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English 112B

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Book Talk: *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore*

**Author Information**

* Jones was inspired to write this book by her love of regency novels and for stories containing magical elements.
* The first version of *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore* was finished over 10 years ago, under a different title. Jones revisited the project after she got her first book published, and rewrote the book entirely from scratch, before sending it to her publisher.
* Before she became an author, Jones worked in libraries and bookstores for fifteen years. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English and Anthropology and a Masters in Library and Information Sciences from the University of Washington.
* Information about the author and all photos were taken from the author’s website: <http://curiosityjones.net>

 **Summary**

In the opening chapter of *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore*, the novel’s main protagonist, Annis Whitworth, learns that her father has died while away on a business trip and all his money seems to have disappeared with him. Annis has a secret though, she knows that her father was a spy for England, and she suspects that his death was in fact a murder. Determined to unmask the killer, Annis goes to the war office and offers her services as a spy, but they refuse to take her on, even when Annis tells them that she is a modiste. A modiste is someone who can use magic to alter garments, or even to make clothing that turns the wearer into a different person entirely. Annis and her Aunt Cassia are forced to move away to a country town, where Annis sets up shop as Madame Martine, a French modiste and dressmaker. This gives her the perfect opportunity to look for her father’s murderer while she tries to earn enough money to support herself and her aunt.

**Representative Quotes**

“Though you do not understand the value of a young lady’s appearance, I should hope you recognize the talent it takes to disguise one’….I did not stop until we were around the corner and out of sight of the guard on horseback” (Jones 27-29).

 This quote is essential to understanding Annis’ character. Mr. Smith’s response to her attempts become a spy, is a reflection of the stereotypes about women that prevailed throughout the Regency period. Women of Annis’ station were supposed to be sheltered, and they were not seen as being capable of having careers. Although Annis herself recognizes that these stereotypes exist, as we see from her response to Mr. Smith, she refuses to let herself be limited by them. This encounter shows the reader that Annis is determined to let nothing stand in the way of her avenging her father’s death. It foreshadows her behavior throughout the rest of the novel as Annis continues to defy expectations: she opens a dressmaking shop and declines to marry (even though that would solve her problems). Furthermore, this quote introduces the idea of Annis as the archetype of a Seeker, as mentioned in *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*. Not only is Annis searching for a murderer, but she is also trying to create a new life for herself and her aunt. Their lack of funds means that they must establish a new place for themselves in society. Annis expresses her determination to accomplish this when she tells Mr. Smith “I shall be in touch” (28). The interaction that occurs between her and Mr. Smith shows just how headstrong and determined Annis actually is.

“‘Someone must help that poor girl, only how are we to do it?’Cassia’s eyes snapped back to my face. ‘Very true. Weren’t you able to speak with her then?’ I looked away….It was a faint nod, but it would do. He would have plenty to think about” (Jones 128-130).

In this passage, Annis aptly describes the predicament faced by many young ladies in the regency period. Many women born into genteel families did not have money of their own. As they were neither trained nor expected to acquire jobs, their only chance at living comfortably was to marry a man who was relatively well off. As a result, this quote portrays fashion not as a frivolous interest, but rather as a tool that can be wielded either for espionage (as Annis uses it), or for securing a woman’s future by helping her attract a husband. As a symbol, fashion represents freedom in this novel. In Annis’ case, her disguises grant her an anonymity that allows her to spy on various people. Moreover as Madame Martine, she is able to run a store, something that would have been frowned upon for a woman of her social standing. For Miss Spry, wearing a flattering dress could allow her to secure her future as a married gentlewoman. Toward the end of the novel, Lady Dustingham disguises herself as a housekeeper, so that she can have the freedom to observe her own party. The connection between fashion and freedom is introduced in this passage, and elaborated on throughout the rest of the book.

“Why did Mrs. Smith want to hire Millie instead of me?…I had never dreamed to fail so completely that my name ought to be on their list” (Jones 188-89).

This passage is another instance of Annis’ character development. This is the first time in the novel that Annis contemplates the possibility that it may not be possible for her to become a real spy. This is a sign of maturity, as Annis comes to terms with the reality of her situation. At the same time, she has to deal with the knowledge that her maid has been recruited to work for the war office. In other words, Millie will have the same job that Annis has been trying to get for some time. Although Annis is a natural leader, she has to learn allow others to be in the spotlight as well. Moreover, this quote signals a shift in Annis’ attitude towards Millie, as she begins treating her like a partner, and not as a subordinate. The key to this shift lies in Annis’ realization that she is being hypocritical for begrudging Millie the job that she wanted for herself. Her thought process in this, the latter half of the novel, contrasts with the willful and thoughtless nature she sometimes demonstrates in early chapters. Jones uses this moment to comment on the socio-economic divide that separates Millie and Annis. Annis feels guilty once she realizes that Millie, as a member of the working-class, has never had the secure and comfortable lifestyle to which Annis is accustomed. Annis is used to having servants, and she takes Millie’s assistance for granted throughout much of the novel, despite the fact that Millie is not even being paid. This is apparent from Annis’ initial opposition to Millie’s becoming a spy.

**Teaching Ideas**

* Jones begins each chapter of *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore*, with a quote from another famous work of literature. Students could do a short writing assignment in which they discuss why Jones might have included these particular quotes and how they relate to the text as a whole.
* *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore* is an excellent example of magical realism. Students could do an exercise where they imagine how magic might work in the modern day. What kind of magic would it be? What would it be used for? This could either be the basis of a short in-class writing assignment, or a group discussion.
* Some of the people Jones references in her novel are famous historical figures. Students could write a short story (or even just a scene) featuring their own favorite historical figure. Since Jones also mentions characters from other books, another option would be to have students do this assignment with their favorite book character.
* One of the themes in this novel is that clothing can influence the way we feel and how others perceive us. Students could be divided into groups and discuss the truth of this statement. As a follow up question, students could discuss the merits of making judgements about people based on their appearance (clothing or otherwise).
* One the novel’s key moments is when Annis sews herself a new dress to wear to Mrs. Spry’s ball. Annis believes that this gown will help her solve her problems, narrating “I distilled all my thoughts into the longing I felt: that this gown would reinvent my life” (Jones 104). Students can discuss in small groups if they have ever had something that they’ve believed would change their lives. Students could then share their objects with the class as a whole.
* Since fashion plays an important role in *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore*, students could be tasked with drawing an outfit that they think best represents one of the novel’s main characters. Students could share their drawings with the class and justify why their outfit fits the character that they chose.

**Why Should Teens Read this Book?**

* Because they may find themselves having to adapt to unfamiliar situations: At the beginning of the novel, Annis and Aunt Cassia are forced to move to the small town of Flittingsworth, due to lack of funds after the death of Annis’ father. Annis has to adapt not only to the change in their social status, but also to living in a town where she knows absolutely no one. Her methods of coping with this, as well as with the loss of her father, should help teens who are going through similar circumstances.
* Because they may struggle with not being taken seriously: Throughout the novel, various people tell Annis that she is not capable of being a spy. The opening chapter has Mr. Smith telling her that spying is no occupation for a “young lady.” Furthermore, Aunt Cassia does not think that Annis will succeed as a seamstress either, and she wants her to find a job as a governess. Annis’ ability to prove all of her doubters wrong by the end of the novel, should be encouraging to teens who feel as if they are being underestimated by the adults in their life.
* Because their plans will not always work out: Annis’ journey to becoming a spy and uncovering the mystery behind her father’s murder is full of ups and downs. Many of her schemes don’t go to plan, but although Annis does get discouraged at times, she never gives up her goal. Annis’ ability to problem-solve, and to never let setbacks stop her completely, could be a good model for teens who are trying to achieve something that may seem unattainable.
* Because it fits in the category of books about “Real-Life Experiences”: *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore* is written as magical realism, but it deals with topics that many teens can understand, including moving to an unfamiliar area, losing someone close to you, overcoming obstacles, and being the victim of an attempted assault.

**Text Complexity**

Quantitative Complexity

Lexile Measure: 870L

Grade Level: 5-6

ATOS Book Level: 8.0

Grade Level: 6-7

Dale-Chall Formula

Raw score 3.244

Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 3.244)

Final Score: 6.9

Grade Level: 7-8

Qualitative Complexity

 There are three Exeter qualities that this novel embodies exceptionally well. The third Exeter quality refers to books with characters who go through struggles that teens can identify with, and books featuring strong female characters. Annis Whitworth is one such protagonist. Not only must she deal with her father’s death and the financial strain that it puts on her and Aunt Cassia, but Annis must also overcome obstacles set in her way by a culture that refuses to believe women can be just as smart and independent as men. Furthermore, Annis is certainly a flawed character, and her ability to learn from her mistakes makes her a worthwhile role model for young teens. This also ties into Exeter quality number four, which talks about characters who “go beyond typical experiences.” Annis’ involvement in espionage and her magical dress-making abilities certainly make her unique, but readers should be able to identify with Annis’ desire to help her family, and her frustration at not being taken seriously. *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore* also embodies the fifth Exeter quality, which refers to books that contain “lively, varied, and imaginative language” that is easy to understand without being overly simplistic. Jones’ language is certainly not boring, and she is particularly good at writing vivid imagery. While some of the words she uses may be unfamiliar to teen readers (largely due to her attempts at historical accuracy), the book as a whole is easy to read.

 Although an analysis of the quantitative complexity gives a wide range of grades for which this novel could be used, it is probably best taught to sixth and seventh graders. The plot is fairly straightforward, as Jones tells the story in chronological order and from the perspective of Annis only. The plot twists at the end are easy to understand, and some readers may be able to guess what they are ahead of time. Despite being a murder mystery that includes allusions to rape and the threat of assassination, this novel can in no way be considered “dark,” as Jones maintains a light-hearted tone throughout. Ideally, the reader should have some knowledge of the regency period including Britain’s war with France and the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, as Jones’ references these historical events. However, the references are so brief and enough context is given, that a middle-schooler with no knowledge of the time period would most likely still be able to follow the plot. In terms of levels of meaning, Jones employs various literary devices, including symbolism and imagery, that could be discussed in a middle-school classroom. As mentioned earlier, *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore* does contain allusions to rape (although it is not explicitly mentioned), and this combined with a more advanced vocabulary means that it should probably not be taught to grades much younger than middle-school. At the same time, the plot is simplistic enough that a high-school aged reader would most likely find it boring.

Reader-Task Considerations

 Readers should be intrigued by this novel’s element of mystery, and the high-stakes situations that Jones makes her characters confront. Those readers interested in fashion, the regency period, or fantasy, will find this book particularly appealing. The plot is easy to understand, which should help prevent less advanced students from being discouraged as they read. Jones also includes characters from other middle-grade and young-adult regency novels, which fans of those books should appreciate. All these things will make *Murder, Magic, and What We Wore* an enjoyable read for middle schoolers.

Implicit Complexity

 This book touches on several important themes for middle-schoolers including friendship, jealousy, and perseverance. Annis’ struggle provides a larger commentary regarding the limitations imposed on women during the Regency period as well as insights on the class differences that prevailed during that time. Additionally, Jones explores the way in which clothing can influence how people feel about themselves, and also how people perceive others. Although at times Jones focuses too much on “telling,” she does use Annis’ inner monologue as well as conversation between characters to “show” the reader what is happening. Jones relies on “telling” largely to convey historical information and to thoroughly explain her plot twists.