Papers
Explorations into Children's Literature

The Witch Protagonist in Two Young Adult Fantasy Novels: Finding Social Agency through the Natural

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Abstract

The teen witches in young adult fantasy often possess magical abilities related to nature. In Rachel Griffin's *The Nature of Witches* (2021), witch student Clara must learn to control her power over the weather as the last hope in the face of devastating climate change. In *This Poison Heart* (2021) by Kalynn Bayron, budding botanist Briseis can grow a seedling into a tree in moments and withstand the world's most poisonous plants. Both Clara and Briseis use their abilities for community benefit, manipulating nature for medicine and protection. As teenagers their social power is volatile. As witches they are invaluable to their societies. Roberta Seelinger Trites identifies young adult literature as a place of power imbalance that allows young adult readers to explore their own social power within the safety of the text. Through an ecofeminist lens, this article explores the disconnect between Clara and Briseis's status as adolescents and the social power gained through witchcraft. It considers how the protagonist witches employ their powers over nature to make a place for themselves (and the natural) within a community. I argue that the renegotiation of western ideological binaries in these texts is impeded by didactic socialisation within the young adult genre.

Keywords

witches, YA fantasy, agency, magic, ecofeminism

Young adult fantasy allows adolescent readers to explore how social and cultural practices impact personal agency in a world removed from their everyday lives. Though fantasy societies can look very familiar, the teenage protagonists of these stories are imbued with extraordinary abilities to combat threats that range from personally tragic to world ending. What almost all

these narratives have in common is a clear link between the protagonist's agency, their magical abilities, and where they fit into their fictional society. This article analyses how elemental magic and adolescent social power intersect through the witch protagonists of *The Nature of Witches* (2021) by Rachel Griffin and *This Poison Heart* (2021) by Kalynn Bayron. The phrase 'social power' refers to the navigation of social structures discussed by Roberta Seelinger Trites in *Disturbing the Universe* (2000, p. 2). To better understand dynamics surrounding power, nature-based magic, and gender, I consider these texts through the lens of ecofeminism. I argue that the two young adult fantasy novels create a platform for surface acts of feminist subversion, but a closer reading of the texts reveals passive ideologies that validate masculine-coded social structures over feminine-coded nature.

These gender-based social structures are at the forefront of both texts owing to their portrayal of adolescent growth which is synonymous with the young adult genre. Rachel Moseley highlights this growth as a key progression within teen witch-centric narratives, arguing that 'teen witches usually acquire their powers at a moment which both marks adolescence and captures the moment of transition from child to woman, and thus the potential attainment of adult femininity and (sexual) power' (2002, p. 406). The protagonists of these stories progress through stages of fear, experimentation, and finally acceptance using their nature-based abilities, further integrating the links between adolescent social evolution, the witch archetype, and nature as feminine. From this acceptance comes valued places within their communities and self-sufficiency regarding their own lives and choices.

Witch Protagonists

Powerful female leads within magical and/or dystopian worlds present a challenge to male-dominated stories of adventure and power. Looking widely at popular young adult fantasy series and their commonalities, Kim Wilkins notes that '[y]oung adult fantasy's exceptional females

fulfil at every level the expectations of their Chosen One status. We know this, because they compete and win within and against oppressive institutions' (2019, p. 22). Within this space, previously marginalised fantasy characters and the fairy-tale archetypes on which they were built, like the princess or the witch, are utilised to subvert expectations of gender and class. These heroines 'have encouraged a new expectation that women, especially young women, have strength, skill, and stamina enough to save the world' (Wilkins 2019, p. 19). The two texts discussed throughout this article have been chosen because of how the witch protagonist relates to this trend and their overall popularity with readers of the young adult genre.[1] They both contain clear subversions of the witch archetype with Clara's story renegotiating the gendered history of the witch and Briseis challenging the racial history within her storyworld. Considering the importance of genre, Alison Waller argues that '[f]antastic spaces, magical powers and enchanted identities all allow teenage protagonists possibilities for resolving the problems of adolescence and actively seeking agency' (2008, p. 142). How these texts integrate nature-based magic offers another perspective on how strong, adolescent protagonists can alter the social world around them.

Both girls could be considered feminist protagonists because they have been branded as Other due to their association with nature and must overcome their separation from their communities. However, throughout their narratives, both characters develop their relationship to the natural world specifically to succeed in society. Some ecofeminist theorists like Greta Gaard (2008) and Sherry B. Ortner (1974) have observed that the natural and the social are diametrically opposed in their western contexts, with the former aligned with feminine and the latter masculine. Gaard defines this ecofeminist perspective,

> Beginning with a recognition that the position and treatment of women, animals, and nature are not separable, ecofeminists make connections among not just sexism, speciesism, and the oppression of nature but also other forms of social injustice – racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and colonialism – as part of western culture's assault on nature. (2008, p. 12)

Within the two novels, nature becomes a tool to help the protagonists achieve social independence, rather than something used by others to disassociate them from society. I argue these texts simply repackage the same western binary ideology for a young adult audience, which impacts the surface ideologies of feminist social change.

The Nature of Witches (Griffin 2021) follows Clara, an Everwitch who has magical control over all four seasons. Clara's seasonal powers are tied to global politics. Because her fellow witch students can only control one season, Clara takes on the responsibility to stop the climate change ravaging her world. However, she is troubled by the strength of her magic and struggles to trust herself and her abilities. The eventual acceptance of her connection to nature—all aspects of it, from creating dangerous weather events to growing food—gives Clara an integral position within her world. She becomes a spokesperson for her fellow witches and the earth itself. This personal acceptance is paralleled with the global acceptance that climate change is a genuine threat, and the various cultures of the world must come together to fix it. Although, Clara cannot fix the social issues within her world until she fixes her relationship to her nature-based magic. At the conclusion of the text, she makes herself and the witches around her more powerful by creating an ecocritical society. The wellbeing of Clara and her society is clearly linked to the wellbeing of the earth.

In *This Poison Heart* (Bayron 2021), Briseis believes she is the only person in the world who can control plant life until she inherits an estate from her estranged birth family. This inheritance comes at a time of immense financial struggle for Briseis and her adoptive mothers, prompting them to move to the estate with minimal research. Upon first exploration of the house, they discover a previously flourishing apothecary and begin to receive visits from hopeful customers. Briseis realises she can handle poisonous plants, and members of the community are willing to pay handsomely for products she has treated and cultivated with empathy and good intent. As Briseis practices her abilities, her relationships to her family,

nature, and society shift due to her growing skill. This novel questions what it means to be human while also considering the economic implications of magic, particularly in the hands of an adolescent desperate to prove herself.

In both texts, the protagonists' power over nature directly impacts upon their social responsibility and power. Along with stopping climate change, Clara shoulders the burden of protecting her fellow witches from 'depletion'—a death occurring when a witch tries to control a weather pattern outside their season of power. For example, winter witches attempting to disperse an unexpected blizzard in the summer do not have the extra power they would in the colder months. As an Everwitch, Clara can act as a focal point for many witches' powers to strengthen their individual and collective impact on the seasons. Owing to this power, the community looks to her to prevent the rising depletion rates. The lives of these witches are in the hands of a teenager, who is still unsure of herself. Throughout the text Clara's self-discovery is paralleled with her growing confidence in her magic.

Briseis also begins her story in a place of self-doubt, and only through her exploration of her own magical community is she able to find comfort in her abilities and in who she is as a person. Better control and the freedom to use her powers on the estate, rather than hiding them when she used to live in New York City, allows Briseis to ease the financial struggles of her family. Previously, any attempt to use her powers resulted in the loss of friendships or property damage. In her new circumstances and community Briseis realises the powers can also provide for her.

The link between magical power and social power is commonly explored within young adult fantasy. Magic often acts as a stand-in or metaphor for the newfound social responsibility and control first experienced within adolescence. Trites writes that 'growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power. Without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow' (Trites

2000, p. x). The graduations between power and powerlessness Trites references can also be seen in how Clara and Briseis struggle to maintain personal agency. Waller observes that in television shows featuring teen witches, '[b]oth the female adolescent and the witch are viewed with a mixture of awe, envy and fear, and with desire to contain and control' (2008, p. 128). Similar representations of female witches are found in *This Poison Heart* and *The Nature of Witches* in which both witch protagonists are deeply preoccupied with their navigation of society despite these worlds varying from high to urban fantasy. Clara laments, '[t]he school pushes me as if I'm the answer, as if I can single-handedly restore stability in the atmosphere' (Griffin 2021, p. 13). She is separated from society by the weight of duty. Alternatively, Briseis is separated from society because she must hide her abilities. Though these texts operate within differing styles of fantasy world-building, the protagonists ultimately struggle with the same magic-based problem: their connection to nature impacts their understanding of themselves and their position within society. Much of Clara's and Briseis's nervousness and self-doubt come from the expectations of others, that they do better with their magic or that they hide it entirely. The eventual proficiency in their respective abilities aligns with the protagonists' development of agency and social power.

Both Briseis and Clara are initially afraid of their power and the control it has over the natural world. Ecofeminist scholars argue that 'feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth' (Gaard 1993, p. 5). What is different in these stories is that nature becomes a source of untapped power to the female protagonists. Feminised nature is therefore aligned with adolescent exploration and personal growth—as well as the corresponding confusion and emotional growing pains adolescents experience. The process of transforming nature-based magic from a source of fear to a source of strength parallels the ideological shifts feminine power has gone through over time. For example, the witch archetype as viewed through Barbara

Creed's concept of the monstrous feminine is a character that unsettles boundaries. Creed states that the witch's 'evil powers are seen as part of her "feminine" nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms' (1994, p. 76). Incorporating the feminine and the natural through the witch solidifies her status as Other and relates the concept of a powerful woman to a figure outside of society's boundaries.

However, popular subversions of this character have become more common in recent decades, particularly through her association to adolescent development. In the case of film and television, Moseley argues that 'the representation of the teen witch is a significant site through which the articulation in popular culture of the shifting relationship between 1970s second-wave feminism, postfeminism in the 1990s and femininity can be traced' (2002, p. 403). This trend has become more apparent as magical and powerful female protagonists continue to appear in young adult literature. Wilkins notes that, in popularised young adult fantasies the 'common medievalist fantasy trope of the exceptional woman allows conflict to arise out of women's resistance to male power' (2019, p. 19). Rather than the witch representing adult women operating outside of society, the adolescent witch easily adopts the shifting power dynamics present in much of young adult literature. Once a caricature of Othered women, the witch is instead a symbol for strength and a site of adolescent maturation, in which her power and connection to nature are only a source of fear when they are not yet understood. Yet this connection implies that the girls must be able to control the natural in order to assimilate into society.

Briseis and Clara begin their stories as outsiders. They are Othered from their communities by a power that ultimately assists them in excelling within these social spaces once they understand how to use it. For instance, Briseis considers that, as she got older, 'I had a harder time keeping my power in check. … The flora wanted my attention, and if I was being honest, I wanted to give it to them' (Bayron 2021, p. 11). Her connection to nature directly

prevents her from being part of the human community until she learns to utilise it in a way that is beneficial to humanity, by balancing the call of the flora with her obligations to society. Both texts map the movement of the protagonists from outside a society to finding a place within it. The way in which this transformation is explored mirrors the adolescent transition from child to adult. It promotes the idea that social power is a tangible gift that, once the protagonists learn how to use it effectively, can alter their worlds both literally and metaphorically in ways that upset the status quo.

There is a dissonance between how authority figures interact with the adolescent characters and the protagonists' exploration of their own social power, which can be displayed through friction within institutions like schools and governments. However, there is another form of socialisation explored and challenged through the magic of these texts: culture. Trites writes,

> We can also assess how adolescent literature is itself an institutional discourse that participates in the power and repression dynamic that socializes adolescents into their cultural positions: characters created by adult writers test the limits of their power within the context of multiple institutions for the benefit of adolescent readers who supposedly gain some benefit from experiencing this dynamic vicariously. (Trites 2000, p. 54)

Fantasy uses elements that present problems and solutions to these problems that are still impossible to achieve in the real world. In these novels, the protagonist's magical abilities are metaphors for an adolescent's real-world social power. If culture is considered through its ideological influences and expectations, then the act of equalising the natural and the social with magical powers is a form of subversion. The cultural construct that nature is ideologically less than (and opposite to) society is rewritten as a source of untapped power and acknowledgement of the self.

Witch protagonists gaining social power through their nature-based magic is presented as a feminist act of defiance against a masculine-coded society. Transforming the archetype in

this way can rewrite the harmful ideologies discussed by Creed. These ideologies have also been observed in an ecofeminist context from scholars such as Alice Curry, who writes that an ecofeminist reading 'further enables an exploration of the ways in which young adult novels attempt to develop a sustainable ethic of care that can encompass such "feminised" peoples and spatialities, including nonhumans and the environment' (2013, p. 1). The adolescent protagonists gain the ability to subvert the nature versus society binary by employing nature itself. It allows readers to live vicariously, as Trites describes, through characters who challenge the status quo and turn socially-imposed weaknesses into power metaphorically through their magic and literally within their fictional societies.

Ideally, this subversion would also mean that nature is equalised with society, and the society/nature binary is broken down. Jack Zipes writes that '[b]oth socialization and reading reflect and are informed by power struggles and ideology in a given society or culture' (2006, p. 68). As societies and cultures evolve over time, so do their archetypes. Therefore, the power struggles and ideologies they are associated with at any given iteration can be difficult to completely ascertain. Archetypes like the witch can be altered to reflect new socialisation strategies in a changing society. Young adult literature is strongly focused on socialising its readers; however, attempts to break down the absolute influence of society and culture over nature are difficult to navigate. I ask whether this dismantling has been achieved in the next section.

Clara

The Nature of Witches (Griffin 2021) concludes with Clara discussing a partnership between the humans (called shaders) and the witches formed to hopefully combat the ongoing climate emergency. Clara narrates,

> It's the first time shaders have come to one of our training sessions, a result of the conversations we're starting to have. They're listening to us, they're asking

> questions, and they're putting in the work to reverse some of the damage they've done.
>
> We aren't in this alone and shouldn't act like we are; the atmosphere is hurting, and that's a problem for all of us, witches and shaders alike. The challenge is great, and we have a lot of work ahead of us. But we're in this together, and if there's anything I've learned this past year, it's that together is where the magic lies. (Griffin 2021, pp. 348-349)

This scene mirrors one at the beginning of the novel where Clara fails to combine the individual magic of her fellow witches to stop a forest fire during training. At the first session there are no humans invested in stopping the ongoing climate disaster, and Clara has yet to unlock her potential as an Everwitch. When Clara says in this passage that she has learned 'together is where the magic lies', she references two insights. First, that she has the magical ability to combine, amplify, and access out-of-season magic from the witches around her. Clara literally brings the magic of other witches together. Second, Clara's new control over her magic, and the hope it offers, brings shaders and witches together. This union is achieved at the climax of the novel when she saves a music festival from being flooded during a freak storm. The near devastation is enough to convince global governments of the need to act against climate change. Clara's progress throughout the novel as a member of the global society is informed by her nature-based magic. In 'Is female to male as nature is to culture' (1974), Sherry B. Ortner states, 'woman is being identified with – or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of – something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself' (Ortner 1974, p. 72). Like many ecofeminist scholars, Ortner explains the connection between women and nature as both undervalued by society. When nature is presented as equal to and capable of changing society and culture, its connection to women within this context also changes. Like the weather itself, Clara's magic impacts her world to such a strong degree that she alters how the global society values the earth and its climate. Not only has she gone through extensive personal growth throughout the text, and at the closure understands who she is within the world, but that understanding and confidence changes the

world around her for the better. Young adult fantasies like *The Nature of Witches* (Griffin 2021) subvert the devaluing of women and nature by using the natural to explore an adolescent's navigation of society and the self.

However, for witches to be respected, Clara has to put herself in considerable danger and conform to what the shaders had hoped for all along: that the witches and their magic would save the day. By ending the story with such hope and comradery, the novel implies a drastic alteration of the global society into one that is truly ecocritical but cannot deliver on it. Clara states that the shaders are 'putting in the work to reverse some of the damage they've done' (2021, p. 348). This statement is significant because throughout the novel she and the other witches have lamented the strain shader society has put on the earth. Gaard discusses the best methods for exploring nature with younger readers and observes that 'when assessing ecojustice problems, students seem to rely more on their emotions than on their intellectual knowledge of environmental science' (2008, p. 20). When considering young adult literature as a source of socialisation, the kind of social evolution *The Nature of Witches* explores through these issues can also trigger an emotional response from the audience in a similar way to what Gaard references. Clara, and those like her, are characterised as protectors of the planet fighting against an ignorant majority. Shaders misunderstand their power and believe witches have complete control over the environment and should be able to fix whatever damage modern society has done to the atmosphere. Due to their magic and deep connection to the earth, the witches cannot be harmed by it the same way shaders can. Miscommunication and differing physiology further separate the two groups within the cultural boundaries of the text.

Because witches in *The Nature of Witches* can be any gender or race, might come from any shader family, and emerge from various communities and cultures, the text challenges previous stereotypes. On the surface, this diversity of witches subverts the tendency of dominant groups aligning minority groups with nature to justify their lower status within

Western society. However, nature itself is still feminised through the personification of the earth as female. Curry writes that '[t]he Mother Earth imagery that has sustained the human imaginary for centuries bolsters a metanarrative of propriety over "feminised" peoples, groups and spatialities, including the earth itself' (2013, p. 26). From Clara's perspective nature/earth is presented as feminine 'mother', thus strengthening the very binaries the text is attempting on the surface to dismantle. The conclusion of the novel promises the elimination of the nature versus society binary as witches and shaders begin their collective work but fails to address the feminisation of the planet. It instead presents the earth as both a tired woman and someone needing care, which can be seen in Clara's diary excerpt where she insists, '[*o*]*ur Earth is tired—let her rest*' (Griffin 2021, p. 348, emphasis in original). Throughout the text, Clara presents genuine empathy for the planet and positions the global population as united in improving the climate through respecting the earth. Unfortunately, this respect is tainted. In maintaining the Mother Earth figure, *The Nature of Witches* maternalises nature without unpacking the impact this coding has on Clara's global society.

This social change also takes place at the closure of the story. Because the novel ends without further exploration of Clara's new eco-society, one can only speculate whether the binary has been effectively challenged. This ambiguity makes *The Nature of Witches* a useful text to explore how western binaries impact the global attitude towards climate change but does not provide a roadmap to combat the sexism and racism tied into the climate emergency. The persistent association of the feminine and the natural makes the initially positive explorations of adolescent power ultimately ineffective. The power Clara and her fellow witches display is still at the mercy of the global society until Clara performs an act of heroism. If the witches are a representation of the feminised earth, then the implication is that nature must first prove itself for society to care. Clara's inability to spark real ecocritical change until she is allowed to by the global society makes her passive despite her magical powers.

Briseis

In *This Poison Heart*, Briseis also utilises her nature-based magic to make space for herself within society but on a more specific level than Clara's world-changing narrative. Briseis's abilities are primarily impacted by social power dynamics with authority figures. The previously clear lines of social status between mothers and daughter are blurred when Briseis's powers increase, resembling the change in responsibility and relationships adolescents experience as they themselves grow older. At the beginning of the novel, Briseis and her mothers run a flower shop in New York City. The shop is called Bri's, and Briseis notes that it was 'another way [my parents] tried to embrace what I could do' (Bayron 2021, p. 116). While in the city, she has very little control over her magic and cannot help in the store, but when they move to a forest estate, she feels comfortable enough to experiment with her power and is able to financially support for her family through the apothecary.

What is interesting about this transition is the reaction from Briseis's mothers and how the social dynamics shift along with her abilities. Shortly after arriving at the estate, Briseis brings a dried plant back to life. She narrates,

> The look of shock on their faces when that plant in the turret came back from practically nothing bothered me. They had always been supportive, but they didn't know all the ways this power could manifest, and neither did I. Each time something new happened, I braced myself. It was one thing to be afraid *for* me, but it was something else to be afraid *of* me. (Bayron 2021, p. 116, emphasis in original)

Briseis uses her maturing magic to provide for her family but fears her parents' reactions despite their support. It is common for young adult texts to explore the line between what is an acceptable level of power and what is instead seen as a threat to the community (Trites 2000, p. 54). Within young adult fantasy, the weight of this shift is even more important due to the constantly changing social dynamics felt by adolescents. Their position within society changes and visualising this transformation as strengthening magical powers is an engaging way to

explore new social expectations placed on adolescents. Trites writes that adolescents 'must learn to balance their power with their parents' power and with the power of the other authority figures in their lives' (2000, p. x), and some of that tension can be seen in Briseis's narration, in which her parents are seemingly scared of her. When considering the flower shop as its own representation of the natural, Briseis's abilities compared to her mothers' can be interpreted as each new generation building on what has come before. Where they could not fit the natural into the social through their flower shop, Briseis could, using her own unique power for the apothecary.

Clara's story unfolds on a global scale and attempts to simulate the formation of an ecocritical society. Briseis also attempts to renegotiate the nature versus society binary but on a vastly different scale. *This Poison Heart* presents a world where people with magic are hidden from the general population, which means people with magic navigate the nature-social structure with more subtlety. Briseis's apothecary allows her to harness her abilities into a resource for the community and makes her an active participant in the exchange of goods and services. Nature becomes business. Of power, Trites writes that it

> is a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature; teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books. (Trites 2000, p. 7)

Briseis operates inside a system of other power structures that dictate how her own power appears. Her powers manifest as financially beneficial because the racial and class structures of her social world.

The financial struggle of Briseis's adoptive family is a key driving factor within the narrative. It moves her into the ancestral home of her birth family because it is cheaper to live there than in New York City. It motivates her to experiment more with her powers so she can fill orders from customers. As she grows more comfortable with her abilities, she also has the

chance to become more affluent. The impact of this power on her relationship to nature changes in three ways. First, her own fear of her natural abilities positions them as something volatile. Therefore, the benefits she accrues (financially, personally, and socially) from developing them is written as a triumph. Her powers are shown as an intuitive skill she simply needs to hone, and she will be greatly rewarded for it. As in Clara's story, complete control of these environmental powers results in extreme personal benefit.

Second, unlike *The Nature of Witches* where the greatest social division is based around whether a person is a witch or a shader, *This Poison Heart* does not shy away from discussions of race. Briseis's birth family and her adoptive families are Black and the text interweaves this with nature-based magic in a way that grants both social power. The novel situates Briseis's Blackness in relationship to the mostly white town, to the more diverse, hidden community of magic practitioners, and to her own experience with magic. Her mother describes her as 'some kind of actual Black girl magic' (Bayron 2021, p. 149) when she grows a rare flower in seconds. Her elemental powers become linked to race in a way that is both empowering and hopeful. That they serve to bring Briseis and her family out of financial hardship rewrites racial, socioeconomic stereotypes in a way that is not possible in the worldbuilding of *The Nature of Witches*.

While this link between a woman of colour and nature can be seen as derivative of the pervasive and harmful ideologies that socially link racism and classism with the sexist comparisons of femininity and nature, the integration of natural magic with social mobility gives Briseis the very autonomy otherwise denied to people from racial or sexual minorities. A young adult protagonist reclaiming something that was once used against them is its own form of socialisation. Trites writes that '[t]he dynamic of (over)regulation → unacceptable rebellion → repression → acceptable rebellion → transcendence-within-accepted-limits is a common one in YA novels set at schools' (2000, p. 34), but this process is also visible within young

adult texts that question the cultural status quo. Briseis begins with her magic hidden (overregulated) and when she rebels (unacceptably) she loses friends and must hide her magic (repression). Once she and her family move out of the city, Briseis has room to explore her powers (acceptably) and financially renegotiates her place within society (transcendence-within-accepted-limits). This process of working within the system and manipulating the tools of the system allows the adolescent audience to experience social change vicariously, but, when scrutinised, shows that many young adult texts are still operating within the accepted confines of a capitalist Western society.

Third, the line between physical humanity and nature is greatly blurred. In *The Nature of Witches*, Clara and the other witches are immune to certain aspects of nature that often harm shaders and present an innate connection to the earth. Briseis's story takes this connection a step further. In *This Poison Heart* a poisonous plant, the Absyrtus Heart for which the book is named, was once Briseis's ancestor. In death, his body parts were transformed into this plant and the descendants gifted with power over nature so that they may protect the Heart. Briseis feeds her own blood to the Absyrtus Heart to keep it alive. If prepared properly, it can create an elixir to grant immortality and is therefore of great value to anyone who wishes to use it themselves or sell it for an extravagant profit. Again, there is the link between nature and economy. The distinction in this narrative between what is human and what is nature collapses but is further complicated by the protagonist's race and use of her magical abilities. In both texts, the broadening of what it means to be a part of the earth and of society drastically changes how the texts socialise their readers.

Social Agency through Nature

The natural, the social, the personal and the global are all represented within Clara and Briseis's stories in varying degrees. The power struggles specific to young adult narratives can provide

a safe space for young adult readers to reflect upon power dynamics in their own lives. Fantastical elements allow for interrogation and subversion of wider and more nebulous topics, such as the contentious relationship often forced on the natural and the social, which in turn influences representations of gender and community.

Clara's story gestures towards the possibility of an ecocritical society. Although, this direction is only achieved through the assimilation of Clara and her seasonal gifts into the global society. Before the climate can be prioritised, the adolescent protagonist must understand her place within society and provide aid to the community. She is effectively using her powers to prove that she is worthy of being listened to by the shaders. Such social navigation is typical of young adult texts but in this instance undercuts the autonomy of nature. The representation of nature as a tool of society is also present in *This Poison Heart*, but on a more personal scale. Physically and financially, Briseis and her relationship to the Absyrtus Heart goes further to break down the barriers between nature and society. While this text further blurs the established lines between humanity and nature, it is still operating within the confines of a binary system in which nature and society are separate, conflicting entities.

The inability of these texts to fully renegotiate binary social structures, despite their subversion of the witch's relationship to nature and society, is closely related to their genre and audience. Waller notes that 'fantastic metaphors are as likely to *encode* prevailing anxieties over age or gender or fragmenting identities as they are to *question* them' (2008, p. 91, emphasis in original). When recasting the witch and her nature-based magic as a protagonist, young adult fantasy is influenced both by these fantastic metaphors and the socialisation inherent within young adult literature. Though these texts provide the protagonists with agency and strength through the natural, their representation of how this power must assimilate into society for both it and the characters to gain acceptance further reinforces the division.

Young adult fantasy provides the space for second-hand subversion through the exploration of social power. However, the inherent socialisation within the young adult genre prevents further resistance to the core ideologies of society. Though the natural is used magically to impact the social, neither Briseis or Clara completely subvert the binary associations between nature and society. The two protagonists instead utilise nature in a way that allows them to have more control over their individual places within their societies—which reflects the growing pains of adolescent socialisation.

Notes

1. *This Poison Heart* has been hailed an indie bestseller, appearing on the Waterstones Best Books of 2021: Teens & YA (Waterstones 15 November 2021). *The Nature of Witches* was a *New York Times* (New York Times 20 June 2021) bestseller.

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Biographical Note

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