

## Magical Interpellation: An Althusserian Analysis of Ideological Control in Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper applies Louis Althusser's Marxist theoretical perspective of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as instruments of ideological control to examine Lev Grossman's nove The Magicians. Through an analysis of Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy as a fictional ISA, the study explores the interpellation of characters and readers, raising questions about power, resistance, and subjugation within the fantasy genre. The Magicians not only reflects systems of power in the real world but also critiques these same structures, inviting readers to engage critically with escapism, identity formation and the function of fantasy in cultural and ideological contexts. This analysis develops a framework for understanding popular culture's role in ideological reproduction and its potential for contesting these processes. The study concludes that The Magicians is both a reflection of, and a challenge to, contemporary cultural ideologies.*

**Keywords:** Popular culture, ideological control, power and resistance, fantasy, ideological state apparatuses

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## Introduction

Popular culture plays a vital role in determining the conditions of everyday life in both social and political terms. It acts as an important site where the ideological frameworks that frame people's existence are critically assessed because "ideology is a crucial concept in the study of popular culture" (Storey 23). Narratives in books, television, film, and similar media set the terms for popular consciousness. Nowhere is this more obvious than the enduring legacy of fantasy literature, the genre that has so long captured the imaginations of audiences, presenting fantastic worlds rich with magic and myth, while reflecting the realities of the society from which they flow. Taking this into consideration, the research attempts to investigate the complex connection between fantasy fiction and ideology through the work of Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*, a novel that both engages with and critiques the forces which it represents.

*The Magicians* is rooted in the structure of modern fantasy and can be explored through the Marxist lens because it provides a useful framework for studying the mechanics of ideological control. Initially, the novel transports readers into a world of magic and wonder. At a deeper level, however, it serves as a mirror of the complexities and contradictions of contemporary society, supporting the view that "popular culture, ... is the style of life of the majority of the members of a community" (Shiach 59). The duality, serving both to satisfy escapist needs prevalent in the fantasy genre while also critiquing the socio-political status quo, makes *The Magicians* a rich subject for philosophical and ideological analysis. Louis Althusser and his conceptualization of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) provide the theoretical lens to examine the ideological constructs present in the text. This lens helps explore how educational institutions in the novel serve as instruments of cultural hegemony.

ISAs may be viewed as far-ranging institutions such as schools, places of worship, and media that reproduce the prevailing ideology and uphold the status quo. Althusser identifies the key role of educational institutions, stating, "what the bourgeoisie has installed as its number-one, i.e. as its dominant ideological State apparatus, is the educational apparatus" (Althusser 153). These apparatuses secure consent through interpellation, 'hailing' individuals into subjective positions that conform to dominant social values and norms, since "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (173). In the context of *The Magicians*, Brakebills represents a fictional ISA that directs students towards a seamless acceptance of a particular world view that favors particular identifications and modalities of power. Furthermore, the novel's process of interpellation shapes its characters' identities and perceptions. It also asks readers to reflect on their positions relative to real-world systems that mirror those in the novel.

Gradually, *The Magicians* draws out the play of fantasy, ideology, and education in a way that undermines long-held assumptions about where fantasy literature serves the best. Long thought of as nothing more than escapism, the genre of fantasy has attracted continuous critical interest for its ability to provide sharp social critique, demonstrating that the debate surrounding fantasy and popular culture is “about the nature of the good life, particularly about which culture and whose culture should dominate in society” (Gans 4). The genre has evolved, both reflecting changes in cultural sensibilities and addressing themes of identity, agency and resistance. Grossman’s work may be typified by this expanding tradition and deploys the fantastic in order to tackle questions of power and control that ripple out from its fictional basis. This calls for a critical inquiry into the ways that fantasy narratives can be both tools of ideology and spaces for resistance. In this way, this research places itself within the intersection of literary criticism, cultural studies, and Marxist theory to provide an insightful analysis about the function of ideology in fantasy literature because the content of popular culture carries “built-in educational requirements” (11). The present study expands the discussion of the ways that fictional narratives may expose as well as challenge the mechanisms through which ideology has been internalized in the text. The study, therefore, interrogates the implications of educational environments as vehicles of ideology within the narrative itself as well as the broader impact of such fictional constructs on readers’ engagement with sociopolitical paradigms in the real world.

It should be emphasized that although the central concern of this study is with *The Magicians*, its focus is informed by an awareness of the larger cultural context in which the novel is located. It does so as it reflects and contributes to the ongoing discussions about the role of literature in ideological reproduction and resistance as art mostly portrays “people where they are, not where they were once in the purer days of yore” (Duncombe 193). By untangling *The Magicians*, this research seeks to contribute to the literary discussion on the relationship between fiction and ideology in modern culture, with the intention to better understand other works in the fantasy genre.

The present research is a detailed examination of ideological control in Grossman’s *The Magicians*, informed by Althusserian theory, which traces the intricacies of the actions presented in the novel. The study of popular culture “now has its own set of theories and analytical frameworks” (Danesi 62). The analysis, therefore, aims to unfold these frameworks by examining how the story of the novel is both a product of and response to culture, a comparison between the way things are and how they could be. Thus, fantasy fiction becomes a potent tool for unraveling the webs of meaning in constructs of identity, power, and resistance. This analysis intends to emphasize the importance of popular culture

as a dynamic site of engagement with, and potential subversion of, the ideologies that govern our world.

### Literature Review

The intersection of literary critique and ideological analysis in Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* interrogates cultural fantasies and ideological constructs. Tony M. Vinci, for example, discusses how "Grossman's traumatized female characters perform a series of ... drifts that effectively rupture and destabilize the androcentric gaze and its textual body" (368), yet does not explore how educational institutions like Brakebills College serve as ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). Similarly, Kelly Kramer focuses on "unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire—the depressed main character Quentin's inability to find anything that will ease his disillusionment" (152), but does not discuss how Brakebills, as an institutional apparatus, influences these emotions within broader ideological contests.

Amanda E. Himes critiques *The Magicians* for its engagement with Narnia and parody, stating "Grossman is perfectly entitled to over-sentimentalize Narnia, parody Aslan, and even turn the author of the Narnia-esque books into a pederast" (59), but does not consider the deeper dynamic of Brakebills as an ISA within this parody. J. B. Himes notes character excesses, "tendencies toward excess with drinking, drugs, and sex" (66), and the "lost generation growing up in a pampered suburbia" (66), without examining how these behaviors reflect ideological frameworks fostered during education at Brakebills. Thus, the connection between Brakebills' role as an ISA and character behavior remains underexplored.

Nadine Dolby highlights popular culture as a "site for engaging in the process of democratic practice" (258), but does not examine institutions of learning like Brakebills as agents of ideological propagation in narratives such as *The Magicians*. Institutions like Brakebills serve both to perpetuate and criticize social ideologies. While Bahramand Shah et al. focus on "political and religious domains of ISA" (164) in colonial contexts, their analysis does not extend to educational practices or contemporary ideological constructs.

Joshua Gunn explores fantasy as a tool "of the rhetorical agent" (41) and the transformation of imagination in rhetorical theory, but not the role of fantasy in reinforcing ideology. Furthermore, Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis explore "fantasy and enjoyment" while focusing on subjectivity and ideology in their article. While examining "the relationship between reason and affect" (256), they touch on ideological frameworks and their role in society. However, the discussion does not address the dynamics and function of ISAs, revealing that

the fantasy genre needs further exploration from the perspective of ideological constructs and narratives.

Though *The Magicians* has received varied scholarly approaches, few studies specifically analyze Brakebills College as an Althusserian ISA. This gap highlights the need for examination of educational institutions in narrative as sites of ideological dissemination and critique. With the increased influence of fantasy and popular culture on contemporary ideology, this study contributes to understanding how fantasy literature and educational ISAs interact, both within fiction and in wider cultural critique.

### Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to achieve an in-depth examination of the ideological mechanisms at work in *The Magicians*. This design emphasizes a qualitative rather than quantitative approach in seeking to interpret meanings as well as socio-cultural phenomena in the text. Qualitative research is appropriate to capture the intricate mechanisms through which literary narratives actuate as vehicles of ideology and cultural critique. The design, therefore, enables a descriptive and critical analysis, considering that the study is immensely dependent upon theoretical interpretation with an organization of argument that lends itself to a deep exploration of the novel and its complex relation to ideology because ideology is intricate and “eternal, i.e. omni-present in its immutable form throughout history” (Althusser 161-162). The analytic framework of this study is focused on the Marxist theory of Louis Althusser with emphasis on his concepts of Ideological State Apparatuses and Interpellation. According to Althusser, “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (173). This framework allows to analyze the textual elements and themes of *The Magicians*, providing insight into how ideologies are embedded within Brakebills College and its surrounding narrative.

The research is based on significant themes highlighted in the novel including power structures, identity construction, and cultural critique in relation to the fantasy genre. Thus, by utilizing Althusser's theoretical framework, the present study attempts to delineate how the novel mirrors and critiques the functioning of ideological control in the real world. The analysis ensures that the research is thoroughly referenced, with all sources, both primary and secondary, accurately cited, ensuring transparency and credibility throughout the process. This research also recognizes some of the limitations inherent in literary analysis as the study's concentration on a single text restricts the transferability of findings throughout the wider domain of fantasy literature. Moreover, the subjective interpretative nature of the text can ideologically lead to bias where readings and interpretations of the text influence the perception of the text in question. However, the

limitations are addressed through strong use of theoretical approaches and engagement with concrete research methods and scholars.

### Discussion and Analysis

This chapter examines Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* to provide an analysis of the novel's complex representation of ideologies using the tools provided by Louis Althusser, specifically the idea of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy acts as a central ISA in the novel. The story of magical education mirrors real-world structures and cultural norms. The text shows the readers how institutions seemingly appear to be places for growth and development but, at the same time, they hide their efforts to control and conform individuals to certain ideologies. This research analyzes how the novel presents the themes of identity formation, self-worth, and personal agency while it engages readers in critical evaluation of ideologies both in the text and the real world.

### Brakebills as an Ideological Apparatus

The portrayal of Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy in Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* can be examined through Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which states that the school "teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology" (133), making it a place that transmits and reinforces dominant ideologies. Brakebills fulfills this function by shaping magical attitudes and culture. The world of magic first opens up to Quentin when he discovers Brakebills, a school where students are assessed on their aptitude for magic. In the novel, Professor March declares, "We rely upon our will and our knowledge and our skill to make a specific change to the world" (Grossman 41), showing how the college provides a particular set of values involving will, knowledge and skill as methods of social and magical influence.

Brakebills, by spreading its ideology into the students' psyche, aims to mold Quentin and the other students' duties and identity in a way that relates them to the larger cultural narrative the school serves to preserve. As Althusser notes, schools are crucial in ensuring that individuals "are steeped in this ideology in order to perform their tasks conscientiously" (Althusser 133). Students are chosen for their intelligence and magical aptitude, creating a culture based on elitism and exclusivity. As the Dean explains, "this isn't summer school, Quentin. This is—he pronounced the phrase precisely, eyes wide—"the whole shebang"" (Grossman 33). The formal, elite nature of the higher institution indoctrinates students into a societal hierarchy that reflects hierarchies in the world outside; they are being trained not only in magic but also in a worldview that reproduces existing power relations.

Also, Brakebills' practices of education emphasizing discipline and autonomy align with Althusser's thoughts on ISAs and their functioning. The rigorous training that students endure at Brakebills metaphorically represents how societal structures internalize norms and values. Over the years, Quentin learns that magic is like all the other things you aspire to be good at in a world in which you desperately want to fit in; Eliot grants him some understanding of this. He asserts: "It's not what you think. You don't just wave a wand and yell some made-up Latin. There's reasons why most people can't do it" (38). Such education illustrates how ISAs ensure compliance and internalize the values of the dominant ideology.

Brakebills also mirrors ISAs through its social environment and cultural practices, formulating identities and hierarchies among students. Quentin finds the school to be a "highly satisfactory" (32) place, which reflects adherence to the institution's expectations. The sorting and ranking of students by ability and docility illustrate Althusser's concept of subject identification and regulation within ISAs. The way that students relate to one another, which Quentin notes, "they were quiet and intense, always eyeing each other assessingly" (46), ends up reinforcing how this indoctrinating institution disciplines people to continue to espouse its ideology.

Even as Brakebills challenges existing cultural ideologies, it also critiques its own dissemination of said ideologies. The narrative questions the characters' desires for freedom and authenticity under institutional structure. Quentin often feels that there's something lacking in his life, that his abilities set up a conflict with the system Brakebills represents. "He wondered if he was undergoing some dire neurological event" (19) when first grappling with the reality-bending effects of Brakebills' magic. As Althusser notes, ideology is not without contradictions, as it is a space where "the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself..." (Althusser 147). Despite its fantastical elements, the school enforces many "rules" that keep students coiled within a larger, ideological system of beliefs, reflecting Althusser's idea of ISAs as sites of both indoctrination and potential contestation.

The fantasy genre setting of Brakebills serves as both a location of ideological resistance and, at times, a site of control. With magical realism, the novel interrogates and obscures the social order that Brakebills represents. Quentin's journey serves as an allegory for questioning established worldviews as magic is both a source of power and a tool to challenge that power. Quentin experienced that "even without his coat on he was sweating like a bastard" (Grossman 19), highlighting both his physical and ideological discomfort with the system. This

shows the potential for subversion and self-awareness, prompting readers to question the power dynamics in their own lives.

The Magicians constructs Brakebills College as an ISA that embodies dominant cultural ideologies while also critiquing them. Echoing the structures of a society that they will eventually enter, its pedagogical practices prepare students to accept particular worldviews while simultaneously offering a forum to question those assumptions. Thus, Grossman's novel serves to awaken people from their ideological slumbers, both entertainingly and critically, making them face the power of institutions and ideologies, reflecting Althusserian thought about how education and fantasy shape culture.

### Identity, Agency, and Ideological Resistance

Brakebills is a prime example of Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), where students are indoctrinated to learn the dominant cultural ideologies under the guise of magic education. In the text, Brakebills functions discreetly, resembling a system of ideological control, even as it presents itself as an elite academy. Quentin's first impression of New York upon leaving Brakebills was that he "expected to be knocked down and ravished by the sheer gritty reality of it all" (163), highlighting the divide between the protected space of the school and the outside world. The reality is that magic is not accessible to most at Brakebills; students are selected and segregated, their magic imprinted and scrubbed from the real world, shaping their perception of what defines magic and their freedom to wield it, drawing lines as divisive and rigid as those in actual society.

The novel also depicts Brakebills as an ISA by examining its role in the formation of individual subjectivity, revealing how ideological 'hailing' functions in this magical landscape. Coming to Brakebills, in Althusserian terms, itself is a process of interpellation as Quentin comes to learn who he is, what he is, and who he might potentially be through this school of magic as the education system "takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years... it drums into them... know-how wrapped in the ruling ideology" (Althusser 155). The narrative states Quentin is on his "third or fourth lifetime" (Grossman 163), raising questions about the nature of existence and whether new subject positions are a condition for moving forward in life. Quentin is being hailed by Brakebills repeatedly. This 'hailing' serves to align Quentin's actions and aspirations with the ideological norms of the institution, compelling him to learn to use magic as it is "the tools of the Maker" (168), revealing how institutions operationalize and control individuals.



Interpellation is not only manifested in the characters in the novel, but this ideological process also extends to the readers through a critique of the world both within the story and outside it. The portrayal of New York as “non-magical and obsessed with money and amazingly filthy” (163) contrasts starkly with Brakebills and critiques the very socio-political structures that narrative ‘tools’ sustain, as “the ‘ideas’ or ‘representations,’ etc., which seem to make up ideology, do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a material existence” (Althusser 165). This makes readers look towards their own mundane world in contrast to the freedom Brakebills grants its students, all the while questioning the true reality that the fantasy genre often provides. *The Magicians* critiques the ideological standards of modern society by mirroring them through its structure and setting. The novel creates an allegorical critique of how individuals are shaped and restricted by education systems, acting as representations of ISAs, in both magical and real-world settings. Their limits to enlightenment are rooted in their inability to see beyond the ‘tools’ given by the Maker, reflecting a philosophy that lacks practicality and remains vexed by societal structures.

Quentin's continual internal struggle and disillusionment reflect the challenges of interpellation faced by individuals once they achieve freedom that is paradoxically perceived as absolute. His interactions with Alice, and his warring feelings toward her, illustrate Althusser's notion that ideology exists in material form, independent of individuals, as Quentin asserts, “There was nothing to hang on to. They couldn't go on like this forever” (Grossman 170). This admission emphasizes the persistence of ideological impact even when one becomes aware or resistant, reflecting Althusser's claim that “ideology has no history” (Althusser 159) as it endures as a transhistorical structure that continually interpellates individuals. The novel interrogates the mechanisms by which identity is formed in the cultural and ideological scenarios of the fantasy genre by exposing tensions between individual agency and the workings of structural forces. Penny's claim, “We're not bad people ... We're the good guys” (Grossman 186), juxtaposes personal identity against the ideological expectations of society, as it shows how popular culture and the fantasy genre operate as a cultural ISA, spreading ideology through escapism. This blurring of heroic and villainous dichotomies, common in fantasy, not only enhances our understanding of identity interpellation, but also how readers can resist these ideological controls.

Ultimately, the text provides dual perspectives on the reproduction of ideologies: it disseminates certain positions, while the agency of readers acts as a site of possible contestation. Brakebills, as an ISA, mirrors real-world educational institutions that sustain and critique hegemonic norms. “They could live in Castle Whitespire. Alice could be his queen” (193). Through this, the novel highlights

the paradoxical nature of the fantasy genre as both a product of cultural ideology and a site where contradictory narratives and alternatives can flourish.

### **Resistance and Subversion in the Fantasy Genre**

Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* can be perceived not only as a story of escapism through magic but also as an allegory of real-world ideological systems, particularly through Althusser's Marxist lens. The core of the story is at Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy, an institution examined as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that breeds consent through education. In the novel, Quentin's experiences thread through the narrative; Brakebills offers to wrap Quentin in an ideological blanket that pressures him into conformity. Quentin's initial experience at Brakebills is one of escape, a place to fulfill his dreams, but the text holds deeper ideological undertones, because when Quentin starts working at PlaxCO account team he does not "inspire any resentment in his new colleagues, or even any particular curiosity" (277). Like many real-world educational institutions, it becomes clear that Brakebills produces docile, moldable individuals in the name of education and skill production. Althusser notes that "the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order" (Althusser 132), which encapsulates Brakebills' role in shaping Quentin's development.

*The Magicians* also illustrates how fantasy literature can represent the interplay of power and submission. The centaur monastery, or the Retreat, complements Brakebills' doctrine with its own uncompromising values, underlining the novel's exploration of ideological allegiances. Quentin, isolated in the Retreat, contemplates his life with a sense of loss: "The centaurs watched him weep with alien unconcern, like fish" (Grossman 262). By this depiction, Grossman critiques the negative, dehumanizing effects of institutional supervision and control as "the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression" (Althusser 145). Brakebills and the centaur Retreat both serve as ISAs, indoctrinating and refining characters into submission to ideological normativity, particularly to extract a useful human product, which highlights the extent to which ideology shapes a person.

The novel also explores ideologies connected to identity and self-worth through Quentin's journey. Though initially convinced magical power would give purpose, Quentin's experiences mirror sentiments of dissatisfaction: "Magic could never fix. His body was still weak, and he spent a lot of time in bed, resting his atrophied muscles" (Grossman 263). This challenges the idea that elite institutions or abilities guarantee fulfillment. *The Magicians* reveals the absence

of substance in seeking identity through ideology, encouraging readers to question conformity and to explore self-discovery beyond institutional boundaries.

Grossman uses fantasy not just as a setting but as a vehicle for ideological critique, illustrating possible resistance within the genre. *The Magicians* subverts social and elite power structures by exposing the epistemic arrogance at their core. When Quentin wants to go back in time to save Alice, Jane says, “We can’t go back” (268), but he insists, “We can go back. We can and we will!” (268). In this way, Grossman urges reflection on blind conformity and ideological entrapments. The fantasy genre in popular culture is not merely an escape, but also a lens through which resistance and subversion are possible, inviting the reader to reconsider hegemonic norms.

The dynamics of power and vulnerability play out in character relationships, mirroring the socio-political arguments of the narrative. Alice’s transformation into a niffin, “she had died for him, for all of them, and she was never coming back” (262), acts as a metaphor for ideological sacrifice and loss of freedom. People are conditioned by societal expectations, propagated through sites similar to Brakebills, and pay the price in freedom and authenticity. The novel’s symbolism, like the Questing Beast and the crown of Fillory, addresses power and resistance. When Quentin confronts the Questing Beast, it refuses his demands: “I wish that the rules were different” (274). This highlights how ideologies are limited and that resistance is possible. Therefore, the narrative affirms fantasy literature as a tool for addressing ideological themes and challenging readers to analyze power and identity critically. In doing so, the novel both extends and complicates ideological formations, showing the potential to evade cultural hegemony.

## Conclusion

In this research, Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians* is analyzed through the lens of Louis Althusser’s concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), focusing on the nature of the relationship and critique between the fantasy genre and ideological constructs characterizing contemporary society. The study highlights how Brakebills functions as an ISA, perpetuating dominant ideologies under the guise of magical education. The institution’s authority to inscribe characters’ expectations and perspectives can be framed within Althusser’s notion of interpellation where “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (Althusser 173), positioning individuals within hegemonic cultural practices. Structures of elitism and conformity within Brakebills are a microcosm of real-world power dynamics. Moreover, the social environment of the novel reflects ideological indoctrination through hierarchies and interactions

formed within the school, allegorically reflecting systems of power and control in the outside world.

The study emphasizes fantasy literature's potential to function as a site of ideological critique and resistance. By contrasting Brakebills' exclusive educational experience with the larger, often hostile world outside, Grossman encourages readers to interrogate the tacit promises and failings of ideological institutions. The novel works to upend the idea of fantasy literature as escapism and also presents itself as a subversive device for counter-discourse, showing how inventions in the genre of fantasy allow it to “conform and respond to ideological shifts” (Brandt and Clare 65). In the novel, the characters contend with the constraints of prescribed identities as well as the search for authenticity, which provides possible ways to subversion and transcendence in entrenched ideologies. Ultimately, this research encourages engagement with the role of popular culture in both reproducing and contesting systems that shape identity, power, and resistance.

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