

Feminism in the Harry Potter Series

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i
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Feminizam u serijalu o *Harryju Potteru*

Završni rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2022.

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Associate Professor

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Abstract

J.K. Rowling is an author of the series of seven fantasy novels about Harry Potter. The series depicts the lives of three best friends and young wizards: Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and their fight against the evil wizard Voldemort. This paper analyzes the feminist characters in the Harry Potter series as well as anti-feminists in the novels. Some critics accuse J.K. Rowling of being anti-feminist because the main character in the series is a boy and, at first glance, it seems that the majority of the most important characters are males. They condemn her for stereotypically describing female characters as the weaker and less competent sex. This paper aims to portray the feminist characteristics of selected female characters in the series and to illustrate their power and importance. The characters who initially appear to be stereotypically described usually experience a significant character development throughout the series and able to demonstrate that they are not just passive characters but fighters for the rights of oppressed social groups, and against discrimination and racism. Witches have proven to be just as brave and important as wizards in the fight against evil.

Key words: J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter, feminism, female characters, the Harry Potter series

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Introduction

The majority of fantasy novels have been written for the male audience, and it seems reasonable to assume that the Harry Potter series is not different. In fact, Joanne Rowling published her series under the pen name J.K. Rowling, which she created by combining the initials of her first name and her grandmother's name Kathleen, so that she would not stand out as a woman. Her publisher suggested that she should use a gender-neutral name because they thought that boys would not be as interested in buying her books if they knew it was written by a female author ("About"). The Harry Potter series is intended for children and the majority of readers are young people. The novels are not only about magic, teenage love, and friendship, but they deal with important and complex topics such as discrimination, racism, inequality, chauvinism, bullying, and unfair treatment of certain groups of people. Beginning with a brief discussion of what feminism and feminist criticism are, the paper continues with the analysis of female characters in the series who exhibit feminist values and promote equality, as well as those that oppose that mindset. The characters with the feminist elements in their characterization are Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Minerva McGonagall, Molly Weasley, Fleur Delacour, and Luna Lovegood while the anti-feminist elements are observed in the characters of Dolores Umbridge and Bellatrix Lestrange.

1. Feminism and Feminist Criticism

Feminism is a social movement that fought, and still fights, for the equality of genders and women's rights. Its First Wave started in 1890 and lasted until 1920 when women in the US and Britain demanded the right to vote and to have equal civil rights as men, of which the right to work in various workplaces and the right to higher education had been highlighted the most. The Second Wave feminists sought to discover how the differences between men and women arose and to investigate the phenomenon of gender inequality in society (Guo 453). Feminist criticism is criticism of gender stereotypes and socially imposed roles that are justified by the biological differences between men and women (Kumar Sharma 3). Feminist criticism has developed due to the dominance of male writers in literature and the common belief that women cannot be as good writers as men. The reason for such an attitude has been found in the belief that a woman's social role is primarily to be a good wife and mother, which in the past meant that a woman could not fully devote herself to a writing career and could not perfect her talent to the same extent as men (Kumar Sharma 1-2). One of the objections of feminists and feminist critics has been that men have written for male readers, so they shape female characters based on a male perspective and behavior, due to which female readers cannot identify with literary characters (Guo 454).

Given all this, we firmly believe that the Harry Potter series can be studied from the point of view of feminist criticism even though critics have different interpretations of the novel and there is a conflict between two different views, namely that the series can be interpreted in both a feminist and sexist way. Moreover, some critics claim that the series is intended for male readers, which is contradicted by the opinion of others who state that numerous characters can be role models for young girls and who they can identify with (Mikulan 288-89).

2. The Feminist Elements in the Depiction of Female Characters in the Harry Potter Series

2.1. Hermione Granger

Hermione Granger is initially portrayed stereotypically as a frightened and emotional girl. That is shown in Rowling's first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, when Hermione encounters a troll in the girl's bathroom (Mikulan 289): "Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went" (89). One may say that her emotions are the reason she ends up in such a dangerous situation, but the real reasons are to be found in the mistakes of her friends and Voldemort's evil plan. Professor Quirrell frees the troll for Voldemort, Ron's comments make her insecure and emotional because of which she goes to the girl's bathroom to cry, and finally Ron and Harry lock the bathroom door, which leads to Hermione being trapped alone with the troll (Zettel 93). It is also important to draw attention to Rowling's choice of verbs when she describes Hermione's behavior. She uses verbs that are typically associated with female behavior such as "scream," "cry," and "shriek" while male characters "snape," "snarl," and "bellow" (Mason 5): "'Come on, Harry!' Hermione screamed, leaping on to her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape – she didn't even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe and Goyle" (Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone* 113). Adverbs connected to her character are similar to verbs. She behaves "uncertainly," "quietly," and "frantically" in contrast to Harry and Ron who act "fiercely" and "angrily" (Mason 13): "'Light?' said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself" (Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone* 110). When Hermione acts "hysterically," Ron and Harry are calm and collected, even though Hermione is the most logical and rational out of them (Dresang 223). Her character eventually begins to express the stereotype-subversive traits, one of which is fast thinking and acting (Bell 98): "'He's doing something – jinxing the broom,' said Hermione. 'What should we do?' 'Leave it to me.' Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared" (Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone* 96).

It is important to point out Hermione's cliché physical glow-up. In the first novel, her looks are not described as classically beautiful: "She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth" (Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone* 57). She changes her appearance for the Yule Ball, which she attends with the popular athlete Victor Krum:

It was Hermione. But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow — or maybe it was merely the absence of the twenty or so books she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling — rather nervously, it was true — but the reduction in the size of her front teeth was more noticeable than ever. (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 414)

Hermione even improves her teeth when shrinking them to their previous size (Malfoy made them a lot bigger): "'Well . . . when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were,' she said. 'And I just . . . let her carry on a bit'" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 405). Her transformation has an effect on Ron, who becomes jealous of Viktor and the attention she starts getting: "'How's it going?' Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer. Ron didn't answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 420). Hermione is downhearted when the Ball ends because her transformation did not grant her a fairytale happy ending, and she becomes her past self again. This act can be termed feminist because she takes control of her appearance and does not let society define how she should look (Turello 13). It is important to point out that she is the one who decides that she wants a change, and not somebody else who told her that she needed to (Zettel 92). Hermonie's next feminist trait is standing up for the rights of the weaker. She is very sensitive about the oppression of the elves, which despite their great magic power are not free but owned by wizard families. The roots of her sympathy and understanding can be found in her own oppression as some wizards bully and humiliate her by calling her "mudblood" because her parents are Muggles. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, she fights for elf rights. She is so determined that she even goes on a hunger strike because elves cooked the food (Greif 13-15): "'Slave labor,' said Hermione, breathing

hard through her nose. ‘That’s what made this dinner. Slave labor.’ And she refused to eat another bite” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 182).

Even though it may seem at first that Harry, Ron, and Hermione experience adventures equally, in reality, Hermione is more of a supporting character in Harry’s and Ron’s exploits. She is, though, the smartest out of the three and her intelligence is crucial in developing a plan and solving problems and mysteries (Bell 5). Harry and Ron sometimes question if Hermione is capable of performing all the spells she has learned (Grief 45). Hermione unapologetically trusts herself and her knowledge and is not affected by the opinions of others who doubt her abilities. She does not give up when she encounters a problem, instead she looks for alternative solutions until she succeeds in what she sets out to do (Zettel 95).

2.2. Ginny Weasley

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Ginny Weasley is Voldemort’s victim that has been taken to the Chamber of Secrets. She is under the influence of Tom Riddle’s diary and, not being aware of her actions, opens the Chamber of Secrets. Harry and her brother Ron look for the Chamber and try to rescue her. Harry ends up being the one who defeats the giant snake Basilisk in the Chamber and saves her life: “‘It’s all right,’ said Harry, holding up the diary, and showing Ginny the fang hole, ‘Riddle’s finished. Look! Him and the basilisk. C’mon, Ginny, let’s get out of here’” (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 275). Being possessed and nearly killed is an agonizing experience that affects the psyche and from which it is not easy to recover. She does not let the trauma define her as a person but shows that she has surprising mental strength. Not only does she recover, but she becomes even stronger and more self-reliant (Saffideen and Rodriguez Moskalkova).

Furthermore, Ginny is in control of both her professional and private life. Despite numerous hints that Harry and Ginny are in love, their relationship does not begin until their first kiss, which she herself initiates in *The Half-blood Prince* (Turello 14). In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when she starts going out with other boys even though she is in love with

Harry, Ron rebukes her as he is not able to accept that his little sister has started dating: “‘He’s WHAT?’ said Ron, outraged, his ears now resembling curls of raw beef. ‘She’s going out with — my sister’s going — what d’you mean, Michael Corner?’” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 348). Growing up with six brothers, Ginny had to learn how to stand up for herself and not allow her brothers to control her life. Ron’s remarks does not affect Ginny’s decisions, and she rebels against his wishes, letting him know that he has no right to interfere in her love life. Ginny has, therefore, a feminist perspective on dating. Not only does she stand up to her brothers interfering in her love life and is not afraid to change partners, but she does not allow that her relationship with Harry turns into a stereotypical relationship between a hero and a damsel in distress. Ginny is as equally brave as Harry and they fight against Voldemort together. She does not wait for Harry to save her but rebels against her mother’s wishes and bravely joins Dumbledore’s Army (Turello 15).

Her self-confidence increases drastically as time goes on and she changes from being a shy, quiet girl to a popular girl who is beautiful, successful, and good at sports (Šustić 23). Her brothers did not let her play quidditch with them when she was a child, but that has not stopped her from becoming a successful player even though there were no girl-only teams. It is interesting to note that she is the only one among the main female characters who plays quidditch. Instead of giving up trying because her brothers would not let her play with them, she played quidditch all by herself without anyone knowing. She does not only prove herself as an amazing athlete, but she is also an exceptionally good student whose hard work and intelligence are recognized by Professor Slughorn who invites her to attend his “Slug Club.” Her other feminist trait is her confidence to stand up against bullying. In spite of her timid personality, she stands up to Malfoy to protect Harry at the bookshop Flourish and Blotts (Saffideen and Rodriguez Moskalkova). In *Harry Potter and The Order of Phoenix*, she rebels against discrimination and joins Dumbledore’s Army in order to end it. She was also determined to try to rescue Sirius Black from Voldemort, even though she was aware of the serious consequences if the venture does not succeed (“Harry Potter and the Nerdy Feminist”).

2.3. Minerva McGonagall

Minerva McGonagall is portrayed as knowledgeable but not sagacious and with less authority compared to other male professors in Hogwarts (Heilman and Donaldson 148). She looks out for Harry and his friends and helps them get out of trouble. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, she is one of the professors who fights for the good and does all she could to help Harry stop Voldemort and his followers (Grief 20). She is a kind professor and motherly figure to her students, especially to Harry whose mother died: “Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, frowning at Harry. Then she said, ‘Have a biscuit, Potter’” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 248). She becomes Harry’s guardian and role model and takes care of him and loves him (Grief 34). It is, though, surprising that she, despite having a motherly instinct and being characterized as a loyal person who loves children, does not have her own family but has devoted her life to career (Saffideen and Rodriguez Moskalkova).

Moreover, she is a brave person who has the courage to oppose Dumbledore. She objects when he decides to leave Harry at the Dursley’s when he was a baby because they are not good people (Bucknell 33): “‘You don’t mean – you can’t mean the people who live here?’ cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. ‘Dumbledore – you can’t...’” (Rowling, *Philosopher’s Stone* 13). Yet, she does not try to convince Dumbledore of her position but ends up agreeing with his decision to leave Harry with the Dursleys as she realizes that this is his best option to live a normal life. Occasionally, Minerva McGonagall has to give up her authority in front of her male colleagues: in *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore and Fudge do not want to hear her opinion about Voldemort and his return. Despite being an influential professor, McGonagall still has to obey her male colleagues (Henderson et al. 101) as they are hierarchically above her.

2.4. Molly Weasley

Molly Weasley is the mother of Ron, Ginny, and their five siblings. She does not have a career but chooses to be a full-time stay-at-home mom. In spite of that, she is still one of the

feminist characters in the Harry Potter series. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, she is not only portrayed as a caring mother but a brave witch. She manages to defeat one of the most important Voldemort's allies, Bellatrix Lestrange (Tenreiro 3): "Harry watched with terror and elation as Molly Weasley's wand slashed and twirled, and Bellatrix Lestrange's smile faltered and became a snarl. Jets of light flew from both wands, the floor around witches' feet became hot and cracked; both women were fighting to kill" (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 506). She does not have to fight Voldemort because she is not a "mudblood," but she nevertheless chooses to resist Voldemort and become a member of the Order of Phoenix because she believes that his philosophy is unfair, racist, and immoral (Chmelickova 22).

She is similar to Harry's mother, Lily Potter. Lily sacrificed her life so she could protect her son, and Rowling points out that her unconditional maternal love is stronger than most powerful dark magic. Molly Weasley is also a protective and caring mother and is willing to give her life for her children, which she especially shows in her fight with Bellatrix (Lundhall 6). She is not only a maternal figure to her children, but to Harry as well. She cares about him and wants to protect him. She buys Harry Christmas presents, and she even invites him to spend holidays with their family because she wants to protect him from the Dursleys and make him feel loved and a part of a family (Saffideen and Rodriguez Moskalkova). Similar to Minerva McGonagall, she is disrespected by a male dominated group of people, and she requests her husband's support so that she would be taken seriously (Chmelickova 28-29). She tries to have authority over her children, but they too often ignore her remarks (Chmelickova 22).

2.5. Fleur Delacour

In the Harry Potter series, an example of an underestimated female character is Fleur Delacour, a French student from Beauxbatons school who comes to Hogwarts to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. She is described as an exceptionally beautiful but vain girl (Šustić 18). Even her name and the name of her school hint at her beauty, Fleur meaning flower and Beaux beauty (Bucknell 27). Feminist critics resent Rowling for highlighting her beauty and seductive appeal, saying she is not a good role model for young girls to follow (Bucknell 28). In addition,

they also point out that she is the only female contestant in the Triwizard Tournament where she achieves the worst result (Fatmawati 3). However, she shows her skills by easily solving riddles unlike Harry who needs a lot of help from his friends to successfully solve them (“The Role of Women within the Harry Potter Series”).

Some critics attribute Fleur’s failure at the Triwizard Tournament to her being weaker than the other candidates as a simple obstacle like weed prevented her from saving her sister’s life. In reality, she fails to pass the second task at the Tournament not because she is weak or incompetent, but because Grindelohs assault and injure her, causing her to entwine in weed, which makes her helpless. She shows love and care for her sister by not paying attention to her own injuries and by only focusing on her sister being saved (“The Role of Women within the Harry Potter Series”).

Fleur shows her kind side to Harry and Ron after Harry rescues her sister Gabrielle from drowning at the Triwizard Tournament. She displays modesty when she admits that she does not think she deserves to receive any point for her performance. She is not liked by a lot of people, especially Mrs. Weasley because she gets married to her son Bill. In *Harry Potter and Half-Blood Prince*, she proves once again that she is not as arrogant as she seems when Bill sustains severe facial injuries in a fight with a werewolf. Like many of the female characters in the Harry Potter series, Fleur has undergone a transformation from a stereotypical portrayal to a gradual revelation of her true nature and personality (Šustić 18-20). She is a courageous witch who participates in a fight against Voldemort and his army. She even puts herself in great danger by allowing Harry, Ron, and Hermione to hide in her home while the Death Eaters are looking for them. Her act is virtuous because she does not protect them because they are her friends, but because this is the right thing to do and her moral obligation, especially because Harry is the reason her sister is still alive (“What Fans Forget about Fleur Delacour”).

She is not afraid to speak her mind and question the authority when she thinks she is not treated fairly. She protests when Harry is tricked into attending the Triwizard Tournament because the rule of the competition has been that only three wizards can compete and that each contestant must be seventeen years old or older, and Harry is significantly younger. She believes that it is not fair to have an extra competitor to defeat in order to win the tournament (“The Role of Women within the Harry Potter Series”).

2.6. Luna Lovegood

Luna Lovegood is portrayed as a lonely and weird girl, but also wise and knowledgeable. She can be seen as a feminist because she embodies someone who is confident with being unusual and shows other people that it is alright to be different from others. She never tries to copy others and be what she is not to please others and fit in (Saffideen and Rodriguez Moskalkova). Her mother's death has had a major impact on her life. She tells Harry that he is not the only one who could see thestrals and explains to him that they are only visible to those that encountered death. Luna's trauma and experience with death are another reason why she is different from her peers. She has been ridiculed because she is completely different from everybody else, but she does not care about the opinion of other people; instead, she remains true to herself. As Harry's good friend, she helped him many times when he was in trouble. She fights against injustice and evil in Hogwarts (Saffideen and Rodriguez Moskalkova). She is a caring person and she treats everyone with respect, even those who are mean to her. She is not one of the witches who have been discriminated against by Voldemort and his followers, but she still chooses to stand up to their racism (Chmelickova 71). Similarly, she condemns all kind of oppression, which is visible in her treatment of Dobby the elf. He is very surprised when she calls him "sir" because he is not used to being treated with respect by other wizards who believe he is beneath them: "Whenever You're Ready, Sir" (Yates, *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, 2:06:13 -2:06:14). By coming up with the idea of what the next Horcrux is, not only does she show how knowledgeable and intelligent she is, but proves that her help is crucial in defeating Voldemort (Šovagović 15-16).

3. The Anti-feminist Elements in the Depiction of Female Characters in the Harry Potter Series

3.1. Dolores Umbridge

Dolores is an ambitious woman who wants to take over powerful work positions. Some compare her to male tyrants like Adolf Hitler, the leader of Germany's Nazi Party. She is a racist and uses cruel punishments to torture her students (Bucknell 35). As punishment for breaking the rules, she inflicts pain on her students by making them use their own blood as ink so they can write what they have done wrong on their hands (Lundhall 7): "She handed him a long, thin black quill with an unusually sharp point. 'I want you to write 'I must not tell lies,' she told him softly" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 266). Unlike most female characters in the novels, she does not possess maternal qualities. She only pretends to care about her students (Lundhall 6). This is the difference between her and the other female villain, Bellatrix Lestrange. Dolores cannot be openly violent towards her students because she has to do it legally since she works for the Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts (Lundhall 7).

Her physical appearance is very feminine, which is in contrast to her personality: "She looked, Harry thought, like somebody's maiden aunt: squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 203). Her feminine attire, however, does not match her ambition, career drive, and her readiness to manipulate, use, and oppress anyone to achieve her goals. On the other hand, Dolores Umbridge shows that even characters who are not feminists can send a certain feminist message. Professors and people of high power in Hogwarts are mostly men, yet Dolores Umbridge shows that women can achieve a lot even in male-dominated places (Budge 5).

3.2. Bellatrix Lestrange

Bellatrix does not act or look like an ordinary woman. She does not put a lot of emphasis on her physical appearance but on her ability to serve the Dark Lord (Bucknell 35). Just like Dolores Umbridge, she is not emotional and does not have empathy towards anyone, not even her own family. She does not try to comfort her sister, Narcissa Malfoy, and understand her feelings when she has doubts about whether it is a good idea for her son Draco to serve the Dark Lord. Moreover, she does not have any regrets about killing her family members, and she is even happy to do it (Lundhall 7). She does not have to restrain her violent urges because she does not care about following rules. The only authority that she respects is Voldemort. She enjoys people's pain and torture: "“Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?” she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. ‘You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain — to enjoy it’” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 810). She brags about how she killed Neville's parents to him so that she would provoke and hurt him: "Neville Longbottom, is it? How's Mum and Dad?" (Yates, *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix* 1:49:16 – 1:49:20) (Lundhall 8). Another antifeminist trait that she possesses is a desire for power through the oppression of others. She is already powerful but she constantly tries to please Voldemort to gain even more power. It is important to note that both she and Dolores Umbridge respect the superior male authority (Lundhall 11). On the other hand, her feminist trait is visible in the fact that she cannot be influenced by anyone but lives and acts as she wants and pleases (Bucknell 36).

Conclusion

To summarize, the paper has shown that many characters in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series possess feminist traits. Even though it seems that some characters are portrayed stereotypically, as the plot progresses each of those characters proves themselves to be more than just a typical female. Harry Potter would not succeed in his attempt to defeat Lord Voldemort if it were not for the help of his female friends and teachers, many of whom do not fight Voldemort because they are his target but simply because his discriminating ideas are not correspondent with their moral values. Hermione experiences discrimination because of her Muggle parents as they are not "purebloods." Nevertheless, she proves herself to be an outstanding witch and of vital importance in Harry's adventures. He would not succeed if it weren't for her knowledge and creativity. Her experience of bullying makes her sympathetic towards others who are unfairly treated and she even decides to go on a hunger-strike to express her objection to treating elves like slaves. Ginny is similar to Hermione but even more rebellious in her actions, standing up to her six brothers and letting them know that they are not allowed to interfere in her decisions; she is not afraid to speak her mind about anything she believes is wrong. Minerva McGonagall and Molly Weasley both experience questioning of their authority and struggle to fight against not being taken seriously as women around men. Their main characteristic is maternal personality but both of them choose to fight Voldemort to protect others and their ideals. Fleur Delacour is another brave witch that is not afraid to risk her life and hide Harry, Ron, and Hermione and help them with the battle. She is a misunderstood girl who is judged based on her physical appearance, and many do not acknowledge her strength, intelligence, bravery, and loyalty. Luna Lovegood is the most unusual character in the series who is misunderstood and bullied because she is different. She does not let people's opinions affect her and stop her from being kind to every creature she encounters. Dolores Umbridge and Bellatrix Lestrange are both cruel villains who use their power and influence to mistreat, oppress, and manipulate others. Both of them do not challenge the male authority; in fact, they accept and acknowledge it as their driving force.

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