

Unit of Study: Fantasy, a Tool in the Fight Against Reality and Life

The most attractive genre in young-adult literature is fantasy, it is a work that is so “elemental” that it “allows us,” even “forces us,” to “become greater than we are, greater than we could hope to be” (*Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, Chapter 7). Introducing fantasy to young adults arms and readies them for a world wrought by ambiguities and dualities of life. A hero’s journey in a young adult novel captures perfectly the idea of life, the journey itself is an impeccable metaphor to growing up. In fantasy the hero faces the duality and relativity of good and evil, right and wrong, love and hate, themes that are often ambiguous to hero and even more so to young adults, but as the hero in the fantasy novel progresses so does the understanding of the young adult who is now armed with that hero’s story, and thus can apply it to his own growing up. For example, the dementors in Harry Potter are symbolic of depression and sadness often felt by teens, while chocolate, and happy moments that create the patronus, are their counter, so simple an idea, yet so impactful a metaphor to young adult life. If one is sad, simply think happy thoughts and create a figurative patronus, a fantastical idea to arm young adults against their own sadness. And herein lies the point and importance of fantasy for young adults, under the surface of magic, mythical creatures, and epic quests, is a connection that breaks the harshness of reality, softening the a world that is otherwise dark and impenetrable, and making it able to be defeated.

The importance of my unit, then, is creating and strengthening the connection between fantasy and real life, helping students recognize that fantasy is a medium through which they can see the world, and possibly defeat the harsh realities with the fantastical.

In my unit I plan to utilize all resources available to me, and that includes new media. I will start it immediately with the fantastical and let the students bask in wonder and awe of

fantasy while slowly discussing the subtle comments on reality in my sources. I will later have a book from the genre of realistic fiction so that they can begin to draw connections to the issues presented in the two genres, slowly making more apparent the connection between fantasy and realism. At the end of the comparison, I will create a project that incorporates the idea of fantasy within their lives, so that they can begin to apply fantasy to real life as intended.

Launching the Unit: Capturing the student's attention on a subject is probably the most difficult, thus approaching the launch of a unit should be done with caution. What better way to launch a fantasy unit than to call the students to adventure and beckon them to go on a quest! To launch the unit I will have the students read J.R.R Tolkien's *Over the Misty Mountains Cold*, as well as have them watch the scene from the movie, *The Hobbit*, where the song is sung, which really adds to the effect of the poem. After that I will have the students draw their own ideas about the poem and its implications and then discuss it fishbowl style (all the students are in a circle).

How did you feel when reading the poem before seeing the clip?

After seeing the clip?

Does the poem make you feel like adventuring?

What are some of the images that you see, and what do they do for you?

What do you think about when you read "lonely mountain" and "worm of dread"?

Can you imagine some of these images juxtaposed with moments in your life?

Activity 1:

My first activity would be to create a quest. The students would find something in real life that they would journey for, may it be food, money, love, or simply making it through school. They will then write a paragraph on how their journey would unfold, and what types of challenges they would conquer.

The Center Piece Work:

After getting the students to think about questing, I will introduce them to my center piece work; *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon epic poem written in Old English (I would of course use the translated version), by far one of the most difficult reads I could imagine, but also by far one of the most engaging pieces I could use for this unit. There is so much about Beowulf's quest and his fight with Grendel that epitomizes the idea of duality and the relativity of good and evil, as well as the ambiguities of life, even the idea of the hero is blurred, making this piece a great initiation into the connection of fantasy to obscurities of reality.

Activity # 2: The book, due to its difficulty, will be read together in class, however the students will be asked to skim chapters ahead of time. As the class reads they will have a sheet of focus questions that they must answer, and then discuss in fishbowl style (students sit in a circle with a single sit in the center where an idea is presented, and the peers must discuss with each other and while furthering the idea of the center person), all students will be required to be the 'fish' at least once.

Focus questions (Those highlighted are taken from mseffie.com, not highlighted are created for this unit by me):

What is Grendel's lineage? What do the characters in the poem know about Grendel? How is this different from what we know?

Why would Beowulf rather be a hero than a king? What is the difference?

Where does the dragon come from? Why does he attack the Geats? Is the dragon a greater or lesser threat than Grendel? Why does Beowulf go to fight him?

When Beowulf dies, does he go to Heaven?

What are some Major themes in *Beowulf*?

What do you think each monster represents in *Beowulf*? Do they correlate with some of the themes you have thought of?

Visualizing Grendel, can you form another monster of your own creation using the themes presented?

Is good and evil clear? When is it not, and when is it?

Activity #3: *Beowulf* introduces the idea of questing and encountering monsters that embody some type of ambiguity or evil, thus the next idea is to get the students to start thinking about more modern monsters of our time. I will have students find, either through current news or in their own life, something they feel is wrong, bad, or even evil and then create a monster out of it. The monster can be created through description or artwork, I will also be open to any other creative ideas. The students, however, will be required to present their ideas, but also explain how the monster is evil. This activity will begin my main lesson, which is to teach how fantasy can make great evils tangible enough to be defeated. After creating the monster, the students will have to create a way to defeat it, taking into consideration real ways to defeat the real life evil and then making a fantastical way for their monster. I will end this unit with a discussion of what the students thought of the project based off *Beowulf*.

Extending The Lesson: This will be by far the most important part of my unit. My students will have to choose a pairing of books. One fantasy and one realistic fiction. The pairings will be predetermined, but the students are able to choose which pairing they want. Each pairing will have an essay question that concludes this unit.

First Pairing:

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by J.K Rowling: The third book in the *Harry Potter* series that follows Harry Potter as he is chased by an escaped convict named Sirius Black as well as the guardians of Azkaban, the dementors (Scholastic.com).

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After the First Death by Robert Cormier: *After the First Death* is a suspense novel for young adults by American author Robert Cormier. The focus is on the complex relationships that develop between the various characters (Wikipedia.com).

Rationale:

The Prisoner of Azkaban and *After the First Death* incorporates an important theme, and that is the duality of life and the relativity of good and evil. In Rowling's work there is a constant jostle between good and evil not just in a big picture sense, but also in each individual. Some of Rowling's character seem to be evil, but are not and vice versa. Nothing is always what it seems as Rowling would teach us in her book. While in Cormier's work the same is also true, evil is not so obvious when delving into the minds of each respective character, and everything seems relative depending on whose point of view one is reading. Thus, the two are a great pairing if trying to connect fantasy to reality. The essay question for this pairing would be:

There are themes that are very similar in both Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban and After the First Death, some include the relativity of good and evil, the duality of life, and the ambiguities in life. After reading both, write a 3-4 page paper connecting the fantastical in Harry Potter and the realistic in After the First Death.

Second Pairing:

Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S Lewis: When Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy took their first steps into the world behind the magic wardrobe, little do they realise what

adventures are about to unfold. And as the story of Narnia begins to unfold, so to does a classic tale that has enchanted readers of all ages for over half a century (goodreads.com).

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Holes by Louis Sachar: And so, Stanley Yelnats seems set to serve an easy sentence, which is only fair because he is as innocent as you or me. But Stanley is not going where he thinks he is. Camp Green Lake is like no other camp anywhere. It is a bizarre, almost otherworldly place that has no lake and nothing that is green. Nor is it a camp, at least not the kind of camp kids look forward to in the summertime. It is a place that once held "the largest lake in Texas," but today it is only a scorching desert wasteland, dotted with countless holes dug by the boys who live at the camp (goodreads.com).

Rationale: Both of these titles have similar villains, and incorporates the important theme of justice prevailing over evil and greed. These titles also express the importance of loyalty and the power of companionship. By pairing the two you can make more real villains such as the White Witch in *Narnia* and reduce her to The Warden in *Holes*.

Essay:

Compare and Contrast the White Witch and The Warden from each respective novel and the themes of justice, greed, and companionship 3-4 pages.

Third Pairing:

The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman: In this multilayered narrative, however, *nothing* is as it seems. Lyra sets out for the top of the world in search of her kidnapped playmate, Roger, bearing a rare truth-telling instrument, the compass of the title. All around her children are disappearing—victims of so-called "Gobblers"—and being used as subjects in terrible

experiments that separate humans from their daemons, creatures that reflect each person's inner being. And somehow, both Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter are involved (goodreads.com)

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The Life of Pi by Yann Martel: Piscine Molitor Patel, known as Pi, learns a great deal about the animals in his father's zoo in Pondicherry, India. He is also interested in religion and adopts a blend of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. When India becomes politically and socially uncertain in the 1970s, Pi and his family travel on a cargo ship to Canada. Some of their animals travel with them. When the ship sinks, only Pi, a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan and a royal Bengal tiger, called Richard Parker, survive. Pi's faith and his knowledge of animals sustain him on a long journey of survival aboard a lifeboat and makeshift raft. The characters of Pi and Richard are admirable in their determination to survive (wiredforwords.com).

Rationale: Both of these books deal with the relativity of truth and lies, as well as the ideas of freedom and free will, religion, and the loss of innocence.

Essay: *Connect a theme between the two books such as freedom, religion, and the loss of innocence.* 3-4 pages

Conclusion of the Unit:

After completing the comparison essays, the students will do one last activity where they will use the monster and the quest that they had created from real life and create a fantasy journey where they deal with real life problems in a fantastical way. This can be done through comic strips, acting, poem, or prose.

Work Cited:

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Alleen Pace Nilsen. Literature for Today's Young Adults. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 2012. Print.

Goodreads.com

Mseffie.com

Wiredforwords.com

Scholastic.com

★ Tools Against Reality

A Unit of Study By Tony Pham

★ Why Fantasy is Important

Fantasy gives young adults the ability to prevail against the ambiguity and duality of life that is at times insu



✦ Launching the Unit

J.R.R Tolkien's *Over the Misty Mountains Cold*

A call for the quest!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRUBe2RTq74>

Activity #1: Creating your own
something real

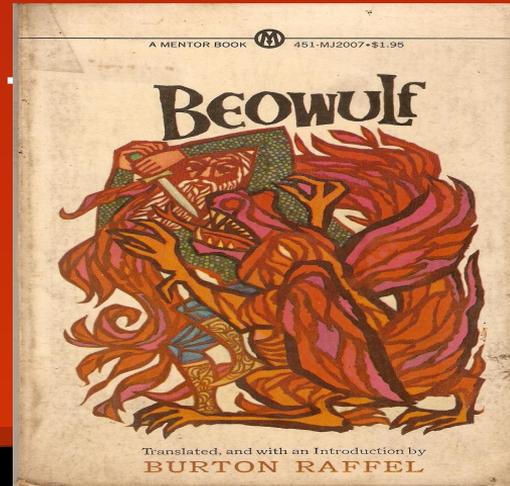
in a fantastical way



★ The Center Piece Work

Beowulf as an introduction to the duality of life and the relativity of good and evil.

Activity #2: In class reading with questions for fish bowl style discussion



Activity #3: Creating your own monster from

★ Connecting Fantasy and Realism

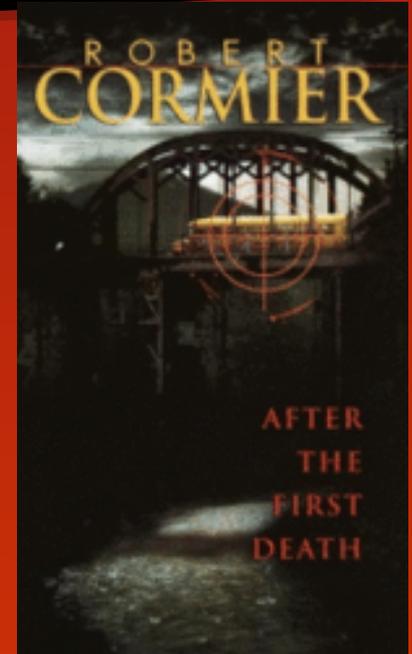
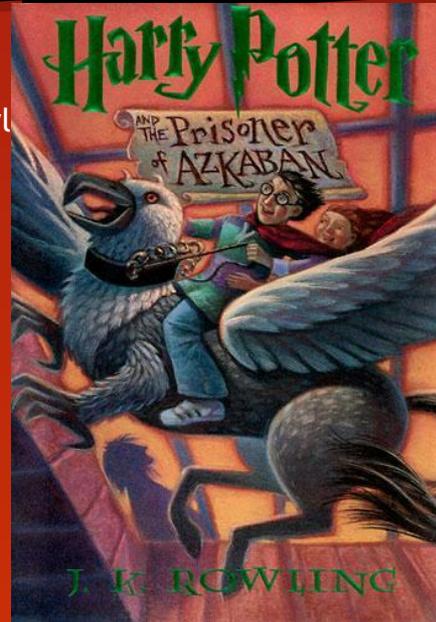
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◆ Pairing # 1

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by J.K. Rowling

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After The First Death by Robert Cormier



Rationale: *The Prisoner of Azkaban* and *After the First Death* incorporates an important theme, and that is the duality of life and the relativity of good and evil. In Rowling's work there is a constant jostle between good and evil not just in a big picture sense, but also in each individual. Some of Rowling's character seem to be evil, but are not and vice versa. Nothing is always what it seems as Rowling would teach us in her book. While in Cormier's work the same is also true, evil is not so obvious when delving into the minds of each respective character, and everything seems relative depending on whose point of view one is reading. Thus, the two are a great pairing if trying to connect fantasy to reality.

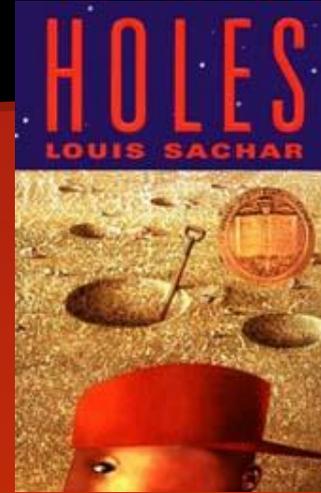
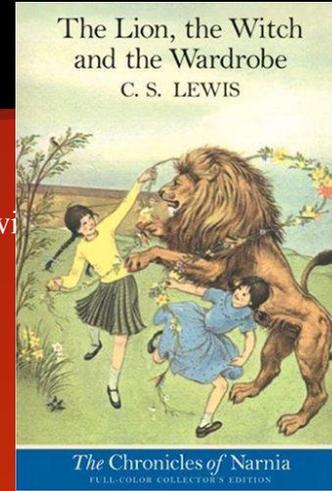
✦ Pairing # 2

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S Lewis

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Holes by Louis Sachar

Rationale: Both of these books deal with the relativity of truth and lies, as well as the ideas of freedom and free will, religion, and the loss of innocence.



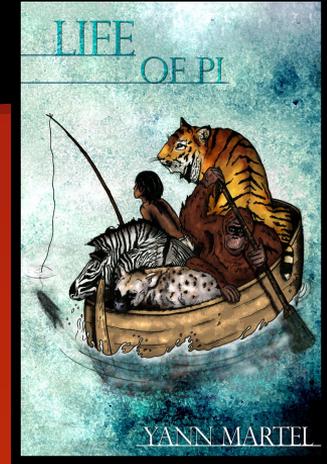
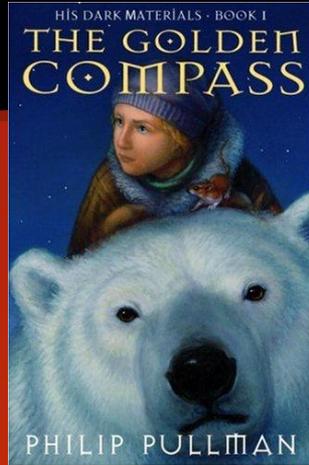
★ Pairing # 3

The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman

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The Life of Pi by Yann Martel

Rationale: Both of these books deal with the relativity of truth and lies, as well as the ideas of freedom and free will, religion, and the loss of innocence.



✦ Creating Fantasy

After completing the comparison essays, the students will do one last activity where they will use the monster and the quest that they had created from real life and create a fantasy journey where they deal with real life problems in a fantastical way. This can be done through comic strips, acting, poem, or prose.

