

A House with an Unsteady Foundation

A Narrative Equilibrium Look at *The House in the Cerulean Sea*

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February 2026

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

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Number of pages: 24 pages, 0 appendices

Abstract.

This thesis examines how the minimization of sustained conflict affects narrative progression and character transformation in T. J. Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. The study applies Tzvetan Todorov's model of narrative equilibrium as a structural framework and analyzes the novel on three interconnected levels: macro, meso, and micro. These are compared with analogous patterns in selected works of tension-driven fantasy in order to identify systematic differences in the operation of the five stages of narrative equilibrium.

The analysis shows that in traditional fantasy narratives, successive disruptions generate cumulative pressure that produces transformation through risk, partial repair, and lasting consequences. In *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, by contrast, disruptions are repeatedly resolved at the local level and equilibrium is rapidly restored. Narrative progression therefore occurs through confirmation rather than through irreversible change. As a result, character development is presented as immediate ethical realignment rather than as transformation through sustained conflict.

The findings indicate that the reduction of tension alters both the tone of the narrative and its underlying progression logic. Comfort is produced structurally through the neutralization of contradiction, which limits the accumulation of causal and moral pressure required for proportionally earned transformation. The thesis thus argues that low-conflict fantasy operates according to a distinct narrative logic in which equilibrium is repeatedly re-established without structural escalation.

Key words: cozy fantasy, narrative equilibrium, Todorov, character transformation, conflict, progression logic

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1 Introduction: Cozy fantasy's warm embrace

What could be cozier than a Sunday afternoon spent with a good book? Why, spending it with a Cozy fantasy-themed thesis that focuses on Todorov's theory of narrative equilibrium as applied to T.J. Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, of course. However, before we embark on this cozy adventure, what exactly is Cozy fantasy, and which of its comfortable aspects are we going to examine?

At present, it is challenging to find an authoritative voice to give Cozy fantasy a clear definition; however, it's possible to outline the defining features of the genre from some of its most commonly available descriptions:

Cozy fantasy is like *Lord of the Rings*, but you never leave the Shire. Cozy fantasy is like cozy mystery but with magic instead of murder. Cozy fantasy is a type of comfort read, a subset of optimistic fantasy, that is characterized by low stakes and high emotional resonance. Cozy fantasy is a vibe. (Durst 2024).

Reinforcing the low-stake, low-conflict description is an article from *USA Today* that spends some time introducing the readers to the concept:

Hood prefers to define it by what it does include – uplifting slice-of-life storylines, rich world-building, magic, strong character development and found family. [...] Cozy fantasy is sometimes defined by what it doesn't have – dark, world-saving quests, death or blood-pressure-raising stakes. (Mulroy 2024).

Indeed, the stakes and conflict, or their absence or severity, seem to largely define the genre and further split it into three unofficial subgenres, Small, Medium and Large Conflict:

The Small Conflict category includes stories with little to no conflict at all, where the fantasy worlds are mostly a setting for a series of slice-of-life scenes. [...] Next, the Medium Conflict category encompasses books that have a dash of danger, death, and/or other conflicts. [...] Finally, the Large Conflict category is for all the cozy fantasy books that contain both slice-of-life scenes and epic battles where lives are at risk. (Nassor 2023).

Through these descriptions, we can synthesize the following description for Cozy fantasy: It is a sub-genre of Fantasy Fiction that follows the genre conventions, diverging by largely omitting conflicts and friction while placing greater emphasis on comforting themes and imagery (Durst 2024; Mulroy 2024; Nassor 2023).

In this thesis, I intend to focus on one representative of Cozy fantasy (from here on referred to as "CF"). Written by T.J. Klune in 2020, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (from here on referred to as "*The House*") is widely considered to be a genre-defining work, frequently

appearing in articles and various recommended reading list. Sitting at 988000 ratings on Goodreads.com as of February 14th, 2026, it can certainly be considered a popular, far-reaching, and, to an extent, genre-representing work (Goodreads. n.d.). *The House* fits the earlier definitions – it is a story with no world-saving quests; it has no deaths or high stakes; however, it is a story about found families, uplifting slice-of-life storylines, and mostly low stakes. Additionally, *The House* belongs to the “small conflict” category of CF novels, therefore featuring minimal conflict tension, which will be indicated as an important point for its narrative structure.

The House follows Linus Baker, a mid-level, experienced bureaucrat in his forties, working for the Department In Charge Of Magical Youth (DICOMY further in the text). In the inciting incident, Linus is charged with evaluating an orphanage for magical children – an almost routine assignment for his line of work. However, it is soon revealed that the orphanage houses the literal son of the devil, which comes as a shock to Linus. In addition to the spawn of Satan, named Lucy (short for Lucifer), the orphanage contains several other magical beings, and is ran by Arthur Parnassus, himself a magical being. Over the course of the novel, Linus learns to better appreciate the magical children, falls in love with their caretaker, and changes his world views. Set in a faux-dystopian setting, the novel is centered around the themes of empathy, found family, and quiet transformation.

The aim of this thesis is to examine *The House* through the lens of Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of narrative equilibrium as outlined by him in his article, *The 2 Principles of Narrative*, in order to establish the divergence of *The House* from the Fantasy genre at large; in addition, I intend to examine the results of minimization of conflict in the novel’s narrative scope, and its effect on the aspect of transformation throughout the narrative.

The research question is as follows – does minimizing tension and maximizing perceived reader comfort affect the magnitude and appropriateness of character transformation within the novel?

This thesis will use Todorov’s model and T.J. Klune’s novel as primary sources. In certain cases, well-established examples of non-CF will be used as counterpoints for *The House* examples to illustrate points of structural divergence.

The scope of this thesis excludes later adaptations or expansions of Todorov’s model; it will, additionally, not make use of any other CF examples. These limitations serve to focus the

analysis on one body of a single representative text through the means of the original formulation of Todorov's theory.

2 Methodology

In this chapter, I intend to outline the theoretical sources and their use in this thesis. This chapter discusses the primary source – Todorov’s *The 2 Principles of Narrative*, and its central theory – the model of narrative equilibrium. In the final section, I will provide practical implementation of Todorov’s model in narrative analysis of *The House*.

2.1 Primary Source

The primary theoretical source for examining *The House* in this thesis will be Tzvetan Todorov’s narrative equilibrium model as it is presented in *The 2 Principles of Narrative*. In this article, Todorov reflects on Vladimir Propp’s structural analysis of Russian folktales in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), in which Propp identifies a series of recurring narrative functions, and examines which of the functions identified by Propp are integral to the narrative (Todorov 1971, 37).

Having analyzed both Propp’s originally observed *Swan-Geese* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron* III, 6, Todorov proposes a more concise set of elements that form a symmetric narrative structure (Todorov 1971, 37–38). I will discuss these elements in greater detail in chapter 2.2 as it will be the main lens for this research.

In addition, he also proposes that relationship between narrative units is not only that of succession, but that of transformation as well:

“It is obvious that the first element repeats the fifth [...]; and that the third is the inversion of one and five. In addition, the second and the fourth are symmetrical and inverse. Thus it is not true that the only relationship between the units is one of succession; we can also say that the relationship of the units must also be one of transformation” (Todorov 1971, 39).

Finally, Todorov distinguishes two types of transformation narrative: a mythological and a gnoseological one, in which the former sees the world change due to the actions of the characters, and in the other, the characters themselves transform through new knowledge (Todorov 1971, 38–39).

Together, the three aspects of symmetry, transformation, and the mythological/gnoseological divide form the analytical foundation for assessing how *The House* alters the traditional dynamics of narrative equilibrium.

2.2 Todorov's Narrative Equilibrium Model

This section introduces Todorov's narrative equilibrium model and illustrates its elements through selected examples.

Todorov's narrative equilibrium model consists of five main elements that he argues are essential to any narrative, and taking any of these elements, while possible, will likely make for an incomplete narrative arc. (Todorov 1971, 37–38).

These elements are:

1. Equilibrium
2. Disruption of the equilibrium
3. Recognition of the disruption
4. Attempt to resolve the disruption
5. State of new equilibrium

Todorov demonstrates the model using Vladimir Propp's analysis of the Russian folktale *Swan-Geese*, which follows a sister's search for her kidnapped brother (Todorov 1971, 38):

1. The equilibrium is the life of the family before the events of the story
2. The disruption occurs when the swan-geese kidnap the boy
3. The recognition happens as the sister realizes the boy has been kidnapped
4. The sister then attempts (and succeeds) to resolve the disruption by finding and rescuing her brother
5. By bringing him home, finally, a new equilibrium is achieved, bringing the story to a successful resolution.

Similarly, narrative structure of a fantasy novel follows the same rhythm. For example, *The Lord of the Rings* goes through similar steps (Tolkien [1954] 2012):

1. The Hobbits live in a state of peace in The Shire
2. Gandalf brings the knowledge of the One Ring that poses a threat to the entire world
3. The ring is recognized as the One Ring, and the threat as Sauron

4. The Fellowship is formed and attempts to destroy the Ring and Sauron
5. The Fellowship is successful; peace is restored; the world sees a new equilibrium.

While Todorov does not explicitly describe the model as operating on multiple textual scales, the same equilibrium sequence can be observed at the level of the whole narrative, its constituent arcs, and individual scenes. For the purposes of this thesis, these will be referred to as the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels.

While certain narratives may be too brief to contain all the levels of narrative equilibrium, fantasy novels are certain to not be among them. For an example of a meso level narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*, the final chapter of the final book, The Scouring of the Shire, can be used – it fits both as a mid-level narrative event, and as a self-contained chapter (Tolkien [1954] 2012):

1. The Hobbits return to the Shire, expecting peace
2. Instead, the Shire is oppressed by Saruman and his ruffians
3. The Hobbits realize evil can take root anywhere – even at home
4. A rebellion begins, liberating the Shire and destroying the villains
5. The Shire is free, peace returns, but simplicity and innocence are lost

This example also illustrates both types of transformation – the world changes, and so do its inhabitants.

Finally, the micro level of *Lord of the Rings* (of which there are extremely many, due to the sheer volume of the work) example could be Gandalf the Grey's confrontation with the Balrog – a single, self-contained scene within a chapter (Tolkien [1954] 2012):

1. The Fellowship flees through Moria
2. The Balrog appears, threatening Fellowship's destruction
3. Gandalf realizes he must confront it to save the others
4. Gandalf battles the Balrog, sacrificing himself
5. The rest escape, Gandalf's temporary death providing temporary peace.

As mentioned, a larger work is filled with moment-to-moment narrative events like the above example; however, while the model and the named elements set an expectation for complete equilibrium, this is not the case for most narratives. Instead, rather than balancing the narrative scales, the resolution is often partial or failed, leading to a state of partial or reduced

equilibrium. The structure still exists; however, it is symmetrical in its pattern, not its outcome (Todorov 1971, 37–38).

These partial repairs and new equilibriums continue to cascade to create further friction and escalation within the ongoing narrative arcs. This provides moral and physical challenges for the characters of the stories to overcome – or sometimes permanently fail. However, through facing these challenges, the characters reinforce the validity of their transformation – it becomes earned, instead of being granted.

Having outlined the theoretical framework of Todorov’s narrative equilibrium, the next section applies the model as a lens for literary analysis. In particular, I will consider how this model can be used to trace structural and transformational dynamics within a narrative.

2.3 Application of the Model

In this section, I will outline the application of Todorov’s principles in the analysis of *The House* in a way that will serve to answer the research question.

As described in 2.1 and 2.2, Todorov’s theory includes three interrelated components:

1. The five-stage narrative equilibrium model (Todorov 1971, 37–38),
2. The distinction between succession and transformation as means of narrative progression (Todorov 1971, 39), and
3. Mythological and gnoseological aspects of transformation (Todorov 1971, 38–39).

In Chapter 3, these principles will be applied to examine the impact of reduced or removed conflict in *The House* using all three dimensions of Todorov’s framework. Comparative references to well-known fantasy works will be provided to contextualize structural divergence of *The House* from the traditional narrative.

Table 1: Narrative progression in traditional fantasy and *The House*

Stage	Traditional fantasy	The House
Equilibrium	Default state based on the previous phase. Emphasis on continuity.	Default state based on the emotional baseline. Emphasis on stability.
Disruption	Increases global instability; often long-term; may never be repaired within the entire work.	Increases local instability; usually short-term; typically repaired within the chapter or phase.
Recognition	Often complex, delayed, or incomplete. May generate further micro-phases outside the current.	Usually immediate and concrete; provides practical or emotional ways for quick restoration.
Repair	Often partially successful or failed; sets up for escalation in the next phase.	Rarely unsuccessful; sets up for emotional reset in the next phase.
New Equilibrium	Continuity from the prior phase(s) contribute to tension escalation.	Phase resolves in reset to emotional baseline; rare cliffhanger may be present. Tension dissipates.

As shown in Table 1, the main structural difference between regular fantasy and *The House* is that of narrative progression – whether it is driven by succession or transformation. In Traditional fantasy, transformation is achieved through conflict, tension, and irreversible change, producing structurally earned progression. In *The House*, by contrast, disruption and repair function as a form of reassurance. Succession outweighs transformation; progression is granted for display of virtue or acceptance, and equilibrium is restored almost immediately.

3 Applying Narrative Equilibrium Model to *The House*

In this chapter, the three aspects of Todorov's narrative equilibrium model will be applied to the macro, mesa and micro narrative levels of *The House* in order to answer the research question.

3.1 Macro Level

The macro level is the first logical step for comparing *The House* against regular Fantasy fiction – when zoomed out, both may appear similar, however, as the analysis will get closer to the constituents of the macro narrative, greater levels of divergence will become apparent.

At the macro level it makes sense to compare narrative on a novel-to-novel level, rather than novel-to-series – therefore, in 3.1, *The House* macro-level narrative will be compared with macro-level narrative of J.R.R. Tolkien's first *Lord of the Rings* novel (referred to as *LotR* from here onward), *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien [1954] 2012), and J.K. Rowling's first *Harry Potter* (referred to from here on as HP) novel, *The Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling [1997] 2015).

Table 2: Narrative stages at the Macro level

Stage	HP	LotR	The House	Observation
Equilibrium	Harry's static life under the Dursleys; stable but suffocating.	Hobbits' safe, stable and innocent life in the Shire.	Linus Baker's stable existence in a bureaucratic world, secure and undisturbed.	<i>HP's</i> equilibrium is the most precarious of the three despite originally viewed as "children's literature".
Disruption	Hagrid's arrival and the revelation of the wizarding world shatter the known order.	Gandalf's arrival, the revelation of the One Ring and the threat of war shatter the known order.	Linus receives a work assignment fit for a professional of his rank.	Traditional fantasy shatters order; <i>The House</i> upholds it.
Realization	Harry understands his new role within a magical world, learns of Voldemort, and begins grasping moral and personal stakes.	Frodo understands his mission as the ring-bearer, learns of dangerous creatures, begins grasping moral and personal stakes.	Linus learns(!) that magical creatures are magical and charming, Arthur is morally superior, and that he enjoys being at the orphanage.	Growing tension and conflict in Traditional fantasy, while decreasing in <i>The House</i> .
Repair	Harry confronts Quirrell/Voldemort, risking his life to prevent the Philosopher's Stone from being stolen.	The Fellowship is formed, its purpose is clarified; Frodo's role as ring-bearer reaffirmed, placing him in permanent danger.	Linus challenges bureaucracy mildly, "standing up" to the DICOMY board with little resistance, also steals some case files with no consequence.	Traditional fantasy resolves through risky action either fully or partially. <i>The House</i> suggests major change through minor unchallenged steps.
New Equilibrium	Harry returns to the Dursleys changed — now aware of his power, belonging, and destiny. Danger is postponed, not removed.	Fellowship collapses, Boromir dies, Merry and Pippin are captured, Frodo chooses to continue the quest with Sam.	Linus leaves DICOMY for the orphanage, is welcomed.	Traditional fantasy offers partial, transformed equilibrium that is based on the results of previous narrative beats. <i>The House</i> creates a positive, complete equilibrium.

HP data from Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Rowling [1997] 2015);

LOTR data from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien [1954] 2012);

The House data from *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (Klune 2020).

Already at the macro level, the difference is very clear – the Traditional fantasy representatives present clear stakes and challenges even at the “novel outline” level of narrative. While the original equilibrium is similar for all the novels, the disruption stage shows an immediate and clear divergence between Traditional fantasy and *The House* – disruption in Traditional fantasy implies dangerous knowledge or dangerous events in the world – or both, thus, working on both mythological and gnoseological levels.

In *The House*, the disruption presented to the protagonist is his own work – another assignment that should be routine to him. It is later revealed that one of the children he is sent to assess is the son of the Devil; however, this is learned later, and the original inciting incident and the disruption trigger is having to do his work – possibly an unusual thing to be a disruption for a career bureaucrat. In *The House*’s version of macro-disruption, conflict is largely absent, and, similarly, so is the transformational aspect. The protagonist does not change through action, nor does his world – however, he successively moves on to a new stage in the world, that of the sea-side Marsyas Orphanage, while accepting, successively, new world views.

The same tendencies continue in the Realization stage – in Traditional fantasy, the protagonists realize the importance and danger of their mission, and of the nature of the world around them.

In *The House*, a trained, 40-year-old career bureaucrat that spent successful years in the DICOMY learns, to his shock, that magical youth is magical, dwarves act like dwarves, and that children of the devil, too, are real; furthermore, he also realizes that children are both magical and endearing – certainly not facts his earlier career had prepared him for. This is, in a sense, a transformational event, but it is transformational regression, not progress, and it can make the reader question the entire premise based on this transformation alone. The revelation here is for the reader’s benefit, not for the internal narrative logic.

In the Repair step, Traditional fantasy characters either directly risk their lives, or know they place their lives in danger in order to save the day or prevent complete failure of their quest. By doing so, they validate their moral stance within their novels' own moral structure.

In *The House*, Linus' risk is never fully presented to the reader. The world is implied to be totalitarian, yet totalitarianism never materializes. The system is characterized as rigged and unfair, and yet, a mid-level ministerial employee is capable of "standing up" to his superiors and talking them into submission without leverage, charisma, or oratorical skills. This confrontation and resolution are simply given to the protagonist and the readers as the very swift resolution of what momentarily presents as a risky situation.

Linus also steals some case files from the archives. Of note, the novel does away with the traditional moral framework earlier:

"He turned back towards the group, eyes wide. "As you all know, there is an evil sprite—"

"Hey!" Phee cried.

"Lucy, we do not call people evil," Arthur reminded him as Theodore settled on his shoulder. "It isn't polite."

Lucy rolled his eyes. "Fine. I take that back. There is a murderous sprite..."
(Klune 2020, chap. 10).

Linus is shown to *internalize* this concept in the next chapter, when he addresses his cat's theft of Linus' possessions as, "It's impolite" (Klune 2020, chap. 11).

Therefore, one of the biggest implied changes in the protagonist is his moral stance moving from absolute to relative. This theft could present a tension within the story – Linus could be caught, suspected, or even told off for being rude by other characters – however, his theft is rewarded as, in the end, it counts as leverage against the DICOMY.

In this sense, *The House* performs an almost complete moral inversion of the Traditional fantasy repair stage: where traditional heroes risk themselves to restore ethical balance, Linus redefines ethics until the acts previously seen by him as amoral are no longer morally unacceptable, though perhaps rude.

The final step is the New Equilibrium stage of the model. TF narrative in offered examples varies greatly. *HP* offers a nearly complete return to the original equilibrium mythologically

(Harry returns to the Dursley house), yet not gnoseologically, as he is now aware of the secret world of wizards, his own power and identity, and of the threat posed by Voldemort. *LotR*, instead, ends at what could be considered a failure to restore equilibrium – the Fellowship’s quest nearly fails, and the decisions that follow this near-failure set up a very fragile and uncertain temporary state. Both these narratives arrive at this point through the actions and transformation of the characters and the world.

New Equilibrium in *The House*, on the surface, does establish a new order, though it does so as an inversion to the starting order: at the start, Linus has his house, his bureaucratic daily work, and the endless rain in the capital. He is also completely alone, his cat and his sunflower notwithstanding. At the end, he abandons the house, the work, replacing it with daily toil with the children, who directly replace his former work supervisors, has his partner, and clear-sky weather. However, all this is granted to him through the most minute amounts of effort and transformation; there are few to none changes to his character through the narrative.

It can, therefore, already be said that even on the most zoomed out level, the narrative diverges significantly.

3.2 Meso Level

At the meso level, overarching narrative can be taken apart to shorter arcs, such as acts or chapters. These serve to carry the macro level narrative forward, and, just as already established with the macro level, the trend towards divergence continues. In the following table, I offer one example of such divergence.

Table 3: Narrative stages at the Meso level

Stage	HP	LotR	The House	Observation
Equilibrium	Harry spends his first Christmas at Hogwarts, surrounded by friends.	Representatives of different races gather, seeking to understand the Ring's threat.	Linus travels to the nearby village to send his first report.	None.
Disruption	Harry finds the Mirror of Erised, which reveals the deepest desires of the heart. In it, he sees his parents. He begins obsessing over the mirror.	The revelation of the Ring's full power divides the council.	The villagers, starting with the ferryman, are prejudiced against the inhabitants of the orphanage.	Here, the conflict and divergence begin growing more pronounced – <i>LotR</i> escalates, <i>HP</i> experiences gnoseological threat, <i>The House</i> presents a values misalignment.
Realization	Harry learns that the mirror shows only desire — and that those who dwell on dreams forget to live.	Frodo realizes that no-one else but him can safely carry the Ring.	Linus realizes that he is an official DICOMY representative and has government-vested power.	Of the three, <i>The House</i> realization does not come with an underlying labor-intense or duty-bound state change.
Repair	Harry stops visiting the mirror, accepting that clinging to illusion prevents growth.	Frodo volunteers to bear the Ring to Mordor, bridging divisions through self-sacrifice.	Linus puts villagers back in their place by pulling rank.	Traditional fantasy protagonists decide to make moral and/or physical sacrifice; <i>The House</i> protagonist inverts by applying institutional power.
New Equilibrium	Harry's understanding of loss and self-discipline deepens.	The Fellowship forms, ready to take on the quest through newfound unity, Frodo ready to head into the unknown dangers.	Linus returns to the island with a sense of accomplishment.	In Traditional fantasy, gnoseological/mythical transformations occur to form a new equilibrium, in <i>The House</i> , the character is granted higher ground through authorial voice.

HP data from Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Rowling [1997] 2015);

LOTR data from The Fellowship of the Ring (Tolkien [1954] 2012);

The House data from The House in the Cerulean Sea (Klune 2020).

The tendencies identified in Section 3.1 continue at the meso level in a more pronounced form. In Traditional fantasy, narrative arcs operate over extended durations, maintaining pressure and tension across successive phases. Although the initial equilibrium may be similar - for example, both *HP* and *The House* begin in a mundane state - the scale of disruption and

the subsequent movement toward a new equilibrium diverge significantly. In *HP*, the disruption compels the protagonist to confront his identity and develop self-mastery; in *LotR*, Frodo learns of his role in the larger conflict and accepts his responsibility. In *The House*, Linus encounters townspeople expressing hostile views toward the children and resolves the conflict through the use of his pre-existing institutional authority.

In the first two examples, realization and repair are driven by external pressure: the protagonists must adapt to new knowledge and altered circumstances in order to restore equilibrium. In *The House*, by contrast, resolution proceeds from the assumption that the protagonist already possesses the necessary moral and psychological resources; the conflict is therefore resolved through self-affirmation rather than through cumulative transformation.

At the meso level, where narrative arcs are fully articulated, the divergence between the texts becomes structurally explicit. In Traditional fantasy, successive disruptions generate sustained pressure to fuel transformation; in *The House*, successive disruptions are briskly resolved, and equilibrium is repeatedly restored, producing progression through confirmation rather than world-driven change. Having established this contrast at the level of the arc, the analysis now turns to the micro level to examine how the same progression logic operates within individual events.

3.3 Micro Level

If the meso level demonstrates how successive disruptions accumulate into distinct narrative arcs, the micro level shows how this progression logic is generated in the first place. Examining a single interaction reveals the minimal equilibrium sequence from which the larger structure is composed.

Table 4: Narrative stages at the Micro level

Stage	HP	LotR	The House	Observation
Equilibrium	The Dursleys and Harry arrive in a small rowboat during a violent storm.	The hobbits and Strider stop at Weathertop Hill for the night.	Linus arrives at the village's postmaster to send out a report.	In <i>HP</i> and <i>LotR</i> the initial equilibrium is already unstable, while in <i>The House</i> it is neutral and requires an additional trigger to produce conflict.
Disruption	At midnight on Harry's 11th birthday, Hagrid breaks down the hut's door, delivers Harry's Hogwarts acceptance letter personally.	The Nazgûl close in on the group.	The postmaster makes hostile comments on the orphanage and its inhabitants.	Disruption in Traditional fantasy takes the form of an external and material threat, whereas in <i>The House</i> it takes verbal or social form.
Realization	Harry learns he is a wizard, that his parents were murdered by Voldemort.	Frodo realizes he and the Ring are the target.	Linus identifies that his official status gives him leverage.	Realization in <i>HP</i> and <i>LotR</i> redefines the situation by increasing the stakes, while in <i>The House</i> it identifies the means for immediate resolution.
Repair	Vernon attempts to refuse and deny it.	Frodo attempts to use the Ring, Strider drives the Nazgûl off.	Linus invokes DICOMY authority.	Repair in Traditional fantasy provides additional pressure and may not eliminate the threat; in <i>The House</i> it is immediately effective and fully stabilising.
New Equilibrium	Hagrid leaves with Harry the following morning.	Frodo is wounded and poisoned.	Hostility ceases immediately.	In Traditional fantasy, the new equilibrium commits, escalates or even worsens; in <i>The House</i> , it de-escalates and re-stabilizes.

HP data from Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Rowling [1997] 2015);

LOTR data from The Fellowship of the Ring (Tolkien [1954] 2012);

The House data from *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (Klune 2020).

At the micro level, the same divergence is visible in the internal dynamics of a single event: in *HP* and *LotR* repair does not restore stability but carries the disruption forward, producing a new and more precarious equilibrium, whereas in *The House* repair is immediately effective and terminates the conflict.

Therefore, as the meso level is composed of de-escalated and self-contained micro-level events, progression becomes episodic rather than cumulative, and neither the world nor the characters carry forward lasting structural change. The resulting pattern is repetitive and frictionless, creating the conditions of a comfort read while limiting the sustained tension required for a progressively built conclusion.

4 Synthesis

While the previous chapter established the structural divergence between Traditional fantasy and *The House*, the present chapter synthesizes those findings by examining how these structural differences translate into thematic and moral consequences. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, the texts operate according to different progression logics, and thus the task here is to consider what those logics permit, and what they make structurally difficult, within the narrative world.

As shown prior, the divergence is not confined to a single scale of the text but is consistently observable at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. *The House* does not alternate this pattern; rather, the same logic of locally resolved disruption and restored equilibrium governs the narrative throughout. On the surface, this produces the promised effect of comfort for the reader. However, the minimization of sustained conflict begins to affect more than tone: it alters the conditions under which transformation, value formation, and causal progression can occur.

At closer examination of the meso- and micro-level sequences, a further point becomes visible: the question of internal narrative consistency and the operation of moral logic within the text. As disruption is repeatedly resolved locally and does not generate sustained structural pressure, the narrative does not provide a space in which values can be contested, thought upon, or tested over time. As a result, moral development is replaced with moral confirmation, as positions presented as valid are accepted and internalized without challenge from within and from without.

Because the novel's progression logic repeatedly resolves disruption at the local level, it does not generate the sustained pressure required for values to be challenged, negotiated, and transformed over time. Moral positions are therefore presented as immediately valid and subsequently internalized. When one set of values replaces another, this shift does not occur accompanied by resistance or proportional cost, but through recognition of an already established authority within the narrative.

Characters whose moral position is aligned with the novel's moral encoding are able to enforce this position through mechanisms that function as immediate repair: institutional rank, privileged access to information, or even the threat of force. These actions do not introduce new instability or produce lasting consequences; instead, they terminate the conflict and

restore equilibrium. As a result, acts that would conventionally generate moral tension are integrated into the narrative as stabilizing, and their ethical status is determined by the confirmatory logic of the progression rather than by a universally applied in-world moral framework.

A similar effect can be observed in the construction of the protagonist's institutional role. Linus is introduced as a long-serving and competent case worker within the DICOMY, a position that presupposes the ability to operate effectively within the novel's bureaucratic hegemony. Within the narrative, however, this competence is not functionally demonstrated. Advancement in the progression of the plot is therefore not tied to the successful performance of his institutional task, but to the confirmatory logic already identified above.

As a result, the role the narrative assigns and the competence it has Linus demonstrates are incompatible. The same system that is described as capable of efficiently regulating the lives of magical and non-magical subjects alike entrusts its most sensitive case to a representative whose actions do not display the professional competence that the role implies.

The apparent contradictions that follow from this arrangement are therefore not isolated inconsistencies but cumulative effects of the progression logic itself. Because repair and advancement are granted through structural confirmation rather than achieved through tested action, the narrative can assign expertise, revoke it for tonal contrast, and reassign at will.

Upon his arrival at the Marsyas orphanage, Linus continues to act as he had before—deferential, passive, and administratively ineffective—while the narrative adds a further layer of emotional disorientation in the form of fear, confusion, and infatuation. His reports, which progressively abandon professional register in favor of personal reflection, do not function as demonstrations of institutional competence.

His rapid realignment following a single conversation with Arthur is structurally revealing. It does not follow from cumulative pressure, failed repair, or the proportional cost that would conventionally mediate gnoseological transformation; it is instant. Reframed in other terms, the mechanism becomes clearer: if the same exchange concerned something other than the ethical status of magical beings but, for instance, the composition of the moon, the structural dynamics would remain unchanged. Linus's acceptance would be no less immediate, and the narrative would be equally capable of presenting the position as newly meaningful. The issue,

therefore, is not the content of the belief but the absence of a phase in which belief is challenged.

When belief replaces inquiry and alignment replaces transformation, the result is not the reconfiguration of a worldview through narrative experience but its confirmation through positional authority.

Furthermore, when Linus does move to direct action, it is, with few exceptions, not mediated through proportional cost to himself but through consequences borne by others, most often those who oppose him. Within the village, his intervention functions less as a confrontation that generates instability than as the invocation of external authority that terminates it; within the DICOMY, his shift from compliance to opposition does not follow from a sustained phase of internal contestation but from the same engine that has previously rewarded him. Even actions that would conventionally introduce moral tension, such as the theft of restricted case files, serve as immediate repair and are retrospectively integrated into the narrative as necessary and valid.

The protagonist's agency is therefore not tested through risk, failed repair, or lasting consequence. What is framed as growth is not produced through cumulative disruption but granted through positional confirmation. Therefore, transformation occurs as narrative declaration rather than as lived change.

5 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine what happens to transformation when sustained tension is removed in favor of comfort. What the analysis shows is that this is not only a change in tone but a change in how the narrative progresses. In tension-driven fantasy, contradiction is not a flaw to be corrected but the engine that keeps the story in motion. The gap between ideal and reality, role and self, desire and limitation generates pressure; that pressure produces conflict; conflict makes transformation necessary, and the new equilibrium carries the trace of what it costs to achieve it.

In *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, this sequence is reorganized. Because disruptions are repeatedly resolved at the local level, contradiction never develops into sustained instability. Repair does not mediate between opposing positions but removes the need for mediation altogether. The narrative continues to move forward, but it does so without escalation and without the accumulation of cost and consequence.

The same progression logic governs character change. Linus's ethical realignment is presented as growth, yet it does not follow from failed repair, prolonged pressure, or lasting consequence. Belief replaces inquiry, positional authority replaces challenge, and action is detached from personal risk. What appears as transformation is therefore granted through confirmation rather than produced through experience.

This has consequences for the generation of meaning. In Traditional fantasy, stability is achieved by confronting contradiction and converting it into change. Here, stability is preserved by neutralizing contradiction before it can become structurally productive. The effect is the comfort the genre promises, but that comfort is not only affective: it is built into the progression logic itself.

The research question asked whether minimizing tension alters the magnitude and appropriateness of transformation. The answer is that it does. When conflict is no longer allowed to accumulate, transformation no longer needs to be mediated through proportional experience. Change still occurs, but it takes the form of narrative declaration rather than lived transformation.

The House in the Cerulean Sea therefore does not merely tell a lower-conflict story. It operates according to a different logic of progression in which contradiction is neutralized rather than negotiated and equilibrium is repeatedly restored without structural escalation.

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