

# Howl's moving castle: a work on the edge of literary traditions



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Everyone has his or her own idea of literature and what separates a work of literary fiction from a work of popular fiction. Generally speaking, a work must adhere to literary traditions, convey a deeper meaning, and present conventional themes in order to be recognized as a work of literary fiction. To be recognized as young adult literary fiction, a work must meet all of the previous requirements, and it must be appropriate in style and subject matter for the intended audience, provide the audience with a valuable moral lesson, and focus on some sort of theme revolving around coming-of-age or self-realization. However, a work can meet all of the previous requirements and still lack the necessary cohesion, harmony, and conciseness required to meet the literary fiction standards. A work of literature intertwines various aspects of a novel that may seem unrelated on the surface in the interest of attaining a certain level of stylistic and technical aptitude. While a work of popular fiction is merely a source of entertainment that gratifies the masses with no significant end result, a work of literary fiction is a piece of unified art with a purpose. Diana Wynne Jones's young adult novel *Howl's Moving Castle* is a work of fantasy which meets all of the requirements that are necessary to be considered a work of literature.

*Howl's Moving Castle* begins in "the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist" (Jones 1). The protagonist of the novel, Sophie Hatter, is the eldest of three sisters, and this is considered to be "quite a misfortune" in Ingary (Jones 1). Both of Sophie's biological parents died before the story takes place, and she is left in the care of her step-mother, Fanny Hatter. Being the eldest of the three sisters,

Sophie is destined to inherit the family hat business while her sisters go on to fulfill their dreams. Sophie grows tired of living like an old maid working at the hat shop, but she continues to do so because she feels as though it is her destiny. Meanwhile, magical warfare is on the horizon in Ingary. Howl, a wizard with a reputation for stealing the hearts and souls of beautiful young women, roams around the areas surrounding Ingary in his enchanted castle, and the Witch of the Waste, a powerful and dangerous witch who has been banished to the Waste, a dismal land outside of Ingary, is on the prowl. One day, the Witch of the Waste visits the Hatter's hat shop, and by mistake, she turns Sophie into an old woman using a curse. Sophie, in hopes of finding a way to break the curse, sets out to go visit Wizard Howl. Upon entering Howl's moving castle, Sophie meets Calcifer, a fire demon, and Michael, a young apprentice. Calcifer recognizes that Sophie has been cursed, and he makes a deal with Sophie. If she can break the mysterious contract between Calcifer and Howl that keeps Calcifer bound to the castle's hearth, he will undo the Witch of the Waste's curse. Jones takes fantastical concepts and blends them with traditional aspects of young adult literature in a manner that creates a stunning work of literary art.

Seda Yavaş, author of the scholarly article "Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) Or The Story Of A New Mythology," notes, "The very title of the novel could be interpreted as a warning for the readers that this is not going to be a typical fairy tale although all the necessary elements are present throughout the text, but in a completely different order in utterly different associations and combinations" (31). Jones explores traditional young adult themes of self-definition and coming of age while placing the

readers of the novel in unconventional yet fully developed settings and situations. Charles Butler, author of the book *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children's Fantasies* of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper, recognizes: In recent years, Jones's critical fortunes have risen sharply, in part because her exploitation of such "post-modern" devices as multiple or fragmented subjectivities, alternate realities, self-altering narratives, intertextuality, and generic hybridity have made her a more fashionable writer in the theory-conscious academy of the 1990s and beyond. (6) Jones takes common motifs and simplistic themes that are used in young adult literature, and she weaves aspects of high fantasy within them so that she may highlight or dramatize the actions taking place or lessons being taught in the novel. Jones did not create a work of popular fiction with a flashy storyline and alternative realities just for the entertainment value of it. She did not create a work of young adult literature which relies solely on fairytale clichés to teach a lesson. Instead, Jones explores elements of fantasy to accentuate and complicate the young adult story of *Howl's Moving Castle* in a style that is befitting of a work of literary fiction.

One of Jones's most notable adherences to the young adult literary tradition is seen in the absence of Sophie's parents. Absent parents are quite common in young adult literature. Removing the parental figures from a novel allows the author to throw the protagonists into worlds of their own. The absence of parents in young adult literature is a technique employed by authors so that the focus of the novel is shifted toward the youth's own ideals, choices, and actions. It is the literary equivalent of a mother bird pushing her fledglings

out of the nest and forcing them to live their own lives. The absence of parental figures moves the plot forward by forcing protagonists to act on their own accord. Jones utilizes the absence of parents in Howl's Moving Castle so that she may set up Sophie's character's growth. Another way in which Jones follows the young adult literary tradition is setting boundaries for Sophie to break during her character's growth. Because Sophie is the eldest of the three sisters in Ingary, she is destined to lead an uneventful life. Her sisters could marry, learn magic, and be successful, but Sophie knows that she will have to live the life of an old woman in her hat shop. A common motif in young adult literature is breaking the rules or conditions of the setting, so Jones includes the limitations of Sophie's identity in order to highlight Sophie's character development and self-definition.

In addition to having no real parental figures and struggling with self-definition, Jones employs another common young adult literature in through Sophie's attitude. Sophie is extremely unhappy in her position at the beginning of the novel. She feels as though her endless work in the hat shop is being taken advantage of by her step-mother, and she feels trapped in her reality. When she is cursed by the Witch of the Waste, she is able to seek another reality and escape her own. Escaping reality is a common theme in both young adult literature and fantasy literature, and Jones brings attention to and raises questions about this theme as the novel progresses. In addition to blending aspects of the young adult literary tradition with the fantasy tradition, Jones utilizes several literary devices which complement the literary quality of the work. An example of this can be seen in the self-fulfilling prophecy of Sophie's age. When Sophie is despairing over her

identity at the beginning of the novel, she feels as though “ the past months of sitting and sewing had turned her into an old woman” (Jones 17). Shortly after this moment, the Witch of the Waste curses Sophie and turns her into an old woman, and this fulfills the prophecy. The Witch of the Waste turned Sophie's fears of aging in a hat shop into her reality.

Age is a prominent subject in young adult literature, but Jones delves into the concept of age in a completely fantastical way. Deborah Kaplan, author of the article “ Disrupted Expectations: Young/Old Protagonists in Diana Wynne Jones Novels,” notes the importance of age in the young adult literary tradition: “ Questions of age confusion are particularly notable in works for young readers, for whom age is considered a pressing concern” (197). In addition to serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy, Sophie's age serves as an important turning point in her character development. As a young woman, Sophie was uncomfortable with her identity. As an old woman, Sophie becomes more open and comfortable. Because she does not feel confined by her identity as the eldest of three sisters as old woman, she is able to overcome her ill-fated destiny. Sophie's old age allows her to become more comfortable with her identity and understand the trivial nature of the boundaries that she once perceived as determining her destiny. What was supposed to be a curse proves to be a useful tool for character development.

Another literary device employed by Jones is the use of allusions in Howl's Moving Castle. Jones uses many allusions in her work, but she uses them in a slightly unconventional manner. Based on the idea that Ingary is a reality in which magic exists, Jones is able to mold literary allusions to fit her

fantastical world. Among the allusions are references to Arthurian legend, <https://assignbuster.com/howls-moving-castle-a-work-on-the-edge-of-literary-traditions/>

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, J. R. R. Tolkien's Elven city of Rivendell, and Hamlet. Clearly, Jones understands the importance of calling upon works of classical literature for the sake of furthering her own literary quality. One of the most striking allusions employed by Jones is the curse that was used on Howl by the Witch of the Waste. The curse is an allusion to the John Donne poem "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star." In Ingary, John Donne's writing takes on a magical meaning that diverges from reality. The poem operates as a curse, and it is able to do so successfully because of the fantastical alternate reality which removes the poem's original or true meaning. In Ingary, magic is normal, so normal is foreign. If magic is real in Ingary, then poems can certainly be curses. Jones takes advantage of the opportunity to blend reality with fantasy in a way that helps the story generate its own form of believability. Because of the fantastical structure of her novel, she is able to generate a suspension of disbelief for her audience in what Farah Mendlesohn, author of *Diana Wynne Jones: The Fantastic Tradition and Children's Literature*, labels "a fully immersed fantasy" (88). Jones allows her readers to become fully immersed in the land of Ingary from the beginning of the novel. Sophie is never shocked by the magic that she witnesses in the world, and this further cements the believability of the novel. This suspension of belief that is generated by the wholeness of the fantasy reality allows Jones to employ allusions in a way that differs from standard use. Jones is able to separate the world of the novel with the real world through her magical twists on literary allusions. The plausibility or believability of the young adult themes explored in the novel is made possible by the setting. Because Jones asserts from the beginning of the

work that magical is the norm in Ingary, she is able to convincingly explore common young adult themes in a groundbreaking and otherworldly manner.

Pauline Dewan, author of *The Art of Place in Literature for Children and Young Adults: How Locale Shapes a Story*, notes the importance of setting in other fairytales and fantasy works: Fairy tales are a particularly concrete, visual, and cinematic form of writing, a genre in which place is all-important. In fact, the concept of place is the focal point of Tolkien's definition of the fairy tale: "Fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being." (2) The world that Jones creates in *Howl's Moving Castle* is what allows her to openly explore the young adult literary tradition without limitation. By creating a fantasy world, Jones is able to take readers into an unknown universe where they have no choice but to rely on the characters and their actions. In conclusion, Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* is a work of literary fiction rather than popular fiction. Jones demonstrates a clear adherence to both the fantasy literary tradition and the young adult literary tradition. *Howl's Moving Castle* explores common themes associated with young adult literature through an unconventional fantasy setting which bolsters the believability of the novel. Jones effectively amplifies young adult themes by dramatizing them in a fantastical manner. Jones includes allusions to other literary works in her novel, but she does so atypically. Jones's allusions adhere to tradition while deconstructing reality. It is apparent that Jones intended for the work to be read as a piece of literary art that takes the form of a young adult fantasy novel based on the sense of intricacy and interconnectivity that is displayed.



## Works Cited

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