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Escaping Inward

(escapism in urban fantasy used for inner reflection)

Fantasy is often thought of as childish or immature. The concept of story elements being impossible and fantastic often leads many to assume there is no merit to the stories being told within that context. Amber M. Simmons states “Despite its popularity among adolescents, fantasy literature, which I broadly define as works that involve fictional worlds or altered realities, is still stigmatized and generally considered as lacking rigor, therefore making it unqualified for classroom analysis,” (8). This leaves many to overlook the amazing stories and vivid worlds of the fantasy genre. More importantly, however, writing off fantasy means not making use of or even noticing the immense important and power of the fantasy genre. What many fail to realize is that fantasy, and within fantasy, escapism, is not just a tool used for entertainment, but a tool with which topics and ideas can be addressed that normally would be difficult or impossible.

Fantasy as a genre has quite a following, by both old and young readers alike. Center tells us “Although modern fantasy is frequently considered a meritless genre, the literature commands a loyal readership of children, teenagers, and adult readers so loyal that they dip into fantasy books outside those designed for their age groups looking for those which will satisfy their huger for myth and hero and fantastical things,” (qtd. in Simmons 8). Why then, does this often looked down upon genre pull in such a great and varying following? It could be argued the pull is the deep lore and vivid background often provided within these stories. It could also be argued that the pull is the vibrant and varied cast of characters found within these stories. Another valid and highly cited argument is that fantasy is the best genre through which readers experience escapism. The Merriam-Webster website defines “escapism” as “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine.” Escapism, however, is much more important than it sounds. By distancing one’s self from one’s surroundings, and becoming part of something different, a new perspective is created which can lead to conclusions that were too difficult to make before. The ability to remove the readers from their lives and shove them into a new environment makes for the perfect opportunity to help the readers not only look at the world, but look inward and learn about themselves. This effect can be seen nowhere better than in adolescent readers. Characters in fantasy give adolescent readers role models, as well as young characters with whom they can identify. Simmons suggests adolescents are often prone to ignoring their own emotions in order to endure the busy lifestyle demanded of them, and goes on to say “By witnessing the range of emotion each hero is experiencing, students are given the opportunity to recognize the similar tempests that are currently raging within themselves,” (9). Although escapism often present in fantasy seems to be a mechanism to free the mind from the turmoil of real life, it is a useful tool in self-reflection.

One of the best subgenres of fantasy for escapism is urban fantasy. Tvtropes.com describes urban fantasy as “a genre that combines common fantasy conventions with a modern setting.” This setting is famous for its ability to provide a powerful route for escapism. It is easiest to become immersed in a setting that is realistic, and easiest to project onto someone in a similar situation to yourself. While these would normally be difficult to achieve with fantasy, urban fantasy eases readers in by first presenting them with things they are familiar with, then providing the fantasy alongside those things. This powerful genre will be the focus of this unit.

Centerpiece work:

The centerpiece work for this unit would be *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.* This unit would be used in a class that was grade 9, or the first year of high school, placing them directly in the grade Harry is part of in the book (or at least the equivalent Hogwarts year). The choice of which Harry Potter book to include for the unit could vary if the unit were to be used for a different year, though this example will focus on the concept of it being in the 9th year. The use of the book where Harry is in the same year makes it easier for students to engage in escapism while reading.

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (along with the other books in the series) is a great example of urban fantasy in which escapism is used in large part, and to much success.

Intro to the Unit:

To start, the very first thing the class would do would be an activity. As moderated by me, each student would take the Hogwarts house sorting test. If available, I would have students log onto “wizardingworld.com” and take the official test there. If procuring computers was not possible, or if having the class take this test in this way proved too difficult, I would provide a written quiz asking the same questions (announcing before hand that the assignment is required but not something they could fail). This would then be followed by dividing the class into their houses, along with descriptions of each house’s virtues and a description of the common room for each house (as the common rooms are a unique setting for each house that highlights their features a bit). I might even bring along speakers to quietly play some movie from the film adaptions to get the students in the mood to have some fun. Using this fun little personality test would provide a way to engage the students with escapism and help them become more immersed ahead of time. Reading the book would then become a bit more fun hopefully, as students would be able to identify with different characters more easily, as well as feel more in tune with the setting. The world presented in the book is supposed to exist alongside the real world, after all, so the ability to leave that world for the assignment would be similar to the journey Harry took earlier in the series. Finally, some reading would be assigned (based on the speed necessary to keep up with our curriculum).

On the next class session, a reflective short in class essay would be issued, using questions provided on the board. These would be aimed at proving the students did the reading (an even more necessary precaution than usual given the series has been adapted into movies as well). For this class session, I would have students watch a video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix5ddu8KV5U>

This video talks about the meaning of escapism, as well as reflecting on what accomplishes escapism, and why it is important. This will help students to get a grasp of the focus of our unit, and give some context to the goals of immersing ourselves in the story of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

I would then provide a second opportunity for writing in class. This time I would ask for students to write why they think the genre of fantasy is unique, and why they think it is important. This would help to see what the students caught from the video, and what their current views are on the subject. Grading would be decently lax one this assignment, focusing on whether they attempt to connect with the subject and provide reasoning, along with usual grammatical and spelling checks. For next class, more reading would be assigned.

The writing assignments for each class session, all based on the reading assigned, would continue throughout the unit. Examples of questions asked would be along these lines:

“Each year since Harry has been at Hogwarts, something has always happened involving the trustworthiness Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and each year Hogwarts gets a new one because of this. Does Alastor ‘Mad Eye’ Moody seem trustworthy? Provide reasoning beyond ‘He seems creepy’ or anything like that.”

“Despite the intense and fantastic happenings around him, Harry is still just a normal teenager at heart. What struggles do you notice Harry is going through right now that a normal teenager might face? Remember our talk about how fantasy makes identifying normal issues easier.”

“Hermoine’s fixation on house elf rights is often met with disdain or annoyance by other characters in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. What is a real-world issue currently or from history that you think this story element could be based on? Provide example of how they are similar.”

“Fred and George have taken a backseat in the story, having their own issues they are currently struggling with. Do you agree with their mother’s attempts to get them to focus on their schoolwork? Do you think her intentions are right, and do you think her actions toward those intentions are the right way to handle things?”

These assignments would be followed by discussion. Students would be encouraged to share what they thought about that day’s prompt or prompts. Students that spoke out less often would be encouraged to speak as input from all students would be needed.

Extending the Unit:

The urban fantasy genre is wide and very unique, with each story often offering something completely different from the last. The themes and ideas often overlap, however, and the importance of escapism is often a focal point to these stories. Because of this, there are several works that would make great companion stories to go alongside *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis:

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is another famous fantasy book centering around young adult characters and set within a fantasy series (*The Chronicles of Narnia*) where the real world exists parallel to a fantasy world. It has been quite some time, but I have read this book. The book centers around Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, who have all been sent away for safety during a war. While looking around their new home, they discover an old wardrobe, which ends up transporting them to Narnia, a fantasy world. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* centers around Christian lore and morals, and faces its adolescent characters with difficult physical and mental dilemmas.

*The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan:

*The Lightning Thief* is yet again a famous fantasy book that centers around a young adult cast of characters, where the setting is originally the normal world, but soon the characters find the normal world is alongside a fantasy world with magic and beasts. It is also part of a series. I have read this book, but this is the only book in the series I have read. While *The Chronicles of Narnia* focused on Christian mythology and ideals, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* focuses on Greek and Roman mythology. The main character Percy Jackson finds out that he is the son of Poseidon, and ends up at a camp where each camper is a descendent of a god. The journey Percy embarks on is a unique modern take on a mythological quest.

*Lord Loss* by Darren Shan:

While the other books on here may sometimes (incorrectly) be considered childish and often center around more positive fantasy, *Lord Loss* goes in the opposite direction. *Lord Loss* is again a fantasy book with young adult characters, set within a fantasy world alongside the real world, and is part of a series (although it was originally intended as a standalone). I personally have never read *Lord Loss.* Instead of wizards, Christian lore, or Greek mythology, *Lord Loss* centers around a world of demons, who are portrayed as evil and inhuman. Although maybe not a great read for everyone, this darker look at the world is a useful take on more negative subjects, like evil.

*Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer:

*Artemis Fowl* once again meets the criteria of the perfect young adult escapism book: the setting takes place in a world where fantasy elements are secretly present alongside the real world, and is told through the eyes of a young adult character, Artemis. It is also a part of a series (which seems to be a common theme with this genre). I have never read this book, but have heard it mentioned several times. *Artemis Fowl* again provides a unique take on the genre, seeming to tie its fantasy elements more closely with the modern world, whereas in the other entries on this list the fantasy elements tend to be a bit more old-fashioned. The world of *Artemis Fowl* ties modern elements of crime into the fantasy genre.

*City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare:

*City of Bones* once again fits the outline each other book has fit: it takes place in the normal world but it is revealed there are fantasy elements secretly present in that world, and is told from the perspective of a young adult character, 15-year-old Clary Fray. It, again, is part of a series. I have never read this book or any in this series. *City of Bones* is one of the darker entries, focusing on things like demons, and starting with the main character witnessing the death of someone seemingly human (who turns out to be a demon).

Each of these works would make a great addition to the themes we would discuss and focus on within *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. They would also serve to help solidify the urban fantasy genre as a viable genre for deep storytelling within the minds of my students, who would hopefully never agree with the stigma against fantasy again. The array of different options available would give everyone an opportunity to find something they like within the genre.

Finishing the Unit:

While the unit would obviously be focusing on the book *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, letting go of the opportunity presented by the movie would not be my aim. I would let the students know at the beginning of the unit, that at the end we would be watching the movie, alongside an assignment. I would provide incentive to do well in the class (alongside some fun competition) by offering the opportunity to pick what snacks would be provided during the movie to whatever Hogwarts house had the highest mean grade before the movie. All students would get snacks and watch the movie, but the winners would get to choose what I bought (within reason obviously). After the movie, students would be responsible for writing a paper about the differences between the movie and the book. Theses would center around the reasoning behind the changes as opposed to listing all the changes possible. For this reason, it would be ok for students to center on just a couple changes, as they would be going in depth.

Alongside this, but with time given as these would both be papers, students would be tasked with writing a paper based on the book itself, focusing on one particular topic. Topics could be approved by me if someone was inclined to do something specific. I would provide example essay prompts as well, such as:

“Harry struggles with keeping things to himself during his fourth year at Hogwarts. Cite examples of this, and explain the thought process behind this. Then go on to explain whether or not you think he should have told someone, and explain what you think would have happened if he hadn’t kept things to himself.”

“Hagrid’s race is brought up in this book. It is used by other characters against him to put him down and express that me might not be trustworthy. Give examples that either confirm or deny this, and try to provide an argument for or against Hagrid and his credibility as a teacher and as groundskeeper.

This would provide the close of this unit.

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