

Talking with Books: A Reader-Response Approach to Fourth Wing and the Cultural Inferences of Popular Fiction

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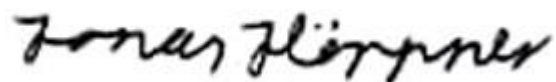
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Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonas Höppner". The script is cursive and somewhat stylized, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

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My supervisor, Professor Virginia Pignagnoli, for being a great support throughout the process and guiding the direction and structure of this dissertation.

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Abstract:

This dissertation applies Reader-Response Theory and Narrative Empathy, drawing on works from the likes of Louise M. Rosenblatt (1982), Peter Lamarque (2024), Suzanne Keen (2022), Minna-Kerttu Kekki (2024) and Lise Zunshine (2022), to develop a theoretical framework for literary analysis that focuses on how empathy is communicated between reader and text in order to attempt to understand what, if anything, this resonance may reveal about elements and popular sentiments of the current Zeitgeist. *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros (2023) is taken as the case study example due to its popularity as defined by a quantitative analysis of popular fiction statistics over the last years from online platforms Amazon and Goodreads. The theoretical framework is built on a configuration of formal elements being utilised by a text in combination with different approaches to the act of reading by readers, to ascertain how a resonance is created between the two. The subsequent textual analysis of *Fourth Wing* informs a critical interpretation of its narrative as being defined by the journey towards sexual narrative agency of the main character. This is then put in the context of a wider sociocultural Zeitgeist, defined by the evolution and online presence of the Romantasy genre the book belongs to, pulling on scholarship from Laura Niebling (2025), Alysia De Melo (2024), and Jodi McAlister and Kate Cuthbert (2025), in order to reach an indicative answer to the reason for its popularity being due to its representation of an idealised fantasy of a relationship that is defined by emotional security and trust.

Keywords: Zeitgeist, Reader-Response, Narrative Empathy, Female Gaze, Popular Fiction

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Chapter 0: Introduction

In his Foreword to the 1966 second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien famously wrote:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and weary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thoughts and experiences of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author (Tolkien, 1966).

A common understanding of the trilogy is that Tolkien drew direct inspiration from his experiences during the First World War to characterise and contextualise the events of the story, thereby making it, while perhaps not a direct allegory of, a clear response to and result of that historical moment, as his grandson reflects (BBC, 2017). Regardless of the extent to which that is true, however, Tolkien’s assertion of preferring history ‘with its varied applicability to the thoughts and experiences of readers’ validates the enduring legacy of the novels as not coming from their historical situatedness or accuracy, but rather their ability to reflect and respond to readers’ personally lived experiences of the themes within them. As such, while the success of the series – and other literary works of similar acclaim and influence – are well-suited as case studies for analysis within different theoretical frameworks such as war and trauma studies, eco-criticism and feminist studies, part of their appeal comes from their ability to engage and resonate with readers’ broader imaginations and sentiments, without either of the latter necessarily having been explicitly stated.

To that end, this dissertation argues that such a resonance with readers’ sensibilities is a feasible theory for the cultural visibility of breakout literary hits on the level of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, the *Twilight* saga by Stephanie Meyer, or Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. The present hypothesis proposes that, in addition to perceived merits of literary quality and marketability, these works have achieved their success by capturing unspoken elements of their respective cultural moments that resonated with a significant portion of the population within their potential reach. More recently *Fourth Wing* (2023), the first book in *The Empyrean* series by Rebecca Yarros has emerged as a commercial phenomenon along with its sequels *Iron Flame* (2023) and *Onyx Storm* (2024). While the literary quality of the book may be analysed through

a number of theoretical lenses, its popularity can be fruitfully approached from the perspective of the readers' experience. This is because, as discussed in relation to Tolkien, a text's 'applicability to the thoughts and experiences of readers' implies a dialogue between the two in which the text guides the reader's response to itself via its 'history, true or feigned', whereas the reader in turn interprets the text in accordance with their own imagination and mental state. It is in the nature of this dialogue on the part of the reader as a socio-culturally situated agent that the reader response may be capable of shedding light on broader public sentiments reflected by the culture the reader is necessarily a part of, which in turn may answer questions about prevailing attitudes within society.

While scholarly work has been done on literary works like the above-mentioned series to varying degrees – and much more elsewhere on works from the likes of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Cervantes, to Austen, Le Guin, and Butler, to name a few, this dissertation aims to take a different approach to textual analysis. Namely, focusing on a broader understanding of critical engagement with popular fiction that applies ideas from Reader Response Theory and Narrative Empathy Studies to contribute to an understanding of why Romantasy books are as popular as they are to their readers – and what that popularity says about the cultural moment those texts are a part of. The importance of this research stems from the effort to bridge literary studies with wider social sciences in an effort to acknowledge literature as not just instances of social critique and response in their own right, but as, in the case of *the most* popular literature, reflections of public sentiments indicative of the current Zeitgeist that might not be sufficiently voiced elsewhere.

With this in mind, the guiding research questions for this dissertation, in order, will be as follows: According to which metrics of popularity and engagement can *The Empyrean* be considered one of the most popular contemporary book series? Why has it achieved that level of popularity, drawing from its literary elements? What cautious inferences can be drawn about prevailing attitudes, factoring in the book's online presence, surrounding interpersonal relationships in the cultural Zeitgeist that may have facilitated that popularity?

While this line of questioning is more exploratory than purely analytical in nature, the central thesis will consider reader base demographics, genre conventions

and social contexts which will be expanded upon in later chapters. As such, the thesis statement will be that the representation of female agency within a hostile environment, combined with an acute application of the female gaze to matters of character and intimacy, allows the book to leverage its market positioning as a Romantasy novel for a predominantly female reader base to, partially, fulfil audience desires for emotional intimacy, personal recognition and validation, and fandom as a source of community.

The methodology will consist of three parts, each addressing in order the research questions underlying the dissertation and will shape the overall thesis structure.

Publicly available statistics pertaining to popularity from Amazon reviews and Goodreads ratings will be compiled and compared, with weight being given to the number of ratings and not the aggregate review scores, in order to, at this stage, reach a conclusion of engagement rather than qualitative opinion. The findings of this section reveal that, when taking the total number of reviews left on authors' works within a specified time frame and dividing them by the number of works to find a per-book average engagement, Rebecca Yarros comes out second on Amazon.com and first on Goodreads.com between the years 2020-2025.

Answering the question of *Fourth Wing*'s popularity will be done through the application of a literary framework combining established areas of scholarly research, namely Reader-Response Theory and Narrative Empathy Studies. These will first be discussed and laid out theoretically before being synthesised into a cohesive framework to be more closely applied to the text.

Engaging with the Zeitgeist as it pertains to the topic of this dissertation will be done by briefly examining the trajectory of romance and fantasy from its historical origins up until the modern conception of Romantasy as a genre. Further, social media as a modern platform for dissemination of information, group and identity formation, as well as algorithmic and social conditioning will be used to examine how the online sphere's reception to *Fourth Wing* has contributed to shape its popularity.

As stated, the aim of this dissertation is to critically engage a modern work of popular fiction in order to understand why it, and books like it, are so popular, and what this reveal about the sociocultural context surrounding their reception. In this way, the intended potential impact of this research on the area of literary criticism pertaining to

popular fiction is to suggest a critical engagement with alternative genres of fiction that have, thus far, gone largely unexamined, in order to acknowledge and validate the reach of such works as indicative of popular sentiments. Doing so will hopefully contribute to a widening conversation around the aims of the social sciences to examine social behaviour by considering literature and literary trends as more deeply integrated into specific sociocultural moments. This research relates to the thesis statement by examining representations of the female experience within modern society, and how issues surrounding agency, intimacy, and interpersonal connection are represented in resonant ways to a broad reader base.

Further to that, some obvious limitations of this study is the amount of clear information that can justifiably be ascertained from only one primary source, as well as the lack of access to hard data pertaining to international consumer statistics and background demographics to make a general claim about ideology. Without a large-scale evaluation of user opinions through direct forum and review interaction of readers on the likes of Goodreads and TikTok, or a similarly scaled corpus of interviews with readers, the results of this research must necessarily be taken as indicative and theoretically grounded rather than quantitatively verifiable. The latter point about ideology is also relevant for sales statistics of the primary source in question, as while the reliance on publicly available data from a predominantly US consumer market via Amazon and Goodreads gives an idea about consumer habits and preferences, claims about broader inferences must necessarily be considered as relative rather than concrete without further access to detailed regional sales data. Furthermore, the theoretical framework developed for this research is not universally applicable, meaning that while it is intended as a conceptually useful tool for the study of literary appeal and resonance, it is not grounded in a firm and well-established theoretical tradition, and should therefore be understood to an extent as abstraction.

0.1: Terminology

Primarily, Reader-Response Criticism, defined by the Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory as '[involving] a focus on meaning and other textual effects as they are produced by readers, rather than as they are intended by authors or stably encoded in texts' ("reception"), can be further understood as a field of literary criticism that emphasises reading as an act of dialogue between the reader and the text that takes into account how aesthetic elements

influence the reading experience. Building on the works of Werner Delanoy (2024), Louise M. Rosenblatt (1982), and an edited volume by Thomas Petraschka and Christiana Werner (2024), its primary use is to understand how meaning might be derived from a text by a reader, and by what mechanisms – from both parties – that meaning is communicated and constructed. In highlighting the response to a text, rather than purely focusing critically on its formal elements, the theory allows a sociocultural lens to contextualise the work.

Related to that is the concept of Complex Embedment, referred to in relation to literary studies as a metaphor for ‘[talking] about complex social dynamics that depend on people’s awareness of their own and other people’s states’ (Zunshine, 2). Reader-Response Criticism understands characters as strongly related to a reader’s impression of a text, whereas Complex Embedment further contextualises that appeal as characters containing qualities and indicators of ‘having a mind of their own’ in the mind of the reader. More specifically, Complex Embedment is an interdisciplinary area of study which in literary studies focuses on character cognition in the sense of understanding their awareness of cognitive interpretation and mapping of interactions. Discrete levels of cognition are attributable to characters depending on their level of embedded cognition, ranging from being aware of the internality of other characters to complex comprehension of how one character’s actions might be perceived and interpreted by another.

This framework will be combined with Theory of Empathic Reading, a method of literary analysis that emphasises how a text can generate emotional investment with a reader via portrayals of character, setting and narrative that characterises the reader’s response as sympathetic and relatable, based on the work of Suzanne Keen (2022). The emotional resonance with a text is the central component that enables a Theory of Empathic Reading to focus on formal and aesthetic elements as key parts of a reader’s response and investment. The aim is not to over-generalise the efficacy of a text, but rather to critically engage components of it that might elicit an emotional response in order to further understand textual elements as relative to the sociocultural situatedness of the reader. That is to say, a reader at one time in one place might have a different interpretation of textual features than another reader spatially and temporally distanced from them.

In other words, such an interpretation did not resonate with the *Zeitgeist*, described by Merriam-Webster as ‘The general intellectual, moral and cultural climate of an era’ (*“Zeitgeist”*). To elaborate further, the *Zeitgeist* considers broadly prevalent attitudes and

beliefs of people of a given period of time and space that distinguishes it from the past by representing embodied personal and collective traits that both respond to and shape the current moment. It manifests in popular culture such as media and fashion, as well as characterising the rhetoric of public arenas like politics. Rather than describing a historical period, its function is to highlight how the political, economic, and social realities of the time shape people's response to it.

Additionally, and more specifically in relation to the primary source of this dissertation, the Female Gaze is a branch of feminist theory acting as an ‘the idea that there is a specific lens through which a woman views, influenced by the women creators whose eyes the audience is looking through’ (Dangerfield, 2). Due to the audience of *Fourth Wing* – and the Romantasy genre more broadly – being heavily skewered towards a primarily female reader base¹, an understanding of how the textual elements appeal to women is central to the analysis. As it relates to the modern Zeitgeist, this information helps contextualise the popularity of the book. More specifically, the Female Gaze is a term situated in artistic analysis and feminist theory that engages creative expression as a medium intended to engage a predominantly female audience. As it is an evolving term (Dangerfield, 2), areas of critical discourse use it discursively, but the focus remains on the female viewing experience as one characterised by working against conventions of power, authority, and structures of expectations (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

0.2: Methodology:

A quantitative research approach will be used for gathering data pertaining to the popularity of modern literary works, ‘modern’ here being defined as literature published between 2020 and 2025. This is because while popular fiction from earlier years experience resurgences in popularity via social media, understanding popularity as it pertains to the specific attributes of the contemporary Zeitgeist, as discussed by Laura Niebling (2025), is best examined via literature of that time due to the social moment being experienced and catered to rather than recalled. Given the market share of Amazon for book sales and Goodreads’ estimated userbase², the result found in this section present a strong indicative argument for *The Emphyrean* books being the most popular new series on the market, thereby justifying the use of *Fourth Wing*,

¹ See Chapter 5

² See Chapter 1

specifically, as a primary source case study for this dissertation. To further understand the demographic properties of Goodreads, a research article by Mike Thelwall and Kayvan Kousha (2016) will be combined with metrics from SimilarWeb, a website traffic tracking site, to contextualise the analysis by determining the nature of the demographics necessarily being included in the statistics for this dissertation.

The concept of Reader-Response Theory was pioneered by the likes of Louise M. Rosenblatt (1982) and is further expanded upon by the work of Alejandra G. Lobo (2013), Cargi T. Mart (2019) and supplemented by Minna-Kerttu Kekki (2024). Complementing the conceptualisation of reading as being a transactional process between reader and text, the works of Suzanne Keen (2022) and Lisa Zunshine (2022) provide the groundwork for understanding empathy as it relates to literature and readers. Keen's discussion of narrative empathy focuses on how different situated contexts of the reader cause different projections onto a text which in turn colour how story elements are perceived. Zunshine develops a theory of Complex Embedment which explains reader engagement with literature in terms of understanding characters as complexly layered agents displaying social reasoning through perceived awareness of themselves and other characters' motives, and wherein intentionality is applied – not necessarily consciously – by the reader in order to fill out those elements of story and character being opened to interpretation. Here, elements such as sociocultural background, age and gender of the reader become potential factors for how they relate to and assess characters differently. Pulling from a 2024 volume on the role of empathy in understanding literature, among other things, and edited by Thomas Petraschka and Christiana Werner, three pieces of scholarly work by Peter Lamarque, Suzanne Keen and Christiana Werner are used to further supplement Keen's own and Zunshine's previous works by considering more deeply the role of empathy in how readers perceive and interpret literature.

Following this theoretical analysis, the inferences about the cultural *Zeitgeist* will be based on a discussion of the sociocultural context of reader responses by Richard Walsh (2007), followed by a historical examination of the Romantasy genre by Jodi McAlister and Kate Cuthbert (2025), as well as existing academic analyses from Alysia De Melo (2024), Anna Kiernan (2021) and Laura Niebling (2025) on the effects of sites such as TikTok in contextualising that discourse. Further supplementing this will be the work of Beth Driscoll and DeNel R. Sedo (2018) in analysing the nature of

the content of Goodreads reviews across different methodological approaches and in relation to different source materials. Keeping in mind the demographic findings of the first research question, contextualising this discussion will be a consideration of the Female Gaze, drawing from Peg Zeglin Brand (2000), Eleanor Heartney (2000), and Cambridge University Press (2013).

Chapter 1: Quantitative Analysis

As stated in the introduction, arriving at a statistically conclusive answer as to what is the most popular modern literary work will consider ‘modern’ to be literature published between 2020 and 2025. Due to limited access to comprehensive sales data, the choice was made to analyse publicly available statistics from Amazon.com and Goodreads.com due to their similar systems of cataloguing books by author, rating, and genre. Importantly for Amazon, the data used reflects the number of ratings and not total sales, as while Amazon publishes lists of ‘Best-Sellers’ each year, it does not make public the total sales numbers themselves, making it an incomplete evaluative method for this analysis. Additionally, as according to Bernice M. Murphy, Amazon ‘has done more than any other company to transform the publishing, distribution, marketing and reading of popular fiction in the twenty-first century’ (Murphy, 21). He argues that by undercutting the competition via ease and perceived affordability, integrated e-readers via Amazon Kindle, self-and digital publishing, audio books and its own publishing arm (Murphy, 21-22), Amazon is a dominant player in the literature market that, according to WordsRated.com

reportedly controls at least 40% of the print book sales in the States... by 2025 could take over more than 70% of the US print book market... In the UK, Amazon controls at least 50% of the market, selling over 106 million copies each year... The company’s market share in e-books sales stand at least 67%, climbing to 83% when Kindle Unlimited is included... is estimated to control over 87.9% of yearly e-book sales in the UK... increasing its [audiobook] market share by 54.6% over the last 5 years (Wordsrated.com, 2023)

While the data is predominantly US-based, its mentioned market share in other countries like the UK is a strong indicator for its international influence, despite being a few years out of current date. As such, while tentative, the statistics can be argued as

indicative of broader market trends. The methodology used to gather hard data involved going by the five top-selling books of each year from 2020 to 2025 – disregarding books that made the cut but were published in previous years³, but including books that were published in previous years within the relevant time period (2020-2025) – and noting down their respective genres and number of ratings.⁴ Following this, all books were numerically added according to genre as well as their total ratings in order to find the top selling genres over the 6-year period,⁵ revealing Thriller, Fantasy, and Romance to be the top three. For specific authors, their number of appearances and total individual ratings were respectively added and divided in order to find a Rating Per Appearance.⁶ The results of this reveal that Freida McFadden has the highest score due to the significant popularity of *The Housemaid*, with an RPA of 686.341. Rebecca Yarros, across the three books of *The Empyrean* series published within this timeframe, has the highest average of 393.132 RPA, roughly 45.000 ahead of Colleen Hoover at number two with 348.729 RPA across four books.

As for Goodreads, according to SimilarWeb.com the site had a total monthly visitors count of 85.17 million in May of 2026 with the US accounting for 43.35% of all traffic and the UK coming in second at 6.58% (SimilarWeb.com, 2026). According to a 2016 review of user habits on the site by Mike Thelwall and Kayvan Kousha, ‘books by female authors were more likely to be rated online than were books by male authors, suggesting a female bias on the site. The data were consistent with the hypothesis that female authors were more commercially successful than were male authors because they were more often rated online’ (Thelwall & Kousha, 2016). Further to this, they argue that ‘although females form about three quarters of Goodreads members, there was little evidence that they used the site differently from males, at a macro level, although there is presumably a partial gender split in the genres of books read’ (Thelwall & Kousha, 2016). Taken together, these statistical analyses validate the choice of using Goodreads for data compiling due to its broad userbase, with the added remark of consisting of a primarily female user base impacting the kind of books being promoted on the site. With that in mind, the same process of sorting by year, genre, and

³ With a few recurring exceptions. See Appendix, Image 1 for elaboration

⁴ See Appendix, Image 1

⁵ See Appendix, Image 2

⁶ See Appendix, Image 3

total ratings⁷ revealed Romance, Fantasy, and Thriller to again be the top-scoring categories⁸ with Romance and Fantasy being roughly within the same band of total ratings, but outperforming Thriller by around 10.000.000, suggesting a strong preferential bias. Using the same method as for Amazon, Rebecca Yarros comes out on top with an RPA of 2.657.257, followed closely by Freida McFadden at 2.647.761 RPA.⁹

A quantitative analysis of modern book popularity thus reveals that, while Freida McFadden's *The Handmaid* wins out on the Amazon-based ranking, Rebecca Yarros is the most consistently popular author for her *The Empyrean* series across both Amazon and Goodreads, justifying the use of the first instalment of the series, *Fourth Wing*, as a case study for this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Analysis

2.1: Outline

The two main components of this framework – terminologically and structurally original to this dissertation, but based in the corpus of scholarly work mentioned above¹⁰ – are the concept of Empathic Understanding; analysing how empathy is being established between in-text elements and a reader, and the Aesthetic Elements of the text; how in-text elements are communicated. The Aesthetic Elements are further broken down into categories pertaining to both characters and setting and are preoccupied with a formal decoding of the techniques used by a text coupled with the conditions facilitating readers' unique response to it.

Empathic Understanding of a text comprises three elements: Kekki's understanding of the Expressivity of the Language, the Expressive Qualities of the construction of empathy as discussed by Lamarque, as well as his conception of the Causal and Reflective Aspects of writing on the nature of the empathy being conveyed. The concept of Expressivity of Language comprises the recognition of literature as

⁷ See Appendix, Image 4

⁸ See Appendix, Image 5

⁹ See Appendix, Image 6

¹⁰ Lobo (2013); Rosenblatt (1982); Mart (2019); Petraschka & Werner (2024); Keen (2022); Kekki (2024); Zunshine (2022)

being a spatially and temporally mediating carrier of empathy that first occurs when it is brought into contact with a reader through the Wortleib – the notion of language carrying empathy only to the extent it is recognised as an utterance by a ‘someone’. This is a prerequisite for grasping the content of a narrative as not just descriptive, but lived in, which in turn facilitates the underlying perception of a character or narrator as that ‘someone’ being behind the utterance.

Expressive Qualities involve a recognition of the different causal approaches taken by both the reader and writer in dictating the reflective flow of how meaning in the text is constructed. More specifically, on the part of the reader it involves the understanding that being in a unique state of mind, such as wanting to consume fiction with an emphasis on romance – and recognising the reasoning for the affective impact of a text, how the effect of the romantic elements of said text are communicated, are two main perspectives from which a reader intuitively approach a text, respectively focusing on internal or external qualities of a text that may be further understood as the mimetic features and the mode of presentation of the text.

Finally, the Causal and Reflective Aspects of the nature of the empathy being conveyed stresses the Expressive Quality of a text as being the proximity of the emotion evoked to the emotion being expressed. This quality can be further understood as the poignancy and empathic character of the text, which acts as the objective centre of empathy in the text the actual response of the reader is measured against. Important to this is the understanding that the response from a reader will likely be influenced by individually interpreted affect created from mental states of characters. Extrapolated further, this affect from mental states embed readers in complex matrixes of relations to characters and establish Narrative Empathy which, while potentially taking on many different forms, can still be explained as existing within the bounds of this theoretical framework.

As for within the Aesthetic Elements, character here is primarily understood in relation to three constituent composite elements: the Unknowability of an Other, the Known Aspects of a character, and the temperaments and sociocultural situatedness of the reader. Firstly, the Unknowability of an Other is understood as the notion of the complete interiority of one individual never being completely knowable to another, hence always leaving some parts of them inaccessible to the observer. This principle in

effect implies that the engaged reader superimposes aspects onto characters and justifies them by the construction of embedded mental states following from the second point, namely Known Aspects of said characters. The known aspects of characters are conversely those elements of a character made readily available to the reader, and which contrasts the latter's assumptions and expectations about the former to establish a transactional moral code with which the character is comprehended by the reader. This comprehension is further understood and contextualised by the third point: the temperaments and sociocultural situatedness of the reader. These are components of the reader which condition their response to the character via specific social group belongings, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status – validating both who a character is and what they represent for differently situated readers. Taken together, these three points encompass the circumstances under which a character becomes understood vis-à-vis the reader.

Setting, conversely, is comprised of two main elements: the process of demystification of writing, mentioned by Mart (2019), and the understanding of an 'in-between' state, conceptualised by Keen (2024), of textual elements between the reader and author. The demystification of writing happens via readers' relating of narrative events to their own personal experiences, similarly to how the Unknowability of an Other causes the reader to superimpose elements onto them. This relating of narrative to personal experience makes setting a site of active collaboration between the reader and author via textual elements the author presents and which the reader interprets. These elements of the text pertaining to setting thus occupy an in-between state by guiding readers' responses via regulative attention and speculation about emphasised elements of worldbuilding. This subtle narrative guiding is understood, according to Keen, as being configured by relational Affective Resonance.

2.2: Empathic Understanding

2.2.1: Overview

Understanding *Fourth Wing*'s popularity from a scholarly point of view requires an understanding of how the text manages to resonate with so many readers. This is a two-fold undertaking necessitating both an understanding of the broader theoretical conception of how engagement is established between the text and the reader, as well as

how the specific elements of the narrative create that connection. Empathy in this sense becomes a way of understanding the nature of the mechanisms by which the writing induce engagement with the reader, in addition to explaining the thought process and extrapolations made by the reader as they engage the story.

2.2.2: Expressivity of Language

The Expressivity of Language is a conceptual understanding of how language as a medium inherently creates a version of empathy when it is understood by the reader as an utterance by a ‘someone’. Minna-Kerttu Kekki formulates this notion of Expressivity of Language as being an example of the *Wortleib*, first proposed by Edith Stein and defined as ‘(a living word body) referring to words as “living” and bearers of meaning’ (Kekki, 166). She identifies the primary obstacle of this perception in relation to literature thusly;

as the phenomenological account of empathy is very much centred around the perception of other’s living body [Lieb], it has faced challenges in discussing the empathic experience in media-based context, where we cannot perceive the other’s body... The core of this problematic is the unclarity of *what* is the perceived object in the empathic experience by media (Kekki, 166)

In other words, the issue is how one conceptualises of empathy in a narrative when the object being engaged with is text on a page. By defining the *Wortleib* as either non-empathic, i.e. lexical information, or empathic, an expression by *someone* (Kekki, 174), Kekki conceptualises media – for the purposes of this dissertation, language – as able to be considered empathic based on the understanding of it as an expression by a ‘someone’. Richard Walsh elaborates on this point, saying that ‘The emotional power of narrative lies in its ability to draw out and particularise the affective charge of words... first generated in semiotic rather than narrative terms’ (Walsh, 157). As such, the Expressivity of Language can be conceived of as language that is indicative of the lived world experience of someone via particularising the choice of words. Crucially, this does not necessitate the physical presence of the ‘someone’ doing the expression.

It is worth here to address some of the counter arguments to this general line of thinking due to the centrality of the assumption of empathy through writing to this dissertation. The phenomenological approach of considering the necessity of an object, a *physical* someone, being directly interacted with as a prerequisite for enabling any

level of empathy¹¹ contends that any affect and empathy created with media may only be a person being ‘affected by [their] own projections of the other and have a pseudo-empathic experience’ (Kekki, 169). While Kekki conceives of the two sides of this debate as *pessimistic* and *optimistic* accounts on media-based empathy (Kekki, 168-169) and focuses on the degree of leniency given to media-based empathy as constituting ‘actual’ empathy, this dissertation takes a different approach. As will be discussed later in relation to the Aesthetic Elements of characters, the Unknowability of the Other, i.e. the understanding that the complete interiority of something which exists outside of the self can never be absolutely grasped by the self without a total ego merger, exists as an absolute rule regardless of the phenomenological qualities or properties of the Other. Therefore, all forms of empathy always contain an element of superimposition of the self onto the Other and should instead be understood as the effort to minimise that unknowability without presuming the correctness of the superimposition as absolute, but rather approximative.

Separate from this debate, however, the Expressivity of Language contests that, by perceiving language as the communicated experience by a ‘somebody’, fictitious or otherwise, it becomes an expression of their specific perception of the world they inhabit. Narrative Empathy can thus be understood as an engagement with a text that foregrounds the contents of characters as valid enough to be worthy of engagement in the first place. However, this engagement is not uncritically or equally valid across all literature. In order to critically evaluate the quality of the empathy being conveyed in a text it is necessary to have a conception of the qualitative alignment between the invocation and expression of emotions on the page, and the proximity of those emotions to those likely to be experienced by the reader. For instance, a sad scene on the page can be expressed with overly dramatic writing which could cause the reader to be left feeling annoyed. In this example, the alignment of the emotional character of the scene, its expressive execution, and the affective response from the reader are all in disharmony. Therefore, while the Expressivity of Language makes valid an empathic engagement with this writing, its quality should be considered as poor due to the misalignment of intention, execution, and effect.

¹¹ Here, Kekki uses Fuchs (2016) as a primary proponent of this argument

2.2.3: Expressive Quality

Critically assessing the Expressive Quality of a text necessitates considering the equivalence of output to input. In other words, the proximity of the emotion being evoked to the emotion being expressed. Peter Lamarque suggests that ‘it is precisely through recognizing the poignancy and empathic character of the scene – i.e., the expressive quality of the writing itself in its context – that our empathetic emotional response is stirred’ (Lamarque, 146), which argues for the primacy of the quality of a piece of writing in its ability to subsequently evoke an emotional response in a reader. Of note here is the elaboration of, to use Lamarque’s own terminology, the Expressive Quality of the writing ‘in its context’, meaning that an emotionally engaged response to the text can exist on an aesthetic level, and a contextually dependent level. While he concedes that a pre-emptive grasp of the emotion being expressed may contribute to heightening the effectiveness of the passage for readers¹², he nonetheless holds that a grasp of the expressiveness of the writing itself precedes the emotions felt by reading it, thus making a particularly strong emotional reaction an indicator of the effectiveness of the text. This is further corroborated by Walsh, as he says, ‘the intensity of the emotion will be conditional upon the intensity of the mimetic illusion’ (Walsh, 153). It is important here to remind of the need for the expressed emotion to approximate that being felt by the reader in order to ascertain its quality, which Lamarque puts as

the more specific the connection is between the emotion and its causes, the more likely it is to be an emotion shared by other “sufficiently informed” readers... the precise emotion induced by a work (or a passage in a work) will likely either coincide with, or be closely derived from, the precise emotion expressed in the work (or passage), and thus founded on reasoned justification, not mere cause and effect (Lamarque, 143)

Put differently, if the emotion felt by readers possessing of the same information about a work closely equates that of the emotion being expressed in the work, the text’s Expressive Quality can be justifiably reasoned for on the aesthetic level. Within the context of *Fourth Wing* and the stated aims of this dissertation, the argument is not to ascertain *if* the book succeeds in this Expressive Quality, but rather to argue due to its popularity that it *does* succeed, and to consider its writing as indicative of well-executed Expressive Quality. To this end, Lamarque remarks that

¹² Lamarque (2024), p. 155.

To experience the values in the passage it would be sufficient to experience the power and poignancy of the writing... The aesthetic value of the passage largely rests on the rhetorical achievement of eliciting that experience. The objective heart of the empathy in the passage lies in the way... responses are expressed, within the wider context, rather than in any felt emotion caused in a reader (Lamarque, 153)

That is to say, feeling the emotions portrayed in a text is primarily a concern of Expressive Quality on the aesthetic level, whereas the Expressive Quality of empathy specifically comes from the understanding of *how* and *why* characters have the emotions that they do within the storyworld.

One important point of contention with regards to the validity of this kind of Narrative Empathy is what Suzanne Keen has coined as ‘empathic inaccuracy’, defining it as ‘a strong conviction of empathy which incorrectly identifies the feeling of a literary persona. Empathic inaccuracy occurs when a reader responds empathetically to a fictional character at cross-purpose with an author’s intention’ (Keen, *Empathy and Reading*, 36). This term contextualises Lamarque’s characterisation of Expressive Quality on an empathic level as being a potentially erroneous assessment by the reader of characters in context, thereby disrupting their continued understanding of the narrative. As Keen states, ‘Most theories of narrative empathy assume that empathy can be transacted accurately from author to reader by way of a literary text... In fact there is no guarantee that an individual reader will respond empathically to a particular representation’ (Keen, *Empathy*, 35). Nonetheless, this erroneous potential still fits within Lamarque’s assessment of Expressive Quality, as a passage or work of sufficient quality will minimise the amount of empathic inaccuracy a reader could plausibly make, as verified by ‘other “sufficiently informed” readers’. Further to this argument of empathic inaccuracy is what Keen elsewhere refers to as the active collaboration by readers to co-create fictional worlds, the argument being that ‘Regardless of the order of the response to the stimulus of fiction reading, its impact require the active collaboration of readers, whose mental simulation co-creates fictional worlds devised by authors’ (Keen, *Affective Resonance and Narrative Immersion*, 203). This is a more broad-scale understanding of reader engagement with a text that charts the understanding of Reader-Response Theory as a way of reading that centres the efforts of the reader to construct meaning in a text. Werner Delanoy, in delineating the utility of Reader-Response Theory, argues that ‘readers do not engage with art with a narrow

focus in mind but ask themselves what a text/artifact as a whole means to them as a whole... all the aspects and connections portrayed in the text can become the reader's focus of interest, and recipients can bring all their life experiences into play to evoke the piece' (Delanoy, 15). In effect, this active collaboration involves, on the part of the reader, registering textual clues and making a constructive assessment of their broader implications for the fictional world presented by the author, while simultaneously taking into account the reader's own meaning-making. Keen goes on to state that 'reading is a creative dynamic, responding to textual prompts put in place by, but no longer controlled by, an author' (Keen, *Affective Resonance*, 204), thereby giving more agency to the reader as an active meaning-maker of a text, as opposed to the author's intention being final, as per Delanoy's argument about the potential for the reader to bring in their own life experiences. As discussed in relation to Lamarque, however, a Reader-Response frame such as this does not imply complete freedom on the part of the reader to extract whatever meaning they desire out of a text. Rather, it functions as a means for the attentive reader to engage the Expressive Qualities and the Expressivity of Language to garner an empathic comprehension of narrative they themselves construct and revise as they read.

Lisa Zunshine directly attributes this construction and revision of meaning inherent to Reader-Response Theory to the presence of mental states in readers. She argues that 'elements such as metaphor, alliteration, and allusions bring in mental states. A single metaphor, even a subdued one, can inadvertently change the tone of a whole vignette, evoking a mental state in a reader, even if that mental state may be too subtle to describe in a propositional format' (Zunshine, 24-25). Her examples are consistent with the means by which a reader garners empathic comprehension of narrative as stated above, in part due to the formal techniques an author have at their disposal to evoke such a response, and also due to the nature of this relation between author and reader via the text as a changing and evolving comprehension of the narrative. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.3 in relation to in-depth character analysis, Zunshine raises the topic of Complex Embedment in characters to be the means by which a reader further grasps the Expressivity of Language as uttered by a 'someone' put forth by Kekki insofar as that kind of embedment attributes degrees of interior awarenesses to characters as they exist in the context of other interior awarenesses of other characters. Zunshine argues that 'As we read, we construct

contexts in which to make sense of potential embeddings, and then we use the information we derive from those embeddings to construct contexts for subsequent embeddings. We can think of this process of continuous and contingent construction as “participatory sense-making” (Zunshine, 29). Put differently, and in explicit relation to Reader-Response Theory, the reader considers textual and contextual clues related to the narrative in order to attribute levels of cognition to characters and intentions in order to make sense of the events as they are laid out by the author – giving a level of flexibility and agency to the reader to fill in blank spaces of character, setting, and theme within the framework of the constructed setting of the author.

Important for grasping this ‘sense-making’ as it relates to Lamarque’s idea of Expressive Quality of a text which makes it comprehensible to the reader in the context of the story, is the awareness of the degree to which the psychological plausibility of descriptions positions the text as being grounded in fact or fiction. That is not to say that the plausibility of a scene is contingent on its (lack of) fantastical elements, but rather on the understood plausibility of the description of mental states. Christina Werner argues that one of the benefits of reading fiction is the potential for what she calls ‘What It’s Like’, or WIL-knowledge as a way for a reader to gain a phenomenological perspective about what it is like to undergo a specific experience. She says ‘ If the work of literature contains descriptions of the mental states of the character who undergoes the experience, the reader gains information about the character’s specific state’ (Werner, 187), which is to say that by gaining information about the lived experience of the character, a reader is able to grasp the Expressive Quality on both the aesthetic and empathic levels to engage in a participatory sense-making of that character to understand them on a complex relational level to themselves. Werner attributes this potential to the aesthetics of ‘elaborate and rhetorical use of language we find in these works’, saying that ‘stylistic devices can be a way of describing mental states and thus help readers imagine the described state... thereby enabling readers to learn what something is like for other people, especially those who lack these linguistic and rhetorical skills’ (Werner, 188). In other words, the Expressivity of Language and the Expressive Quality of descriptions may help readers to not just better understand characters, but to gain a better phenomenological grasp of the represented experiences. As stated, however, one point to keep in mind is the

psychological plausibility and potential for misrepresentation that can occur in the writing. Werner argues that

Especially in cases where authors write about people in circumstances very different to their own, the chances are quite high that the author describes experiences not exactly in the way experiences of a real person in these circumstances are. If these authors use their own personalities as a source of inspiration for their characters, it seems very likely that their characters will somehow remain within the realm of the author's own experiences (Werner, 192)

While being a general point of caution when it comes to interpretative efforts of characters, in relation to *Fourth Wing*, Werner's argument uniquely supports its popularity as an example of experiential descriptions which could be argued to resonate with a large audience of readers. She brings up the point of the quality of extraordinary imaginative skills, saying that 'it is possible that an author might be such an extraordinary imaginer that she can correctly describe a complex mental state or a series of complex mental states of another person although she has not talked to this person' (Werner, 192). The public reception to the book, which will be discussed in more details in Chapter 5, indicates that the high degree of resonance with readers is conducive to the argument of the text having hit on a particular point of the cultural Zeitgeist through its experiential descriptions of the main character, Violet. Further to that, Keen argues that 'the social, personal, and emotional sensations of connection, scaffolded on the core affects of narrativity by way of the discourse, and hitched to actants and events through representation, embed the individual reader in a matrix of relations that often includes intensities of shared emotional experience: narrative empathy' (Keen, *Affective Resonance*, 199). Her argument of core affects of narrativity in the discourse of a text via sensations of connection and the contextual situatedness of characters through representations – i.e. the aesthetic and empathic levels of Expressive Quality – being the things that embed readers in the relational dynamics of characters and setting, validates Werner's assessment of the potency of authorial descriptions. This is because the Expressive Qualities are conducive of the author's representations facilitating the degree of what Keen calls the 'intensities of shared emotional experiences', in other words the degree of empathic resonance a reader might have with a character.

While the focus has so far been on the essential degree of knowability of characters and setting as prerequisites for an empathic connection, as stated in the chapter on Expressivity of Language, empathy, by its very nature, always necessitates a level of superimposition by the self onto the Other, regardless of the form they might take. This becomes important in particular for the representation of characters because, as Kekki argues, ‘we only have a partial access to the other consciousness. There are always aspects of the other that do not appear to us, because their experience as they have it is never accessible to me as such’ (Kekki, 182). This constant of Unknowability could be argued to be a reason for personal character investment in readers because of their own unique ways of superimposing elements onto characters. As Walsh argues, ‘imagination will augment [the fictional information] at least as far as the minimal assumption of fictional being: the unit of mimesis, as it were, must be the whole individual’ (Walsh, 152). Superimposition of elements onto characters here becomes an act rooted in the assumption that the known parts of character exist as a baseline for ‘who’ that character is, for which the augmenting imagination, or superimposition, functions as an extension of that ‘whole individual’. This act is not arbitrary, however, as Zunshine argues. Her claim, partially considered by evolutionary biology, is that humans are “‘designed by nature” ... to read mental states into behaviours’, but that ‘we still need to be “trained by culture” in the locally appropriate ways to perform such readings’ (Zunshine, 129). Put differently, while the tendency to read intention into actions is an evolutionarily conditioned trait of humans, the specific ways in which we do so, and the specificities of those readings, are culturally situated. This is a fundamental point to consider when discussing the reception and inferences about the current Zeitgeist from the in-depth analysis of *Fourth Wing*, because by pinpointing the specificities of the readings, the culturally situated thoughts and ideas they represent can be extrapolated more broadly.

2.2.4: Causal and Reflective Aspects of Reading

Directly aiding such a situated reading is a clearer understanding of the differing approaches of readers, as that informs which aspects of the writing a reader might primarily focus on. Returning to Peter Lamarque, he proposes a distinction between a reader being in a ‘state of mind’, i.e. having an internal perspective responding primarily to the mimetic features of a text, and a ‘recognising of the reason for a response’, i.e. an external perspective of being aware of the mode of presentation in a

text (Lamarque, 146). To unpack that further, this distinction presents two different approaches to textual engagement which conditions the level of narrative empathy a reader might get, thereby influencing the degree of Affective Resonance they will get. In its general terminology, Keen describes Affective Resonance between individuals as ‘[understanding] the “interaction dynamic itself [as] create[ing] an affective experience rather than transmitting internal feeling states between pre-existing individuals... shaped by potentials arising continuously within the relational configuration itself” (Keen, *Affective Resonance*, 197). In other words, Affective Resonance describes an interaction between individuals as not just a bi-directional exchange of thoughts, ideas, and feelings, but rather as a continuously evolving process of co-creating meaning within the context of the exchange. In this sense, the goal of a conversation is not so much to exchange a set of opinions as it is to have the conversation itself be an affective experience in which all parties influence and are continuously influenced by each other. Where this becomes important to literature is that this mode of exchange can be understood as taking part between the reader and the text insofar as the reader participates actively in that exchange. Keen argues that ‘When it comes to narrative empathy, an experience of affective resonance occurring while immersed in a fictional world, the sensations are brought to life and concentrated within one person, the reader’ (Keen, *Affective Resonance*, 204). As such, the experience of Affective Resonance, while being facilitated by two parties in the reader and the text, is entirely situated in the reader, thus making them the agent of meaning-making of the text. This is where the Expressivity of Language proposed by Kekki and the Expressive Quality as being aesthetically or empathically bound according to Lamarque, is applied and acted upon specifically in relation to literature. Affective Resonance describes the act of reading as an active co-construction of meaning between the text and the reader, while the Expressivity of Language and the Expressive Quality are the mechanisms by which the text communicates itself *to* the reader.

As previously stated, Lamarque distinguishes between the reader’s internal ‘state of mind’ and their external ‘recognised reasoning for their response’ as the two ways in which the reader responds to those mechanisms. While the discussion so far has been on the ways in which a text makes itself understood, then, this part constitutes the generalisable ways in which the reader might engage those qualities of the text. Lamarque describes the distinction between these two approaches to reading by

emphasising that An internal perspective... views the characters as ordinary human beings in a recognizable world... and under this perspective little attention is given to the background understanding that they are in fact mere fiction', whereas 'The external perspective... views characters as linguistic artefacts in a designed and aesthetic structure' (Lamarque, 148) Further to that, he also highlights the distinction between Causal and Reflective Aspects of Reading, attributing the former to the internal perspective, and the latter to the external (Lamarque, 146). For the purposes of a Reader-Response perspective, this distinction helps clarifying two principal modes of engagement with a text that conditions a reader's actual response to the text. An internal 'state of mind' paying attention to mimetic features of a text will be more likely to focus on the causal aspects of how a text makes them feel. On the other hand, an external 'recognition of the reason for a response' highlights the mode of presentation in a text via elements conducive of reflective aspects of how the constituent elements of the text influence the whole on a thematic level. Lamarque's theorising of the Expressive Quality of a text on an empathic level being contextually dependent on the interior storyworld, then, further depends on the reader's approach to the text being focused on the Reflective Aspects, because that is what objectively informs the empathy expressed *by* the story according to its qualities. Conversely, the Expressive Quality on an aesthetic level is primarily conditioned by a reader's focus on the Causal Aspects resulting from the mimetic features of a text, as that is what characterises the reader's response *to* the text. To illustrate this, there are several examples of sexually charged scenes and descriptions in the book that can be described as 'fan-service', i.e. passages existing purely for the enjoyment of the fans that do not meaningfully advance the narrative. Yet the two levels of Expressive Quality have the potential to differ in their functional interpretation of these.

To contextualise this, Eleanor Hartney argues in her foreword to *Beauty matters* that 'Young female artists toy with feminine stereotypes in ways that would make their feminist elders uncomfortable. They recognise that, like pornography, beauty can be a double-edged sword – as capable of destabilising rigid conventions and restrictive behavioural models as it is of reinforcing them' (Hartney, xv). Embracing sexual proclivities without shunning or having them shunned as arbitrarily un-womanly thus become an act of thematic relevance that, by virtue of its consistency, is a marker of Expressive Quality on an empathic level that additionally could be argued to enter into a broader discussion about implications of

behavioural models and their representation within configurations of the Female Gaze. She further observes that

discussions of beauty remain deeply enmeshed in questions of morality. We are forever interrogating the guilty pleasures we derive from beauty with such questions as, Is beauty a form of tyranny? Is it exploitative? Is our response to beauty a moral choice, or is it externally determined – a matter of social conditioning, or a function of inalterable biological, psychological, or evolutionary factors? Is the embrace of beauty politically incorrect? (Hartney, xiv)

To the extent explicit representations of sexual indulgence and gratification may be argued to be effectively equated with conventions of beauty, as Hartney does by acknowledging the similar narrative surrounding pornography, the ‘correctness’ of such representations are necessarily tied up with the contextual morality of it. Peg Zeglin Brand, in the introduction to *Beauty matters*, argues about Carrie Mae Weems’ famous untitled picture from the *Kitchen Table Series*, that

Weem, as an artist and woman, invites us to sit at the table and to share our thoughts about beauty. To do so, I believe, is to visually demonstrate *how beauty matters*. She... invites us, to look at the representation of woman as she is situated *in context*: a context in which her beauty – and the value-laden concept of “beauty” – operates historically, culturally, and politically (Brand, 4)

Put differently, the context of the particular kind of beauty being put ‘on display’ via the representation of woman always operates on a historical, cultural, and political level – in other words, on the level of the *Zeitgeist*. To that end, the Female Gaze becomes a specific instance of that ‘display’ where the contextual morality and ‘correctness’ of it takes on a lens of certain authority with the potential to be further validated by broad recognition.

In that context, Lamarque readily concedes that an objective criticism is not always the aim of a reading (Lamarque, 154). Indeed, when it comes to popular fiction like *Fourth Wing*, this kind of reading could plausibly be argued to rarely, if ever, be the objective of the reader over and above reading for enjoyment. He makes relevant the points that the internal perspective is grown out of and invites an inferential process to both story and characters by virtue of the reader’s close attention to characterisation and contextual clues (Lamarque, 148) – i.e. their engagement in a Reader-Response reading of a text. This is more generally supported in relation to Reader-Response Theory by

Delanoy, as he argues ‘RRT-specialists... have defined aesthetic experience as a mix between intensive emotional involvement and self-critical detachment... A case is made for strong immersion in textual worlds and self-critical reflection upon them and the feelings and ideas evoked during the reading process’ (Delanoy, 15). In this vein, and in accordance with Reader-Response Theory, while Lamarque’s distinction is important for a critical understanding of literature more broadly, and more specifically in connection to the potential for faulty assumptions of Empathic Understanding, as Delanoy delineates, how a text makes the reader feel and the specificities of what informs those emotions may be argued to be an equally valid avenue for criticism of a text.

2.3: Communication of Aesthetic Elements

2.3.1: Overview

So far, the concept of characters as contextually situated agents and carriers of meaning has been discussed primarily through the lens of their effect of resulting in an Empathic Understanding. It is further worth to engage the specific mechanisms by which they do so, and how the co-creating position of the reader informs interpretations of those mechanisms, because characters are the primary in-text moderators of how the story is conveyed and understood. Similarly, the setting of a story also carries significance in and of itself by virtue of how elements of its relatability to the reader helps inform the latter’s conception of the narrative in relation to their own life. To that end, the discussion of characters will be structured in accordance with the aforementioned three topics of the Unknowability of the Other, the Known Aspects of characters, and the temperaments and sociocultural situatedness of readers. The discussion of setting contains two main components, namely the process of demystification of writing and the textual in-between elements that are communicated between the author and reader via the narrative.

2.3.2: Characters: The Unknowability of the Other

As referred to in Chapter 2.2 on Expressivity of Language, the Unknowability of the Other as a concept holds that, regardless of effort or intention on part of the self, there always remains a part of the Other that exists outside of the comprehension of the self. Therefore, the self will always make a relational assessment of the Other based off their perception of them. In discussing Reader-Response Theory, Alejandra G. Lobo

relates this concept to the act of reading by saying that ‘This personal and individual... connection between reader and text is dynamic because the text presents the reader with an array of perspectives and patterns that the reader must use and relate to, elements that have to be somewhat unknown to him or her, for reading to be entertaining’ (Lobo, 24). In addition to the aspect of the unknown when reading characters, Lobo also references the dynamic engagement between a reader and text Keen calls Affective Resonance. Reader engagement to Lobo, then, depends in part on the Affective Resonance as it exists between a reader and their engagement with the Unknowability of characters. Further, the ways in which this Unknowability is being superimposed on and configured by the reader is characterised, as Zunshine argues, by ‘becoming conscious of one’s self and one’s problems in specific ways that may be less readily available otherwise... It is in this sense that literature affords a unique form of self-consciousness, in which you focus on yourself and yet you do not’ (Zunshine, 30). In other words, the reader configures the Unknowability of characters in relation to themselves by drawing from their own experiences to inform their view of the characters. It is in this way readers come to not only relate to characters based on how much of a known quantity they are, but also via a unique form of self-consciousness that sees them project parts of themselves onto the characters. This is reiterated by Delanoy as he proposes reader-recipients are able to ‘bring all their life experiences into play to evoke the piece’ (Delanoy, 15). This means that characters exist both within the context of the complete, unfolded narrative of the book, and as continuously grasped agents by the reader. What the latter of these enables is the potential for a dynamic projection of possible actions characters *could* or *would* make if presented with a set of circumstances, related or otherwise, to the events of the narrative. Keen states that this theory authorises ‘the active reader’s content-rich projection and invention of counterfactual events and consequences – the alternative possibilities that a plot being alive in the mind, driving reading forward... through readers’ imagining of the behaviour of characters unbound from textual limitations’ (Keen, 120). This is further supported by Zunshine’s conceptualisation of Complex Embedment in characters, in which by conceiving of them as perceivers of themselves, their actions, and the actions of other equally perceiving characters, the engaged reader attributes intentionality and constructs contexts which characters partake in, as an act of ‘participatory sense-making’ (Zunshine, 29). As such, it may be argued that the more prominence a character has in a narrative, the more opportunity there is for them to develop a state of

Complex Embedment, as well as a depth of character which reveals and configures the ways in which their Unknowability is perceived by the reader.

2.2.3: Characters: Known Aspects of Characters

The ways in which the reader's perception of how this Unknowability is configured is not arbitrary either, however. Instead, it exists as discussed from an extrapolation of the reader's own experiences being projected onto the character, but also to a great extent from the Known Aspects of that Character in their context. Put differently, what is Unknown about a character always exists in direct relation to what is Known about them. While it is being engaged with via their Unknowability which makes a character entertaining, as Lobo argues, the Known Aspects of a Character are those components of character that conversely opposes the reader's superimposition of intent and relatability. Louise M. Rosenblatt, one of the pioneers of Reader-Response Theory, argues that 'There may be... a feeling of approval or disapproval of the characters and their behaviour. We may be aware of the contrast between the assumptions or expectations about life that we brought to the reading and the attitudes, moral codes, social situations we are living through in the world created in transaction with the text' (Rosenblatt, 270). Reader-Response Theory, as she explains it, is a quintessentially dynamic process as it compels the reader to consider their own reactive response to characters as being according to their own socially situated attitudes and moral codes. She describes the process between reader and text as 'transactional', which can be further understood by Cargi T. Mart's parallel assertion that 'meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text and throughout the transaction' (Mart, 79). That is to say, the transactional nature of the Affective Resonance between the two parties is understood as constructing meaning via the continuous back-and-forth engagement. Further to that, Mart also argues that 'learners bridge the gaps in the text[,] employing their previous knowledge and disposition... as well as their interpretation of the text' (Mart, 79). Taken together, the Affective Resonance in combination with the reader's predispositions infers that reading as a dynamic engagement contrasts the Known Aspects of Characters with the reader's own assumptions and expectations about them to establish a transactional moral code from that engagement. That the moral code is what becomes transactional can be explained by a character's actions either adhering to or opposing the reader's own moral stance, which in both cases simultaneously signals the moral stance of the character, and

thereby puts the morality of both in a progressively evolving – i.e. transactional – stance to each other. Considering the mechanisms of Empathic Understanding then enables the attentive reader to gain a complex, empathic picture of characters which positions itself in contrast to the reader themselves. Lobo's and Zunshine's arguments about the Unknowability of the Other in relation to the self, intersects with Rosenblatt's and Mart's ideas about the social situatedness of the reader informing the transactional moral code that occurs between them and characters via the reader contrasting their expectations and assumptions about the character as they become more Known.

Returning to Kekki's conception of Expressivity of Language, she argues that with this level of complex comprehension of character and relations insofar as it manifests itself as empathy, readers 'can come to grasp feelings and values that are foreign to us, and we can also learn about ourselves as empathic experiences also reveal our own values to us and show us what we are not' (Kekki, 180). Here she presents a hitherto untouched-upon point: namely that through Reader-Response Theory analysis and an Empathic Understanding, the reader themselves becomes more aware of their own moral stance and opinions. Importantly, however, this moral stance does not exist exclusively in relation to a text, nor in any one absolute framework to be based on. Readers are always socially and culturally situated agents in and of themselves, and that context is likely to influence and colour a reading of characters, as Keen argues: 'readers' individual temperaments, in addition to their historical and cultural contexts, their experiences, and chance distinctions of their identities, have a little-acknowledged but profound impact on their responses to fictional characters' (Keen, *Empathy*, 124-125). As it pertains to the analysis of inferences about the Zeitgeist, Keen makes a broader claim about reader responses to characters as, in addition to being shaped by Empathic Understanding, also existing as a response from readers' own sociocultural situatedness:

The potential outcomes of reading fictional character extend beyond character identification and imagination... They convey warnings about hazards represented by deceptive, manipulative, or malignant characters. They invite safe role-playing imagining of actions that would be hazardous in real life. They permit rehearsal of potential future emotional states and experiences, and so forth. Each one of these outcomes could refract differently through the lens of temperament, with bold and shy readers making different use of the opportunities to travel with characters. Though the governing principle of

character education by way of fiction takes a simple view of fiction reading as formative of character and behaviour, real world responses to fictional character may be more shaped by disposition than a shaper of them (Keen, *Empathy*, 126)

Her argument, as it relates to Reader-Response Theory, posits that reading is not only an act of transactional understanding between reader and characters, but is also a way of configuring those same relational dynamics in terms of how different readers understand different characters differently depending on their own sociocultural predispositions and aforementioned temperaments. Zunshine surmises this point and contextualises it in accordance with specific social markers, saying that ‘Cultural traditions, social stereotypes, and professional occupations all play roles in hindering the way we understand each other’s intentions’ (Zunshine, 59). This is further remarked upon by Delanoy, as he argues ‘from a dialogic perspective, human understanding is viewed as subject to basic limitations resulting from humans’ socio-cultural embeddedness, their limited lifespans, the hyper-complexity of their habitats, and their restricted cognitive and sensory capabilities’ (Delanoy, 11-12). While being sociologically dense and requiring an extensive matrix of factors in order to be configurable, on the conceptual level, all three argue that sociocultural situatedness and temperaments of readers intersect and, to some extent, condition how a given reader will respond to a character.

Considering this, Keen questions the efficacy of Narrative Empathy as it intersects with identity, asking if ‘we respond because we belong to an in-group, or can narrative empathy call to us across boundaries of difference?’ (Keen, *Empathy*, 37). While an idealised view of fiction more broadly is that it *can* create resonance across boundaries – as stated by the principles of Empathic Understanding of both textual elements and reader engagement influencing the nuance with which a work is being engaged – responses may be argued to always retain an element of predisposition and conditioning from self-identified group belongings. Keen’s argument for the use of empathy takes into account the multifaceted aspects of sociocultural belongings and temperamental predispositions and prompts an awareness of how narratives and characters can come across to different readers, and how those differences can then be targeted for in order for a text to have the desired effect on the desired audience. Lastly, in order to better contextualise what is meant by reader temperaments, Keen references Hochman’s Character in Literature chart to distinguish the different ways in which differing temperaments of readers validate character personas

differently.¹³ In this way, reader temperaments becomes another factor for understanding Reader-Response as individually situated in each reader, and affected by predispositions of temperament, or, as Keen puts it, ‘It would attempt to disentangle what fictional character ought to be from what it actually is for readers of various temperaments’ (Keen, *Empathy*, 128).

2.3.4: Setting: Demystification

While establishing connection with characters appears to be a more straight-forward endeavour due to relatability, the same principles of Affective Resonance and dynamic co-construction also appear for a relatability of setting within a narrative. Narrative setting, regardless of genre or form, becomes Demystified by relating it to one’s own experiences in much the same way a reader’s superimposition of information onto a character makes them more knowable to themselves. Returning to Keen’s argument about the collaborative efforts of readers, she states ‘Regardless of the order of the response to the stimulus of fiction reading, its impact requires the active collaboration of readers, whose mental simulation co-creates fictional worlds devised by authors’ (Keen, *Affective Resonance*, 203). This active response of the reader constitutes a creative dynamic based on textual prompts which they use to reconstruct the world as imagined by the author. However, as discussed in Chapter 2.2 in relation to empathic inaccuracy, Reader-Response Theory emphasises the reader’s understanding of a story as based off textual elements of Expressivity of Language and the Expressive Quality above the explicit intentionality of the author. As such, the reader’s reconstruction of the setting exists separate from the author’s initial construction of it, as the reader understands the setting according to their own lived experience, and so makes it more relatable via its constituent parts of description and portrayed storyworld interaction with it. As demonstrated by these textual elements, this reconstruction is not arbitrary either. The text, through mechanisms of description and narration, guides and regulates the reader’s responses by dictating what is brought to their attention within the story. As Mart argues, ‘the text activates the reader’s early experiences concerning his/her experiences with literature and with his/her life; guides for the selection, rejection and order of what comes forth; and regulates what should be brought to the reader’s attention’ (Mart, 81). That is to say, any text for any reader is on some level a meta-narrative existing in a formulaic relation to literature the reader has previously engaged with that will inform their expectations, as well as their

¹³ Stylisation – naturalism; Coherence – incoherence; Wholeness – fragmentariness; Literariness – symbolism; Complexity – simplicity; Transparency – opacity; Dynamism – staticism

past lived experiences functioning much to the same ends. The text primarily regulates what is brought to the reader's attention, which in relation to setting takes the shape of location, description, area, time, and other markers of space, thereby using, as Keen argues, 'Textual content and narrative technique [to] put some limits on the possible interpretations of a text' (Keen, *Empathy*, 105).

2.3.5: Setting: In-betweenness

Returning to Keen's other theorising of Affective Resonance, the ways in which this regulative attention takes place happens on multiple potential levels of interactions¹⁴, which can broadly be understood as the different levels of In-betweenness of narrative from which a relational understanding of the setting occurs via, as Keen says 'the reader's co-creation of the fictional world by responding to the text's instructions and implications about all of the former positions' (Keen, *Affective Resonance*, 9). In addition to structuring setting, this relational matrix also, by virtue of coming across via characters, further adds to the reader's evolving understanding of the narrative as it exists in the minds of those characters. That is, as Zunshine argues, 'we recursively embed – mostly on the third level – thoughts, feelings, and wishes of its characters, as well as... of its narrators and implied audiences' (Zunshine, 219). Setting, then, is brought to life via the characters inhabiting it, the narrator, implied narratee, author, and reader – with all of these perspectives existing within the reader's own unique configuration of how these relations coexist.

Chapter 3: Overview of the Narrative

The story of *Fourth Wing* takes place in the country of Navarre on the Continent where ongoing conflicts with neighbouring countries have led the nation to pursue an isolationist policy. The Basgiath War College aims to educate soldiers to aid in the defence of Navarre's borders via four specialised faculties, or Quarters – these being the Scribe Quadrant, the Healer Quadrant, the Infantry Quadrant, and the Riders Quadrant. The last of which is where young cadets from across the country are put through brutal training where death, whether accidental or intentional at the hand of other students, is officially sanctioned policy. The purpose of this policy is to prepare

¹⁴ (author (narrator (character – character) narratee) reader)

them for the Selection and Threshing traditions where they bond with a dragon as their Rider – the reasoning being that only the strongest and most capable individuals are deemed worthy of becoming official Riders. While the dragons are largely an independent body from humans, they agreed to enter a pact with them in order to defend their home, the Vale, as well as to defend the stability of the magic within Navarre. The main character Violet Sorrengail is forced by her mother Lilith, a senior general of the military, to enrol into the Riders Quadrant despite intending to join the Scribes Quadrant from a young age. Violet has a disability, alluded to being Ehler-Danlos syndrome, which makes her ligaments uniquely frail and causes her to be in regular pain when performing physically straining tasks. Upon entering the Riders Quadrant, she encounters Xaden Riorson, a third year at the Quadrant and the son of one Fen Riorson, who in the past led a rebellion against the king of Navarre in which Violet's older brother Brennan was killed. Fen was captured and executed by Lilith alongside the vast majority of the people who took part in the rebellion on his side. A deal was later struck wherein the children of the rebels would be Marked by the king's dragon and enrolled into the Riders Quadrant to fight on Navarre's behalf – the underlying thought being that they would either die or be deemed unworthy by the dragons. Xaden initially intends to kill Violet as revenge, but over the course of the narrative, the two grow closer through a series of encounters and conversations that gradually results in them catching feelings for each other. After successfully bonding with Tairn, one of the largest and strongest dragons on the Continent, who is also mated to Xaden's bonded dragon Sgaeyl, Violet and Xaden gain the power to telepathically communicate with each other and are conditioned to remain close to each other due to their dragons not being able to be apart from each other for prolonged periods of time. Throughout the book, Violet uncovers parts of a larger conspiracy involving the powers of government and outside forces it is revealed towards the end that Xaden actively supports. After being sent out to an exercise mission revealed to be a plot to kill Xaden and some of his followers at the school, Violet learns of the truth about the conspiracy and decides to join forces with him, but not without feeling betrayed by him and refusing to continue their romantic relationship.

Chapter 4: Textual Analysis

4.1: The Word-World At Large

In *Fourth Wing* the component of the narrative that is most central to reader engagement is the struggle for survival the main character, Violet, goes through at the war college, as well as her adversarial, romantic, and sexual tension with her senior and commanding officer within the hierarchy of the school, Xaden Riorson. As such, the book will primarily be analysed in relation to how these plot points manage to establish and develop a sense of empathy with the reader, as well as conceptualising how the reader takes an active part in that development.

A basic level of this understanding in relation to fiction is the conceptualisation of the narrator as the ‘someone’ narrating the events of the story, which, in the case of *Fourth Wing*, becomes clear via the narration being the first-person present tense account of Violet. An additional level of meta-narration exists through the storyworld foreword of the novel stating ‘The following text has been faithfully transcribed from Navarrian into the modern language by Jesinia Neilwart, Curator of the Scribe Quadrant at Basgiath War College. All events are true, and names have been preserved to honour the courage of those fallen. May their souls be commended to Malek’ (Yarros, 0). Instead of being an abstraction on the level of characters or narrator, this foreword acts as a para-text that explicitly foregrounds the presence of characters as the chief conveyors of the events, thereby letting the reader more easily register the events as ‘told’ instead of ‘presented’. As mentioned, considering Complex Embedment to be the degree to which characters display interior awarenesses, this example of Expressivity of Language as ‘telling’ events necessitates an awareness on the part of Jesinia that she is being ‘read’ or listened to. Another example of this is when Violet discusses her chances of surviving the Parapet, the initiation trial for the Riders Quadrant, with her big sister, Mira, as the older says “‘Though you’ll be a cadet by sunset, I suppose.” *Or dead*. Neither of us says it’ (Yarros, 6). Violet’s interiority is acknowledged by default via her role as narrator, but Mira’s interiority is similarly acknowledged as existing in relation to Violet via the statement of a shared, unspoken understanding of the circumstances. Conversely, a character being aware of the limited awareness of other characters also defines the degree of Complex Embedment. For example, after accidentally reading a recent battle report while on library duty with a

classmate, Violet enters the Battle Brief class wherein students discuss such reports, but notices that the teacher, to whom the report was addressed, does not mention it, causing her to question the circumstances. ‘I glance left and right, watching the other riders begin to take notes. Surreal... None of them knows what we do, that an entire village of Navarrians was ransacked last night along the border and supplies looted... Or it had to have been marked as classified. I just missed it’ (Yarros, 279-280). The circumstances around the attack, who are in the know, why the teacher chooses to not inform the students, and how the students, unaware of the situation, simply follows along, are examples of how this passage embeds intentionality in characters and prompts the reader to engage in sense-making of the narrative and involved characters within the framework created by the author that dictates which answers are probable.

Registering events as told then enables the reader to judge what is being narrated as being from the point of view of Violet, wherein an assessment of her character depends on being able to consistently grasp how and why she thinks the way she does. One example can be found in taking the evident popularity of the main love interest of Violet, Xaden Riorson¹⁵, and trace the felt emotions about him by the readers back to the way he is represented, or, expressed by the text. Given that the first-person present tense narrative voice of Violet is the lens through which the text is being experienced, the Expressivity of Language conditions the empathic response on the degree to which the readers are made to understand Violet’s reactions towards Xaden through her expressed emotions. During their initial encounter, Violet describes the moment as

The third turns in my direction and my heart simply... stops. He’s tall, with windblown black hair and dark brows. The line of his jaw is strong and covered by warm tawny skin and dark stubble, and when he folds his arms across his torso, the muscles in his chest and arm ripple, moving in a way that make me swallow. And his eyes... His eyes are the shade of gold-flecked onyx. The contrast is startling. Jaw-dropping even – everything about him is... He’s the most exquisite man I’ve ever seen. And living in the war college means I’ve seen a *lot* of men. Even the diagonal scar that bisects his left eyebrow and marks the top corner of his cheek only makes him hotter. Flaming hot. Scorching hot. Gets-you-in-trouble-and-you-like-it level of hot (Yarros, 20-21)

¹⁵ This will be elaborated upon in chapter 5. For now, it will suffice to say that the number of instances referring to him positively across the 20 Goodreads reviews totals 52

On an aesthetic level, the Expressive Quality of this passage makes it straight-forward to identify the emotional response of being captivated by the physical features of another person, as well as the nature of their description as ‘dark’ and ‘strong’ evoking character traits consistent with the ‘bad-boy’ archetype. The Expressive Quality on the empathic level, however, comes not from the reader’s own emotional response to this passage, but from their understanding of how and why Violet *in particular* has this reaction to him. She has been alluded to as having Ehler-Danlos syndrome, making her body uniquely frail which combined with her relatively small height of 1.52 metres and a self-conscious attitude about it, signals to the reader that she does not have physically or mentally dominant attributes. Her physical attraction to Xaden, then, is understood by her finding those attributes in other people attractive, of which Xaden is ‘the most exquisite’ example. This is further evidenced by her repeated assessment of how hot he is, up until and including her own awareness of the appeal of the ‘gets-you-in-trouble-and-you-like-it’ personality he might represent – which at this stage in the book also furthers the reader’s understanding of Violet’s Known Aspects. The point of the empathic level of Expressive Quality is to assess the consistency of a character’s expressed emotions in relation to their lived context. Using the passage above as an example, instead of empathically identifying with Violet’s attraction to Xaden’s persona, an erroneous, inconsistent, assessment would be for a reader to identify her feelings as envious admiration for his looks and stature, wishing that she herself could embody those traits.

Further, the process of meaning-making on the part of the reader is dependent upon the lived context of characters being sufficiently expressed via the Expressive Quality to allow the former to readily imagine the latter’s mental state. Such as, since Violet is made by her mother to enrol in the Basgiath War College as a Rider, regulations state that any of her fellow students, save those in her own Squad, are within their right to kill her. The impact of this piece of information becomes grasped by the reader first when they engage in a mental simulation of how this could happen, which is underscored by Violet’s own remark of ‘The thousands of twenty-year-olds waiting outside the gate to enter their chosen quadrant for service are the smartest and strongest in Navarre. Hundreds of them have been preparing for the Riders Quadrant, the chance to become one of the elites, since birth. I’ve had exactly six months’ (Yarros, 1). Her comparative unpreparedness to them invites the reader to consider the intensity

and ferocity with which the other people are focused on succeeding, thereby considering their capacity and willingness to kill Violet to get there as an act of co-creational worldbuilding.

In addition to this co-creation is the Reader-Response as it pertains to how the significance of textual elements is understood on the Causal and Reflective level. For instance, during a sparring session, Violet happens to see, and in vivid details describe, the sight of Xaden sparring shirtless. The following exchange between her and two other students of her year goes:

“Stop objectifying out wingleader,” Liam teases. “Is that what we’re doing?” Rhiannon asks, not bothering to look away. My mouth waters at the muscled expanse of his back and that sculpted ass. “Yeah, I think that’s what we’re doing.” Liam snorts. “We could just be watching for technique.” “Yeah. We absolutely could be.” But I’m not. I’m shamelessly wondering how his skin would feel under my fingertips, how my body would react to having every ounce of that intense focus on *me*. Heat races through my veins and stings my cheeks (Yarros, 285)

A reader response on an aesthetic level could be argued to broadly fall into the two categories of either enjoying or finding this sort of scene annoying or tasteless, because the focus is on the aesthetics of the interaction and description as considered purely by the reader in terms of its Causal impact. On an empathic level considered in its storyworld context, however – i.e. on a Reflective level, this passage may be considered markedly different. The direct remark and concurring of objectification coupled with fantasising on the part of Violet about how it would feel to have ‘every ounce of that intense focus on *me*’ is both consistent with her as a character and the text’s established attitudes towards sexual interactions in the setting. Further, its thematic relevance is poignant in the sense that it openly affirms female sexuality and female lust without pretence of otherwise, which is consistent with the wider thematic structure of self-actualisation and defining one’s own person within the storyworld.

The interplay between Unknown and Known Aspects of characters exists within an Empathic Understanding as situated agents within the narrative whose likeability could be argued to be understood by the Affective Resonance created between them and the reader. This comes as a result of how each character makes themselves known, and stays unknown, to the reader. An example of this is the evolving Affective Resonance between the reader and the character of Dain. He is introduced as Violet’s childhood

friend, and she is asked by her sister before entering the College to seek him out so that he can help her survive. During their first meeting after the Parapet, Violet describes him as ‘The beautiful, easygoing smile that’s starred in way too many of my fantasies is far from the scowl that purses his mouth, and everything about him seems a little... harder, but it works for him...Sometime in the last year, Dain Aetos went from attractive and cute to *gorgeous*’ (Yarros, 35). The judgement the reader makes of him is naturally influenced by Violet narrating everything insofar as the Expressivity of Language understands the utterance as hers, but the Expressive Quality of aesthetic and contextual empathy respectively emphasise his good looks as appealing, and his past connection to Violet as a marker of security. Beyond that, his Unknowability as an Other enables the reader to superimpose a range of elements and qualities onto him such as having a romantic interest in Violet, intending to take on a mentoring-role or having grown disinterested in her during their time apart. At this stage of the book, all of these exist as possible trajectories for him, and the Unknowability of his character enables the reader to speculate on which direction his character will go in. While this is not an original conception of characters in and of itself, it is a useful way of thinking about the practical ways in which a reader makes a character understood in the context of the narrative and of themselves as engaging in active meaning-making. The understanding of his character is further contextualised by a later scene in which they are alone where, after confirming that they have missed each other, Violet notes ‘he says [so] quietly, his eyes softening. My chest draws tight, and there’s an awareness between us, an almost tangible sense of... anticipation as he looks at me. Maybe after all these years, we’re finally on the same page when it comes to wanting each other. Or maybe he’s just relieved to see an old friend’ (Yarros, 39). This exchange further narrows his Unknowability as a character by establishing a sense of intimacy between them, albeit one still unspecified in nature. The transactional moral code between reader and character, conversely, occurs first when an ideological stance is clearly being taken by the character, i.e. when a Known Aspect of the character becomes defined enough to reject a superimposition of intentionality by the reader. This is made apparent with Dain as he suggests sneaking Violet into the Scribe Quadrant, in order to keep her safe.

“You’ll break the first time they put you in the sparring ring, and that’s *before* the dragons sense that you’re...” He shakes his head and looks away, his jaw clenching. “I’m *what?*” My hackles rise. “Go ahead and say it. When they sense I’m *less than* the others?”

Is that what you mean?” ... “As it was, last year we had thirty-four unbonded cadets who have just been sitting around, waiting to restart the year with this class to get a chance at binding again, and they’re all perfectly healthy—” “Don’t be an asshole.” My stomach falls. Just because he might be right doesn’t mean I want to hear it... or want to be called *unhealthy*. “I’m trying to keep you alive... I can’t protect you here. Not fully.” “I’m not asking you to!” ... Next to Mira, Dain is the person who knows me best on the entire damned Continent, and even he thinks I can’t hack it here (Yarros, 42).

In this case, Dain’s stated desire to protect Violet informs his moral code of wanting to shoulder the burden of keeping her safe which, while being done willingly, reflects his moral stance of thinking her incapable of surviving on her own. Depending on whether the reader agrees with this assessment, Dain either conforms to or contrasts their assumptions and expectations of him, which in turn make them positively or negatively inclined towards his character. Agreement does not precede positive inclination, however, as a character whose moral stance is in opposition to that of the reader can still be considered qualitatively good if their Expressive Quality of contextual empathy remains coherent while their Unknowability as an Other allows for a nuanced assessment of their complex embedment. As an example, a well-written villain is not well-written because the reader is prompted to agree with them, but rather because their actions make sense in the context of the narrative and their role in it, while also being unpredictable enough for those actions to surprise and engage the reader. Other moments in the book further contribute to the development of this transactional moral code via Dain’s dynamic with Violet. She remarks that ‘Seeing him is the best part of my day, even in the moments when he’s anything but personable in public. Even in the moments where he’s consumed with trying to save me from this place’ (Yarros, 98) but goes on to contrast him with Xaden when ‘Dain squeezes my hand gently. “Just steer clear of him.” I blink. The advice is so different from Xaden’s throw-a-few-daggers-at-his-head approach.’ (Yarros, 101). Of note with these examples is that while they serve to establish his moral code, he is not shown to grow more complex as a character via actions or conflicts, which means that he does not retain a degree of Unknowability – in turn making him more predictable and less interesting, as per Lobo’s argument. This is demonstrated by his argument with Xaden, having accused the latter of having broken the rules after Violet bonded with two dragons at Threshing.

“And out of curiosity, would you have, let’s say *bent* those rules to save your precious little Violet in that field?” ... “Dain’s jaw flexes, and I see the war in his eyes... “No. I

wouldn't have." My heart hits the ground. I've always known deep down that Dain valued rule and order more than relationships, more than me, but to have it so cruelly displayed cuts deeper than Tynan's sword (Yarros, 201)

As such, the rigidity of his moral code as it exists in a transactional relationship to the reader, does not evolve or provide the reader with anything new to comprehend and contextualise him by. This in turn makes him too much of a known quantity that is too far removed from the Empathic Understanding of the other main characters the reader is far more likely to relate to, such as Violet, to be considered favourably by that reader. This is further established mainly by three scenes; when he first kisses Violet, when he refuses to believe her accusation about a friend of his, and when he realises the feelings that Violet has for Xaden. They are in order described by Violet as

His lips are soft, but the kiss is firm, and delight races up my spine. After years, Dain is *finally* kissing me. The thrill is gone in less than a heartbeat. There's no heat. No energy. No sharp slice of lust. Disappointment sours the moment, but not for Dain. He's all smiles as he pulls away. It was over in an instant. It was everything I've ever wanted... except... *Shit*. I don't want it anymore (Yarros, 207)

"It's impossible." His cheeks flush a mottled shade of red. "I was there, Dain." The reality of his disbelief hurts so much more than I expected, like a blow to my already battered ribs' (Yarros, 262)

"No fucking way," Dain whispers, but it reverberates in my bones like a lightning strike. I pivot, dropping my hand from Xaden's arm, but it's obvious by Dain's expression that he now knows there's something between Xaden and me – and he's hurt. My stomach hits the ground. "Dain..." "Him?" Dain's eyes widen and his face flushes. "You and... *him*?" ... "If he's what you choose..." He sighs. "Then I guess that has to be enough for me, doesn't it?" "Yes." I nod. Thank gods all this nonsense is about to be past us. He swallows hard and leans in to whisper, "I'll miss you, Violet" (Yarros, 465)

In all of the above scenes, Dain, as he is described by Violet, remains Empathically Understandable on the level of the storyworld's contextual Expressive Quality. Yet, as the dynamic created by his Unknowability as an Other and his Known Aspects skew heavily in the direction of being a known quantity standing too far in opposition to Violet – who acts as the moral reference point of the narrative – his place in the story is far more likely than not to be considered negatively by the engaged reader.

As for setting, *Fourth Wing* is largely confined to the Basgiath War College and contains, on the whole, little in the way of physical descriptions of what the school looks like. Despite this, there are multiple ways in which the setting is configured and made to be understood by the reader. The primary example is the setting being an academic institution which demystifies a large part of the functional and structural mechanisms. With the college functioning as a metaphorical entry into a new arena of life, the reader relates Violet's experience to their own of entering a new academic institution. This in turn indirectly invoke notions of uncertainty around new people and customs but simultaneously simulates a familiarity with the concepts of lesson plans, dorms, layouts consisting of classrooms, staff offices, and recreational facilities, as well as a hierarchy of upperclassmen and individual merits and distinctions. More specific to the story's setting is the different Quadrants – functionally faculties – that make up the college, wherein Violet is in the Rider Quadrant. After surviving the Parapet, in an exchange between her and Rhiannon, her first friend, the latter says 'Have you seen the people around here? I swear I just saw a second-year with pink streaks in her hair, and one guy has dragon scales tattooed up his entire biceps,' to which Violet replies, 'Conformity is for the infantry' (Yarros, 34). Functionally, this description demystifies the setting by making clear the general attitude of non-conformity in the Quadrant, i.e. establishing the notion of each character being encouraged to express themselves. Violet further remarks about the first-year uniforms that they have been provided with that 'The armoured corset Mira made me isn't regulation, but I fit right in among the hundreds of modified uniforms around me' (Yarros, 51). Further to that, Dain also warns that 'This place can warp almost everything about a person, Vi. It cuts away the bullshit and the niceties, revealing whoever you are at your core. They want it that way' (Yarros, 59). While in the literal sense talking about the kill-or-be-killed policy of the college that requires a degree of suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader to accept, the 'cut-throat' mentality of a prestigious academic institution allows the reader to further demystify the setting. By fronting these examples early on, the book guides and regulates the reader's attention to focus on the components of the setting that are the most relevant to the story – namely Violet's struggle to overcome the odds of surviving in a hostile environment. Similarly to how the sociocultural situatedness and temperament of a reader to an extent conditions their response to characters, differently situated readers could also be argued to respond and relate differently to a setting depending on how they configure it.

4.2: Violet and the Question of ‘Taming’ Xaden

4.2.1: The Question

A core component of Violet’s character is, as previously mentioned, that she is physically weak and outmatched by her peers from the get-go. She is, however, shown from early on to be very intelligent and mentally capable. She makes it across the Parapet by reciting the history of the Continent to herself by following the advice of her father: ‘*Your mind already knows the answer, so just calm down and let it remember*’ (Yarros, 27), demonstrating a high level of mental fortitude that gets rewarded later when Xaden teaches her to mentally Shield herself from the minds of her bonded dragons which she masters in a matter of moments, as he expresses ‘You are astonishing... I couldn’t do that for *weeks*’ (Yarros, 298). In a similar vein, her extensive knowledge of poisons allows her to win a series of one-on-one challenges by making her opponents sick in advance (chapter 8); she manages to ascend the Gauntlet¹⁶ on a technicality about the use of her knife, earning the insult-taken-as-a-compliment from one of the adjudicators of ‘You think like a scribe’ (Yarros, 153); she remains calm during Presentation when two dragons approach her by comprehending their thought process of recognising the scales on her vest as being those from her sister’s dragon (chapter 12); and she is able to defeat an attacker without killing him by virtue of her knife-throwing skills and anatomical knowledge, from her own joints being very fragile, to know exactly where to hit to disable him (chapter 14). These examples gradually solidify the Known Aspect of her character as being able to utilise her intelligence to overcome her physical disadvantages to still come out on top – as well as growing more confident in her own capabilities in the process, while also informing her character traits of showing mercy and compassion towards others as in the cases of the challenges and the attacker.

While the issue of using her intelligence to overcome challenges is rooted in logic and rationality, her more empathic traits invite an aspect of Unknowability by asking how far she is willing/able to take that ideology. Her choices to show mercy towards hostile characters then become a point of Affective Resonance between the reader and her, where her choices inform the transactional moral code between both parties by contrasting the reader’s assumptions and expectations about her. This streak of compassion may also be understood in terms of her willingness to trust and build relationships with other students, as the

¹⁶ A sheer cliff with an obstacle course the students need to ascend in order to get to the Flight Deck where they learn to fly on the dragons

Unknowability of the interiority of other characters imply that both she and the reader must make a judgement about who is trustworthy or not. Examples of this are her proactive willingness to help ensure Rhiannon makes it across the Parapet (chapter 1); wanting to show mercy to an upperclassman after they have been sentenced to death for conspiring to kill Violet in her sleep (chapter 20); and deeply feeling for Xaden as he has withdrawn from a party due to his personal struggles with his role at the college (chapter 32). In all of these, it is the Unknowability of their narrative position as an Other that prompts a judgement of them based on their Known Aspects. In the case of Rhiannon and Mavis, the upperclassman, these are straight-forward assessments, as neither possess much in the way of complex embedment of interior states. Rhiannon is quickly shown to reciprocate Violet's friendliness and express little complexity of mind beyond her reactivity to Violet's circumstances, whereas Mavis appears far less in the story and functions primarily in relation to Violet via her relationship to Dain. As discussed in relation to him, neither of these characters retain a balanced degree of Unknowability in relation to their known aspects to be considered complex. However, in the case of Rhiannon, her values as a known quantity are closely aligned with those of Violet, making her far more likely to be a favourably considered character because of it. As such, their primary function is in relation to Violet to enable her to display compassion and kindness, while at the same time, in the case of Rhiannon, being another character for her to play off of through comedic and playful banter to set the tone.

In connection with Xaden, in addition to displaying logical intelligence Violet also demonstrates a degree of emotional intelligence in how she navigates their relationship. As the following section will show, sexual innuendos and explicit language at times colour much of Violet's interactions with some characters, yet there are multiple occasions where she expresses nuanced thoughts in relation to those same topics. As one example during a conversation with Xaden after they have slept together goes,

"You want me." I put my hand on his chest and feel his heart pounding. "And I know that scares you even though I want you just as badly." He stiffens. "But here's the thing." I hold his gaze, knowing he could bolt at any second. "You don't get to dictate how I feel. You might give the orders out there, but not in here. You don't get to tell me we can fuck but I can't fall for you. That's not fair. You can only respect what I choose to do. So we're not doing this again until I *want* to risk my heart. And if I fall, then that's my problem, not yours. You're not responsible for my choices" (Yarros, 426)

The Affective Resonance of her statement negotiates her own agency as it pertains to the romance and intimacy of their relationship while not diminishing or dismantling Xaden's own character in the context of his role within the hostile environment of the college.

Thusly, Violet's character is defined by her ability to utilise intelligence and compassion over brute force to overcome challenges and resolve conflicts, as well as being shown to extend and display that compassion to others as a way of reinforcing her personality. This could inform the popularity of the book among a predominantly female reader base as being rooted in a broader desire for non-violent conflict resolution that favours a compassionate approach to confrontations, being made more apparent by the stark contrast of that approach to the 'conventional wisdom' of the college. As such, the sociocultural situatedness of readers in a Western, educated democratic society may broadly be said to validate this ideology as it is represented by Violet, as her character is understood favourably by virtue of the popularity of the book, given her role as the primary protagonist.

4.2.2: The 'Taming'

Another element of her character is her specific relationship with Xaden, and by extension her – and the book's – wider relationship with expressed sexuality. Early remarks such as in a conversation with Mira: "I happen to know a rider whose powers can make big things very small." A devious smile plays across her lips. "And smaller things... much, much bigger." I roll my eyes. Mira's always been more vocal about her men than I have been... about all two of them. "I mean, how much bigger?" (Yarros, 10); while when alone with Dain after they just met: "Don't worry – if someone sees us, I'll just say that I was overcome with lust at first sight and couldn't wait another second to get you out of your pants... I can throw in a few *oh*, *Dain* cries once we're in your room just for believability," I offer, and actually mean it' (Yarros, 38); and later during sparring: 'The guys are mostly shirtless because they think shirts give their opponent something to grab on to. Personally, I'm not arguing with their logic, just enjoying the view' (Yarros, 69). Coupled with her aforementioned description of Xaden the first time she met him, these early examples demonstrate the book's use of suggestive and descriptive physicality to inform the Expressivity of Language both as it pertains to be utterances by one, or multiple, 'somebodies' as well as being in direct reference to other characters. This character-about-character and character-to-character language is made apparent to the reader, prompting a sense of characterhood and personality to the voices, mainly Violet's, in the narrative.

Further, the text negotiates her relationship with Xaden on multiple levels vis-à-vis the characters and the reader. Within the storyworld, the Expressive Quality of the aesthetic elements invites the reader to ‘indulge’ in the engagement of such sexually charged exchanges as humorous and potentially relatable to personal desires. Put differently, it represents a sexually liberated narrative that, by virtue of being framed via Violet, centres the female experience and the Female Gaze as they relate to the issue of sexuality and interpersonal connections on the platonic and intimate level that constitute what could be called her sexual narrative agency. As argued by Hartney and Brand, as far as *Fourth Wing* may be argued to be a representation of that Female Gaze by virtue of being written by, from the perspective of, and for an audience consisting primarily of, women – the notion of ‘beauty’ as it pertains to sexually charged descriptions of intimacy opens for a discussion about what constitutes a ‘good’ representation of female sexuality. Again, while no formal description of the Female Gaze as it pertains to literature is established, the general understanding of it, as laid out in the introduction, is that it puts a bigger emphasis on emotional investment and attraction rather than the physical traits of sexual appeal – which in this case is being considered under the broader term of ‘beauty’.

The starkest example of this found in the book is in chapter 30, which begins directly after Violet has initiated by kissing Xaden. This takes place after Violet, after unlocking her signet¹⁷ and in a burst of anger, killed another student during a flight test. As she is principally opposed to killing, Violet is left in a state of emotional and moral turmoil which Xaden pulls her out of by validating her feelings. ‘There is nothing *wrong* with you. You get to be angry that you killed a man today... that man tried to kill your friend. You get to feel however you want within these walls’ (Yarros, 402). After inviting her to take out her anger on him, Violet then kisses him, thinking that ‘Hitting him is the last thing I want to do, and suddenly, I’m done fighting it’ (Yarros, 402). This comes after a series of back-and-forth moments between them and represents Violet ‘letting go’ of her inhibitions. That she is the one who initiates it is an important point, as it indicates her maintaining control and fully consenting to the situation, while in another sense willingly letting go of controlling or containing her emotions and wants. ‘The plea in his tone floods my veins with a whole different form of power. Knowing he is just as affected by our attraction as I am is a rush’ (Yarros, 403), is an example of how the encounter frames their intimacy as a mutual attraction that constitutes an equal share of power. Xaden’s plea lets Violet know that she has

¹⁷ Unique power granted to the Rider after they have successfully bonded with a dragon

that power over him, from the get-go situating the encounter as between equals. Further descriptions such as “‘If I get my hands on you... I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop.’ He would. I know it in my soul. That’s why I trust him with my body’ (Yarros, 406-407), ‘the moan that rips from his lips make me feel invincible’ (Yarros, 408), “‘I’ve never lost control like that.’ He says, bracing his weight on one arm and brushing my hair back from my face with the other. The move is so gentle, so at odds with what we’ve just experienced, that I can’t help but blink, then smile’ (Yarros, 411), all contrast the sexually explicit descriptions with affirmations of her agency and desire. The Expressivity of the Language makes clear that she is the one in control, even when a loss of control is implied during their intercourse, maintaining a position of sexual narrative agency. As such, the way female sexuality is being explored emphasises physical gratification in the form of touch and stimulation that corresponds with Violet’s stated desires, including a partial loss of situational control in favour of heightened arousal. The appeal also comes from the psychological comfort of feeling secure and in emotional control, as the consensual intimacy implicates the perceived control of Xaden to contain the effects Violet has on him.

Additionally, there are multiple occasions where Xaden expresses a vested interest in Violet’s training and improved physical capabilities while framing it as her realising her own potential – in contrast to Dain’s more directly protecting, and by extension diminishing, approach towards her. In one of their earlier exchanges, he says “‘Fascinating. You look all frail and breakable, but you’re really a violent little thing, aren’t you?’ ... I hate how beautiful he is... He’s like one of those poisonous flowers I’ve read about... His allure is a warning not to get too close, and I am *definitely* too close’ (Yarros, 94-95), while during the previously mentioned moment where he teaches her how to shield; ‘Xaden studies me with an intensity that makes me sway towards him “You are astonishing.” ... His thumbs stroke over the soft skin under my ears, and his gaze drops to my mouth and heats... This is everything I should run from, and yet denying the primal attraction I feel is completely, utterly impossible’ (Yarros, 298), and later in a sparring session;

“You need weaponry designed for your body type.” At least he didn’t say *weaknesses*... I study the blade in his hand... “It’s spectacular.” “It’s yours.” My head snaps up, but there’s no line in his onyx eyes. “I had it made for you.” His lips curve slightly. “What?” My mouth opens, and my chest tightens. He took the time to have it made? Shit. That gives me feelings I really don’t want to have. Soft, confusing feelings (Yarros, 322)

In these examples, his established competence as a skilled authority figure serve to validate his acknowledgement of her potential as well as in-context taking a personal interest in her improvement. They are also contextualised by the sexually charged language used to frame them, thereby portraying him as strong and dangerous, yet competent and considerate towards her, which, as reflected by Violet's narration, act as compounding factors for the intensity and complexity of her emotions. This then reframes a simplistic description of Xaden as a 'bad-boy' and 'toxic man' by his revealed layers of Known Aspects establishing a transactional moral code with the reader that centres around his deepening connection to Violet. He retains the aesthetics of the archetype but is enabled to be validated by readers via their sociocultural situatedness emphasising his other qualities that exist in his relation to Violet.

The Expressive Quality of contextually situated empathy also negotiates this desire via an understanding of Violet grappling with her own thoughts about her desires. After Xaden initiates a sparring lesson that results in them jostling on the mat, she describes her feelings as 'Beautiful. Fucking. Asshole. My breath catches and my body warms, the traitorous bitch. *You are not attracted to toxic men*, I remind myself, and yet, here I am, getting all attracted. I have been since the first second I saw him, if I feel like being honest' (Yarros, 119). Her established and expressed attitude towards sexual fantasies, also in explicit relation to Xaden, are consistent with her description of her own reaction to the situation, informed also by the complicated context of the two of them being supposed to hate each other. The internal conflict informs Violet's relationship to her own feelings, as well as those of the reader – insofar as the Affective Resonance between the reader and the text prompts the reader to consider and negotiate the propriety of those feelings for a character like Xaden. As previously mentioned, his initial character personality and traits are consistent with the 'bad-boy' archetype, which has traditionally been viewed as a kind of hyper-masculinity, and has more recently been associated with the 'toxic masculinity' discourse. At face value, this makes Violet's attraction to him be indeed toxic, yet the popularity of the book points to a strong Affective Resonance between the text and readers, indicating that the portrayal of Xaden, as far as his relation to Violet goes, connects with a large portion of readers as they exist within the sociocultural situatedness implied by the quantitative data to consider him/the representation of him as desirable.

Furthermore, unlike Dain, Xaden maintains a big degree of Unknowability throughout the narrative, inviting a superimposition of qualities and traits from what is known about him.

While he is initially characterised only through his public-facing ‘bad-boy’ persona and his curt attitude towards Violet, his gradual knowability from other factors could, again, be taken as indicative of the narrative ‘correctly’ developing his character’s moral code in transactional line with reader expectations and assumptions as per their sociocultural situatedness. From that, it could thus be argued that the traits he comes to embody are positively comprehended by readers. The culmination of the examples that constitute these is represented in chapter 32 when Violet confronts him on the Parapet about their feelings for each other.

I finally trust him enough to know he won’t go for the kill... “You. Want. Me, Xaden Riorson. You might not say it, but you do one better and *show* it. You show it every time you choose to trust me, every time your eyes linger on mine. You show it with every sparring lesson you don’t have time for, and every flight lesson that pulls you away from your own studies. You show it when you refuse to touch me because you’re worried I don’t really want you, then show it again when you take the time to hunt down violets before a leadership meeting so I don’t wake up feeling alone” (Yarros, 442-443)

These qualities he exhibits, when taken together over the course of the narrative, come to be constituent parts of the larger knowability of his character, whereby his popularity is indicative of a confluence with reader predispositions from a sociocultural situatedness. As such, his exterior qualities mixed with his gradually revealed interiority of a unique care and consideration for Violet arguably validate him for a large portion of readers as being the ideal fantasy of a desired love interest. A significant distinction to make here is the assumption of a character representing a *desired reality* or an *idealised fantasy*. While both representations can consist of the same qualities and attributes, the two perspectives of them existing in relation to a textual or lived reality must necessarily be taken into consideration, as while the dissertation so far has explored ways in which readers come to experience deep immersion in texts, an understanding of the act of reading being an abstraction of an experienced reality should be taken as a baseline assumption for readers. Walsh argues this succinctly by saying ‘The equivalence of our ideas about actual and fictitious people does not work in terms of being, but in terms of evaluative meaning’ (Walsh, 159) In other words, regardless of the assumed existence of a figure, the way in which they are comprehended comes down to the ways in which they are able to be evaluated and given specific meaning to the individual reader – part of that meaning, as far as reading is concerned, being to consider a character as just so. To that end, as Keen argues,

The potential outcomes of reading fictional character extend beyond character identification and imagination... They convey warnings about hazards represented by deceptive, manipulative, or malignant characters. They invite safe role-playing imagining of actions that would be hazardous in real life. They permit rehearsal of potential future emotional states and experiences, and so forth... Though the governing principle of character education by way of fiction takes a simple view of fiction reading as formative of character and behaviour, real world responses to fictional character may be more shaped by disposition than a shaper of them (Keen, *Empathy*, 126)

Her noteworthy points about a reading of fictional characters as they pertain to represented danger, imagined role-playing, and emotional states and experiences, as well as different readers' responses being influenced by rather than influencing dispositions, all consider readings of characters as being influenced by an understood reality, rather than influencing an understanding of that reality. Put differently, and in relation to the present analysis, that Xaden is a popular character is not indicative of the book influencing the tastes in romantic love-interests, but that an understanding of him is being influenced by readers' already-existing tastes in romantic love-interests as it is transferred via Violet's narration as the primary reader-insert.

As argued, however, this is not necessarily to say that reader affect for Xaden as a character should be taken as a real-world affection for an equal embodying of those qualities in another person. Xaden being a desired reality versus an idealised fantasy of a romantic partner is a distinction that must necessarily be viewed through the lens of *Fourth Wing* being narrated by Violet, and which should as a result be configured by Lamarque's two modes of Expressive Quality; as a reader's enjoyment of empathically *mimicking* the feelings of Violet, and empathically *understanding* Violet's feelings as they are *represented* within the storyworld of the text – and therefore exist as isolated from any person's individual conceptions of a potentially equivalent representation in reality. To that end, and in relation to Keen's argument, it is worth mentioning the part of the dynamic between Violet and Xaden that culminates in her symbolic 'taming' of him. Her descriptions of him relating to his physical appearance and brooding personality, as discussed, portrays him as a traditionally masculine 'bad-boy' character, which can be encapsulated by Violet's remark as she is hiding from a clandestine meeting between Xaden and some of the other marked students: 'I feel like a cat clinging to the leaf-tipped limbs of this tree while the wolves circle below' (Yarros, 88), and later when she points out 'He looks deceptively calm as he approaches, but I can feel

his tension as if it's my own, like a panther prowling towards his prey' (Yarros, 257). These descriptive parallels to animals may be superimposed onto his wider traits of aggression and capability. This in turn contextualises his relationship with Violet as one wherein she, over the course of the book, 'tame' him. She does not do this in a literal, physical sense, but rather, as mentioned, via her character traits of compassion and kindness that nonetheless become her way of gaining emotional power in their relationship. During their scene together in Xaden's room after the party, Violet describes how

Heat rises to my cheeks, and my mouth curves into a smile. "Thank you. Now sit." I pat the edge of his bed. "What?" His eyebrows rise. "Sit," I order, staring him down... To my absolute surprise, he does as I ask, sitting on the side of his bed... "Now what?" I move between his thighs and run my fingers through his hair. He closes his eyes and leans into my touch, and I swear, I feel my heart crack wide open. "Now I take care of you" (Yarros, 448)

While the evolution of their relationship on Xaden's end comes from his physical appeal to Violet and her emotional response to his gradual acknowledgement of her effort, capabilities, and intelligence, the way Violet proactively 'gets under his skin', so to speak, is by using her own empathic sensibilities to circumvent his authoritative persona and get to his softer, more vulnerable interior – in a sense, 'taming' his aggressive domination to willingly follow her emotional authority. As such, part of what could arguably be said to make Xaden an ideal fantasy, while also corresponding with an already-present disposition in readers, is not so much to do with the portrayal of him in isolation, but also the way in which he is 'tamed' or 'won over' by Violet's softer emotional influence. His physical dominance, then, is balanced out by her emotional dominance that makes the wider fantasy of their relationship not just a physical one, but also an emotional one in which Violet as the heroine gets to have both aspects on her terms, to a large extent, that lets her experience a fuller range of gratification from the relationship than if it would only have been one or the other. The trust inherent to this dynamic becomes evident later in the scene as she remarks 'The intensity in his eyes and the vehemence of his words should frighten me, but they don't. Even if this man loses every ounce of his self-control, I know he'll never hurt me' (Yarros, 450-451). The physical and emotional gratification and safety the moment represents for her could be argued to be an instance of Affective Resonance between the book and the reader wherein the fantasy of living out such a moment reflects broader desires to love intensely with the knowledge of still being in control and having power over the situation. Conversely, what this argument implies

is the presence of real-world anxieties surrounding this issue where these moments and emotional states are not thought of as realistically obtainable. This, then, becomes the important reference point for discussing the popularity of *Fourth Wing* as it pertains to the wider Zeitgeist.

Chapter 5: Zeitgeist Analysis

5.1: How we got here

Richard Walsh argues that ‘Fiction is not a second-order phenomenon of the kind which a mimetic framework necessarily implies, but an integral part of a culture’s discursive exploration of itself’ (Walsh, 168), which is to say that, as discussed, the exploration of fantasies within fiction are not arbitrary, but culturally specific in that it is a response to, and exploration of, the cultural moment at the time of the fiction’s creation. Nor does that fiction exist in isolation, but rather, along a socio-historical axis characterised by evolving trends, sentiments, and ideas about what constitutes the current moment. Jodi McAlister and Kate Cuthbert chart the origins of the Romantasy genre, stating that ‘The relationship between romance and fantasy is long and storied, intertwined since before the concept of literary genre itself really took root’ (McAlister & Cuthbert, 2025), linking it back to the Arthurian mythos and the tales of the knights of the Round Table. Entering the 2000s, they elaborate on the success of the Young Adult (YA) book genre, which, going into the 2010s showed that ‘the foundational principle – that there is a multi-generational readership for younger protagonists and a space in the market for protagonists ageing out of teenagehood and into young adulthood – [remains]’ (McAlister & Cuthbert, 2025). Alongside this evolution was that of the digital marketplace which shifted the means of disseminating information and criticism of books. Anna Kiernan, taking into consideration Roland Barthes’ reneging of the authority of the author and an active application of Reader-Response Theory techniques, argues that this shift can ‘be viewed as a prelude to the advent of digital criticism, online reviewing and curation, in which the experience of often unknown bloggers and influencers (the new cultural intermediaries) can become as significant (in terms of social media “likes” and sales) as the views of experts’ (Kiernan, 24). In other words, the democratising effect of the internet allowed for a multiplicity of new voices to gain a semblance of qualitative authority by way of mass-reach. This shift altered

how media has come to be engaged with, as well as creating a new foundation for the individual constructs meaning. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the Habitus, Kiernan further argues that 'The social, cultural and economic framework in which we find ourselves... informs our ability to decipher and reproduce meaning, which is inevitably informed by educational and economic factors' (Kiernan, 28). It is within this relatively new digital era that social media sites like TikTok, by virtue of enabling targeted reach via tools like the 'hashtag' function, have facilitated online spaces for talking about topics with likeminded people from around the world. Specific to TikTok, the BookTok sphere has, as according to Alysia De Melo 'caused a rise in book sales and reading patterns that other online reading communities have not been able to accomplish. The success of BookTok does not appear to be due to different content, but instead the nature of the TikTok application' (Melo, 2024). To elaborate, TikTok uses an algorithm that is highly proficient at discerning the specific tastes of the person using the app, and thus at providing a feed of content more likely to keep the individual engaged. As an aside, however, Melo points to numerous studies demonstrating that 'Cultural matching suggests that gatekeepers will use social cues related to and prefer those who share similar culture to them... cultural similarity is a form of capital as it can be converted to monetary gains' (Melo, 2024). She goes on to argue that, in a primarily White publishing industry, people of colour are incentivised to adhere to society's ideas about them (Melo, 2024), thereby skewing both representations by authors and of identities outside of the societal norms incentivised by the publishing industry. As such, in the study conducted by Melo on literary criticism and diversity specifically on TikTok, 'Out of the 134 authors, there were 94 White authors, 8 Black authors, 13 East Asian authors, 8 Latino authors, 3 Middle Eastern authors, 3 South East Asian authors, 3 South Asian authors, and for 4 authors, race was unknown' (Melo, 2024). This data further indicates that the available pool of literature people on TikTok have the potential to be exposed to is disproportionately made up of White authors. More specifically in relation to White female authors, Melo marks that 'there has been a shift toward TikTok being more gender-inclusive since women authors are highlighted on the app and have received high praise... However, this is a narrow lens as when looking into race and gender, White women make up the majority of women authors' (Melo, 2024). In relation to *Fourth Wing*, this is an important point of reference because it demonstrates how the book's popularity in part came from a social media landscape predisposed to be favouring it via a multi-

generational reader base, the digital marketplace opening the public arena of criticism and dissemination of books which gave rise to sites like TikTok, in turn causing a paradoxical narrowing-in of the fanbase via algorithms and a publishing landscape designed to steer readers toward, and highlight certain authors based on gender and ethnicity. As Laura Niebling elaborates in relation to the BookTok ‘community’ around *The Emphyrean* series, it ‘refers to the imagined main (albeit statistically not sole) audience of BookTok, which is broadly defined through a shared (mostly Anglophone) canon, specifically algorithmic “peer group” (white, cisgender, heterosexual, Gen Z/Millennial women) dynamics, the bookish lifestyle and a strong sense of community’ (Niebling, 2025). As such, it must be recognised that the popularity of *Fourth Wing* is not only attributable to its quality when looked at from the Reader-Response Theory-based framework laid out in this dissertation, but also the fortuitous circumstances surrounding its online presence that, while not predisposing it to succeed, allowed it to be more easily adopted by mainstream book discourse.

5.2: Who is ‘We’?

Following from this is what Niebling describes as the post-digital marketing strategy of reader-author connection, which she explains as relying ‘on authors and readers sharing digital spaces, but also more broadly on the well-established concept of actively *identifying* with a book franchise, as has happened in the past for Harry Potter... or The Hunger Games’ (Niebling, 2025). She argues that connection and identification acts as facilitators of the ‘bookishness’ aesthetic strategy which ‘reinscribes the cultural significance of physical books’ that become expressed through practices such as ‘acting, cosplay, fanart... or “memeing” books’ (Niebling, 2025). Through the sense of community that arise from such practices in connection with a specific franchise like *The Emphyrean*, then, Niebling argues that these series effectively ‘support identity, formation, cultural identification, and coping as consumers turn to them to organise, give, and receive social support in the face of such traumas as racist policing and sexual violence’ (Niebling, 2025). Through this, the argument can be made that the aforementioned real-world anxieties surrounding issues of consent and power dynamics in relationships, by being represented empoweringly in *Fourth Wing*, allows readers to identify with the book as a cultural artefact of the Zeitgeist that validates those anxieties both by showing a healthy subversion of them as well as enabling a sense of community around shared enjoyment of the book. As Niebling goes on to say, ‘It is a

dynamic activity that produces meaning shaped by the time and place in which a reader reads' (Niebling, 2025). By using a qualitative compilation of information from the twenty most popular Goodreads reviews of the book, looking at the most recurring points across the data, a positive mention of characterisation was brought up 51 times as well as 21 mentions of Xaden's attractiveness and a favourable view of the romantic elements between him and Violet, respectively.¹⁸ This becomes even more poignant when considering a large portion of the popular reviews were very negative towards the book, making the number of reiterated favourable mentions indicative of a strong Affective Resonance between those readers and the character. This data could be argued as indicative of the positive view readers have on the characters and their relationship that, while not expressing any personal experiences of it, could point to a contrasting view of real-world relationships. The popularity of Goodreads makes it a strong indicator of which types of narratives are popular, which Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo argue 'affords these readers a new set of strategies to negotiate roles as active commercial and cultural mediators within book culture' (Driscoll & Sedo, 2018). To the extent book culture is a reflection of the Zeitgeist through the dynamic activity of meaning-making mentioned by Niebling, then, this cultural mediation argues that popular narratives like *Fourth Wing* are not just popular from an entertainment standpoint, but from a position of speaking to the cultural moment that resonates with people.

5.3: Where 'Here' Is

The book's resonance with elements of the current Zeitgeist is arguably a reason for its continued popularity, rather than being a 'flash in the pan' instance. Real-world anxieties surrounding relationship dynamics being compared to how they are represented in the book is an example of what Niebling attributes to Romantasy as doing, that being 'providing a space for women to explore and respond to the shifts happening around them and in their lives' (Niebling, 2025). She further argues that 'heterosexual romantic fiction since 1980 has come a long way toward reconstructing the hero in the image of women by creating males who reflect female values' (Niebling, 2025). Xaden could be argued to follow this continuing shift by reflecting female values expressed in his relationship with Violet – namely the negotiation of consent.

¹⁸ See Appendix 7

Niebling refers to the progression from the ‘no means no’ to the ‘only yes means yes’ rape prevention campaigns as an example of socially negotiated ‘consent capital’ that encompasses communicative boundaries and bodily autonomy (Niebling, 2025). While elements of the sexually charged language in *Fourth Wing* have already been discussed, in explicit relation to the Zeitgeist these then function as a commentary on such communicative boundaries and bodily autonomy indicative of a narrative sexual agency that contrasts readers’ navigation of felt real-world sexual agency. Referring to the ‘My Body, My Choice’ mantra of the feminist movement of the 1970s and its modern antifeminist co-opting ‘Your Body, My Choice’, Niebling argues that consent capital is a function of transnational body politics pertaining to health, identity, societal roles, and legal institutions being negotiated in the ‘Global North’, and which are then shown via contemporary values in popular culture such as *Fourth Wing* (Niebling, 2025). Violet, at one point, comments on how

“I miss sex.” I really do, and it’s not just the physical gratification, either. There’s a sense of connection in those moments that I crave, a momentary banishment of loneliness. The first is something I’m sure Xaden would be more than capable of providing, *if* he ever thought of me that way, but the second? He’s the last person I should be craving, but lust and logic never seem to go hand in hand (Yarros, 260)

The progression of their relationship from this point to her aforementioned ‘taming’ of him reflects how his character is negotiated in terms of consent capital that emphasises Violet’s agency by being the one to set the boundaries and claiming agency over her bodily autonomy via facilitating an emotional trust and understanding with Xaden that excludes the possibility of him hurting her. Niebling comments on this kind of character progression by noting that as the story progresses ‘the “alpha males” then often [serve] as a playful critique of hypermasculine behaviour’ (Niebling, 2025), which reconfigures and recontextualises the otherwise harmful ‘toxic masculinity’ narrative of online spaces such as the manosphere as being a root source of the real-world anxiety felt around heteronormative relationships. Consent capital thus becomes *Fourth Wing*’s way of configuring a counter narrative that defines both ‘romance writing *and* (social) reading’ (Niebling, 2025). What inferences can be made about the Zeitgeist from *Fourth Wing*, then, is that the book exists at the forefront of a discourse surrounding romance, attraction, safety, and connection hampered by communicative barriers that limit different kinds of agency. By portraying Violet’s progression towards a clearly

defined sexual narrative agency, *Fourth Wing* resonates with readers by presenting an idealised fantasy of relationships defined by trust.

Conclusion:

The Empathic Understanding of a text comprises three primary areas of literary theory pertaining to the conception and portrayal of empathy that a literary work applies in order to create, affect and condition an empathic response from readers. The Expressivity of Language conceives of language as an active medium which, by being engaged with by the reader, makes itself understood as an utterance by a someone that a reader then becomes more readily inclined to relate to. The term ‘empathic Wortleib’ describes the formulation of an opinion or description as being subjectively expressed by a character, which thereby conditions the engaged reader to identify that character as that someone making that statement. A critical approach to the expression of empathy in a text lays out a framework for qualitatively assessing the portrayal of empathy via its Expressive Quality, existing on the two levels of aesthetics and of contextually grasped empathy. The aesthetic utilisation of rhetorical devices drives reader engagement on one level to recognise and internally recreate the emotional states of characters being portrayed, whereas the contextually grasped empathy is a more objective assessment of what is being expressed in-context of the storyworld and how the specific characters’ responses are understood by the reader to make internal sense to those characters. In relation to this, Affective Resonance is a conceptual way of understanding the reading process as the continuous effort between the reader and the text to make sense of the story on a thematic level that changes and adapts to the view of both. Here, the Causal and Reflective Aspects of writing further help conceptualising a reader’s response to a work by respectively having either an internally situated perspective of focusing primarily on mimetic features of the text by being in a state of mind to recreate those emotions – or an external perspective grasping the mode of presentation of the text as a self-aware recognition of the reason for a response to the text. The main distinction between these two levels of Expressive Quality, as such, becomes rooted in the conception of empathy as either being felt within the reader, or understood within the context of the text. The qualitative assessment of these levels is further contextualised by the potential for empathic inaccuracy to occur when the

reader response differs from the author's intended reaction. However, this question of intentionality, instead of being a point of risk for a reading, is a central component of understanding Reader-Response Theory as a framework for reading. This 'inaccuracy' stems from the active collaboration between reader and text to create meaning, in which stylistic elements and Expressive Qualities embed a reader in a relational matrix of characters. This relational matrix perceives of characters as contextually situated agents of the storyworld where, through various degrees of complex embedded states, they are understood as existing in relation to each other. The understanding of these states and the various interpretations of them by the reader, furthermore, is related to the fundamental Unknowability of the Other which always necessitates a degree of superimposition onto the characters by the reader in order to more fully and personally inform their characterisation. This superimposition stems from a behavioural 'reading-into' by the reader that is socio-culturally conditioned and situated.

While the communication of Aesthetic Elements happens primarily via characters as opposed to setting, the underlying mechanisms by which they work are similar to the extent that the reader becomes an active co-constructer of meaning via Affective Resonance meaning making from textual elements. Characters remain the primary drivers of this communication due to the relative morality of their stance and presence within the narrative being understood by the way they become actively constructed by the reader in relation to themselves via superimposition, knowability, and how they are socio-culturally grasped. In this way characters are made recognisable by their Known and Unknown Aspects and Qualities of interiority the reader configures in order to understand them. This process of Complex Embedment then sees each character as not just a function in and of themselves, but as one among several situated interiorities whose possible interactions contribute to a relational matrix the reader navigates to comprehend the narrative. Additionally, how characters are understood is not holistically configured by the textual elements of Empathic Understanding and their relative degrees of Knowability but also factors of contextual modes of understanding situated within the reader. The sociocultural situatedness of a reader, while not in absolute terms, acts as an indicator of generally understood and held ideas and notions that impact how they grasp character archetypes and personalities. Further to this, reader temperaments which may vary within the same sociocultural situatedness still impacts how two readers might understand a character differently from each other. That is not to say character analysis is an entirely subjective effort, but rather that reader predispositions

influence how traits of characters are conceptually grasped as indicators of personality. Meanwhile setting may be grasped as a site of demystification similar to the superimposition on characters but differently approached in that attention to it is regulated by textual elements of description the reader re-constructs in relation to their own temporally and spatially situated experiences. The configuration of narrative voices also guides this regulatory stream of information via the differently occupied places of narrators and narratees. Both the author, narrator, and character can be understood as situated conveyors of information, whereas other characters, the perceived narratee, and the reader are understood conversely as the receivers. As discussed throughout this dissertation, however, the receiver is not a passive position and contributes to the broader construction and comprehension of the narrative via a proactive engagement with what is being conveyed.

By applying this framework to *Fourth Wing*, what becomes apparent is that due to its narrative being predominantly character-driven, the Expressive Quality and the Expressivity of Language are major factors in determining the outcome of the reading experience. By being stylised via the first-person present tense narration of Violet, the latter is readily apparent from the start, whereas the former is developed via the Known and Unknown Aspects of the major characters. This is most prominently exemplified via the differing characterisations of Dain and Xaden – where Dain's development makes him more and more Knowable at the expense of the potential for reader superimposition onto his character, while Xaden's development sees him retain a large degree of Unknowability for the reader to engage with. This engagement is characterised by the establishing of Affective Resonance between the reader and the characters that sees the former negotiate the latter's moral code in relation to their own in a transactional manner. The Causal and Reflective Aspects of Reading further informs this transaction by defining the reader's engagement with the text as being focused either on the mimetic features of the text or the mode of representation. Depending on the degree to which the reader engages the text via the former or latter, the empathic reading experience will either come to be situated within the reader as a mimetically based emotional reaction, or conversely from an understanding of the characters in their context as representative agents of the wider narrative. Due to the sexually charged nature of the writing and the story, the two main ways this reading experience can be defined is via an aesthetic enjoyment of the nature of this writing, or via understanding it as indicative of Violet's sexual narrative agency.

Putting *Fourth Wing* in the broader context of the sphere of the Zeitgeist it exists within can thus be argued to yield information about the degree to which the book's popularity stems from its depiction of an idealised fantasy of a relationship that is defined by the trust Violet has in Xaden to conform to her intimate emotional wants and needs – and that the desire for this trust is the empathic root of its resonance with readers. The context surrounding its online reception via sites like TikTok and established presence on Goodreads is an additional source of assessing its popularity. It could be argued to have been algorithmically predisposed to become popular up to a point, while the emerging fandom around it sustains that popularity via a strong sense of interpersonal community and personal fulfilment from the aforementioned depiction of an idealised fantasy that accurately caters to their wants. While it may be argued whether *Fourth Wing* and *The Empyrean* series it introduces is 'good' or 'bad' from a technical writing standpoint, its popularity remains an undeniable sign that while its history may be feigned, its applicability, freely engaged by the thoughts and experiences of its readers, remains true.

Appendix:

Year	Title	Genre	Ratings	Author
2020	A Promised Land	Biography	127801	Barack Obama
2020	Too Much and Never Enough	Memoir	120594	Mary L. Trump
2020	Midnight Sun	Young Adult	82258	Stephenie Meyer
2020	Untamed	Memoir	67419	Glennon Doyle
2020	The Room Where It Happened	Memoir	53296	John Bolton
2021	The Four Winds	Historical fiction	189583	Kristin Hannah
2021	The Last Thing He Told Me	Thriller	169592	Laura Dave
2021	American Marxism	Political commentary	37415	Mark R. Levin
2021	Diary of a Wimpy Kid #16	Graphic novel	30053	Jeff Kinney
2021	Dog Man #10	Graphic novel	27659	Dav Pilkey
2022	Verity	Thriller	451956	Colleen Hoover
2022	Reminders of Him	Romance	360471	Colleen Hoover
2022	It Starts With Us	Romance	229703	Colleen Hoover
2022	I'm Glad My Mom Died	Memoir	87592	Jennette McCurdy
2022	The Light We Carry	Memoir	15346	Michelle Obama
2023	Fourth Wing	Fantasy	483421	Rebecca Yarros
2023	Iron Flame	Fantasy	403896	Rebecca Yarros
2023	Spare	Memoir	116412	Prince Harry The Duke of Sussex
2023	The Woman in Me	Memoir	52305	Britney Spears
2023	Outlive: The Science of Art and Longevity	Medical advice (age)	20467	Peter Attia MD
2024	The Women	Historical fiction	322316	Kristin Hannah
2024	Onyx Storm	Fantasy	292078	Rebecca Yarros
2024	The Housemaid	Thriller	686341	Freida McFadden
2024	The Anxious generation	Self-help	12965	Jonathan Haidt
2024	Good Energy	Medical advice (age)	5511	Casey Means MD
2025	Forgotten Home Apothecary	Medical advice	17299	Dr. Nicole Apelian
2025	Cozy Friends: Colouring Book	Childrens book	11679	Coco Wyo
2025	Sunrise on the Reaping	Young adult	88869	Suzanne Collins
2025	The Let Them Theory	Self-help	38994	Mel Robbins
2025	Diary of a Wimpy Kid #20	Graphic novel	6673	Jeff Kinney
1994	The Very Hungry Caterpillar	Childrens book	78699	Eric Carle
1997	The Four Agreements	Self-help	120134	Don Miguel Ruiz
2000	The 48 Laws of Power	Self-help	87906	Robert Greene
2014	If Animals Kissed Goodnight	Childrens book	75743	Ann Whitford Paul
2015	The Body Keeps the Score	Self-help (trauma)	82957	Bessel van der Kolk MD
2015	I Love You to the Moon and Back	Childrens book	80623	Amelia Hepworth
2016	It Ends With Us	Romance	406784	Colleen Hoover
2018	Atomic Habits	Self-help	146843	James Clear

Image 1: Overview of the top 5 most popular books of each year on Amazon.com between 2020 and 2025 ordered by Year, Title, (primary) Genre, Ratings, and Author. The grey section includes books from previous years which regularly reappeared in the data that presented a persistent enough pattern of popularity to still be included in the data, but which for the most part had little meaningful impact on the final statistics.

Genre	Number	Total ratings	Top genre	Rating
Memoir	8	694061	Thriller	1307889
Self-help	6	522027	Fantasy	1179395
Graphic novel	4	75029	Romance	996958
Thriller	3	1307889	Memoir	694061
Romance	3	996958	Self-help	522027
Fantasy	3	1179395	Historical fiction	511899
Childrens book	4	235065	Childrens book	235065
Young adult	2	171127	Young adult	171127
Historical fiction	2	511899	Graphic novel	75029
Political commentary	1	37415	Political commentary	37415

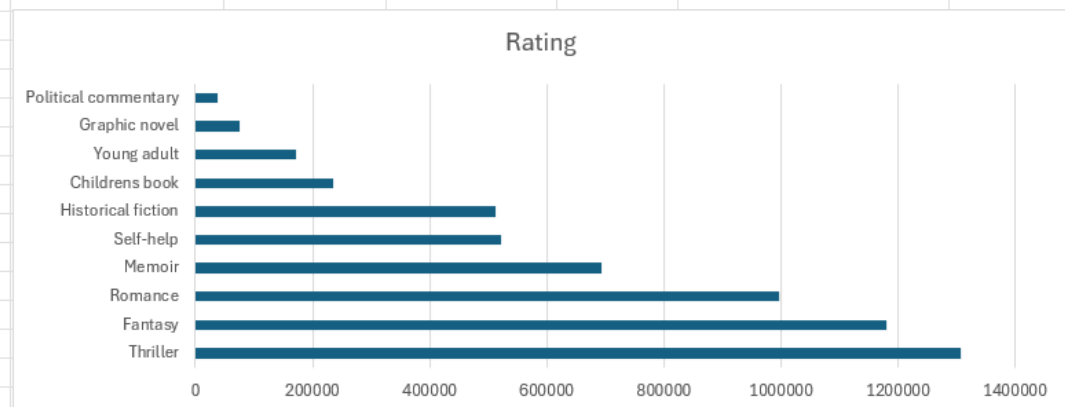


Image 2: Charts summarising the data from Appendix 1 showing the top genres in number of instalments and of total ratings, respectively, as well as a Rating graph visualising the popularity of each genre.

Top authors	Genre	Appearance	Rating	Rating per appearance	Spot
Colleen Hoover	Romance	4	1394914	348728,5	#3
Rebecca Yarros	Fantasy	3	1179395	393131,6667	#2
Kristin Hannah	Historical fiction	2	511899	255949,5	#4
Freida McFadden	Thriller	1	686341	686341	#1
Laura Dave	Thriller	1	169592	169592	#5

Image 3: Chart showing the top-rated authors from collected data on Amazon.com according to an RPA measurement.

Year	Title	Genre	Rating	Author
2020	The Midnight Library	Fantasy	2497289	Matt Haig
2020	Beach Read	Romance	1658829	Emily Henry
2020	The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue	Fantasy	1530558	V.E. Schwab
2020	The Guest List	Thriller*	1298008	Lucy Foley
2020	House of Earth and Blood	Fantasy	1153147	Sarah J. Maas
2021	A Court of Silver and Flames	Fantasy	2115703	Sarah J. Maas
2021	The Love Hypothesis	Romance	1928130	Ali Hazelwood
2021	People We Meet on Vacation	Romance	1770254	Emily Henry
2021	Twisted Love	Romance	1658876	Ana Huang
2021	Malibu Rising	Historical fiction	1301770	Taylor Jenkins Reid
2022	The Housemaid	Thriller	3539901	Freida McFadden
2022	It Starts With Us	Romance	2129708	Colleen Hoover
2022	Lessons in Chemistry	Historical fiction	1806245	Bonnie Garmus
2022	Reminders of Him	Romance	1680020	Colleen Hoover
2022	Book Lovers	Romance	1579062	Emily Henry
2023	Fourth Wing	Fantasy	3614189	Rebecca Yarros
2023	Iron Flame	Fantasy	2648351	Rebecca Yarros
2023	The Housemaid's Secret	Thriller	1755621	Freida McFadden
2023	Happy Place	Romance	1445245	Emily Henry
2023	Powerless	Fantasy	971073	Lauren Roberts
2024	The Women	Historical fiction	1617559	Kristin Hannah
2024	Funny Story	Romance	1308818	Emily Henry
2024	The Wedding People	Romance	1098359	Alison Espach
2024	Just for the Summer	Romance	1095177	Abby Jimenez
2024	The God of the Wood	Mystery	834216	Liz Moore
2025	Onyx Storm	Fantasy	1709231	Rebecca Yarros
2025	Sunrise on the Reaping	Young adult	1103941	Suzanne Collins
2025	Great Big Beautiful Life	Romance	726160	Emily Henry
2025	Atmosphere	Historical fiction	719626	Taylor Jenkins Reid
2025	My Friends	Literary Fiction	393832	Fredrik Bachman

Image 4: Overview of the top 5 most popular books of each year on Goodreads.com between 2020 and 2025 ordered by Year, Title, (primary) Genre, Ratings, and Author.

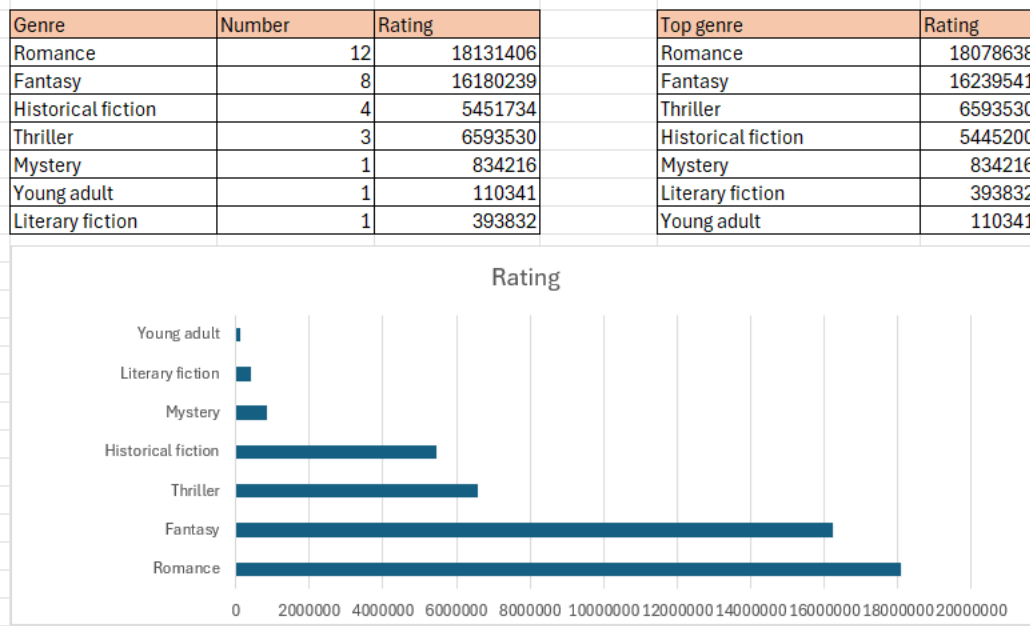


Image 5: Charts summarising the data from Appendix 4 showing the top genres in number of instalments and of ratings, respectively, as well as a Rating graph visualising the popularity of each genre.

Top authors	Genre	Appearance	Rating	Rating per appearance	Spot
Emily Henry	Romance	6	8582792	1430465,333	#5
Rebecca Yarros	Fantasy	3	7971771	2657257	#1
Sarah J. Maas	Fantasy	2	3081277	1540638,5	#4
Colleen Hoover	Romance	2	3708770	1854385	#3
Freida McFadden	Thriller	2	5295522	2647761	#2
Taylor Jenkins Reid	Historical fiction	2	2027930	1013965	#6

Image 6: Chart showing the top-rated authors from collected data on Goodreads.com according to an RPA measurement.

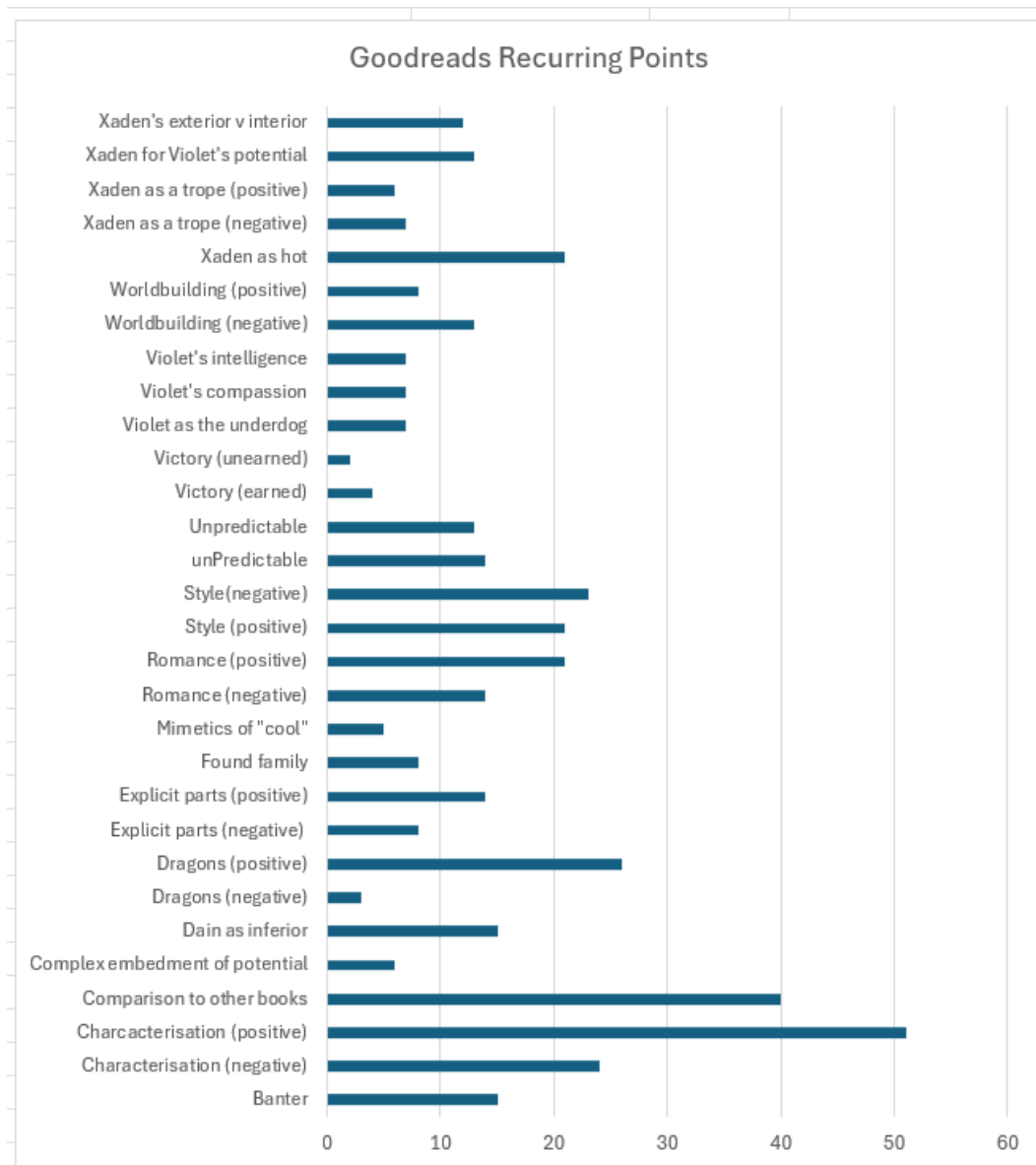


Image 7: Graph of recurring points brought up in the 20 most popular Goodreads reviews of *Fourth Wing*. **“unPredictable”* refers to mentions of the story being predictable (the choice was made for ease of alphabetical sorting). ***Mimetics of “cool”* refers to mentions of elements in the book the reviewer found to be cool.

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