Salem Leavitt

Professor Clinnin

ENG 209 - 1002

16 February 2025

Why *Dune* Should Be Included In The Literary Canon

Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* was published in August of 1965, later encouraging the popularization of science fiction literature for years to come. However, *Dune*'s sales were initially poor, and it didn't gain traction until the 60s and 70s when it became extremely popular among the youth (Gregersen 10). Despite winning both the Hugo and the Nebula, prestigious literary awards in the sci-fi genre, *Dune* is not currently considered part of the greater literary canon. It deserves to be included because of its complex exploration of political power, environmental sustainability, and religion, challenging the traditional exclusion of science fiction from serious literary consideration, and proving its enduring influence on modern media.

The literary canon is a collection of written works considered the most culturally relevant, influential, or otherwise important. Traditionally, the canon has been decided by a combination of critics, scholars, and academic institutions who value "classic" literature very highly. This led to the exclusion of science fiction mainly because of the long-standing bias against genre fiction as a whole. Many people held the opinion that genre fiction could not influence audiences in the same way that classic literature could, due in part to genre fiction reaching smaller audiences. This exclusion was also rooted in the perception that literary fiction (which primarily focuses on complex character studies, stylistic innovation, and philosophical depth) was inherently more valuable than genre fiction, which is often associated with plot-driven narratives and imaginative world-building.

The novel itself is set in a very distant future where noble houses vie for control over Arrakis, which is a desert planet that produces the valuable spice mélange, essential for space travel and extending life. The story follows Paul Atreides, the heir to House Atreides, who is forced into exile when his family is betrayed by the rival House Harkonnen. As Paul makes his way through the harsh desert, he makes allies with the indigenous Fremen, embracing their ways and fulfilling a prophecy that sets him up as a messianic leader. This prophecy, however, was engineered by the Bene Gesserit, which was a large group of witches with powers that could only be held by women. Ultimately, Paul rises to power, but his ascension comes with the weight of unforeseen consequences, setting the stage for the novel's complex exploration of fate and control.

The betrayal of House Atreides by House Harkonnen on Arrakis set the scene for the overtly political themes throughout *Dune*. I think Herbert's political strife in the book, mirrors much of the political landscape leading up to the 1960's as well. For example, how the Atreides were lulled into a false sense of security before they were ambushed by the Harkonnen was representative of the many covert operations and betrayals between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The emperor's and Bene Gesserit's involvement in the political scheme to wipe out the Atreides is also quite similar to the CIA's involvement in overthrowing Iran's government in 1953. *Dune*'s commentary on politics was relevant at the time, and it is still relevant now. The continued violence toward and displacement of the Fremen from their own home on Arrakis in *Dune* is incredibly reminiscent of the current war between Israel and the Palestinian people. The critique remains the same, which is that the people in power will go to great lengths to remain in control, often at the expense of marginalized or indigenous populations.

Herbert's depiction of the Fremen as a displaced people fighting for their autonomy reflects the all too common pattern of imperialism and resource exploitation seen throughout history. The Fremen's struggle against colonial forces seeking to control Arrakis and its valuable spice reflects many real-world conflicts that stemmed from powerful entities prioritizing their own political and economic interests over human rights. Herbert illustrates this tension in the passage with Paul saying, "He who can destroy a thing has the real control of it" (724). This also shows the level of awareness that Paul had of the power he held. *Dune* serves as a warning that history tends to repeat itself when power is concentrated in the hands of the few, and the voices of the oppressed are ignored.

While the Atreides were more benevolent rulers than the Harkonnen, both of them took advantage of the environmental resources on Arrakis, exploiting not only the Fremen but the planet itself. The spice mélange, which was mined on Arrakis, was crucial for the success of the empire in *Dune*. It was necessary for space travel, the Bene Gesserit's powers, enhanced cognitive functions, the economy, and Paul's prophetic abilities, and it had major religious importance to the Fremen. The Atreides tried to regulate the spice mining on Arrakis, but even they knew how much power their control over spice production gave them. The Harkonnen wanted this power for themselves, and the second they got control of Arrakis, they overmined the spice fields and caused irreparable damage to the Fremen's home and the native life on Arrakis.

The themes of ecological balance and the responsibility we have to protect the environment in *Dune* are more important now than ever. Herbert's depiction of Arrakis as an exploited ecosystem mirrors our current concerns about resource availability and environmental degradation. Just as the Atreides and Harkonnen missed their responsibility to protect the planet

that made their universe function, we have prioritized the production/mining of fossil fuels and other finite resources over protecting the earth and its atmosphere, contributing to global warming and deforestation. The over-mining of spice on Arrakis serves as a warning to the modern world to avoid the unsustainable consumption of natural resources. As Kynes, the planetary ecologist, warns, **"**The highest function of ecology is understanding the consequences" (Herbert 438), emphasizing that unchecked exploitation has a price. It is also worth noting that the only group of people who respected the ecological balance of consumption and production on Arrakis was the Fremen, and in the real world it is often the indigenous people that feel the need to protect their land and maintain stewardship of it. Herbert's message here is that when we do not respect the land that makes us prosper, it will inevitably be our downfall.

The Fremen are an integral part of the *Dune* universe, and their religious beliefs set the stage for Paul's ascension to not only a political leader but a prophet for the Fremen. The Fremen were Paul's "key" to understanding the desert (Herbert 330). Paul's otherworldly abilities that he inherited from his Bene Gesserit mother already prop him up as more than just a man, he's also incredibly charismatic. The Fremen had been mistreated and neglected by House Harkonnen before the Atreides were sent to rule Arrakis, and many of them found themselves falling prey to the prophecy of the Kwisatz Haderact. However, this prophecy was not organic; it was planted by the Bene Gesserit. When the Fremen saw Paul, they immediately started to cling to the idea of salvation and Paul gave into the power in the end.

Paul's transformation from a leader to a dictator is one of *Dune*'s most profound warnings. Early on, Paul foresees the terrible future ahead, saying, "there was no past occupying the future in his mind...except...except...he could still sense the green and black Atreides banner waving...some-where ahead...still see the jihad's bloody swords and fanatic legions" (Herbert

500) yet he is unable to stop it. Paul starts as a savior but inevitably devolves into a dictator who starts a universal war and drives the ecosystem into the ground. Herbert was warning against trusting charismatic leaders or clinging to a real-life savior so much that it becomes the only method of survival. This warning is particularly relevant considering the historical figures who have risen to power by putting themselves up as saviors, only to drive their countries to destruction. Some perfect examples are Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin during the 20th century. They initially gained support by promising peace and stability, but like Paul, ended up leading their nations into war and devastation.

In recent years, we have seen leaders around the world use religious and nationalist speech and propaganda to make themselves seem magnanimous, making their followers believe they are the only ones who can bring salvation. The novel illustrates how dangerous it is to place absolute trust in one person, a sentiment echoed in Paul's reflection about control mentioned earlier, noting that if a person has the power to create, they also have the power to destroy (Herbert 724). Just like how Paul's rule led to catastrophe despite his original intentions being good, history repeatedly shows how blind faith in a single person leads to eventual suffering.

The most glaring reason why critics may think *Dune* should not be added to the canon is its explicit branding as science fiction. Unfortunately, the literary canon has been historically a bit snobbish when it comes to including genre fiction, labeling it as "just for fun" or that it has no literary merit. However, *Dune* breaks every rule; it appeals to audiences outside of science fiction, and the writing is not typical for its genre. It focuses much more on characterization as well as intense world-building, aligning it with more classic literature. *Dune* has also managed to maintain its relevance and real-world application and go on to influence other fictional works like *Star Wars* and *Game of Thrones.* From the undeniable similarities of a prophesied hero and

the desert planet both present in *Star Wars* to the character arc similarities of Ned Stark from *Game of Thrones* and Duke Leto from *Dune.*

Dune is so much more than just a science fiction novel, it is a thought-provoking literary work that deserves a place in the literary canon. Through its themes of political power, environmental sustainability, and the dangers of blind faith, *Dune* remains as relevant today as it was in the 1960s. The novel's commentary on colonization, resource exploitation, and charismatic leadership reflects real-world historical and modern struggles, proving that science fiction can serve as a true reflection of society. Despite its exclusion from the literary canon, *Dune* possesses all the qualities necessary for literary consideration. By acknowledging *Dune* as part of the canon, we also acknowledge the power that science fiction possesses to shape our understanding of the modern world.

Work Cited

Gregersen, Erik. “Dune | Novel by Herbert | Britannica.” *Www.britannica.com*, 12 Mar. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Dune-by-Herbert.

Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. 1965. Berkley edition ed., Berkley, Jan. 1977, read.amazon.com/?asin=B00B7NPRY8&ref_=kwl_kr_iv_rec_1.