idiosyncrasies of the last chapter. Spinrad outlines the historical roots of sci-fi to establish that it came out of a “subset of *commercial popular literature*” and is conflated with the pulp- and fan fiction that arose out of mid-twentieth century pulp-fiction magazines (20). Spinrad claims that the genre is tainted by the heavy commercial and fan-based influence that determines how sci-fi writers construct their narratives. He describes Scott Meredith’s description of the “plot skeleton” that allows writers to be commercially successful, “A strong hero...with whom the reader can identify, is confronted with a problem he must solve... As the story progresses, the attainment of the goal becomes more and more difficult... But through intelligence, courage, physical prowess...he turns the tables and triumphs at the climax of the tale” (21). Spinrad notes that it is the plot skeleton rather than the image system used in the novel that “connects a work of sci-fi to the so-called pulp tradition” (21).

Spinrad reiterates one critic's denouncement of sci-fi by arguing that the genre "lacks a decent sense of tragedy" (21). Tragedy references the classical notion that the protagonist of a plot has a fatal flaw capable of leading to a tragic downfall. If the classical character could be "ruined" by a character flaw, Spinrad argues that modern characters are "destroyed" by the "indifferent machineries of an unjust" universe (22). Spinrad states that the plot-skeleton precludes the existence of the necessary tragedy since the plot skeleton relies on the reader's identification with the protagonist. If the protagonist is not victorious then the reader will become, in Spinrad's words, "tumescent" (22). The plot-skeleton presents the universe as "relentlessly moral" in the sense that "good always triumphs over evil" (22). This inflexible universe prevents the "exploration of the spiritual ambiguities confronting imperfect creatures" (22). Spinrad concludes that the genre is incapable of reaching readers on the "philosophical" level all fiction should be concerned with addressing. To Spinrad, science fiction fails when the author confuses "commercial plot skeleton" with "literary parameters" and "plot climax" with "thematic resolution" (23). Spinrad postulates that the novel could be a "complex moral commentary" by which Card reels in readers and then condemns their morally flawed fantasies. However, Card fails to imbue readers with any feeling besides sympathy for Ender. Spinrad identifies the novel as a failed science fiction piece; the plot "requirements" of sci-fi prevent the achievement of thematic resolution. The reader who identifies with Ender must not be allowed to see him or his actions condemned.

Murphy takes a unique approach to interpreting the narrative of *Ender's Game*. Her article begins by questioning whether child violence in fiction is a "moral message for young readers." Many readers have noted the graphic expressions of violence in *The Hunger Games* series and some have interpreted this "heroic" violence as a *bildungsroman*. Children mature into

adulthood by increasing expressions of violence in order to prove their worth in the adult world. Murphy argues that the two narratives should be treated as “allegories” for how “adults and children perceive each other” by “subverting” the violence children perceive in the adult world. Murphy claims that adults are presented as “violating, deceitful, and manipulative” while children are depicted as “unknowably alien, unruly, and dangerously powerful” (199). Like other critics Murphy notes how *Ender’s Game* continues to be widely read (200).

Murphy references Kressel’s discussion of morality and reiterates other voices concerning the presentation of violence in the novels. Both authors allow the protagonists to maintain their innocence, thereby justifying Ender’s and Katniss’ violent actions. Like Ender, Katniss is presented as a helpless child, one who suffers psychologically over the pain she inflicts on others (201). Murphy, however, concludes that the blame-shift that occurs in these narratives is “morally problematic” (201). Murphy suggests an alternative interpretation of the protagonists as “child messiahs.” She describes these as characters are eventually able to redeem the world through their “sacrificial suffering.” Murphy cites one critic’s observations that child messiahs “sacrifice everything for a world that may be less than deserving” and also exhibit a “relentless, inevitable pull towards their own self-destruction” (201). However, Murphy returns to the idea of “moral violence” and the reoccurring critical concern that Ender is an unrealistic portrayal of humanity. She cites Kressel’s observation that “no one is that special; no one is that innocent” (202). Murphy notes how Collins and Card “link childhood’s innocence...with unexpected violent power” (202). Ender and Katniss are both empathetic towards others and this empathy, according to Murphy, both augments the strength of their violence and creates the internal turmoil they experience as a result. Katniss and Ender become increasingly aware of the influence of the adults on their character and how adults are driving them to violence. They each

must come to terms with the violent behavior forced upon them in order to decide how they will respond to their maturation and progression toward adulthood.

Unlike the preceding critics, Edith Tyson unites Card's vision with her own conclusions about the value of his fiction to promote his authority as an author. As she discusses the significance of *Ender's Game* and the sequels in the *Shadow Trilogy*, Tyson states that "the same message" is "whispered softly: Keep trying to understand each other. Ask the right questions. Ask respectfully. Give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Stop evil if you can, but forget revenge. Admit it when you are wrong. Heal. Build up. Encourage. Love" (37). Her analysis focuses on the broad thematic occupations of the novel rather than Ender's characterization. Earth's survival is at stake in *Ender's Game*. From the perspective of the characters, either they will be destroyed or they must destroy the alien race, the "formics," first. Tyson divines two possible meanings from the conclusion of the novel. She states that to the "Patriot," "for the survival of humanity, anything is justified" (9). In contrast, the "pacifist" might argue that "there are things so evil that even the survival of humanity cannot justify them" (10). The purpose of the novel, according to Tyson, is not to uphold one position over the other, but rather to challenge both the "patriot" and the "pacifist" whether they would be willing to "pay the *full* price [for their] position" since "it may be higher than [they] think" (11). Card says that "I can deal with religious, theological, and moral issues with greater clarity in science fiction [and fantasy] than anywhere else (Tyson xi). Card believes that God and "all the great questions and issues are still available within...[speculative] fiction" (xi). Tyson's occupation with broad themes is supported by Card, but this discussion finds alternative interpretations in the text which undercut those conclusions.

Card is one of the best resources in understanding the purpose of his work, about which has said a lot. In "Fantasy and the Believing Reader" Card discusses his philosophy of writing

fiction. His thoughts support Tyson's conclusions about *Ender's Game*. Card's fiction can be illuminated, in part, by understanding his perspective and approach to literary criticism. Though he does not write exclusively science fiction or fantasy, he criticizes the approach of modern critics. In his essay from 1982, "Fantasy and the Believing Reader," Card attacks Modernism and New Criticism and their high-brow approach to criticism. To Card, such institutions have encouraged the perception that "the reason for writing stories [is] to convey meaning in such a way that only a trained reader can receive them." Card addresses the fact that traditional forms of literary criticism have been applied to fantasy writing, a genre traditionally ignored by critics. Card attempts to reformat the efforts of traditional critics and suggest a new perspective for their methods of reading fantasy. Card defines literary criticism as the act of telling stories about stories. He argues that "literary stories" are believed as "fiction" while "critical stories" are believed as "historical." For example, Card suggests that *Hamlet* is a truthful play though the audience knows that "Claudius didn't 'really' kill Hamlet's father." Criticism about the events in *Hamlet*, unlike the events themselves, since criticism is an interpretation. In that sense, Card argues that the fictional story has more authority within the reader's center of belief since it cannot be challenged. Card states: "When a writer tells a story to his community, he will, consciously or not, assume that the community will define itself in relation to the story." Card's statement will be taken as an indication of his expectations of his writing, such as *Ender's Game*.

Card's community appears to be the Mormon Church. According to Edith Tyson's research about Card, much of his fiction is rooted in his beliefs as a practicing Mormon. In an open letter to the community of the Latter-Day Saints, Card addresses concerns that his novel *The Memory of Earth* plagiarized The Book of Mormon. Card addresses the misunderstanding by discussing his writing philosophy. He confirms that he was "retelling The Book of Mormon in a

science fiction context.” Card believes that the Book of Mormon is a holy book capable of transforming the lives of its readers, but this can only be the case for readers who believe that the book is true. He states that “Sacred writings lose all power and truth when studied from ‘outside.’ A fiction writer is in the unique position of being able to take a sacred story and retell it in such a context that it can be received with some of its transformative power by those who remain ‘outside’ the original.” Though *Ender’s Game* is not a retelling of a religious book, Card’s argument is relevant, nonetheless. Card does not hide the fact that he is Mormon, neither does he attempt to suppress his beliefs in his fiction. In fact, he finds it inevitable that an author’s beliefs will surface in the world he or she creates. *Ender’s Game*, with its prominent Christ-figure becomes a universe of Card’s creation, one laden with his beliefs. These beliefs, Card argues, have the power to transform the reader. He states that “most readers approach fiction quite open to the possibility of personal transformation. We give the fiction writer the opportunity to put real-seeming scenes, characters, ideas, and events into our memories, and when the events seem to us to have particular truth or importance, those memories can have some transformative power in our lives.” Card asserts his expectations for how his own fiction should be read. He expects, first, that fiction functions differently from other texts because it appeals to the reader’s center of belief. Secondly, fiction can be a source of personal transformation for readers.

Understanding Card’s argument about how texts are received will later shed light on how adolescent and adult readers read differently. Card compares how readers receive literature to their perception of real life. He argues that in real life,

Things happen; we act, others act. Each event is unconsciously assigned a causal relationship.... from all this we develop the unconscious but unquestioningly

believed story of the world that makes us who we are. We call this 'real life' as opposed to fiction, but in fact our own lives are merely stories we have unconsciously told ourselves about events. Our self exists only in our memory.

In short, Card asserts that "our very self is constantly being revised according to our experience and the stories others tell us." For Card, story-telling is not only the "closest thing to perfect communication," but also an act closely tied to understanding and redefining the self. Card argues that "our self edits our experience of the world, and our experience of the world revises our self in un-measurable, unaccountable ways." Card proposes that readers naturally "edit" their experience of reading, "deciding what is important and what is trivial." Despite this, the reader "will still be influenced by the shapes the writer has imposed on the tale." Card labels critics "detached readers" and argues that detached reading "gives the reader the illusion of control." This is contrary to the function of story-telling, which, according to Card, is to "give [the reader] vicarious memory of events that were ordered by another hand" (-). Card labels this type of reading "escapist." Rather than accepting the story the writer gives, the reader chooses instead to "rebuild the events and language of the story into his own safe and comfortable discourse, which he knows he can deal with because it is his almost unchanged self." From this discussion, it is clear that Card disapproves of readers who disengage from the story being told or who "edit" the story to make it a type of escapist stronghold for the self. One might find in Card's reasoning a possible contradiction. Namely, if it is so natural for readers to edit stories they receive and Card disapproves of "critical" reading to determine the meaning of a text, what, then is the appropriate method of receiving a text?

One method Card suggests for receiving text he labels "participatory reading." In "Fantasy and the Believing Reader," Card postulates that one reason people stop reading stories

after adolescence is the fear of “participatory reading.” This type of reading, according to Card, “puts your very self at risk....It will and must change who you are.” For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo’s finger is bitten off by Gollum, Card notes that the “power of fantasy is not in the fact that a sacrifice has taken place, but that the participatory reader remembers the experience of sacrificing.” Card distinguishes the act of experiencing from the act of critiquing. He states that “the very subjectivity of the experience makes it resist the fashionable language of criticism today.” Card criticizes the Modernist “assertion of power over all story-telling” and contends that “the idea that one must make sense of stories at all is harmful.” The act of “experiencing” a story is located, according to Card, in the reader’s identification with the characters and events of a story. Returning to *The Lord of the Rings*, Card writes that “I never stood at the Cracks of Doom and watched Gollum die. But that faith in the distinction between my own actions and the actions of fictional characters is merely another story I tell myself. In fact, my memory of that event is much clearer and more powerful than that of my fifth birthday.” The participatory reader reads in terms of the self, “It was myself at risk, myself who suffered.” Card emphasizes the personal nature of his writing, stating that he wants to “write a story that would illuminate some hitherto dark corner in someone’s soul and live on in [that soul] forever” (quoted in Tyson 160). Card writes that by “illuminating” an individual’s soul he will have “bent the world’s path a little....yet all would be different from then on because I had done it” (Tyson 160). The question remains, what memory is Card implanting in his readers?

In the introduction to the definitive edition of *Ender’s Game*, Card discusses some reader-responses to the novel and experiences that significantly influenced his writing. Card speculates, “Maybe it was because I, barely an adolescent myself, understood only childhood well enough to write about it” (xvii). The draw of childhood on Card’s imagination combined

with his fascination for military strategy and the power of leadership resulted in the war game scenarios featured prominently in the *Ender's Game*. Charles Catton's *Army of the Potomac* influenced Card for its portrayal of soldiers who were "so young and innocent" (xvii). Card describes the war in *Army of the Potomac* as one in which the "suffering and rear were terrible and real" (xvii). Nevertheless, according to Card, the war was just a "deadly game," a game "played by children, not all that different from the war games my brother and I had played" (xviii). Card locates within criticisms of the novel some of the primary reasons for its success. Card suggests that the novel "disturbs some [critics] because it challenges their assumptions about reality" (xix). He goes on to argue that "the novel's very clarity may make it *more* challenging, simply because the story's vision of the world is so relentlessly plain" (xix). One of the significant aspects of the novel is its portrayal of children. Card states:

Because never in my entire childhood did I feel like a child, I felt like a person all along—the same person that I am today. I never felt that I spoke childishly. I never felt that my emotions and desires were somehow less real than adult emotions and desires. And in writing...I forced the audience to experience the lives of these children from that perspective—the perspective in which their feelings and decisions are just as real and important as any adult's. (xx)

Critics of the novel, Card notes, "believe that children don't actually think or speak the way the children in *Ender's Game* think and speak" (xix). Card wants *Ender's Game*, in part, to "assert the personhood of children" (xx). By doing so, Card hopes to counteract the notion that "children are a perpetual, self-renewing underclass, helpless to escape from the decisions of adults until they become adults themselves" (xx). The success of the novel is not just in the number of copies

purchased, but in the response of readers. Specifically, Card cites the response of adolescent readers.

In a letter Card received, a student said that she and a group of young teenagers (13 to 15 years old) loved *Ender's Game*. She states that “we are all in about the same position; we are very intellectually oriented and have found few people at home who share this trait. Hence, most of us are lonely, and have been since kindergarten” (xxi). She concludes, “we are the Enders of today. Almost everything written in *Ender's Game*...applied to each one of us on a very, very personal level” (xxi). Card observes:

[T]hese readers found that *Ender's Game* was not merely a “mythic” story, dealing with general truths, but something much more personal: To them, *Ender's Game* was an epic tale a story that expressed who they are as a community, a story that distinguished them from the other people around them. They didn't love Ender, or pity Ender (a frequent adult response); they *were* Ender....The truth of the story was not truth in general, but *their* truth. (xxii)

The notion of truth is important to Card and its place in fiction. The purpose of fiction is not for the reader to “be impressed by somebody's dazzling language” (xxiv). Card suggests that most individuals read stories with a desire for “the mythic truth about human nature in general, the particular truth about those life-communities that define our own identity, and the most specific truth of all: our own self-story” (xxv). For Card, *Ender's Game* is less about children and soldiers, and more about a “transaction between storyteller and audience” (xxv). Card describes story as something “that you and I will construct together in your memory” (xxvi). Card claims that the experience of storytelling is one that imbues the mind of the reader with new memories.

Specifically, these memories accurately represent the experience of being human. Card's presentation of humanity can be best discerned in *Ender*.

Ender should be analyzed based on his portrayal of humanity. Tyson's work again becomes valuable in understanding how Card constructed *Ender*. If Card understands his fantasy writing as an arena for "religious, theological, and moral issues" than Tyson's conclusions about *Ender's Game* make sense. Tyson notes that when Card was ten year old, "He learned about good and evil on an international scale from reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer, an account of Hitler's Germany and the Holocaust" (Tyson xv). This surfaces later in Tyson's discussion when she outlines possible meanings of *Ender's Game*. She notes that when *Ender* jokingly signed his name "God" as part of a practical joke, "He has, although he did not know it, taken on himself the awesome right of life or death, survival or extinction" (10). *Ender*, according to Tyson, had two options: "He can become utterly hardened to all suffering and dreadful consequence, justifying his right to cause it....The other choice is to take on himself the burden of the suffering he has caused, without any quibbles about his own degree of guilt" (10). *Ender* does the latter. Tyson references the parallels to WWII that crop up throughout *Ender's Game* to suggest that the "person who plays God" could instead "become Satan," a decision aligning such an individual with "Nero, Ghengis Khan, Hitler, or Stalin" (10). In contrast to this decision, Tyson suggests that the individual playing "God" can instead become "a Christ-bearer, or, at least a Christian martyr" (10). This role involves the individual "devoting his life to healing and rebuilding, regardless of the cost to himself" (10). *Ender's* guilt is portrayed as the "cost to himself." The genocide of the formics by way of the "M. D. device," a weapon of mass destruction, parallels, according to Tyson, the use of atomic bombs in Japan at the end of WWII. The bombs, states Tyson, seemed to be the only way to force the Japanese to surrender.

The bombs “cause suffering of a kind never experienced before,” but Winston Churchill described them as “a miracle of deliverance” (Tyson 11). Tyson references the belief that “the Axis powers were evil and strong. If they had conquered the world we would all have suffered.” She asks, “Did we become something almost as bad as they, in defeating them?” Tyson draws a direct parallel to Ender’s universe, where “ending the buggers meant human war, ending in a world dictatorship” (11). The question remains, “Was the extinction of the buggers worth it?”

Tyson suggests that “military subjects” occupied Card’s attention in 1967 when Card’s older brother went to boot camp to prepare to fight in Vietnam (11). To Tyson, *Ender’s Game* combines Card’s occupation with military training as a result of his brother’s experience as well as Card’s fascination with history, particularly WWII. *Ender’s Game*, then, deals specifically with questions of communication and concludes by reiterating the ethical dilemma surrounding the use of the atomic bomb. Card, in the introduction to the definitive edition of *Ender’s Game* confirms his occupation with the military when writing the novel. Discussing his observations about the function of power in history, Card explains he understood “how a great military leader imposes his will on his enemy, and makes his own army a willing extension of himself” (xiv). Tyson states that “Card does not accept simple answers [to ethical questions]. He feels that, studying a problem, we *can* ask: Is this solution worth the price?” (142). Tyson quotes one critic’s assessment of Card’s position: “There is no good thing that does not cost a dear price....Happiness is not a life without pain, but rather a life in which the pain is traded for a worthy price” (142).

Tyson’s understanding of Card can be summarized by her emphasis on his upbringing and early influences on his thinking, such as history and military training. In her conclusion, “What Card is Telling Us,” Tyson points out that “in most of Card’s fiction there is the moment

when someone realizes that there are no purely good choices left; the choice is between bad choices, but some not quite so bad as others” (157). She argues that “Card is willing to have you disagree with a character’s choice, provided that you understand the agony of decision” (157). This dilemma is reflected not only at the conclusion of the novel when Ender must decide whether to eliminate the alien threat but also when he is faced with the school bully incidents that also resulted in the annihilation of Ender’s enemy. Tyson notes that the “terrible choice” is often made by someone “playing God” (157). However, Tyson notes that in the “Christian tradition, God sacrifices himself. A decision to be like God is not to be undertaken lightly” (157).

Tyson locates in Card’s fiction several themes that are reflected in *Ender’s Game*. Tyson labels these themes “The Team,” “Male and Female,” “It is Essential that We Try to Understand Each Other,” and “We Are Never Abandoned; Help is Always There” (Tyson 160). Whenever diverse groups of individuals are pitted against each other, Tyson notes that “all stand at a point where one group, or both, try to enslave or exterminate the other one” (159). The problem, according to Tyson, is that “most of them have simply not made the effort to understand the other, to see things from the other’s point of view” (160). She then suggests that the conflict “needs a repentant and reformed destroyer (an *ender*) to bridge the gap....A former destroyer is uniquely qualified to see both sides” (160). Regarding the “Terrible Choice,” Tyson notes the implicit presence of God in Card’s fiction. She states that although “struggles and their resolution are never simple....we don’t struggle alone” (160). Tyson concludes, “Card tries to be neither an unrealistic optimist nor an unrealistic pessimist. His hope is that, in the end, the results will be worth the struggle, the sacrifices. He holds to this hope, and holds us to it, without in the least minimizing the struggle or the sacrifices” (160).

When Tyson's argument is resituated in light of the broader context of young-adult literary criticism, Ender's characterization becomes more important than the novel's themes. The primary concern in reconsidering Tyson's statements is not that they are inaccurate, but that a different message is being received by the target audience. Tyson says, rightly, that "at the heart of most of Card's fiction is a highly precocious boy or girl who relates better to adults than to most of his or her peers" (158). Although "not all young people are precocious or talented," Tyson argues that "most wish for it, in some capacity" (158). Even more importantly, Tyson points out that "these portrayals help explain why Card is a popular author among teens.... These are the dreams of youth" (158). For readers of *Ender's Game*, "identification with the central character of a Card story is easy" (158). What Tyson says is true, but should be analyzed further. Card's strength as a writer is crafting characters with whom the reader wishes to identify. This paper suggests that Ender's characterization overshadows Card's moral message by leaving readers with a stronger desire to be like Ender than learn from his struggles.

Fortunately, Card has discussed not only the purpose of his writing but also how he writes. In *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Card suggests how to develop the central characters of a story. Card begins by describing attributes the main character should feature in order to achieve the approval of the readers and to enable the narrative to function properly. Card emphasizes the role of the hero, "an informal synonym for 'main character'" (66). This is the character, Card suggests, the audience is "rooting for" (66). Card states that there's "a moral judgment involved here. We not only care what happens to him [the hero], we also *want him to win* (66). When constructing the main character, Card suggests asking "who hurts the most?" because, according to Card, the "reader's sympathy will be drawn toward a suffering character" (67). Card states that the writer "should be drawn toward pain. Stories about contented people

are miserably dull” (67). Card’s instruction to other writers can be taken as rules to which he adheres in his own writing, rule which enhance interpretations of *Ender’s Game*.

Card also suggests that writers should craft characters that are “active” and can “change things in the world, even if it’s a struggle” (67). Ironically, Card suggests that characters with freedom to use power “in unpredictable ways” are often located “away from the centers of power” (67). In short, Card explains that CEOs and kings are rarely situated to experience action (69). Audiences, according to Card, are “drawn to the strange, the powerful, the inexplicable” (70). Card defines the “Character Story” as one featuring “the transformation of a character’s role in the communities that matter most to him” (79). Ender shifts from being a “third” to being a hero. Card also suggests that the main character should be the narrator (70). This is primarily because the narrator’s point of view offers the audience another opportunity to understand the characterization of the protagonist and increase their sympathy for the character (70). Card utilizes each of these elements in his portrayal of Ender.

Were Card’s novel targeted at adults, Ender’s characterization would be important, but not as consequential. Because Card writes to a younger audience, a reading of his novel must take into account the circumstances of his audience in addition to traditional critical approaches. In other words, the success of Card’s novel cannot be judged based solely on the text. Rachel Falconer’s work regarding young adult-fiction best addresses concerns that arise when considering Card’s audience. At the end of her book *The Crossover Novel*, Falconer writes about the practice of rereading childhood books. Her work intersects with this study as it identifies the different perspectives adults and children bring to literature. Though Falconer never addresses Card or *Ender’s Game*, her arguments confirm the importance of reconsidering critical responses to the novel, such as Tyson’s, in light of the young audience.

Within the discussion of adolescence and reading, Falconer aligns her argument with those who claim that “we are what we’ve read” and that “fiction asserted its most potent influence” during childhood by “fusing ‘with the accelerated coming-to-be we do in childhood’” (156). Reading is identified for its influence in an individual’s upbringing and its role in shaping the identity of the reader. For adult readers, Falconer argues that “a desire for historical depth and a sense of personal rootedness” arise out of “postmodern rootlessness” (156). For many adolescent readers, however, the effects of “postmodern rootlessness” have not destabilized the reader’s subjectivity since the reader is still in the process of identity formation. A novel such as *Ender’s Game* would appeal to both audiences. Though set in the future, Ender’s age acts as the center for “historical depth” while his resolve manifests the adult reader’s desire for “personal rootedness.” Ender is relatable to the adolescent reader for his personal resolve in the face of external challenges and social isolation. Falconer states that “rereading can therefore make us aware of...the architecture of the inner self, and it can reveal exactly where and how this architecture took shape” (164). According to one critic, “the sequence of books [I] read as a child constitutes his inward autobiography” (Falconer 164). In addition, Falconer cites the case of a ten-year-old Jewish girl and a German prisoner of war, both of whom escaped the horrors of their context by reading. Falconer suggests that childhood reading “connote[s] freedom: the freedom to rise above political enmity, and the freedom to escape the circumstances of one’s birth” (157). Thus far, Falconer has established the importance of reading in shaping identity and the power of fiction to temporarily shield the reader from present circumstances. In addition to these facets of reading, are Freud’s observations about children and how Falconer connects them to reading. She cites Freud’s observation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that “in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them” and “in doing so

they...make themselves master of the situation” (165). Freud reiterates this idea by stating that “each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery [children] are in search of” (16). It is important to note that Freud emphasizes the search for mastery through repetition. Falconer uses Freud’s observations to suggest how children and adults might approach reading differently, but her point is especially relevant to *Ender’s Game*. Ender must seem especially striking to young readers. Card constructs the narrative to emphasize how Ender, without external assistance, masters a series of challenges. Though Ender does not fight to master the challenges for mastery’s sake, his uncontested success is a realization of adolescent desire.

Falconer’s discussion suggests that adolescent readers read for three reasons. They read to shape identity, escape their circumstances, and acquire a sense of mastery through repetition. Unlike Tyson’s concern with Card’s religious background and the moral implications of the novel’s conclusion, Falconer’s adolescent reader is unconcerned with ethics. This paper will show that Ender’s growth is characterized by its resilience in the face of opposition. Card crafts three crucial challenges in Ender’s development that require him to face them utterly alone. Rather than engaging with the circumstances with which he is faced, Ender looks inward for resolve and eliminates the source of contention. Ender not only models mastery of his circumstances by steeling his resolve, but by doing so in emotional and relational isolation. Card’s emphasis on Ender’s isolation becomes, to the adolescent, a primary factor contributing to his success. Whereas, as Tyson suggested, Card wants readers to be challenged by the decisions Ender faces to reconsider their own approach to such situations, Falconer’s conclusions suggest this message is lost on the unconcerned adolescent. In conclusion, Card’s novel achieves its goals for the adult reader. However, Ender’s characterization undercuts the discussion of ethics to adolescent readers. Instead, Ender manifests the adolescent quest for mastery of

circumstances and suggests, dangerously, that this can be achieved in social isolation. For a book that continues to be popular on a broad spectrum of ages, readers hoping to shape or re-center their identity must resist modeling their character after Ender's.

Textually, this discussion is best represented in the novel's conclusion. The climactic conclusion to the novel, in which Ender decides to eliminate the formics and their home world, was preceded by two other incidences. The first occurs at the beginning of the novel. The reader learns that Ender is a "Third," a pejorative term in a society where couples are limited to two children. Based on the genetic make-up of his parents, the government allowed the Wiggins to produce a third child with the hope that he would mature into the appropriate candidate for an officer-training program. To determine whether Ender would be physically and psychologically suited to the program, a "monitor" was implanted behind his neck when he was three years old. The novel opens as the six-year-old Ender's monitor is removed. As school ends, Ender is faced with a group of bullies who enjoy mocking him for his status as a "third." With the monitor gone, the bullies feel free to beat up Ender. In a pattern, as Kessel suggests, that surfaces in future encounters, Ender engages with the bullies by first ignoring them, hoping to avoid any aggression. After being pushed around, Ender realizes he must defend himself or risk being beaten. Ender decides that "to keep them from taking him in a pack tomorrow I have to win this now, and for all time, or I'll fight it every day and it will get worse and worse" (Card 7). Despite knowing "the unspoken rules of manly warfare," Ender viciously kicks his tormenter, Stilson, while he lay on the ground. After beating Stilson, Ender says to the crowd of students, "You might be having some idea of ganging up on me...just remember what I do to people who try to hurt me" (7). After ensuring his victory and eliminating the possibility of future conflicts, Ender exhibits the final element of his pattern of engagement: remorse. After escaping the crowd,

Ender “leaned his head against the wall of the corridor and cried until the bus came” (8). Card utilizes these three elements of Ender’s engagement for the remainder of the text. Ender faces a situation and, initially, attempts to avoid conflict. After realizing that conflict is unavoidable, Ender determines that the best course of action is the most extreme: eliminate the source of conflict to prevent even more aggression in the future. Finally, Ender exhibits intense, internal turmoil over his decision and often shows signs of remorse for the consequences of his decision. Card effectively absolves Ender of his crimes while endearing him to the reader.

This pattern is repeated much later in the novel. Ender has established his reputation at Battle School, but his success and the special attention given to him has ostracized him from many of the students. Specifically, Ender had “provoked Bonzo Madrid beyond human endurance” (Card 201). Ender’s rivalry with Bonzo prompted his anger, causing many of the Battle School students to worry that Bonzo would attempt to kill Ender. Bonzo and six of his friends corner Ender. Ender realizes that Bonzo intends to kill him and plans how to engage Bonzo. Just as before, Ender is faced with the decision about how far to allow the fight to continue:

Ender knew that at this moment he might be able to walk out of the room and end the battle. The way he had escaped from the battleroom after drawing blood. But the battle would only be fought again. Again and again until the will to fight was finished. The only way to end things completely was to hurt Bonzo enough that his fear was stronger than his hate. (211)

Ender turns from self-defense and attacks Bonzo aggressively. After Ender defeats Bonzo, he recalls his fight with Stilson back on earth: “All Ender could see, though, was the way Bonzo looked....The empty, dead look in his eyes. He was already finished then. Already

unconscious...just that dead, stupid look on his face...the way Stilson looked when I finished with him” (212). Maintaining his engagement pattern, Ender’s reflection over his violent actions ends in feelings of deep remorse. Directly after the fight, “Ender began to cry. Lying on his back, still soaking wet with sweat and water, he gasped his sobs, tears seeping out of his closed eyelids and disappearing in the water on his face” (213). Ender explains, “I didn’t want to hurt him....Why didn’t he just leave me alone!” (213). Later, Ender confesses, “I hurt Bonzo really bad today, Bean. I really hurt him bad....I knocked him out standing up. It was like he was dead, standing there. And I kept hurting him....I didn’t fight with honor...I fought to win” (222). Again Card mediates the guilt of Ender’s actions through his remorse. But Ender’s remorse is temporary, allowing him to subdue the feelings of guilt in order to move forward with his life.

The final instance of this pattern occurs at the end of the novel. After graduating from Battle School, Ender is placed in Command School. Ender trains with a simulator. The simulator places Ender through tactical exercises simulating the Third Invasion. Ender does not realize that the “simulations” are in fact real. Ender reaches what he believes to be his final “test” in Command School. As the simulation begins, “Ender’s weariness turned to despair” (Card 292). Outnumbered and with vastly inferior resources, Ender realizes he has no chance of succeeding. Ender recalls his fight with Bonzo “and his vicious little know of friends, confronting him, threatening him” (293). Unlike his fight with Bonzo, Ender would not be able to “shame” the aliens “into fighting him alone” (293). It is no great surprise, however, when he successfully maneuvers through the enemy fleet to accomplish the “simulation’s” objective: destroying the target planet. By utilizing a futuristic weapon, Ender directs his fleet to start a chain reaction on the surface of the planet. Within seconds, the planet and the neighboring fleets have been destroyed. For the observing dignitaries, Ender’s success signals the end of a long conflict

between humanity and the alien race, a conflict with little chance of success. Before Ender is told that the “simulation” was real, he is complimented on his strategy: “You made the hard choice, boy. All or nothing. End them or end us. But heaven knows there was no other way you could have done it. Congratulations. You beat them, and it’s all over” (296). Ender soon realizes that the simulations of the past month have been real battles: “Real. Not a game. Ender’s mind was too tired to cope with it all. They weren’t just points of light in the air, they were real ships that he had fought with and real ships he had destroyed. And a real world that he had blasted into oblivion” (297).

Ender deals with his guilt the next day. At first, he shows signs of disbelief as he is debriefed: “I killed them all, didn’t I...All their queens. So I killed all their children, all of everything” (Card 297). Once again, Ender’s guilt is assuaged, this time by his trainer, Mazer, from Command School. In an outbreak of emotion Ender exclaims to Mazer, ““I didn’t want to kill them all. I didn’t want to kill anybody! I’m not a killer! You didn’t want me, you bastards, you wanted Peter, but you made me do it, you tricked me into it!’ He was crying. He was out of control” (298). One of Ender’s generals explains that the trick was necessary:

We had to have a commander with so much empathy that he would think like the buggers, understand them and anticipate them. So much compassion that he could win the love of his underlings and work with them like a perfect machine....But someone with that much compassion could never be the killer we needed. Could never go into battle willing to win at all costs. If you knew, you couldn’t do it. If you were the kind of person who would do it even if you knew, you could never have understood the buggers well enough. (298)

Finally, Ender is told that he “had to be a weapon....functioning perfectly but no knowing what you were aimed at. *We* aimed you. We’re responsible. If there was something wrong, we did it” (298). These arguments were meant to convince Ender that he did not have to feel guilty for his decision to annihilate the alien race. Ender, however, is not convinced. Instead, the arguments convince the reader that Ender was simply a pawn in the hands of his superiors and thereby absolved of any responsibility. Card continues to elicit sympathy from the reader for Ender by portraying Ender’s guilt despite the arguments by which he is meant to feel relief. In a recurring dream, Ender sees his face reflected in the metal surface of a ship. He describes it as “old and sad, with eyes that grieved for a billion, billion murders—but they were his own eyes, and he was content to wear them” (Card 301). Card shows that Ender is both a triumphant and a suffering hero, but innocent. His success against the formics is not undercut by the brutality of their defeat, for Ender was an unwitting participant in their massacre. Additionally, Ender continues to illustrate the depth of his empathy by mourning his actions and the loss of an entire species. Ender does this by dedicating the rest of his life to the position “Speaker for the Dead.” Unwilling to let the memory of the formics die, Ender writes a short book from the perspective of the formic hive queen. In it, Ender laments the lack of communication between the two species and suggests that the two could have lived in harmony. The novel concludes many years later after Ender, now governor of a space colony, discovers an egg left by the formic queens for him to find. The reader is left knowing only that Ender eventually locates a planet on which the formic species can repopulate, hopefully alongside humanity so that the two can live in peace.

Ender’s Game features clear challenges to readers concerning ethnic diversity, communication, war ethics, and questions of morality. This paper explored, after locating Card’s text within its critical conversation, whether Card achieved his own goals of being “true” to

humanity. Card even provided examples of audiences for whom the novel was deeply meaningful. Ultimately, the goal of the paper was to reassess the Card's novel after considering the target audience: young adults. Applying Falconer's framework to the text sheds new light on Ender's function within the text. Exploring Card's intent and the critical analysis of his advocates aligned well with the consensus about the role of science fiction and the 20th Century hero. However, Falconer's theory suggests that these elements are secondary in the mind of the young adult reader. Morality is subsumed in Ender's heroic presence. The text upholds the position that Ender is guilty of nothing, an experience, according to Card, in which he wants readers to participate. *Ender's Game* is potentially dangerous to readers searching for a role model. Ender's character is not true to human nature; no individual can be innocent when faced with a "Terrible Choice." In many ways, this paper is a testimony to the truth of Card's beliefs. Fiction appeals to readers in a poignantly real way. Re-reading literature is an opportunity for individuals to explore their past and uncover the narratives that may have influenced their being. Critics have made valuable observations about the moral dilemma in *Ender's Game*. However, these observations are not poignant until framed within Falconer's discussion of how young adults read. A deconstructed morality is only a threat when it becomes clear that this is indeed how the target audience experiences the work.

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