Fantasy is stereotypically seen as trying to elude mundane platitudes of life. While the genre itself may be derived from a desire to escape, that desire is reflective. It holds a “mirror up to the community and the individual so they can judge themselves” (Harpham, 400). This is to say, through the subversion of desire in fantasy stories, moral lessons can be derived and transferred to be used by the reader in day to day life. Fantasy either affirms and acquiesces to what is desired, or it subverts what one may have perceived as desirable. Through this cycle of desire and subversion, fantasy reveals truth(s) and disillusions both protagonist and reader. This can be seen in the desires of Kamala Khan in Willow Wilson’s *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* and of Sophie Hatter in Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Kamala wants to fit in with her peers; she is torn between her culture and her desire to be normal. Within the fantasy, she realizes that her desire to be normal is unfounded. The peers she so desires to be like do not understand her, and they are not the type of person she wants to be. This is evident in her struggle with self-image as she explores her shape shifting powers. In *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Sophie first embarks on her quest to find a wizard to break the curse the Witch of the Waste put on her, but as the story unfolds, her desire changes to wanting to save Howl (and her family). In this way, fantasy subverts what was once perceived as desirable.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, “subversion” is defined as the “overturning or abolition of an established or existing practice, belief, rule, etc.” (Subversion). This is what fantasy texts do to what is primarily desired; it abolishes what was once perceived by a character or even by the reader as ‘desirable’, and reveals it to be superficial, shallow, or deceptive. By engaging with
the fantastic, the protagonist and reader come to understand what is truly desired, and as I will show in this essay, they are disillusioned and uncover truth(s) about themselves and the world they live in.

In *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, Kamala Khan wants “to be normal” (Wilson, 9). Her identity and self-worth is inextricably tied to her perception of those around her, and her understanding of how they in turn perceive her. She wants it so much that she sneaks out, against her parents’ wishes to go to a party (10). When she got there, she realized that those people that she had emulated did not only misunderstand her, but they disrespect her culture. Upon leaving the party, she encounters something fantastic; she has a vision of “faith”, and is given supernatural powers (17). It was this encounter and embodiment of the fantastic that lead her to understand that what she had once desired was a simply superficial level of comradery with her peers.

Her encounter with the fantastic (her gaining powers to grow, shrink and shape shift) made her question what she had desired. Before, all she wanted was to be like Captain Marvel; to be blonde, pretty, and popular, but when she embodied that desire, she was still unhappy, and did not feel “strong, confident, and beautiful”, as much as she felt “freaked out and underdressed” (24). This is a primary example of how fantasy can take what was once desired and by subverting it, show it to be unfulfilling and not actually what one wants.

As Kamala came to understand her powers, she started to use the lessons she learned from her father and religion to justify her actions. When faced with the choice to try and save Zoe (a problematic friend whose microaggressions seemed to have no end), she quoted the Quran to empower and push herself to be heroic and brave (30). She was first able to do this because she had the disguise of Captain Marvel; she was “[s]omeone else. Someone cool” (27).
In this way, the fantastic facilitated her growth, literally and figuratively. She soon came to understand that she did not need or want to be Captain Marvel to help people; she wanted to be her own superhero, to save people in her own way, while wearing clothes she was comfortable in (34-5). This newfound clarity of what she desired culminated in her claiming her agency and power as distinctly hers, not Captain Marvels, or her mothers or anyone else’s. She donned her mask and proclaimed herself “Ms. Marvel” (72). Through this subversion of desire, Kamala unearths greater truths about herself; she realizes her power follows how she feels about herself. When she wanted to be (like) Captain Marvel, she shape shifted into her (27). When she heard Zoe’s voice, she felt small and subsequently shrank. When she gains confidence in herself as a person and superhero, she has better control over her powers and can effectively help people, like Bruno and his brother. Hence, through her encounter with the fantastic, she became disillusioned and recognized the truth of her old desire “to be normal”, as subjective and superficial, and she began to learn to use her powers for benevolent purposes.

*Ms. Marvel: No Normal* is an important example of how the fantastic can not only lead to the subversion of what was once believed to be desired by the protagonist, but also for the reader. Kamala Khan is a racialized superhero in a hegemonically Caucasian world (both in media and the readers’ own interactions in Western culture with that media). In her novel, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson says, “[t]hrough its ‘misrule [fantasy] permits ‘ultimate questions’ about social order, or metaphysical riddles as to life’s purpose.” (Jackson, 9). Kalama Khan’s story is unique because of the perspective she provides, of the cultural decentralization of a diasporic person. By believing she had to choose between embracing her culture and being accepted by her peers, she embodied a fear many immigrant children have. Her becoming fantastic and deciding she can be whoever she wants to be is a
moral lesson for the reader which is transferrable outside of the comic, fantastic world. Kamala keeps her cultural and religious values, while still accessing the diverse world that of high school in New Jersey (albeit, in the Marvel universe). By telling the story of an immigrant teenage girl in New Jersey, Wilson is encourages readers to question authority figures trying to prescribe who they should be, and how they should live. By escaping into the fictional world of Kamala Khan in the Marvel universe, readers can thus tear signification from the story and find answers to the “‘ultimate questions’ about social order” (9).

In *Howl’s Moving Castle*, the Witch of the Waste cursed Sophie Hatter to be trapped in the body of an old woman (Jones, 32). She leaves the town she grew up in because she wanted to “seek [her] fortune” and later, to get a wizard or fire demon to remove the spell on her (37, 48). Sophie has the power to talk things into life; she spoke life into many objects, including her walking stick, flowers, and even Howl’s heart (39, 238, 298). As she came to understand the existence (and nature) of her powers, Sophie realized that she did not actually desire to undo her curse as much as she wanted to save Howl and the rest of her family, to live “happily ever after” with them (301). This subversion of her initial desire is significant, because it came about as a result of her interactions with the fantastic. This in turn facilitated immense internal growth.

When Sophie was working at the hat shop, she was a completely different person. She was shy and prescribed to the belief that “it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three” (9). She carried this belief wherever she went, insisting whenever something went wrong or she had some bad luck, that it was because she was the eldest of three. As she discovered she had a power and that she was a witch, she began to move from thinking she had a “little chance…of an interesting future” to trying to actively affect change in the world around her and have agency in
her actions. She started off working complacently for Fanny, never questioning a thing, and barely even speaking unless it was to inanimate objects (hats). When she left to search for her fortune, she began to talk and learn from people and listen in on Michael’s lessons. Her encounters with the fantastic changed her from espousing what she was conditioned to think, to thinking for herself and trying to save the day and get her own happily ever after. The beginning of the book is riddling with language which reinforces the idea that Sophie “should” or “ought to” do things, that she is “bound to be” a certain way (10). Once Sophie is free of the hat shop, she slowly begins to unlearn this language and way of thought, as is evident in her relationship with Calcifer. Calcifer is a headstrong fire demon who listened only to Howl, until Sophie came along, threatening him, and forcing him into submission (57). She stopped listening to what other people told her she should be doing to getting other people (and objects) to do what she wanted them to.

Sophie’s power is interesting, because she can talk what she desires into being. She forces the fantastic to bend to her will, as opposed to her desiring something and the fantastic acting as a gateway to her attaining the desired thing. However, what Sophie had initially thought she desired was not what she ended up wanting. She first only wanted to get by in the hat shop and not cause too much trouble. She wanted an interesting life, but could not handle it, as shown when she became extremely claustrophobic and scared when she was out on May Day, and first met Howl (20). She had closed herself up with hats so much that she didn’t know how to interact with other people, because she was so complacent. When she was cursed, she was forced out of her comfort zone (by fantastic circumstances) to go out to seek her fortune. After learning about her powers, and how it was her who had sown a spell into Howl’s suit to make him irresistible, she began to actively work to bring about her will in the world with her words
(166). This culminates in the end of the text when she uses words of power to save Howl and his heart, breaking his contract with Calcifer. This moment is important, because while she is trying to push his heart back into his chest, she tries to ignore her red hair falling into her face (298). Sophie recognizes that her spell is broken, and that she is young again, but it pales in importance compared to saving Howl. What originated as the goal of her quest ended up to be utterly irrelevant. Even after she had saved Howl, and everyone around them was vying for their attention, her sister tried to tell her that she was young again, that the spell was broken, but she did not care because she had Howl (301). What she had once desired was subverted, and in the process of attaining the desired thing, she learned truths about herself. She learned she had power over her destiny, that she was a witch, and that she was in love. Geoffrey G. Harpham said that fantasy could be used as a mirror, and allowed the one to judge themselves (Harpham 400). This is true for Sophie; she saw who she was, an old woman inside and out, with the self-esteem of someone who has no purpose in life. Her escape into fantasy allowed her to understand she has a voice, and to use it to change her life and those around her for the better.

Fantasy is reflexive for both the protagonist and the reader. It lets the protagonist attain what they desire, or upon encountering and embodying the fantastic, the character realizes that what they had initially desired was an illusion, a false ideal. Characters can work with the fantastic to then discover what is truly important to them, what they desire at the core of their being. This can be a desire for justice, equality, love, or any number of things. During the process of attaining this subversive desired thing, the protagonist realizes greater truth(s) and their disillusionment. This is also true in the place of the reader; fantasy acts as a mirror for the reader. By inversing what may seem as possible to the reader and taking them along the path of the protagonists’ attainment of knowledge, the reader gains moral lessons, and can use those
lessons to question many different things, ranging from social order to metaphysical questions of love, sacrifice and what is within the realm of the possible.


