Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres

Book · January 2016

DOI: 10.1007/978-94-6300-758-0

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INTRODUCTION

Challenging Fantasy Literature

Over the years, fantasy literature has attracted a body of scholarly criticism devoted to illuminating works of fantasy not unlike critical analyses of classic and canonical literary works. Critical analyses of fantasy are devoted to uncovering themes and patterns (Croft, 2009, 2010, 2011; Shippey 2002), narrative complexities (Bullard, 2011; Northrup, 2004; Swinfen, 1984), archetypal representations (Brown, 2006; Hiley, 2004; Rawls, 2008; Riga, 2008), sub-categories of the fantasy genre (Clute & Grant, 1997; Le Lievre, 2003; Stableford, 2005), cultural and linguistic commentary (Comoletti & Drout, 2001; Fredrick & McBride, 2007; Livingston, 2012; Shippey, 1977), and other philosophical inquires (Fife, 2006; Flieger, 2007, 2009; Hull, 1986) taken up by the authors of fantasy literature. As evidenced by the (growing) body of scholarly work in fantasy as well as the enormous and enduring commercial success of fantasy novels and films, it is clear that the genre of fantasy occupies a significant role in American culture. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the value of using various works of fantasy in the classroom through discussions of the depth and complexity of various texts as well as their potential to elicit discussion and analysis among high school students through a critical literacy framework.

Fantasy has a great deal to offer the critical reader in terms of complexity and relevance. One of the most interesting aspects of fantasy literature is that it tends to ask the "big" questions of life, forcing students to consider such topics as the nature of good and evil, universal morality, the afterlife, heroism and the quality of one's character, the role of the individual in society, and the importance of cultural diversity. The fantasy novels discussed in this book address these issues and more in the context of rich, compelling narratives. Whether the text offers definitive answers or merely illustrates the complexity of the issues, students of fantasy can find numerous opportunities to engage with the text in writing—challenging the author, pondering the questions raised, acknowledging the author's viewpoint, or analyzing the diversity of views presented among several of the texts.

Additionally, works of fantasy provide an escape from our often prosaic existences. The concept of "escape" in literature, as discussed by J.R.R. Tolkien in his landmark essay "On Fairy-Stories" (1939), is often used in opposition to "interpret," where the former is meant to indicate superficiality, immaturity, vulgarity, and ignorance, and the latter refers to complexity, maturity, aesthetic refinement, and erudition. Tolkien attempted to divest from the term "escape" the disparagement and contempt which it endured (and still endures, to some extent, today) in connection to literature, and reinvest the word with a connotation of respectful appreciation for describing the way a text can provide release from banality into the supernatural—a world of surprise and invention quite beyond our own.

This last point emphasizes the element of unfamiliarity inherent in many fantasy works. Not only is the *literary* landscape of the fantasy genre unusual, but the *fictional* landscape of the fantasy world of the novel is often unique and quite unlike our own. While this point may seem self-evident, it has interesting repercussions in the classroom, where students are learning to decode the complex literary conventions of canonical texts. Students reading William Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, for example, may have difficulty comprehending the symbolic interplay among the boys on the island, but this task is much easier given the fact that those boys interact in a world without magic, where the physics within the literary representation is understood and shared by the reader, where no trolls, witches, or dragons exist, where the land itself is not an active participant in the action, and where words have no power of themselves to change physical reality. In the world of fantasy, where all of the above elements may in fact have a basis in the reality of the text, students are forced to read the text more closely, participating more actively in the author-reader transaction (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978) in order to understand this foreign world which may not conform to the literary or mundane conventions they have become used to. The students' expectations of their own reality, and of the literary reality they are just coming to understand, will not serve them in constructing meaning if they do not engage intellectually and reflectively with the text.

The literary depth of fantasy works, as mentioned briefly in the paragraphs above, represents the temperate conditions which allow a teacher to plant the seeds of critical literacy skills in the fertile fields of student minds with a reasonable hope that their efforts will bear fruit. Character complexity, thematic depth, personal relevance, stylistic excellence, and a compelling story are necessary elements that comprise high-quality literature. These chapters will explore the extent to which the works of fantasy discussed herein contain these important elements and address some of the key components of critical literacy that enable students to acquire the skills of the critically literate reader, thus making the texts appropriate for use in the classroom to engender critical literacy skills.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Critical literacy has been an important pedagogical practice for many years, having its origins in Louise Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) transactional theory of literary criticism which was developed in the late 1930s. Conceptions of critical literacy have expanded since its initial articulation by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1976) in the 1970s. Some researchers view critical literacy as deriving from Marxist, feminist, and postmodern intellectual positions (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993), while others argue that no clear, identifiable position defines critical literacy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Still others (Comber, 1993; Donald, 1993; Grande, 2004) skirt the issue, identifying variations among critical literacy perspectives, differentiating them according to the types of questions that drive interpretation and analysis, instead of defining the theory itself (Green, 2001). However, despite one's definition (or not) of critical literacy, common ideas such as viewing literacy as a social and/or political practice, repositioning readers as active or even resistant

readers, "problematizing" texts, and creating in readers an awareness of multiple perspectives from which to view texts help to clarify what is meant by the term (Green, 2001).

A central premise of Freire's (1970, 1976) theory of critical literacy is that education is not neutral, that the purpose of education is human liberation through what Freire termed a "dialogical approach," the goal of which is critical thinking, leading ultimately toward participants gaining an understanding of the social and political forces that impact their world, an understanding that would help them gain control over their lives (Wallerstein, 1986). According to Freire's theories, "true knowledge evolves from the interaction of reflection and action" (Wallerstein, 1986, p. 34). Freire termed this interaction *praxis*. This is particularly important in that research on reading and literacy suggests that marginalized adolescent readers tend to "give the text authority, expecting it to provide its meaning unequivocally and effortlessly, rather than engaging in an active, dialogic exchange with the text" (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011, p. 442), a tendency which resistant reading, such as that advocated through Freire's concept of praxis, may help overcome. Essentially, the concept of resistant reading is embodied in the following statements: "I am not going to buy into your position as a matter of course. Still, for a fair understanding and assessment of that position, I will try to get at your underlying assumptions by reading, questioning, and considering your text carefully." An immature reader may not even be aware that resistant reading is even a possibility, much less how it may be accomplished, but critical theory gives them explicit permission to do so. Thus, critical literacy is a literacy of empowerment.

At the most basic level, teachers of critical literacy are trying to create an awareness of the relationship among language, ideology, and power (Kempe, 1993). They question whose interests are served through their curricular and pedagogical decisions, and even attempt to challenge the hidden assumptions that are intended to assimilate students into the hegemonic culture through socialization (Moss, 2001). They address social oppression, especially in the areas of gender, class, race, and ethnicity (Grande, 2004). Finally, they challenge the "banking" model of education in which information is "deposited" in students who are expected to retain it indefinitely—or at least until the exam—and instead favor praxis which promotes the idea that knowledge and learning are social constructions that are best realized through critical interactions between teacher and student, neither of whom is recognized as the absolute authority in the classroom (Freire, 1970).

In its most political interpretation, critical literacy implies that the process of gaining literacy (*i.e.*, learning to read and write) should be done as part of the process of becoming conscious of being in some ways "constructed" by the social and political hegemony represented in one's historical era (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). In other words, one's growing aptitude for literacy must be linked to one's understanding of the impact of specific contemporary power relations, and critical literacy involves analyzing and questioning the ways a text positions the reader within the social and political hegemony. If one accepts the underlying assumption of critical literacy—that the concepts of power and social/political hegemony drive the writer who consciously or unconsciously strives to either perpetuate or subvert

the social hierarchy—then critical literacy removes "meaning" from the author and text and re-positions the student/reader more centrally in a meaning-making dialogue as they work to uncover the "hidden" agendas of texts, agendas that the authors may not even be aware exist. According to McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), "critical literacy involves the reader's understanding of the author's intent, bias, and purpose for writing" (p. 62) by "disrupting a common situation or understanding,…examining multiple viewpoints,…focusing on sociopolitical issues,…[and] taking action to promote social justice" (pp. 17-18) with the ultimate goal of readers becoming "critics of everyday life" (p. 23), reading the world with a critical edge, with an eye toward changing it by first recognizing, then questioning, extant political and social power structures.

It is important to note that critical literacy does not *necessitate* hegemonic subversion on the part of the reader just as feminism does not entail a requirement on the part of women to join the workforce, for example. Both offer only an informed and permissible choice. Some readers, while recognizing the political agenda of a particular text, may choose not to act any more than simply resisting the reading the author presents. Nor does critical literacy consider author bias inherently immoral. In fact, critical literacy presumes that all texts have bias to some degree and that bias is normal and unavoidable (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Critical literacy attempts to draw the attention of the reader to the idea of bias and help them uncover it in texts, requiring that the reader understand the power relationship between the author and the reader, not just decode the text.

Each of the following chapters in this book offers ways for readers to challenge fantasy texts, helping teachers develop critical literacy skills in their students through the genre of fantasy, building on the already-established popularity of fantasy to empower students through a skills-based curriculum. The texts discussed vary from children's literature to young adult to decidedly adult novels, and the approaches each scholar employs are similarly varied. Teachers seeking advice to bring fantasy into their classrooms at any level, from elementary through graduate school, will find a wealth of information and ideas in the following pages.

OVERVIEW

This collection begins with a discussion of two bookend fantasy texts for adults: Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. High fantasy is an inherently conservative genre usually concerned with the restoration or preservation of a status quo in the form of patriarchal monarchy or autocracy. These works chronicle a struggle between a transformative force and those—usually male, white, and heterosexual—who oppose it. Women and ethnic or sexual minorities may assist the heroes but rarely reform the power structures in which they have no place. Through two genre standards—*The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*—the authors examine how racism, sexism, and heterosexism pervade modern fantasy and chart a possible evolution towards a more progressive future.

Chapter two explores ways the main character (Arha) of Ursula K. Le Guin's fantasy novel, *The Tombs of Atuan*, is an example of adolescent resistance to

learning. Arha's tumultuous growth and radical transformation serves as an allegory for learning through self-awareness that reflects the ideas of the ancient philosopher Plato as well as those of the modern psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. By using these supplementary texts to decode Le Guin's allegory, students can compare the ideas of all three authors to their own learning experiences, building self-awareness of their own learning habits, developing empathy for the difficulties of students and teachers alike, and finding their own voices in their communities.

Chapter three connects J. K. Rowling's works with those of political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. Manipulation of a population through fear, preservation of hegemonic control through institutionalized oppression, and framing ethical choices through a long view that ignores small evils done along the way—these are concepts attributed to sixteenth century Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, and they pervade the Harry Potter books, informing the decisions of Hogwarts students and professors as they fight against the specter of Voldemort's despotic rule. Through problematizing the text and questioning the decisions of the characters through the lens of Machiavelli's philosophical text, *The Prince*, a critical reader can explore issues of social justice similar to those impacting contemporary society.

Chapter four is unique among the essays included here in that it offers a fantasy literature syllabus resource from which teachers can draw to fit the needs of their course and their students. This chapter is an aid for teachers contemplating designing either a full course on the intersection of critical thinking, fantasy literature, and religious studies or at least material for one or two lessons along these lines in a course in religious studies or English. The chapter surveys eight topics that might be addressed, including (1) defining key terms, (2) colonialism, (3) capitalism, (4) perspectivism and pragmatism, (5) feminism and queer theory, (6) interrogating the self, (7) royal ideology and the monomyth, and (8) critical pedagogy and reflexivity.

Chapter five examines fairy tales using feminist criticism. Students often expect the women in these narratives to possess few choices, but this reductive mindset leads to students seeing the tales as mindless entertainment or as sinister sources of gender indoctrination. The chapter discusses an educational approach to fairy tales that reveals how notions of heteronormativity in the stories are produced by social codes and reader responses rather than inherent elements in the genre. Students learn to see fairy tales as cultural fantasies that continue to evolve as audience needs change.

In chapter six, the authors identify a growing trend of female protagonists who show strength and agency in the fantasy genre, particularly strong female protagonists of color. In this chapter, they explain why *Fledgling* by Octavia Butler (2005) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1987) would be suitable for critical literacy discussions in high school classrooms. The authors acknowledge the perspectives of feminist poststructuralism, queer theory, and critical pedagogy and also discuss scholarship related to fantasy literature. Additionally, they discuss how television shows, parallel texts, and popular culture references can be used in conjunction with these novels to encourage critical literacy skills.

Chapter seven addresses the way Beatrix Potter's children's fantasy literature frequently enforces gender and class expectations and marginalizes various characters. From the standpoint of critical literacy, Potter's books are useful texts to study at the collegiate level, particularly because of their popularity and their intended audience. This chapter will approach *The Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck* (1908), *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (1908), *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* (1909), and *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse* (1910) using Edward H. Behrman's categories of reading multiple texts and reading from a resistant perspective to critically analyze systems of power and the marginalization they produce.

In chapter eight, the author examines how social class is depicted in award-winning fantasy books for children and analyzes these depictions through a critical literacy lens. The analysis suggests that these books 1) position the lives of affluent people as more desirable and important than poor and working class lives, and 2) present class status as a function of an individual's virtues or shortcomings, arguing that such depictions reinforce dominant discourses about class in the contemporary United States and could be potentially damaging to children's class identities unless they read from a critical literacy stance.

In his notable lecture-turned-essay "On Fairy-Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien (1939) ruminates on the origins, audiences, purposes, and benefits of fantasy. Chapter nine reflects upon Tolkien's musings, then unites them with Marxist literary theory and a cherished young adult literature text in the context of the contemporary classroom. As a whole, this chapter asserts that students can use the Marxist critical perspective to identify, analyze, and evaluate the sources of and responses to the two central forms of institutionalized oppression in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Through these exercises in the wizarding world, students will be better equipped to question, scrutinize, and enact change in our world.

Chapter ten explores how Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson's epic fantasy series, The Wheel of Time, can be used in a social justice classroom to explore power and privilege in American society. This fantastical work dramatically portrays how identity markers provide individuals with social, political, and economic privilege that are neither earned nor inherited. Through its depiction of magic, The Wheel of Time books illuminate the inequities of power and privilege in American society. By exploring how society celebrates power, and denigrates and exploits the powerless, Jordan and Sanderson offer insight into the world in which our students live.

Chapter eleven describes how a critical literacy framework allowed a group of preservice English teachers to actively question and challenge educational traditions as portrayed in the Harry Potter series. The authors discuss the experiences of one participant whose interest in the titular character of the series motivated her to explore research about at-risk students and then apply her findings in a familiar and meaningful context, resulting in a year-long inquiry into cultural capital, funds of knowledge, and deficit models of education. Fantasy literature of this kind can nurture the development of preservice teachers into "transformative intellectuals" who develop critical thinking habits that "unite the language of critique with the language of possibility" (Giroux, 2013, p. 196) as they prepare to be active agents of change in educational institutions.

Chapter twelve examines fantasy texts from three very different cultures. Despite the growing popularity of fantasy studies, little has been said about the roles of material objects in fantasy narratives which can be used to advance the plot, shape identities, and determine relationships among characters. Most importantly, they help generate communities, both within the text and in the consensus reality. This chapter addresses this knowledge gap with a comparative close reading of three popular fantasy novels: the British *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (J.K. Rowling), the German *Reckless* (Cornelia Funke), and the Russian *The Stranger* (Max Frei). An understanding of the reciprocally transformative relationship between objects and subjects in fantasy narratives adds to the development of critical consciousness among students and readers.

Chapter thirteen examines a well-loved children's book. Due to its vivid illustrations and short page count, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is often recommended as a children's book; however, a critical look from the perspectives of students in eighth grade reveals issues students themselves face as they embark upon the transition from middle to high school, exploring how and why people make new friends and the sacrifices often made in friendships. Through perspective sharing via focus groups, dramatization, poetry, and song lyrics in an inquiry learning environment, students explore viewpoints of different characters in a story or different people in a real-life situation.

Chapter fourteen closes this collection with a description of how the author uses a novella-length fanfiction work entitled *The Hollow Men* by author "Lettered" as a way to introduce college students to key service learning concepts such as reflection, reciprocity, and community engagement. The chapter includes a primer section introducing the genre of fanfiction, a close reading of the specific text, and a case study describing how the author used the piece in class to bring up complex themes that included race, culture, socioeconomic status, global politics, and gender, which helped ready students for their field service projects in a diverse community.

Taken together, these chapters present a broad view of the applications of fantasy literature to the classroom, challenging the genre and the visions of represented authors and exploring their value to contemporary students. We hope these selections provide a new perspective on fantasy and that they provoke further investigations into the use of fantasy texts in the classroom.

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